

Book Reviews

Women's Health Counts

Ed. Helen Roberts

Routledge, London, 1990

Price £10.99 pb.

Just as the title of this book can be read in two ways, the chapters, which make up this edited collection, work on two different levels. Each author presents information on an aspect of women's health while, at the same time, giving an insight into some of the advantages and problems inherent in quantitative research.

For example, in her chapter "How do you count maternal satisfaction?", Claudia Martin brings to our attention the interesting fact that it is not only middle class women who prefer a birth with a minimum of technological intervention. In her survey, middle and working class women were equally likely to express a preference for low technology options. Her chapter also gives a useful account of some of the problems which can arise when doing research with direct policy implications - the strict time constraints when preparing reports for committee meetings, the very low budget and the selective use of the research findings by interested parties.

Some chapters in the collection have a very practical focus. For example, Sara Arber describes the different formats in which data from the General Household Survey (GHS) can be obtained from the ESRC data archive. She goes on to give examples showing the value of secondary analysis of the GHS for exploring issues such as gender differences in "sickness absence" and in the care of the elderly.

In contrast to this approach, Alison Macfarlane's chapter does not focus in such a practical way on one specific source of data, but provides a useful general discussion of the historical background to the collection of official statistics. In addition, she shows how the original purpose for such statistics can restrict what we can learn from the data.

Despite its focus on the usefulness of a quantitative approach to understanding women's health, the book is not devoid of qualitative

material. Hilary Graham neatly combines statistics and interview material in her contribution which examines women's health and smoking behaviour and suggests why women in poverty continue to smoke. In her chapter exploring the ethics of randomised control trials, Ann Oakley also makes use of qualitative material, quoting the views of midwives who were involved in her study to evaluate the effects of social support in pregnancy.

In line with the aims of the book, as set out by Helen Roberts in her introductory chapter, the collection as a whole succeeds both by providing new data on women's health and by presenting that data in a form accessible to those with no training in statistics or epidemiology. However, in terms of providing examples demonstrating different analytical techniques, the level of statistics discussed in the book is basic with scant reference to multivariate techniques. Those who have already acknowledged the value of quantitative data and secondary analysis and who may be struggling to apply statistical tests to data on social phenomena (where variables are rarely independent or normally distributed) will find little help in the pages of this book.

However, anyone interested in women's health will still enjoy reading it.

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**'Surveys of economically active population,
Employment, Unemployment and Underemployment: An ILO
manual on concepts and methods'**

Ralf Hussmanns, Farhad Mehran and Vijay Verma.
International Labour Office, Geneva, 1990. 409pp inc index. Price: 40
Swiss francs.

Neither cosy bedside reading, nor a blistering expose of the shortcomings of official Unemployment statistics, this manual is nevertheless an excellent reference manual and sourcebook.

The intention of this manual is primarily to assist those, especially in the Third World, to set up what we in the UK would call a Labour Force Survey. It is also intended to help those training people to conduct such surveys. It can also be a sourcebook for anyone interested in employment and unemployment statistics.

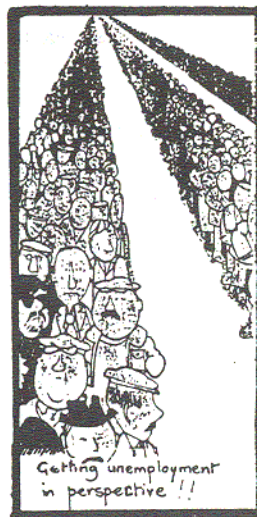
In some ways this manual sticks to general principles, avoiding specific recommendations. It doesn't tell you, for instance, what the upper and lower age limits for the "economically active" population should be. In other ways it is quite specific. The definition of what constitutes "economic activity" is narrow: selling newspapers is "economic", working unpaid in a grocery store for a non-relative is "uneconomic". This concentration on paid employment - jobs - is not surprising, given that the ILO is an organisation set up and funded by Trade Unionists.

Of interest to the watchers of Unemployment statistics in the UK is the complete omission of any reference to the description "*out of work and claiming benefit*" as a measure of unemployment. It is easy to see why the claimant count has such a high profile: it is quick, it is very detailed geographically and is cheap to collect. It is difficult to ask news reporters to wait several months for the results of the once-a-year Labour Force Survey (LFS). Yet, as is clear from this book, the LFS is the only valid measure of employment and, crucially, unemployment. For researchers trying to get at the real position, the LFS is a much more reliable and illuminating source of data.

Another topic not addressed in this book is whether compiling data on employment and unemployment is of much real benefit. There is an implicit assumption that the ideal is the Post-War Western Full Employment jobs-economy and that less-developed economies should adopt the trappings of developed countries and acquire statistics on jobs. It comes as no surprise to learn that Trade Unionists have a fixation with jobs. However, it can be pointed out that it would be quite inappropriate for less-developed countries to try to become simply industrialised jobs-based economies whilst the developed world is already transforming into a post-industrial, post-jobs era. This suggests that measuring unemployment is not just a waste of time. By concentrating on jobs, we are prevented from addressing more important issues of quality of life and of well-being generally.

The ILO in Geneva is an entirely well-meaning organisation, staffed by people dedicated to improving the lot of humankind. However, they have a narrowness of vision that says jobs are the answer. This view underpins this solid, practical book.

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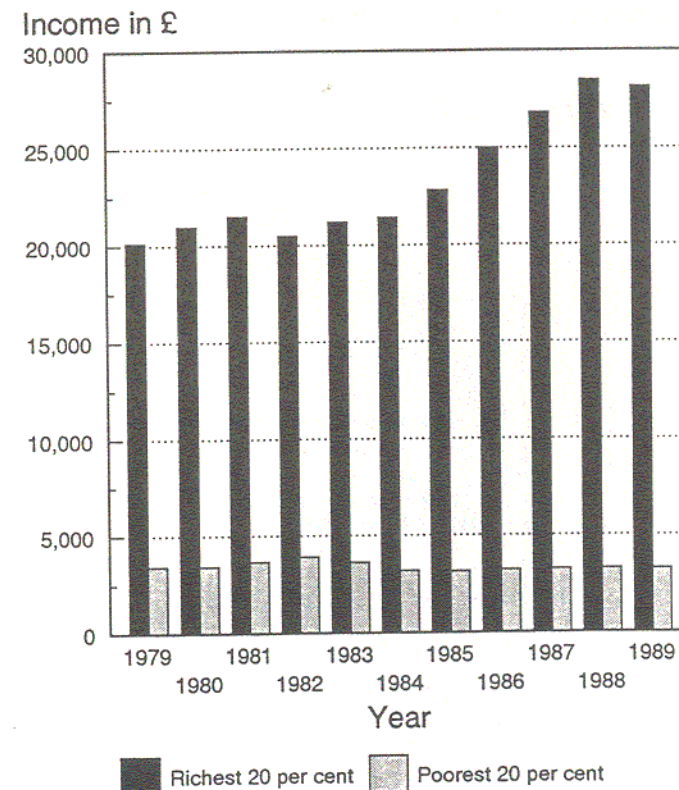
Data Graphics Award Entry

Spot the Trickle Down Effect...

Dave Gordon

In the absence of any other submissions I have included this one of my own. It comes from *The Poor are Poorer: A Statistical Report on the Changes in the Living Standards of the rich and poor in the United Kingdom 1979-1989*, Report of the Statistical Monitoring Unit, Department of Social Policy, University of Bristol

Trends in the Average Annual Disposable Income of the Poorest and Richest 20 per cent of UK Households at 1989 Prices



Source: Annual Reports of the FES. The Retail Price Index has been used to adjust income to 1989 values.