

On the collection of further data on ethnic minorities
(points made during the discussion at the RSS meeting on the sources of data on ethnic minorities; by Heather Booth)

It is already well-known and accepted that discrimination against black people exists in Britain. There are data already available that tell us this; black people, the victims of discrimination have been telling us this for years; the Commission for Racial Equality, which owes its existence to racial discrimination, has been doing the same.

Under the heading 'The need to collect statistics', Chris Lewis of the Home Office says: 'The Government accepts that in order to assess the changing extent of racial disadvantage in this country, there must be further monitoring of the social and economic position of ethnic minority groups.'

I want to raise three questions:

1. Why do we need more official statistics to tell us that discrimination exists?
2. Why do we need more official statistics before anything is done by government to reduce discrimination?
3. Where is the evidence that something will be done by government if more data are produced?

These may sound like the sorts of questions that the black community might be asking, and indeed they are asking such questions, but they could equally be asked by statisticians of themselves and of the Government. Given the constraints of the present economic climate, why should statisticians ...and this applies to the government statistical service in particular... produce data on ethnic minorities when previous findings have had no effect on discrimination and disadvantage? Could not that money be better spent?

It is also already known that efforts to collect such data meet with difficulties. In the present political and discriminatory climate, black people are often less than willing to cooperate with ethnic questions and ethnic monitoring. We have seen this in the opposition to the 1991 census question on ethnic origin, in high refusal rates, and in the obviously incorrect and often amusing answers to survey questions. This presents statisticians with a

'technical' problem, and we have seen how those at the Office of Population Censuses and Surveys are attempting to deal with this problem. But why do it? Might not making improvements in the political climate regarding black people be the easiest solution to this problem?

To go back to Mr Lewis's statement, I want to dwell on two phrases: 'the changing extent of racial disadvantage' and 'further monitoring'. Is this 'changing extent' meant to imply that racial disadvantage is being reduced by some government programme (surely the government is not admitting to wanting to monitor increasing disadvantage)? If this, the former, were the case, I am sure we would all be in favour of further monitoring. But sadly, I do not think that this is the case. I must therefore ask: To what extent is the Government balking at tackling the problem of disadvantage amongst ethnic minorities by concentrating on the production of data? And as statisticians, does our cooperation in this data collection exercise mean that we condone this delaying tactic?

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