

Monitoring Press comment on official statistics

February '96 Bulletin

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This issue is the fifth in a series of monthly bulletins reporting on the monitoring of press comment on official statistics. The main objective of such monitoring is to help reinforce the efforts of those who are striving to improve the quality and availability of politically sensitive statistics and the processes associated with issue.

The papers being monitored are the *Daily Telegraph*, *Guardian*, *Independent*, *Times* and *Financial Times*, together with the *Independent on Sunday*, the *Observer*, *Sunday Times* and the *Sunday Telegraph*, the *Economist* and London *Evening Standard*.

The economic indicators issued by the Central Statistics Office continue to command most attention, especially those dealing with economic growth and economic activity. In January this bulletin selected 8 CSO news releases or publications as important out of 30 releases for inclusion. They are included because their importance is unquestioned, providing the essential basis of informed media comment and analysis.

Second, with three mentions, goes to national opinion surveys, the Telegraph's Gallup poll, the ICM poll for the *Guardian* and that carried out by MORI for the *Times*. In the run-up to a general election such political opinion polls provide the necessary basis for judging the standing of the two main contending parties. The media's interest and investment in regular opinion polling is to be noted as welcome.

January also saw the publication of *Social Trends* that essential reference book for social researchers, now costing a swinging £35.

Beyond the hard and relatively robust economic data, the political polls and *Social Trends*, statistics relating to health and education continue to command media attention. Amongst the most important were asthma in children in deprived areas (7), hard-pressed hospitals and shortages of qualified staff and beds for emergence cases (12 & 13), and the decision to investigate deformities among British babies born to veterans of the Gulf war (16 & 27). The role of the *Sunday Times* to bring this about requiring note.

One other health mention has been noted, namely the Labour Party survey reporting that the number of nurses and midwives in the NHS was cut by 13% between 1989 and 1994 while the number of managers increased by 400%. Very importantly, the government stands accused of systematically and deliberately covering up the nursing crisis by changing the basis on which the figures are compiled and presented (20).

On education it was reported that assessors employed by the university funding councils have provided the first reliable guide to the quality of teaching at British universities (3). Also, the Schools Curriculum and Assessment Authority has stated that the tests for eleven year olds reveal an appalling lack of reading, writing and number skills (26). Yet at the end of the month came the Prime Minister's claim that there is no excuse for a student levy followed by an outcry from university vice-chancellors and principals of the need for a public discussion on how to pay from the vast increase in students entering university. After health and education, further evidence of global warming came from the British Antarctic Survey (25) together with the home office report on 'young people and crime'.

The poor got a notable mention. The FT noted that the poorest 20% got almost three-quarters of their income from state benefits (1), whilst the Institute for Fiscal Studies in an IFS report 'Two nations? The inheritance of poverty and affluence' argued that despite talk of upward mobility and opportunity, in reality poor people have poor parents while the children of the rich do very nicely (30). The *Economist* in the issue of 28 January follows this up. Based on the latest *Social Trends*, in a piece entitled 'A matter of life and death' the opening paragraph runs:

'Not only do the people at the bottom of the heap live nastier and shorter lives, their relative position worsens as they get older. The gap between the death rate of those at the bottom of the social scale widens with age.'

Finally attention is drawn to some claims and counter claims emanating from parliament. On the last day of the month, John Major in answer to some parliamentary questions, asserted that for the first time in forty years, crime was falling and that the UK's economic performance was better than that of its European rivals. Both claims were disputed, most especially by Michael White on the front page of the *Guardian*.

An index of listings for February 1996 is given below with some examples of press cuttings. Further details can be obtained from

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JANUARY '96 INDEX

Date	Subject	Source
1 Tues.. 2nd	The poor	Economic Trends No. 506
2 Wed 3rd	Excessive rail fares	Which
3	University teaching	University Funding Council
4	Cash in circulation	Bank of England
5&6	World prosperity league	Labour Party
7 Sat 6th	Asthma	University of Lancaster
8 Mon.. 8th	Opinion polls	ICM Guardian poll
9	National lottery	Camelot, National Lottery
10 Tues. 9th	Retail sales	British Retail Consortium
11 Thur 11th	Balance of trade	CSO
12	Hospital beds	Department of Health, BMA
13 Fri.. 12th	Hospital beds	
14	Manufacturing output	CSO
15	Opinion polls	Gallup Telegraph poll
16 Sun 14th	Gulf war veterans	Senior doctors
17 Mon. 15th	Government tax take	House of Commons Library
18 Wed 17th	Unemployment	CSO
19 Thur 18th	PSBR	CSO
20	NHS	Labour Party
21 Fri.. 19th	Young people and crime	Home Office
22 Tues. 23rd	The economy	CSO
23	M4 money supply	CSO
24	Social trends	CSO
25	Opinion polls	MORI Times poll
26	Global warming	British Antarctic Survey
27 Fri. 26th	School tests	Schools Curriculum & Assessment Authority
28 Sun 28th	Gulf war veterans	MOD
29 Wed 31st	Misrepresentation	Prime Minister
30	Student levy	University vice-chancellors
31	The poor	Institute of Fiscal Studies