Unsettled populations: Service administrative data and people outside the sampling frame

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Abstract

National social surveys sample the residentially settled population, excluding people in insecure, institutional, and communal accommodation. Drawing on research including with women on the move to escape domestic violence, and on HM Inspectorate of Prisons survey data from prisoners, this article will consider the opportunities and challenges of trying to access and use such administrative data to address knowledge gaps on the unsettled population of the United Kingdom. Whilst services routinely collect considerable data on individuals they support or interact with, these data are rarely made available for wider research, policy, or activist use. This article will discuss reasons for this, and what could be changed.

Introduction

National social surveys in the United Kingdom sample the residentially settled population. There is increasing discussion of how to maintain the scope and quality of such social surveys (Survey Futures, 2024), and calls for adaptation and innovation in methods, especially to tackle falling response rates. However, a long-term issue is the use of the Royal Mail's Postcode Address File (Royal Mail, 2024) as the sampling frame of the large social surveys such as Opinions and Lifestyle Study (ONS, 2024c), the Crime Survey for England and Wales (CSEW) (ONS, 2024a) and the Scottish Crime and Justice Survey (SCJS) (Scottish Government, 2024) to exclude people in insecure, institutional, and communal accommodation. Such

individuals are therefore excluded from being sampled to respond to the surveys that can significantly shape understandings of social issues, and the policy decisions that address them.

It is not only that significant numbers are thereby excluded from the sampling frame, some for short periods whilst they are in such accommodation or incarceration, and others for much longer periods; but that these people often have distinctive characteristics and experiences that are therefore being missed. Important life experiences are being excluded from research that relies on such surveys; and prevalence of particular social issues that is calculated from such surveys will be skewed away from the actual prevalence.

The Inclusive Data Taskforce (IDTF) reported in 2021 on the issue (UKSA, 2021), and the Office for National Statistics (ONS) has been doing some targeted work to address these 'missing' populations. For example, to recognise that women in temporary safe accommodation due to domestic violence are excluded from the survey sampling frame, the ONS carried out a one-off piece of qualitative research with a sample of 40 women in England (ONS, 2024e). Whilst this somewhat highlights their exclusion from the survey sampling frame, and the report includes data on their experiences, it does nothing to address the fact that tens of thousands of women (Bowstead, 2021) may be similarly at risk of being excluded from social research on an ongoing basis. There has been no systematic change to the survey sampling frame, such as adoption of non-address sampling frames (for example, mobile phone numbers are used in other countries (e.g. Nagpal et al., 2021)), and only a wider range of non-postal methods of initial contact (but not the sampling). In fact, the ONS consistently maintains that "excluding the minority of the population that lives in such [communal or institutional] establishments is thought to have little effect on CSEW estimates, according to a research report from 2008" (ONS, 2024d, p. 5). The 2008 report the ONS relies upon for this conclusion actually focuses on the difficulty and cost of extending the sampling frame to communal establishments (Pickering et al., 2008), rather than the impact on the results, with only a footnote mentioning the assumed minimal impact on crime prevalence rates estimated from the survey. There is no consideration of the impact on any specific crime prevalence estimates, or any

factors such as gender or ethnic differences. A brief example later in this article will challenge such complacency.

This article therefore discusses options for including the excluded, focusing on two populations: women on the move to escape domestic violence, and prisoners in England and Wales. The next two sections will discuss characteristics of these distinct populations, followed by a section on the potential of service administrative data, and the opportunities and challenges of accessing and using such data. The two examples are then discussed in terms of specific large datasets that have enabled research into the experiences of individuals in the two populations, pointing to the kind of new knowledge generation that has been achieved. However, the examples also show the precariousness of the availability of such data, and the article concludes with the ongoing challenges and how they could begin to be addressed.

