

## Official statistics are often under-rated, under-valued and over-criticised Discuss

In the modern world, official statistics cover the economy, crime, unemployment, education etc. Official statistics, such as the GHS, represent an extensive source of data on changing attitudes to particular social issues; they also show trends and patterns within a society. Official statistics are data collected or sponsored by the government and its agencies. However, they have been greatly criticised, many sociologists argue that official statistics lack validity and reliability, therefore cannot be an accurate picture of society. This essay shall focus on certain official statistics to see whether the criticisms surrounding them are justified. This can be shown in the way the statistics are collected produced and processed for example in crime statistics police procedures and practices.

Statistics enable one to understand the dynamics of society there are three main perspectives on official statistics from the school of thoughts, firstly the realist school, second, the institutionalist school and finally, the radical school of thought. The realists point out that the official statistics distort the true picture but take statistics as objective indicators of the phenomena to which they refer. Institutionalists reject the idea official statistics are objective indicators of social conditions. They consider official statistics as neither valid nor reliable indicators of objective phenomena. The institutionalist believes official statistics tell one more about process of how the official statistics are made. The radical, agrees with the institutionalist, however they would locate the institutionalist theory within a wider theory of the dynamics and structure of society.<sup>1</sup> (Squires 1990)

---

<sup>1</sup> Cited Squires, P. (1990)

Official statistics is secondary data, which is information that has already been allocated and readily available. Many sociologists such as (Hakim 1982) argue that there are problems with using official statistics for the simple fact of them being secondary data. For example, one may look at results and 'interpretations differently from those presented in the initial report on the survey'<sup>2</sup>. This highlights the fact that secondary analysis use data for purposes other than that of which they were collected. Although doing this is in many ways a good thing, it can create problems. Key social variables in official statistics is often deficient in some ways. Since the researcher does not collect the data there is very little they can do to rectify possible omission, for example how information has been collected and processed. In some cases secondary data such as official Statistics may be transformed and manipulated to suit one's argument or hypotheses. For instance, this approach may be used between different parties such as Labour and Conservatives. Figures in crime statistics for sexual assaults have increased 0.4%,<sup>3</sup> one party may interpret this as an increase in the number of people reporting sex crimes another party may interpret or manipulate these results to suggest there is an overall increase in the number of sex crimes committed. This indicates how official statistics can be manipulated to show different outcomes therefore questioning whether official statistics especially crime statistics are valid and reliable. Another example to show how the government or other agencies can manipulate results is in the case of employment figures in 1994. Conservative politician celebrated the fall of unemployment they stated that it was due to economic recovery, while Michael Portillo insisted that 'government intervention in the labour market was inappropriate interference with market forces'<sup>4</sup>

---

<sup>2</sup> Hakim (1982) cited in Allan, G. and Skinner, C. (1993)

<sup>3</sup> Cited in Home Office 2000

<sup>4</sup> Michael Portillo cited in Newsnight (1 August 1994)

(newsnight 1 august 1994). Therefore questioning whether real drops in figures represent real drops in unemployment.

Official statistics are information that has been collected on individuals in society that are used and stored. However, the production of official statistics is not unproblematic. To help understand certain limitations and some of the discussions concerning problems with official statistics this essay shall use crime statistics as an example to highlight many of the problems and criticisms faced by certain official statistics, however the limitations and criticisms faced by criminal statistics do not apply to all official statistics. Criminal statistics are published for England and Wales they provide information and indications on the types of crimes being committed and the extent to which crime is increasing or decreasing. In the media there are often reports about certain crimes for example assaults against women, this in turn increases fear of crime amongst women. However, 'women's fear of crime is real enough and should not be dismissed as simply 'false''<sup>5</sup> (Stanko 1990). For the reason that crime statistics on sexual offences which are primarily carried out on women, show 37,263 sexual offences this is a small amount compared to overall crime figures. Criminologist such as Walklate (1989) explains that 'sexual offences are crimes that are least likely to be reported to the police'<sup>6</sup> since women are often scared to report the crime. Suggesting that many of the crimes go unreported therefore are not represented in the criminal statistics. This can be used to argue how reliable criminal statistics is in portraying the true extent of crime how high is the validity in criminal statistics. This can demonstrate whether official statistics actually pick up the trends and patterns of society to they really reflect how society really is.

---

<sup>5</sup> Stanko (1990) cited in

<sup>6</sup> Walklate (1989) cited in Coleman, C and Moynihan, J, 1996

In order for criminal statistics to be accurate, it must sustain validity and reliability for example two different incidents not being categorised the same way shows reliability. Police recording and practices for criminal statistics will be used to highlight how official statistics are often criticised for the way in which they obtain information and then portrayed in statistics. The counting methods in policing records are ‘artificial conventions’ meaning they are not impermeable, as they like to think. The rules on the counting method are not entirely consistent, Walker (1995) makes the point that one result of these rules is that they ‘over represent’ offences of violence as compared to thefts<sup>7</sup>. Maguire (1999) makes a different point: ‘if the rules were changed for example to allow all cheque frauds to be counted separately, the overall picture of crime might look significantly different’ indicating that if different measurements of counting was taken then certain figures of crime would double or even triple in numbers<sup>8</sup>. The same argument can be used in official statistics about poverty provided by the DSS, measurement for poverty has been highly criticised, for example there is no definite definition of poverty and that homeless people are not included in the survey in Britain and Wales. One can then argue how can statistics on poverty therefore be reliable. These problems faced in statistics emphasize the way in which information is collected, what information is collected or in the case of poverty information not collected can distort figures. Consequently suggesting that the statistics do not reflect the true picture of society, which subsequently makes ‘official statistics difficult to use as a provider on showing how society changes over time’<sup>9</sup>, If the way in which crime is collected is not consistent or does not have any structure.

