

What are official statistics and who needs them?

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Most statements about 'official statistics' do not actually try to define what they are. Instead, they move swiftly on to the role of the Government Statistical Service. Thus the annual publication 'Government Statistics: a brief guide to sources states': 'The GSS exists to service the needs of government, but much of the information it compiles is readily used by businesses, local authorities, universities and others concerned with changes in society and the economy. A vast amount of this information is published regularly and more is available on request.'¹

The Royal Statistical Society's report 'Official statistics: counting with confidence,'² published in 1990, did not define official statistics either. Most of its recommendations related to the organisation of the Government Statistical Service.

Some of our official statistical systems have their roots in the 1830s, when a different view seems to have prevailed. For the founders of the Statistical Society of London, later to become the Royal Statistical Society there did not seem to be much distinction between official and other statistics.

The introduction to the first issue of its journal, dated May 1838, explained that 'The word Statistics is of German origin, and is derived from the word *staat*, signifying the same as our English word *state*, or a body of men existing in a social union. Statistics, therefore may be said, in the words of the Prospectus of this Society, to be the ascertaining and bringing together of those "facts which are calculated to illustrate the condition and prospects of Society"; and the object of Statistical Science is to consider the results which they produce, with the view to determine those principles upon which the well-being of society depends.'³

The question of how such data might be collected had been raised in an earlier publication by William Jacob, who complained that 'Except on such subjects as have been connected with financial matters, but

little statistical information has been collected' apart from that collected by parliamentary committees. As a result, 'that little has been so mingled with a vast mass of irrelevant, or unimportant, or tiresome details, and is scattered through such a number of ponderous folio volumes, that it has presented an appalling labour to all but the most indefatigable enquirers'⁴. He suggested that a separate department should be formed under the Board of Trade to compile and publish volumes of statistics. A footnote added that something had now been set up but that 'the department is too limited in its extent'.

This view is not surprising as he took the view that 'In a country where discussions on every subject connected with the well being of the state are freely indulged and extensively exercised, it becomes a most imperative duty on those who take the lead to communicate truths and refute falsehoods, in the most clear, accurate and concentrated forms. ... it is the interest of those who administer the government to 'perform no acts that will not bear examination, and it has become a right of the public to receive every kind of information which can lead to a correct judgement of their capacity, assiduity and integrity.'⁴

The statisticians of the 1830s therefore wanted a wide range of data. As the introduction referred to earlier put it. 'It is unnecessary to show how every subject relating to mankind itself, forms a part of Statistics; such as population; physiology; religion; instruction; literature; wealth in all its forms, raw material, production, agriculture, manufactures; commerce; finance; government; and to sum up all, whatever relates to the physical, economical, moral, or intellectual condition of mankind.'³

The aspirations of the 1830s could not be further from the dismal doctrine set out in 1981 by Sir Derek Rayner. In his White Paper setting out his scheme for cutting spending on the Government Statistical Service by a quarter, he wrote. 'Information should not be collected primarily for publication. It should be collected primarily because the government needs it for its own business.'⁵

Although the Rayner doctrine was officially dropped in 1989, its influence lingers on in many areas of government statistics. For example, there are 'efficiency scrutinies' which are more concerned with cutting official statistics than establishing whether there are unmet needs. In particular it is rarely asked whether people locally need national statistics for comparative purposes. Although statistics have become more widely available, accessibility has become

increasingly dependent on people's ability to pay for the 'products' being 'marketed' by the Government Statistical Service.

This raises two key questions. What should be the scope of official statistics and for whom are they produced?

What official statistics do we need?

One of Sir Derek Rayner's arguments for reducing the size of the Government Statistical Service was that the government should not be a monopoly supplier of statistics. Other people have argued, from a different perspective, that government statistics are not worth using as are they are so tainted that they cannot be believed. These arguments presuppose that there are resources for organisations outside government to collect data on a comparable scale and make them available publicly and that their data are more reliable than those collected by government.

Many of the data collected by commercial organisations are regarded as valuable business intelligence and are therefore sold for considerable sums of money. Doubtless they serve the needs of their customers, but they are not widely available. This applies to much of the information collected about care given in general practice in England and Wales. A number of initiatives in the early 1990s came from companies who supply computer systems to GPs. Several of these have had links 'with pharmaceutical companies. As a result there has been a tendency to focus more on prescriptions than on the full range of conditions for which people consult GPs and the ways these relate to the health of the population.

Data collected by research organisations and universities are still dependent on charitable, government or commercial sources for their funding. Thus, whatever steps are taken to maintain an independent viewpoint, they cannot entirely divorce themselves from the agenda of the funding bodies. This calls into question the possibility that anyone's statistics are neutral or value free, rather than the result of the process by which they are collected, analysed and published.

