

Editorial

We go to press without knowing what the outcome of the general election may be. There is no sign that any of the possible outcomes will provide resources to improve the quality of government statistics. A landslide for Labour might encourage a welcome expression of campaigning demands from below, which Radical Statistics members have supported and which have been far too muted for many years. However, nothing is certain at the time of writing.

The highly publicised national unemployment statistics are based on a count of claimants. They have been properly criticised for many years because they are clearly responsive to (and therefore manipulated by) government regulations. The latest demonstration of this manipulation is 'Project Work', which will take yet more off the claimant count with no increase in the number of jobs - as discussed in the section of Radical Statistics on government statistics.

National statistics from the Labour Force Survey have been officially posed as the alternative to the claimant count. However, how good are the employment statistics from Labour Force Survey itself? Ray Thomas levels seven charges against it in this issue.

Czech unemployment statistics have been created along with unemployment following the overthrow of socialist government there in 1989. The woes of its inadequate counting make very familiar reading, in an article commissioned for Radical Statistics by the Postmark Praha bulletin, by Jiri Dolejs.

If you find many economic indices and arguments unconvincing, to an extent which is matched only by the confidence with which they are supplied by economists, you may not yet have caught the virulent disease of economics. Alan Freeman describes the disease, and claims that statisticians may be part of the cure.

Please send in your contributions to Radical Statistics' compilation of news on government statistics. We are offering the original of a Belsky cartoon of 1970 to the most Daring, Accurate, Truthful and Attractive contribution to Radical Statistics (not necessarily on government statistics) submitted by November 30th 1997. We take our cue from a 1919 publication with that title - see the centre pages. And thanks to Tim Hunkin for his cartoons especially for Radical Statistics and Hanne Page for composing this and the last issue.

Governments come and go, and so do Radical Statistics editors. We have signed up for 3 issues of which this is the first, to hopefully give some stability to the production. This one is numbered as a double issue for reasons explained in the Radical Statistics News section. The next issue promises to be a mammoth one, if all promises are fulfilled! Not being entirely optimistic, would all readers start penning a letter, news, views, comment or a longer article, and send in their nomination for the best data graphic: we are ready and waiting.

Ludi Simpson and Danny Dorling

Statistics news and comment

Government statistics news

Compiled by the editors

Tim Holt has been head of the UK Government Statistical Service for nearly two years. How has it fared in his hands? As an ex-professor of social statistics at Southampton University Tim Holt is probably better known outside government than many of his predecessors since Claus Moser left the chief statistician's job. He is not a conventional civil servant and brings experience from Australia and Canada to the job.

One might also expect new directions as his post almost immediately changed presiding over a new Office of National Statistics, combining the old Central Statistical Office with responsibilities for Census, Surveys and population statistics as well as parts of the defunct Employment Department. He has a board of advisors including academic and local authority representatives, moving to a more co-ordinated and open set-up as had been advised by critics of the service, including Radical Statistics.

However, many of the new moves of the past two years are linked to absolute cuts in resources.

This review of developments in government statistics can be a regular feature of Radical Statistics if readers send in their news and views to the editors.

Fewer business statistics

If you thought that perceived poor quality of business statistics was the real reason for a shake up of the Central Statistics Office, then you might wonder why £2m has been taken off the budget for government enquiries of

business. The annual census of employment has become a shorter enquiry, with the total number of employees asked instead of separate details of part-time workers and males and females.

The gap may be filled by some local authorities with their own surveys, leading to incompatible datasets and a larger survey 'burden' to businesses.

Fewer local authority statistics

"Less data, better understanding" is the subtitle of an 'efficiency scrutiny' report on information flows between central and local government. It recommends shorter annual returns from many local government departments to central government, and a higher use of sampling for information that changes slowly over time. The annual census of schools, Form 7, will for instance be reduced by half, with sampling policed by the Schools Inspectorate for more detailed information.

This may be a fine approach for those with a national view, but it is no good for local communities wanting to know what goes on in their patch. Neither does it recognise the administrative need for regularity of procedures as an aid to maintain quality. *Lifting the burden - an efficiency scrutiny on information flows between central and local government.* DoE, 1996.

Fewer social statistics

As we go to press, the General Household Survey has been suspended and looks very likely to continue suspended. Contributions to a Royal Statistical Society meeting in March.

clarified that other surveys do not fill the gap. There is now a further very short round of consultation on a consultative document on the major social surveys in general. Comments were required by 16 May to Elaine Chamberlain, ONS, B4/02, 1 Drummond Gate, SW1V 2QQ, elaine.chamberlain@ons.gov.uk.

Sweet Survey Harmony

Government Social Surveys have been developed each for specific purposes. The wording of those questions that are asked in common has now been worked on and 'harmonised' since 1995, with a new publication this year describing the common questions on household composition, marital status and living arrangements, economic status, housing costs and benefits, and a dozen more.

