

Editorial

I have been sucking my blue pencil for a few minutes already - inspiration will not come. The problem is that I have been overwhelmed by statistical work in the last few months - and in total isolation from anyone who might appreciate the problems of being "the statistical expert". So, I've decided to write an editorial supporting - rather obliquely - Heather Booth's appeal for young, vibrant, radical statisticians.

So what were/are the problems? How do you evaluate gynaecological/obstetric management practice betwixt feminist demands for control over their own bodies and radical female gynaecologists/obstetricians with reasoned cases for intervention (this in Aberdeen, the home of therapeutic abortions for social reasons)? How do you reconcile a (statistical/arithmetical) demonstration that a "socialist" African country (in this case, Guinea-Bissau) is doing "worse" than, say, Kenya, with an inherent abhorrence of being "the expert"? How do you react to (left-wing?) liberals weeping about the relation between rising recorded unemployment figures and rising recorded crime figures when both rates are nonsense?

Well, I don't really know: I'm getting long in the tooth (cf Heather's remarks). But I do know that I have reacted (viz written) in each of those situations in the last few months and I have included extracts from one of those "reactions" in this Newsletter. But Fisher knows if I've made the "right" decisions. It's no good saying to me that there is a Radical Statistics Group (Community?) 'cos it's too far away.

And it is not because of the statistical complexity of any points we might be making - but simply because the ability to make informed comment on numerical data is not apparently keeping pace with the rapid accumulations of same. Heather's right: we need to make contact with other people....and now.

Roy Carr-Hell,

Institute of Medical Sociology
Westburn Road, ABERDEEN

AB9 2ZE Tel 0224-681818

not 2428

Justifiable Terminal-icide

Frankfurt, West Germany -

A judge dismissed charges of malicious damage against an insurance company bookkeeper who attacked his VDT with a chair, and then set it on fire. The dismissal came after the bookkeeper explained his patience had been exhausted when the system went on the blink for the 5th time in as many hours. The judge noted that the bookkeeper regularly had been forced to work long hours of overtime to catch up on work that was delayed by system failures.

- 1/29/82

AFL-CIO Newspaper Guild Reporter



From: PROCESSED WORLD

N^o 6, a magazine
for Radical Office Workers
(inc) from - when else



The Open University,
Walton Hall,
Milton Keynes,
MK7 6AA
Telephone: Milton Keynes (0908) 74066
(Direct Line) Milton Keynes (0908) 65-3844

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THE OPEN UNIVERSITY

FACULTY OF MATHEMATICS

17th December, 1982.

The Editor,
Radical Statistics Newsletter

Dear Sir,

The American Statistical Community does not, as far as I know, have a "Radical Statistics" subset. Nor does it have a "Nuclear Subgroup" of that subset. Nevertheless there appear to be a lot of nuclear goings-on on that side of the Atlantic, and I for one would like to understand what they mean.

In the latest issue of *Technometrics* for instance (November 1982), three members of the Statistics and Safeguards Systems Groups at Los Alamos (yes!, Los Alamos) present an overview of statistical methods for "safeguarding" nuclear materials (i.e. seeing that none get stolen). This is clearly important with a commodity which is

- (a) dangerous
- (b) expensive
- (c) impossible to weigh completely accurately

A total of nine authors respond to this article (by Goldman, Picard and Shipley). Only one of these (Roger H. Moore) in my opinion does anything like focus on the non-technical issues involved. For others it's all a question of estimating the standard deviation of $(\hat{c}\hat{v}-\hat{m})$, where \hat{c} , \hat{v} and \hat{m} are three independent random variables.

What does our Nuclear Subgroups have to say about this? What goes on on this side of the Atlantic? I think we should be told.

Yours sincerely,

John Bibby
John Bibby

P.S. Another technical article in the same area is "On the probability of selfactivation of the world nuclear weapons stockpile", by Bernard Bereaunu of Bucarest (*Methods of Operations Research* 44, 1981, pp. 507-520).

Dear Editor,

Why do 'they', and why might 'we', want to measure 'unemployment'? That was the question raised in my mind by Ludi Simpson's piece on Unemployment Statistics and Unemployment in the last newsletter. This showed very clearly how, if we don't agree with government estimates of unemployment, we can make our own, using published statistics. But implicit was the notion of a true level of unemployment, of which the government publishes a false estimate, and that seems to me the wrong way to look at it. When writing the 'Nuclear Numbers Game' we found that even so apparently straightforward a concept as 'number of Soviet tanks' could be operationalised in a number of ways depending on what was being assessed (Soviet power in general, specific threats to the 'West', ability to police satellite countries, etc.), so that the particular estimates provided would depend on the purposes and uses envisaged for the statistics (and the tanks). This seems at least as true for 'unemployment'.

So, if the government is concerned with monitoring demand for social security it makes sense for it only to include those legally entitled to it. If it is concerned with idling hands doing the devil's work (rightly or wrongly), it may make sense to exclude housewives and YOP victims, and also to emphasise youth unemployment and length of unemployment. If it is mainly concerned with image building then any excuse is good to reduce the figures. Existing figures seem to reflect a combination of these purposes.

What about 'us'? One motive may be simply to dent the government's image by arguing that unemployment is higher than it claims. But if it is only claiming to be measuring 'registered unemployment' then we have to argue that there is some other concept of unemployment that they should measure instead (or that we should measure). There are at least two other motives for measuring unemployment, hinted at in Ludi's article; one is that it is a major cause of poverty (in the narrow sense of low household income), and the other is that it represents a waste of resources which could be used for socially useful production. In the first case it may be reasonable to exclude from the figures anyone living in a household where there is at least one employed person, provided household income is above a poverty level to be decided (although a different concern, with the financial autonomy of women, might lead us to focus on unemployment among married women who would like employment but are not registered). We might also want to focus on the extent to which benefit payments are withheld or delayed, and 'discretionary' payments withheld.

In the second case, concern with the waste of resources, 'unemployment' is just the tip of the iceberg: probably the vast majority of jobs are socially useless or destructive, or if useful could be done using less labour, thus releasing more for other socially useful tasks. What we would then need is estimates of how much useful work is done, how much of it is paid for, how much should be done but isn't, and, resulting from this, how much 'unemployment' we could all enjoy, free from poverty.

Estimates relating to such concepts of unemployment (and no doubt others) should be possible, although perhaps very approximate. I'd have thought that one of the best things that the anti-social trends project could do is explore alternative concepts and best feasible estimates for them in this and other areas.

Yours partly employed in socially mainly useless work,
John Lintott