
Missing Numbers

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(Missing Numbersⁱ is a project of the Centre for Public Data and investigates and campaigns to close gaps in government data.)

Introduction

“Missing Numbers” is a term that refers to the important public data that is not being collected by the government, either out of ignorance or because it doesn’t view this data as a policy priority. However, without this data, we cannot understand where government services are failing or track their improvement over time. For example, the UK government currently collects official data on the number of formal complaints made by citizens in hospitals and schools, which allows us to spot failing hospitals and schools, but it does not collect or publish data on formal complaints in jobcentres, making it impossible to know if jobcentres are being mismanaged.ⁱⁱ

Missing Numbers in Land and Housing

The UK Land Registry releases good data on house sales and has an overall house price index and data on individual sales. However, data is lacking in a variety of relevant areas, including land ownership and control, without clear information on land ownership concentration or the types of owners. The 2016 Bean Review of allocations of land... the effectiveness of the planning regime is hamstrung without access to adequate data on land values”. Data is also missing on affordable housing, with no data being collected on how many Section 106 legal commitments have been negotiated or the terms that these commitments deliver.

The data that is collected in the rental housing market is of limited use. There are 2 official datasets of rental costs, but one does not provide a comparison over time and the other shows relative, not absolute,

changes in rents. This means that these datasets cannot show how much rental costs have changed over time per individual local authority. According to the 2016 Systemic Review of the Office for Statistics Regulation, “the majority of users we spoke to cited frustration at the lack of robust, timely and insightful statistics about the private rented sector... The dispersed nature of... information hinders users in developing an understanding of changing rental patterns”.

Missing Numbers in Social Care

Ed Humpherson of the Office for Statistics Regulation has stated, “I am responsible for regulating data across economics, employment, health and more and it is social care that stands out by far for its low quality or even absent data. We need parity of measurement to have parity of policy”.

There is missing data in social care particularly in the areas of the quality of adult social care, the basic numbers on private care, and the value of unpaid care.

Missing Numbers in Universal Credit

Universal Credit (UC) is the government’s main welfare policy and is geared towards providing basic financial assistance to people who cannot work. The UC has three main measurable aims: reducing the cost to the benefit system, reducing unemployment, and reducing fraud and error. Since 2012, when the UC was being developed, various frameworks have been mentioned to attempt to measure the UC’s successes based on these goals.

For the first aim of saving money, as of 2018, the National Audit Office has stated, “we cannot be certain that Universal Credit will ever be cheaper to administer than the benefits it replaces... We cannot judge the value for money”. For the second goal of reducing unemployment, the government has claimed that the initiative would “mean 200,000 more people will be in work when it’s fully rolled-out”. However, it has been concluded that this government estimate is subject to significant debate and is unprovable. The National Audit Office has said, “the Department will never be able to measure whether Universal Credit actually leads to 200,000 more people in work”.

Missing Numbers on Tax Relief

HMRC allows for a total of 424 different types of tax relief. Of these, an estimated 105 tax reliefs have cost taxpayers a total of £416.8 billion, but the data on the costs of the remaining 239 tax reliefs has not been collected. The Public Accounts Select Committee said in 2016, “despite repeated recommendations, HMRC... still does not make tax reliefs sufficiently visible to support parliamentary scrutiny and public debate about areas where the UK chooses not to collect tax”.

Causes of a Missing Number

There are a variety of reasons that missing numbers exists. The first is that the data is not considered to be important by the people with the power to produce it. The second is that the information revealed by the data is embarrassing for the government. The third is that the data is difficult to collect and the fourth is a combination of all of the above factors.

It is important to note that the UK statistical system is better at producing accurate data than it is at producing relevant data. This is because the UK statistical system is focussed on collecting economic statistics rather than social statistics.

Determining What is Missing, Not Just Unimportant

A lot of data has been collected over time of varying levels of importance. The UK Statistics Authority uses the following criteria to determine what data is important enough to be considered part of the “National Statistics”. the data is used to allocate public resources, is on a topic of significant public interest, generates regular media reporting and is used in Parliamentary Questions or ministerial speeches, in addition to 4 other criteria.ⁱⁱⁱ

Fixing the Missing Numbers

In 2019, the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee completed a review of the UK Statistics Authority and

concluded that, “with only a modest sense of how the public uses data and no evidence of the unmet needs, UKSA is not delivering public good as required under the legislation... We recommend that UKSA should... build an evidence base of how statistics are used in practice... and establish where data gaps persist.”

There are two critical ways that the UKSA can begin to do this: firstly, by commissioning an independent review similar to the 2016 Bean Review of Economic Statistics, but with a focus on social statistics and, secondly, by calling out missing numbers in the current statistical databases.

Implications- What to do when You Spot a Missing Number

If you see a missing number in a government statistical database or other resource, call it out! Tell the Office for Statistics Regulation about the missing number and get in touch with Missing Numbers.

ⁱ <https://www.centreforpublicdata.org/missing-numbers>

ⁱⁱ <https://private-eye.co.uk/registry>

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://data.gov.uk/dataset/9d475e06-3885-4a90-b8c0-77fea13f92e6/cats-per-square-kilometre>