

Russell Ecob

Editorial

This is the first newsletter to appear since the last AGM. You will note the concern expressed there as to the attendance and the commitment given to measures to improve the visibility of Radical Statistics and the support particularly for new members.

Amongst the health group's activities this year has been an attempt to draw attention to and provoke debate about the government's selective publication (and non-publication) of DHSS statistics. This is indeed closely related to the issue of freedom of information, which was the subject of the public meeting held at the weekend of the AGM. A copy of the letter sent to various interested organisations (together with a commentary on the effects) is included in this newsletter.

A large part of this issue is devoted to the ongoing debate, partly stimulated by the Black Report, on Inequalities in Health (the articles follow on from Roy Carr-Hill's in RSN34), and here Colin Thornhurst, Klim McPherson and Steve Watkins take issue with various aspects of Julien Le Grand's thesis. Julien Le Grand has been invited to reply in the next newsletter. This discussion has obvious relevance for the assessment of inequality in other areas.

Though dominated by health issues (see also article on abolishing prescription charges), some semblance of balance is restored by Ludi Simpson's report from Nicaragua with a plea for volunteers and support, Libby Cooper's on Community Based Research and Heather Booth's from "Paradise".

Russell Ecob
MRC Medical Sociology Unit
University of Glasgow

Note: From this Newsletter onwards notice is drawn, on the inside back cover, to the rights of RadStats members under the Data Protection Act.

Letters

55.

22 Leckford Road,
Oxford.

30 January 1986.

Dear Radical Statistics,

Hopefully it will not only be members of Amnesty International who will have welcomed the news that statisticians, acting in their capacity as professionals, have begun to take tentative steps to defend human rights (see John Bibby's article in RSN 34). However, the petition drafted in support of an imprisoned Soviet colleague by an informal gathering of statisticians at the ISI meeting in Amsterdam illustrates how careful they (and Radical Statistics) will have to be to avoid charges of operating double standards. Those who drafted the petition on behalf of Yosif Begun seemed to have found it impossible to stick to the issue in question, that is, securing human rights for a Soviet citizen. Like so many others before them, they also found it necessary to make reference to a perceived haven for some Soviet dissidents, namely Israel.

For some people Israel is indeed a haven: just as long as you were born to the right kind of mother or have been converted by the right kind of rabbi you will be welcomed with open arms and offered Israeli nationality and citizenship papers within no time at all (see *The Unjewish State* by Akivah Orr, Ithaca Press, 1984). As the Israeli League for Human and Civil Rights has pointed out repeatedly, however, the story is very different if you cannot present the exclusive credentials required - particularly if you happen to be a Palestinian Arab. One could cite numerous examples of how this has worked out in practice, but the current issue of *Amnesty* (the Journal of the British Section of Amnesty International) provides an up-to-date, if comparatively benign example. "At least 93 people have been arrested and put under administrative detention in July, August and September 1985 in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. Most of them have been given 6-month detention orders confining them to prison without charge or trial... Among those arrested are students, including the presidents of the West Bank universities students' councils, journalists, trade unionists, and also two field workers for a West Bank human rights organisation, Law in the Service of Man, which is affiliated to the International Commission of Jurists".

If statisticians are going to start taking action at a professional level to defend human rights they must try to ensure that their actions can not be interpreted as tacitly condoning countries, like Israel, with a well-documented record of repeated and flagrant violations of human rights. Statisticians who would welcome demonstrations of the kind of tightrope walking that is required may wish to take out a subscription to *Amnesty* by sending £5-00 to 5, Roberts Place, London EC1 OEJ.

Yours,

Russell Ecob,
Editor of RSN 35,
108, Lyndhurst Grove,
London SE 15.



Iain Chalmers.

Review

Market Research: Head Counting Becomes Big Business
Philip Kleinman, London: Comedia Publishing Group 38pp £15

In the excellent Rad Stats document: Reading Between the Numbers, the education group laid out a set of criteria whereby responsible statisticians should judge a piece of research. Looking carefully at who did the research is not one of the cardinal principles (the "genetic fallacy"). Nonetheless, the authors recommend that we should always find out what we can about both the sponsors and the executors of research; this can provide clues about the way in which the research is likely to have been done.

Since the overwhelming majority of Rad Stats members are involved in social research, they might be interested in a recent publication from Comedia, one of our sister organizations operating from 9 Poland St, which has been running a series of short reports describing different features of the media and communications industry. Philip Kleinman has written an account of the market research industry which is a useful compilation of statistical and anecdotal information about the industry that provides core personnel for much British social research.

Market research is surviving the recession well; the total value of commissioned research in the UK in 1984 was over 40% higher than in 1981. Companies that fail to research their share of the product market accurately do relatively much worse in a recession than those who respond to declining demand in a more aggressive fashion. However, there has been a swing away from expensive ad hoc surveys towards omnibus surveys on which clients purchase individual questions and towards cheaper qualitative research. Although cable technology has not lived up to its extravagant promise (perhaps early days), other new techniques are being introduced, such as spoof mobile shops where customers are unwitting guinea pigs.

Political opinion polling, while being the most visible aspect to social research, was a tiny (£2m) peak on a vast (£150m) mountain even in election year 1983. It is not very profitable and often mainly serves to provide publicity for companies whose bread and butter comes from other types of research.

The report gives interesting details on the structure of the market research profession, (around 5,000 executives, over half in London) of whom 40% become directors. Salaries are not enormous in comparison with other professional groups, but are large in comparison with the piece rates paid to interviewers, who number around 20,000. Details about the major personalities in the business and their companies comprise over half this short book.

However, one is bound to say that £15 is a lot to pay for such a short document, especially when most of the statistical material is pretty easily available elsewhere.

Cathie Marsh, University of Cambridge