Women on the move due to domestic abuse

Relocation away from a threatening and violent abuser is only one possible way of trying to achieve safety, but tens of thousands of women and children in the UK relocate to try and escape domestic violence (Bowstead, 2015). Such relocation causes multiple issues of exclusion and dislocation, but one aspect is that relocation is likely to be to a form of temporary accommodation, whether a women's refuge, a hostel, sleeping rough, or staying with family or friends. Even journeys that end in settled accommodation may take years, and involve multiple moves (Bowstead, 2017), whilst others may never achieve settled accommodation. Such individuals will therefore be at risk of being excluded from the sampling frame of social surveys potentially for years, and yet the widely quoted prevalence rate of domestic violence and abuse comes from the Crime Surveys i.e. a source that systematically excludes anyone on the move due to the abuse it claims to measure. Survey respondents are asked about their experience of violence in the previous 12 months, and yet this is not being asked of the tens of thousands in unsettled accommodation due to their experience of violence in the previous 12 months (or longer). This exclusion is profoundly gendered, because

not only are women disproportionately more likely to experience domestic violence and abuse (from male perpetrators) (HM Government, 2021), but when men experience domestic violence and abuse they are less likely to relocate and therefore exit the residentially settled population sampling frame (Bowstead, 2018). However, the ONS reports on domestic abuse in England and Wales (ONS, 2023a) without acknowledging such profound gendered differences, and as if the prevalence rate it calculates for the residentially settled population can be unproblematically applied to the total population. It cannot, and, as a result, the unsettled become the excluded become the uncounted, and thereby appear not to count.

Prisoners

Prisoners are another group accommodated, maybe for years (whether on remand or convicted), outside the sampling frame of social surveys. As a result, despite numbering tens of thousands, they have no chance of responding to these social surveys, and yet could be expected to have distinctive experiences which remain therefore unresearched and unacknowledged. The Crime Surveys are an obvious example, whereby society's experiences of crime are being measured without the input of the detained population. The Crime Surveys commonly ask about experiences in the past 12 months, and lifetime experiences. The prisoner population is likely to have distinctive experiences of crime in the previous 12 months, and distinctive experiences of whether or not they reported it to the criminal justice system (Braga et al., 2019), so that their exclusion will again skew all survey measures of prevalence. Similarly, their involvement in the criminal justice system, including their imprisonment, is likely to include distinctive crime and safety experiences over their lifetime so far. The difficulties of access to prisoners for social research means that studies are typically small-scale qualitative studies in particular prisons, providing limited scope for any valid generalisations, and being potentially less regarded than quantitative studies by policymakers (Jerrim & de Vries, 2017). Again, the unsettled become the unheard.

Service administrative data

Administrative data is being increasingly recognised and used to address knowledge gaps on social and political issues, as well as to complement and potentially replace the population census (which attempts to include everyone). Administrative Data Research UK (ADR UK) highlights administrative data as a resource for public good, and argues the ethics of its responsible use, as well as the potential efficiency and comprehensiveness of coverage (ADR UK, 2023). Much of this is statutory administrative data, generated by government departments and agencies during their day-to-day activities. They routinely gather information on people, usually at the point of delivering a service, which may include background and demographic data, as well as data on the service interaction and outcome. It is likely to cover a wider population than the residentially settled population, but contains different gaps and inconsistencies given that it is generally designed for service delivery rather than research. The most marginalised people in society may have more interaction with some statutory services and data systems, and less with others, and part of the work of ADR UK is to address these issues of safely cleaning and appropriately linking and cross-checking administrative data. There are, however, other types of administrative data which are not strictly statutory but are collected by service providers for monitoring and evaluating their services, and as a requirement of diverse funders and inspectors. Though the data may include detailed data on individuals' demographics and experiences, they are not the focus of ADR UK, and are rarely made available for wider research, policy, or activist use. However, such frontline services may be in contact with individuals who are generally outside the residentially settled population and excluded from mainstream statutory services. As will be discussed in the next two sections, such data can provide evidence and insights on the excluded populations of women on the move due to domestic violence and abuse, and prisoners in England and Wales.