What types of statistics should government collect? In the nineteenth century, governments collected statistics about trade, the state of the economy, crime and the operation of the Poor Laws. It conducted censuses to collect information about the size and structure of the population. Further information was collected in association with birth

and death registration which started in 1837 in England and Wales, in 1855 in Scotland and in 1864 in Ireland.

Further data collection was introduced as publicly funded services were developed. For example, in the inter war years, annual reports of the Ministry of Health contained statistics about the community clinics run by local authorities and voluntary organisations to which it gave grants for the purpose. The setting up of the National Health Service in 1948 was followed by a huge expansion of statistics about the care and services it provided. Examples can be given of statistics on other subjects where data collection has developed as part of the wider process of accounting for public funds. This means that many government statistics are collected as a by-product of administering public funds to provide public services or pay benefits to individuals. Others are the result of specific enquiries, ranging from the decennial census, government funded social surveys to enquiries to businesses and public sector organisations.

The continuing privatisation of the public sector and the blurring of the margins between public and private has been accompanied by a decline in the availability of statistics, even when the private sector is selling its services to the state rather than individuals. Thus a Department of Environment 'efficiency scrutiny' is leading to a substantial decrease in the collection of data about residential care homes. Increasingly, these are in the private sector, but many of their residents are paid for by local authorities. Similarly, data are collected about the declining numbers of ancillary staff in the NHS, but not about the numbers of staff doing similar work for private companies to whom the NHS contracts out of cleaning, laundry, catering and other ancillary services.

Even fewer data are collected routinely about services which are both privately provided and privately funded, such as private health care. The private sector might argue that it is not the public sector's business to collect data about care which is paid for by individuals or private health insurance. On the other hand, health authorities may want to monitor the extent to which their populations are exposed to forms of health care which may be of no benefit or even harmful. NHS statistics may suggest a decline in its use while people pay to have it in the private hospital down the road.

This example suggests that restricting 'official' statistics about services to describing the activities of the public sector gives a very incomplete

view of society, the circumstances of the population and the services it receives. Of course, many official statistics are about the economy, rather than services to the public. Here it is question of striking a balance between companies' view that providing information to government is a burden and the extent to which the resulting national statistics might help them in running their businesses.

An independent statistical service?

The Labour Party's election manifesto promised us an independent national statistical service, but what form will it take? Helen Liddell, the relevant minister was expected to make an announcement at the Statistics Users Conference on December 11, but the consultation document was not ready. She was therefore left to talk about the principles that would guide the service, integrity, validity and relevance. Informed sources suggest that the document, which may well have emerged by the time you read this, will contain four alternatives. It will be interesting to see whether any of them resemble the blueprint set out in 1990 in the RSS' report.

This recommended ending the present 'decentralised' statistical service in which statisticians are civil servants and thus answerable to government ministers via the heads of the departments or agencies in which they work. It would be replaced by a single centralised statistical organisation in which all statisticians working on official statistics would be at one remove from direct government control.

Moves have already been taken towards a more centralised service. Over the past few years, the Central Statistical Office took over the statistical divisions of several departments before merging with OPCS in 1996 to form the Office for National Statistics. In Northern Ireland, most government statisticians now work in the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency, but some are 'outposted' in other departments, a model suggested in the RSS' report.

Separation of statisticians from ministerial control could well increase the independence of their work but might also decrease its relevance to policy. More crucially, the independence of such a statistical office could be jeopardised by making major budget cuts which threatened the scope of its work or by appointing a head who was too compliant to the short term needs of the government of the day. The RSS suggested that making the centralised statistical service answerable to a National

Statistical Council made up of eminent people would provide a safeguard. Once again, the extent to which this would work would depend on how members were chosen, an issue raised in Paul Allin's article in *Radical Statistics* 66.

Whose statistics?

It is unlikely that structural changes are all that is needed to decrease the extent to which government ministers are able to control the production and publication of official statistics. If statistics are still seen as largely the property of the government rather than being collected on behalf of citizens, there may be little incentive to make them available widely and in a form which has some chance of being understood. What is more, if they are simply seen as yet another 'product' to be sold in the market place, the customers with the most money are likely to be those who succeed in calling the tune.

If official statistics are to serve a wider agenda and become 'statistics for citizens', higher priority needs to be given to improving public understanding of statistics. We need to equip more members of the public to not only challenge misleading use of statistics by central and local government but also to ask questions which set new agendas for data collection. This also implies that we need structures which ensure that the public's questions are answered, rather than being dismissed as being irrelevant to the needs of the government of the day.

References

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