

Report of the Health Group

The past year's efforts had been primarily devoted to finishing the project about Health Information - which, though near completion, has yet to be finalized. Work on this particular project has dragged on over two years and it was felt that an outline history might provide a useful guide to other groups.

Previous documents such as 'Whose Priorities?' and 'In Defense of the NHS' had been written in response to a particular document or policy towards health care suggested by the government. The intention of the original project was to make a positive contribution showing how a more democratically based decision making process in the NHS might influence resource allocation in a more positive manner towards better health. This was slightly modified to something less grandiose, which was to examine the criteria used to justify decision making in the NHS. A three-part document was envisaged consisting of actual case histories; examination of how cost-benefit criteria was (mis-)used; and the data that was available to help arriving at decisions. Gradually the data section expanded such that the document as it now stands is about health information.

The pamphlet examines various sources of (statistical) information about the health and social services, as well as those arising from other bodies that contain information about health/sickness. It concentrates on routine information produced by the Government Statistical Sausage Machine, and until a better name appears has been entitled 'An unofficial guide to official health statistics'. We have examined these data in terms of which authorities produce health statistics trying to answer:

- a. What data is available?
- b. How relevant is the information for answering questions about the health service?
- c. How accessible is the information? Where is it published?
- d. Who to ask for further information?

One of our basic premises is that the structure of the organization influences how the information is organized and what, indeed, is collected. A basically undemocratic organization produces information in a manner suited to its own administrative purposes and regards this information as its own property, with discretion to whom it is going to release such data. Essentially by remaining in control of information the organization maintains a large degree of power over those who try to question management decisions.

The 'Unofficial Guide' has been written as some small contribution to break out of this cycle. To give information about the information system enables local groups to at least be aware of the ropery information base upon which management decisions are taken daily in the Health Service. We haven't provided a detailed exposee of every statistical return produced by the Health Service for example, but have referred to more complete texts on the technical aspects of the subject. What we have produced is a document that will act as a first reference source for local groups, CHCs, trade unions, that are interested in obtaining health information from various governmental bodies showing the scope of information that is available with notes on how that information tends to get used and abused.

It is salutary that it has taken two years for the document to (almost) reach the light of day. Keeping enthusiasm for the original project which has changed numerous times has been difficult. Equally troublesome in a project such as this which was 'original' and not 'reactive', was to determine the audience for such a booklet. Reacting to a Departmental 'consultative' paper is relatively easy in that respect, as the topic, and to a large extent the audience is ready-made. However an original, 'positive' contribution becomes more uncertain - not least because there are no real time constraints placed on a response as there generally are for a 'reactive' document.

The nature of projects for the Health Group was discussed and whether it was necessary for the Group to feel compelled to publish something everytime. A number of people with similar interests are currently looking into a number of topics (e.g. drug trials) but there were no other ongoing projects feeling a compulsion to publish.

Carl Petrokofsky

STOP PRESS

The Unofficial Guide to Official Health Statistics went to the typesetters on 19 May. This means that the booklet will be published around June.

For further information on the Health Group, contact Alison Macfarlane, 40 Warwick Road, St Albans, Herts.

RADICAL STATISTICS RACE GROUP: PROGRESS REPORT - MAY 1980

This is an update of the progress report given at the AGM in March 1980.

Since March 1978, the Race Group have been working on a publication in collaboration with the Runnymede Trust. This has grown into a book which has now been accepted for publication by Heinemann. The book, which is entitled 'Britain's Black Population', has three main aims. The first is to provide a statistical picture of Britain's black population. The second is to describe the official policy responses to the black population. The third is to discuss the inadequacies of the available statistics and the problems in using them, and the general political context in which collection of information is seen as important. The structure is:

- Chapter 1. Britain's Black Population
- 2. Government Legislation and Policy
- 3. Employment
- 4. Housing
- 5. Health and Social Services
- 6. Education
- 7. The Politics of Statistics

Working with the Runnymede Trust has had both advantages and disadvantages. We did benefit from their vast experience of writing and publishing reports in the field of race relations. However, at times cooperation has been difficult. The large number of contributors to the book (about 12) has led to coordination difficulties, and there have been frustrating delays in drafts being produced. Finance has been a prickly issue, as yet unresolved. During the course of the project, Runnymede have been paying typing and travelling expenses, but it looks now as if these costs will be shared between the two groups when the book is published. This is a continuing problem for the Race Group where there isn't money available for typing etc and where some members have yet to learn to type.

Whilst editorial control has nominally been shared, it has at times been hard to reach agreement. A further problem has been the need to maintain enthusiasm over a lengthy period of time...not easy, especially when it was not envisaged that the work would take any more than three months in the first place. There is an argument here for short sharp interventions such as the one on the race question in the 1981 Census which was completed in a month or so, which do not require such a prolonged effort as the production of a book.

Another issue which has been continually raised is the question of the audience to which we address our publications. At the outset we had visions of informing the person in the street with our statistics, but such optimism was short-lived and what we have arrived at is a book more suitable for first-year undergraduates than the person on the Clapham omnibus....though that could be a first-year undergrad, I agree. The question is: is this what Radstats should really be doing?

These reservations aside, the product of two years work by the group now seems likely to appear in print in the not too distant future. In the process of preparation valuable lessons have been learned both about race relations and about group dynamics!

When the book comes out...around October....please buy a copy. And better still, use it in your teaching and recommend it to your first-year undergrads!

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Radical Statistics Education Subgroup

The Education subgroup has been revived and has held several meetings at Poland Street and at the Institute of Education. Various topics have been discussed including 'Consumer Guides' to educational research aimed at different audiences, and a contribution to the 'cuts' debate, but the major focus of attention has been the book produced by Michael Rutter and his colleagues, Fifteen Thousand Hours. Discussion of this book together with some of the criticisms aimed at it, led to the concept of 'Statistical Responsibility' in criticism.

The papers which follow, one by Dougal Hutchison on Statistically Responsible Criticism (a slightly expanded version of that delivered at the AGM) and one by Jeff Evans on the Demystifying Approach follow the progress of the discussion. Thus readers should not be surprised if they appear to contradict each other in places. They are by no means finished pieces (though Jeff's is perhaps nearer being so) and we should hope that readers will view them as stimulants or even irritants to promote discussion and be prepared to offer suggestions for improvement.

All members of the Education subgroup were concerned in the discussion which led to the formulation of these papers and particular contributions came from Harvey Goldstein with his critical review of Fifteen Thousand Hours, Ludi Simpson, whose list of statistical criticisms which have been made of the book, features in Dougal's paper, Russell Ecob, whose report of discussions at the AGM is also incorporated, and Celia Davies who made important contributions to Jeff's paper.