Using Supporting People Programme service monitoring data to research women on the move

The Supporting People (SP) Programme funded housing-related support services across England from April 2003 to the end of the programme in March 2011 when the funding was devolved to local authorities (arrangements were different in Wales). Services included a wide range of accommodation and non-accommodation services, offering support to people with needs around disability, frailty, homelessness, addiction, as well as specifically due to experiencing domestic violence. The Client Records and Short Term Outcomes systems required consistent monitoring data from each service provider on every individual receiving such support, which was submitted to the Client Record Office at the Centre for Housing Research (CHR) in St Andrews for data collection, processing, and preliminary analysis for annual reports. The relevant Government Department (ODPM, reorganised into DCLG, MHCLG, DLUHC, and now MHCLG again) owned the England-wide data and de-identified and archived it with the UK Data Service (UKDS) at the end of the funding programme (Department for Communities and Local Government and University of St Andrews, Centre for Housing Research, 2012). This archiving, and availability for research under Special Licence conditions, meant that the data could be used to research the geography of relocation due to domestic violence. The large dataset enabled research on over 180,000 individual service contacts due to domestic abuse, including over 18,000 per year which involved relocation to temporary accommodation; and were therefore individuals excluded from survey sampling frames. The data therefore enabled quantitative and spatial analysis on the experiences of the excluded on a very different scale from the ONS research on 40 women's experiences of temporary accommodation due to domestic abuse (ONS, 2024e). The women's journeys research has informed policy and practice and been used by activist and service provider organisations (DAHA, 2022). The detailed research is reported elsewhere (Bowstead, 2019, 2021), and the key point here is that the collection and archiving of such service administrative data enabled new knowledge of the geographical and numerical scale of women on the move due to domestic abuse.

However, current equivalent data are not available for research. Support services still collect masses of monitoring data on the individuals they have contact with but, since the devolution to local authorities, there is no consistent data system between services within a locality, between different support sectors, or between different local areas and authorities. Services may be covering multiple monitoring requirements from different funders, generating inconsistencies even within one service provider. The data are generally submitted to funders and used in annual reports, but often not for much else; and are very unlikely to be de-identified, archived and made available under licence for research.

There are powerful reasons for the unavailability of the data for research, with a key reason being that service providers are operating in a competitive tendering context, and do not want to make their data available to their competitors. There are risks in transparency for organisations (Lyon et al., 2015) and with the financial value of such service contracts, such data are commercially sensitive. There are further sensitivities about the kind of social needs that prompt people to seek service help, leading to concern about the political implications of making data available for activist and campaigning use. In other areas of social concern, such as education, researchers have noted increasingly restrictive access to data, and surveillance of the outputs of analysis (Demack, 2019). If activist organisations are only able to draw on evidence from small-scale qualitative research, they are more easily rebuffed with demands for more evidence of the scale of the problems. In addition, there are practical barriers as data are often not even archived internally; and disappear into cyberspace when internal IT systems are updated. Sensitive negotiations with individual services to work with them for more effective use of their data can eventually build up trust only to discover that data are only available for maybe five years; as the contract that required the data collection was only maybe three or four years. Staff remember all the administrative labour of entering data over a much longer period of time, but the IT system has been changed and the data are somehow 'lost', and the experiences of women on the move due to domestic abuse disappear again. However, later in this article, a different research project on prisoners' experiences shows that this does not

have to be the case. These 'missing' people and experiences matter, and the following brief example shows the scale of the problem of calculating supposed prevalence rates from survey data which exclude people on the move due to domestic violence.

A brief example of the potential of using administrative data to address knowledge gaps on the unsettled population

The Crime Survey for England and Wales estimates that 2.1 million people aged 16 years and over (1.4 million women and 751,000 men) experienced domestic abuse in the previous 12 months. (ONS, 2023a, p. 2). There are critiques of CSEW which are not discussed here (see for example Cooper & Obolenskaya, 2020; Pullerits & Phoenix, 2024), but taking the data as valid and reliable, the ONS presents this as a prevalence of 4.4% overall. made up of 5.7% of women and 3.2% of men (ONS, 2023b, p. 4). However, this is estimated by taking the responses from the CSEW of experiencing domestic abuse in the previous 12 months (i.e. from only the residentially settled population), and scaling up to the population aged 16+ in England and Wales (ONS, 2024b).