To the extent that the wording differences were not pertinent to the different focus of each survey, this can only be good news, making it easier to compare survey results from surveys like the Labour Force Survey and Family Expenditure Survey. Do any readers disagree? Is there any link to the suspension of the General Household Survey? *Harmonised concepts and questions for Government social surveys*, £10, ONS sales desk, 0171 533 6262.

Population Statistics in difficulty

The last year has seen reorganisation of the divisions of the previous Office of Population Censuses and Surveys within the ONS. People and sections have been shifted out of dear old St Catherine's House, some to Titchfield in Hampshire and others to Drummond Place in Pimlico, a space vacated by the Metropolitan Police. All incriminating fixtures and fittings had been removed from the latter premises - it is facetiously said that only dents distinguish the interview rooms. There were no safes found containing the proceeds of robberies.

That is a pity, as they would have come in handy to pay for the International Passenger Survey, the only direct source of international migration estimates which are the weakest part of the British population estimates programme and are now funded for only one year at a time by the Home Office. It should be part of the core ONS budget.

Population Statistics generally seem to be having a raw deal within the new Office, coping with high turnover of staff and lack of the leadership that Census and Health divisions have maintained. All eyes are on the new head of Population Statistics, Judith Walton.

Deprivation Statistics - nothing to do with policy?

With a dozen different measures of local deprivation being used by government (see Radical Statistics 61) one might have thought the time was right for a group to examine their differences and their uses, what with the current efficiency scrutiny (see below) and so on. Which is just what local government suggested to the Department of the Environment (DoE) which co-ordinates regular meetings about local statistics between government departments. 'Yes' said the other government departments. 'No' said the DoE, not until "it is information about the statistical issues of measurement and not the policy aspects of measuring and indices that are the focus of attention", as local government finally agreed.

It seems that statistics are safe currency as long as their interpretation is left to others. This is just the kind of impossible separation that sickens statisticians who have a heart still beating. It is hard to imagine an area of policy where statistical indices are more political, so good luck to that new group.

Ted Heath is deprived - official

The Index of Local Conditions, used to target the government's urban policy to the poorest areas of Britain, includes the residence of Ted Heath, St Martins ward in Salisbury. This ward is 801st most deprived, putting it into the worst-off 10% of the 8,619 English wards.

St Martins hits the index jackpot because it has relatively high levels of households without a car, high proportions of its families on low income, and a particularly high proportion of its children live in flats. Therein lies a lesson in the irrelevance to social conditions of both statutory boundaries like wards, and some of the variables commonly used in deprivation statistics; for St Martin's Ward contains both

(1) *The Close* - with lots of wealthy elderly people like Ted Heath living alone and many of them without cars

(2) *The Friary* - Salisbury's only 'medium rise' council estate with many 'problem families' and low income.

But there is a wall separating them!

Business questions statistics

The Foundation for Manufacturing and Industry warned in April that government statistics understates growth in manufacturing industry. Contracting out £4.5 billion of non-core activities during the decade to 1994 has resulted in reclassification of jobs and output to other, non-manufacturing headings.

More cuts to the unemployment statistics

... *Project Work* is the title of the UK version of workfare in the USA. Piloted in two areas since last year, it has from April 1st 1997 been extended to thirty one areas without the promised evaluation of the pilot. All claimants who have been unemployed for two years will be given 13 weeks of assessment and advice, followed by a compulsory work placement for

a further 13 weeks - non co-operation is stated to lead to withdrawal of benefit.

The effect of Project Work on unemployment statistics is two-fold. The claimant comes off the unemployment statistics for the duration of the placement, and then goes back on as a new claimant, slashing the long-term unemployment statistics at a stroke.

... and inflation to employment figures. JobCentres provide statistics of people placed in jobs each month, to coincide with the unemployment figures. Peter Hain MP has called for an enquiry after several JobCentres claimed the same jobs are filled by each of them, copying details from lists of new starters supplied by companies. He claimed that this was "the tip of the iceberg of systematic job-statistics fiddling", and asked for clarification on what controls exist to prevent bogus claims and how much JobCentre managers' pay is related to the level of job placements achieved.

Here comes the next Census

While original and valuable insights to life in Britain are still being extracted from the 1991 Census, discussion on the next one is already very developed.

Attempts to better count the missing millions (highlighted in Radical Statistics 55) may well be supplemented by cloning of records for counted people to represent the uncounted, whose number and general characteristics will be estimated by an improved validation of census procedures. This would result in the One Number Census where all Census output will already be enhanced with the estimate of those missing.

The academic sector has produced a well-argued set of recommendations for the geography of outputs from the next Census (available from p.rees@geog.leeds.ac.uk). They partly resolve a conflict between the purpose of the Census - to provide

information for geographical areas relevant to policy and planning - and confidentiality of information about individuals which may be jeopardised if tabulated data for very small areas are released.

But what kind of Census output is needed for popular campaigns? Certainly accessible data, well-indexed and well-popularised. Census data should be free, and software to interrogate the Census datasets should be encouraged. There is currently no forum for the voluntary, community and trades union organisations to form their demands of the 2001 Census.

