

REVIEW NOTE of 'Rising Infant Mortality' and 'Must these babies die of cold'
by Arthur and Margaret Wynn, published by the Child Poverty Action Group
as numbers 3 and 4 in their series 'The Poor and the Crises' price 50p each

The apparent rise in infant mortality discussed in the first of these two pamphlets resulted from a procedural change by the Office of Population Censuses and Surveys (OPCS). They found that the infant death totals in their weekly returns (OPCS Monitor) which were based on preliminary counts done by local registrars (last thing on Friday afternoon!) were under-reported compared with the corrected quarterly totals. So they revised their procedure in July 1975 and this resulted in a 10% increase in the number of deaths reported weekly and included in the weekly returns. The Wynns noticed the apparent increase but not the footnote explaining its origine, which, to say the least, is not prominently placed.

Writing to the Guardian, who ran an article on the pamphlets, to explain this Dr. Adelstein (OPCS Cheif Medical Statistician) remarked that their other conclusions were 'unfortunately true'.

Most of the second pamphlet compares the seasonal pattern of infant mortality in Scotland, England and Wales, the Netherlands and Finland. In Finland, which now has the lowest infant mortality rate in Europe, there was not much evidence of seasonal variation while in the other countries the rates were higher in the winter quarters. They showed that the winter excess in England and Wales is mainly in deaths ascribed to respiratory causes which in turn they associate with 'low' social class and inadequate space heating. This is what most of us would expect (except that they ignored the question of influenza epidemics) but the arguments they use to arrive at these conclutions are somewhat weak. But they are handicapped by the fact that the appropriate data which would settle their case are not available in published form.

These pamphlets thus illustrate two hazards to reworkers of official statistics. The first is that in our concern about the social and political bias in official statistics we should not forget to check for OPCS' (or who-ever's) own comments about the validity of their numbers. The other is that the vital link needed to clinch our arguments may well not be made; either the data has not been collected or it does not fit in with the time-honoured series of published tables. I suppose this adds another dimension, 'disuse', to the 'use/abuse' model.

A final point is that for their price these pamphlets are extremely tattily produced; it may be that the Child Poverty Action Group or the Wynns are unaware of recent developments in photoprinting, but they could at least have bought a carbon ribbon for their typewriter, labelled their groups neatly and taken off the paper-clips before copying them! Perhaps I am being unnecessarily hard but as there has been talk of Radical Statistics producing pamphlets these details have to be considered as well as the intellectual content.

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