Analysis of the administrative data on housing-related support services, discussed earlier, indicates the different extent of relocation by men and women due to domestic violence: relocation that risks their exclusion from the CSEW sampling frame. In terms of domestic violence in the past 12 months, women are more likely to be on the move, in unsettled accommodation, and outside the sampling frame – as well as more likely to experience domestic violence in the first place. The proportions for relocation from two years of data are 51% of men (460 out of 901) and 69% of women (35731 out of 51628) (Bowstead, 2018), therefore a proportion staying put (and therefore in the sampling frame) of 0.489 of men and 0.308 of women.

This is acknowledged to be an under-count, as it is only those accessing particular types of support services from two years of data, as well as potentially some over-count of exclusion from the CSEW sampling frame if relocating individuals manage to return to a settled

residential household in less than 12 months. However, assuming the rates of relocation due to domestic violence recorded in the administrative data, these 'missing' people can be added in to the CSEW measures of victimisation, and thereby estimate the sample size of domestic abuse 'victims' (to use the language of CSEW) that should be expected, and the prevalence rate that should be estimated. The results are very significant: a doubling of prevalence for men and more than tripling for women, leading to millions more estimated domestic abuse victims in England and Wales in the previous 12 months.

During the COVID-19 pandemic the CSEW was suspended so data are not available April 2020 to March 2022, and estimates in the year to March 2023 are based on eight months of data collection because of an error in the survey (ONS, 2023a). As a result, the figures used here are from the year ending March 2020. The CSEW sample was 24,512 (11,313 men and 13,199 women), and the estimated prevalence of domestic abuse in the previous 12 months was 5.5% (3.6% of men and 7.3% of women) (ONS, 2020a, 2020b).

The calculation is as follows: Firstly, taking the numbers from the CSEW sample who experienced domestic abuse in the past 12 months:

	In the past 12 months		
	CSEW survey sample	CSEW experienced domestic abuse	CSEW prevalence estimate
Men	11313	407	3.6%
Women	13199	964	7.3%
All	24512	1348	5.5%

Secondly, weighting the sample to account for the people missing from the sampling frame because they would have relocated. Therefore, the estimated true sample who experienced domestic abuse in the previous 12 months is (CSEW victims/proportion staying put):

	In the past 12 months			
	CSEW experienced domestic abuse	From SP Admin data - proportion staying put	calculation	Estimate of true sample experienced domestic abuse
Men	407	0.489	407/0.489	833
Women	964	0.308	964/0.308	3128
All	1348			3961

As a result of estimating the relocated people excluded from the CSEW data, the number of male victims should therefore be doubled (833 rather than 407) and the number of female victims more than tripled (3,128 rather than 964).

Estimated prevalence is therefore increased to 23.0% of women and 7.3% of men, with over 4 million additional victims in the past 12 months over the 2.3 million estimated from the CSEW in that year:

In the past 12 months					
	CSEW experienced domestic abuse	Estimate true sample experienced domestic abuse	difference factor	Estimate population experienced domestic abuse	Estimate prevalence domestic abuse
Men	407	833	2.04	1,548,057	7.3%
Women	964	3128	3.25	5,068,182	23.0%
All	1348	3961	2.94	6,616,239	15.3%

This estimate challenges official complacency that "excluding the minority of the population that lives in such [communal or institutional] establishments is thought to have little effect on CSEW estimates" (ONS, 2024d, p. 5), by highlighting the effect on prevalence estimates for a specific, gendered crime type: a crime that causes significant relocation out of settled accommodation. Who is being excluded matters, as well as how many are 'missing', and this example shows the potential of using administrative data to address knowledge gaps on the unsettled population.

Using HM Inspectorate of Prisons survey data to research prisoners' experiences

Whilst prisoners are not freely able to seek help in the same way as people who are not incarcerated, their experiences are solicited as part of the independent scrutiny of conditions in prisons. HM Inspectorate of Prisons (HMIP) in England and Wales has included surveys of prisoners as part of their inspections of prisons for over 20 years. HMIP uses a random sampling method within each prison being inspected, but prisons are sampled for inspection for a range of operational reasons with each prison inspected at least once every five years. Data from these surveys are used in the HMIP reports on individual prisons, and annual and thematic reports. However, an ESRC-funded project has recently processed and prepared the data for archiving and wider research use. The surveys cover prisoners' experiences in prison such as arrival and first night, ongoing support, safety, training, issues of health and addiction, family visits, and preparation for release. Data from these individuals excluded from social survey sampling frames are therefore now available for research under licence from over 600 inspections, over 100,000 respondents, and every adult prison in England and Wales (around 150 prisons). The sample averages around 7% of the prison population each year and HMIP initially archived survey data from 2000-2022 with the UK Data Service and have now added the subsequent two years (HM Inspectorate of Prisons, 2023a, 2023b,

2024). The data are therefore available under licence for research use, under specific conditions.