Irish Catholic the largest ethnic group?

Following intense lobbying co-ordinated by the academic religious establishment, a question on religion will be included in the June test Census, in preference to a question on language. This is in spite of the results of open consultation during 1996 which had dismissed a question on religion as having little purpose in the decennial house to house enquiry. Someone has friends in very high places.

Apparently there has been no dissent from any established religious group, including the Jewish Board of Deputies. It appears that established churches feel that a Census question will enhance the status of religious practice, but what will they say when Irish Catholics are found to outnumber practising Protestants in urban Britain?

Are you British or not?

Black British was not one of the boxes to tick in 1991, but was written in by a small minority who did not accept Black African or Black Caribbean as a description of their ethnic group. Some organisations (among them the London Research Centre) have demanded a Black British category in the next Census in 2001. ONS are taking this seriously and testing also an Asian British category in addition to Indian, Bangladeshi and Pakistani,

and a White British category in addition to White.

The clear suggestion of nationality and therefore a lower status for those who do not state British, is outrageous and will cause strong resistance to the census as a whole. All reference to 'British' should be resisted strongly in consultation leading up to the 2001 Census.

Who's afraid of whom?

The final volume of four on ethnicity in Britain is due out soon. Each contains officially published analyses based on the 1991 Census, and this final one focuses on housing, education and employment. For six months it was held up because the academic editor Valerie Kam's introduction included evidence of discrimination based on sources other than the Census, which the Office of National Statistics (ONS) felt inappropriate.

Some deal was finally reached. Three contributors to the volume in question have so far been asked but failed to write for Radical Statistics an account of the lessons of this experience. Is it because the four volumes are so Establishment and so White-authored, and so tied to the publishing pressures on academics, that no-one wishes to rock the boat of this prestigious venture? Those with perhaps least to gain from wide publicity are the authors who might most feel embarrassed at the lack of political and social feeling contained within this and the other three volumes?

After its AGM in 1996, Radical Statistics suggested to both ONS and the editor of the volume in dispute that it should be sent to campaign groups, and that help be given to use its evidence positively by Black and Asian groups. Nothing has come of this so far.

A new government's statistics policy?

A joint Labour/Liberal Democrat committee on constitutional reform reported in March,

calling among other things for a national statistical service, independent of ministers and answerable to parliament, in a manner similar to the National Audit Office and the Comptroller and Auditor General.

Thanks for contributions from various individuals, RSS News, the Morning Star, and Bradford Resource Centre Rasalah.

Health Matters Magazine

Duncan Munro, editor

If you are interested in health policy and politics, then you may be interested to hear about *Health Matters*, Britain's liveliest health policy magazine.

Health Matters is a non-profitmaking quarterly magazine covering current debates in health care and public health from a user and community perspective. It is independent of health authorities, drug companies and political parties, and is produced voluntarily by health service workers and users with help from professional journalists—and frequent contributions from the Radical Statistics Health Group!

Although *Health Matters* is not an academic journal, it is authoritative. For instance, contributors to past issues have included:

- Prof. Margaret Stacey, emeritus professor of sociology, on regulating the medical profession
- Prof. David Hunter, professor of health policy and management, on health service democracy
- Dr John Yates, the government's waiting list ex-guru, on Britain's two-tier health system

Health Matters has a national circulation which includes academics, policymakers, politicians, health professionals and health activists. Its only financial support comes from its readers.

To see *Health Matters* for yourself, simply write/email/phone or fax us, quoting ref. C44, and we will send you a free sample issue. Alternatively, if you have world-wide web access, visit our web pages at www.luna.co.uk/~health, where you will find on-line features and can even download a whole issue. *Health Matters*, PO Box 459, Sheffield S11 8GJ. Tel/fax: 0114-266 6171. Email: health@luna.co.uk

[Radical Statistics editorial note: we do not usually include free promotional material, but as Duncan says, *Health Matters* has welcomed Radical Statistics material and freely advertised for us in the past]

Best Data Graphic

The graph below shows clearly that the real increase in public transport costs has exceeded disposable income over the last 20 years, and has soared relative to motoring costs (which include all costs like insurance, servicing and repairs, road tax as well as fuel and oil).

The graph is one of around 150 in *Indicators of sustainable development for the United Kingdom*, published by HMSO for the Department of the Environment in 1996. Its title page states that "The indicators presented in this report are preliminary, intended to stimulate discussion about how we measure whether our development is sustainable. The Government would welcome views on which indicators are the most useful, and how they might be developed and improved in future."

The text accompanying the graphic below suggests that reducing fares would have undesirable effects such as increasing the attractiveness of living further out of town centres, increasing journeys to work and for shopping, and increasing pressure on demand for housing in out-of-town sites. Thus the graphic leads to fundamental questions about town planning that a monetary approach just cannot handle.

As a data graphic, one problem is that the original all-colour presentation makes it impossible to photocopy: it has been reproduced below by estimating the data by eye.

(Readers' nominations for Best Data Graphic to the editors please)