It is instructive to identify the factors that made the availability of these data on prisoners possible. Initially there was fact of a single data owner, and the commitment from that data owner (HMIP) to internal archiving, so that the data were still accessible in the IT systems from the year 2000 onwards. Crucially there was funding achieved for a short-term project to do the data archaeology and preparation, which recognised the considerable labour of processing and de-identifying data. An earlier pilot project explored both the feasibility (Quinn et al., 2022) and carried out focus groups with prisoners to hear their understandings and priorities for how HMIP survey data should be used (Quinn et al., 2020). The data owner has now made the archiving part of their business-as-usual: building into their data processing work for their own use the archiving requirements so that these are manageable and routine on an ongoing basis. Fundamentally, there is commitment from the data owner to ongoing openness for licensed researchers, within the important context of the 'five safes': Safe Projects, Safe People, Safe Data, Safe Settings, Safe Outputs (Stokes, 2017). Whilst HMIP does not face competition in providing the service of prison inspections, prisoner experiences are undoubtably a sensitive issue in terms of public and private prison providers, the role and politics of governments, and activist and campaigning organisations. The data enable research into such sensitive social issues, and this newly-available evidence source could provide new knowledge and insights on a population excluded from social surveys (for example, on Healthcare provision in prisons, see (Bowstead & Meek, 2024).

Conclusion

The United Kingdom has a long history of carrying out national social surveys to measure, monitor and improve public and academic understandings of society; and provide an evidence base for policy and practice. Important decisions are made based on such survey data, and measures such as prevalence of particular social problems are widely and routinely quoted from such surveys. However, the

sampling frame of such surveys systematically excludes distinctive sections of the population: those in unsettled accommodation from the Royal Mail's Postcode Address File are excluded. This article has discussed two distinctive populations thereby excluded from social surveys: women on the move due to domestic abuse, and incarcerated prisoners. Excluded individuals are often distinctive populations, and their absence affects not just the sample size but the measures and findings from data that excludes them.

As a result, there should be more caution exercised in reporting measures derived from social surveys, especially on issues particularly affecting such populations, and on which such populations are likely to have distinctively different experiences from the settled population. Prevalence rates of crimes and safety are particularly highlighted as a concern, especially prevalence rates for domestic abuse for the previous 12 months, where rates for men and women are skewed into significant error by the extent of relocation of women (and children) due to such domestic abuse. An example calculation shows survey estimates of prevalence of domestic abuse as out by millions when scaled up to the national population, and challenges official complacency that the exclusion of people in unsettled accommodation has little effect on survey estimates of crime.

The article has explored possible ways to guard against such errors, and to include the excluded in social research by use of particular examples of administrative data. There is a lot of administrative data within contracted and arms-length services, whether statutory, voluntary, or private-sector providers; and this is not just the typical statutory data considered by ADR UK. For such data to be available for social research, several factors need to come together. Fundamentally, there need to be data owners that want openness and knowledge creation by research, whilst recognising the ethical considerations of the potential risks of individual-level data. Service data therefore should be de-identified, archived, and made securely available for research, with the argument that it is wasteful and unethical not to make best use of the data. However, it is important to understand why this is rarely done, by recognising the sensitivity of service providers in a commercial and contract context and with

limited funding. Service providers are only likely to make data available if they all have to, as was the case under the Supporting People Programme example above. The article's examples of when large datasets were de-identified, archived, and made available for research under licence shows the possibilities to include those excluded from the sampling frame of surveys in social research; and the wider and deeper new knowledge that is possible when this is done.

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