---

<sup>7</sup> Walker (1995) cited in Povey. D, 1999

<sup>8</sup> Maguire (1997) Povey. D, (1999)

<sup>9</sup> Rayner (1980) cited in May, T. (1997)

Although there are criticism on the procedures and recording in official statistics, one can not argue that official statistics produce interesting findings on contemporary society which despite there inadequacy, have been used by both radical and realist researchers alike. Arguable official statistics may have some flaws nevertheless the methological value of official data can often be very good for example, the census. Many criminologists such as painter (1995) argues that crime statistics do not portray an accurate picture on certain crimes such as rape, consecutively one can claim that rape is a very delicate subject and the criminal statistics representation of rape is not a defect on its ability to produce good quality data. For example Evidence shows that the 'same crimes, which are least likely to be reported to the police, are also least likely to be captured by victimization surveys'<sup>10</sup> (Walklate 1984 page 78). The 1982 and 1984 BCS had only one report each concerning rape and the Merseyside crime survey failed to find any reports of sexual offences against women (Kinsey 1984) this highlights certain aspects of victim surveys are not useful for collecting valid data on the 'dark figure' of crime. Some studies had found that domestic violence is more likely to be reported to the police than to survey interviewer. This can be understandable because at the 'time of the incident, a woman may have reason to report the crime to the police but later may not be inclined to reveal such a personal thing to survey researchers'<sup>11</sup>, the same argument may be use for rape. This therefore highlights that certain social issues are impossible to collect and official statistics are being over criticised because statistics that may portray a false image of society is inevitable.

The effects of definitions in social issues changing may affect official statistics reliability and validity over time. Using crime statistics the notion of a 'criminal' not

---

<sup>10</sup> Cited in Kershaw. C, (2000) p 45

<sup>11</sup> Cited in Coleman. C, (1996) 97

being a static definition is hugely important when analysing crimes statistics over time. In the past there were certain crimes that were seen as ‘criminal’ and today is not, for example, before 1994 it was legal for a man to rape his wife however, after the law was changed there was an increase in the about of rape cases. One can argue whether it was do with there being more rapes or the fact that women that were raped by their husband where able to classify it as rape consequently increasing rape statistics. The fact that official definitions can shift over time is a significant problem with time trends in data, which is also shown in statistics about unemployment produced by the Labour Force Market (LFM). The LFM when measuring unemployment still calculates it based on pre-1982 definitions. Yet, the definition of poverty has been altered over twenty times since 1980<sup>12</sup>, consequently, can one take the statistics allocated by the labour force market at face value. Since the definition has been changed from the one used in the survey, how can this be a representation of unemployment in society when society now uses a different definition from the survey. Once again government manipulation is brought in, Ruth Leivtas (1996) argues that the ‘government uses this strategy of measuring unemployment to manipulate the statistics’<sup>13</sup>. However, measures of employment should not be under rated because they illustrate perhaps more clearly than any other area of statistics the contradictory trends of the last fifteen years, unlike most research studies which tend to instead offer simply a ‘snapshot’ of society at a given moment. Also statistics on unemployment should be greatly valued because the volume of alternative information available particularly from the labour force survey is much greater than it was in 1979 and despite the short comings of the data, there is considerable scope for secondary analysis.

---

<sup>12</sup> Levitas, R. and Guy, W. (eds) 1996

<sup>13</sup> Ruth Leivtas (1996) cited in May, T. (1997)

The previous paragraphs have discussed many criticism placed on official statistics however, official statistics are often under-rated, under-valued and over-criticised. Many criticisms of official statistics are primarily based on ambiguous social issues such as crime and unemployment. Therefore, it would be impossible for official statistics to illustrate clear unflawed statistics, when the information collected is unclear. Yet, in certain less ambiguous social factors, 'British data deprived from birth and death registrations, for instance is probably among the highest- quality data currently available'<sup>14</sup> Bulmer (1984). Thus, realist would argue that official statistics do have their uses, depending on the types of data that are utilized. Although there are many problems with official statistics certain data cannot simply be blamed or criticised and therefore dismissed, for example the extent of income misdistribution in the United Kingdom is so striking that it can not be account for as methological artefact (the gap between rich and poor increasing). Therefore highlighting how official statistics can still reveal some crucial patterns and relationships.

In conclusion, official statistics are dominated and produced by the government and in social ambiguous issues, the official statistics may be affected by political considerations such as when they are used to assist the image of the government of the day. Although they are many flaws in official statistics, this is the same with most research studies; therefore, there is no logical reason for why official statistics should lead to their outright rejection. They produced tremendous about of information for example the census and reveal crucial patterns and relationships. Realist simply state that official statistics are helpful for some aspects of society and institutionalist argue that they simply show the process of data, either way this shows that official statistics

---

<sup>14</sup> Bulmer (1980) cited in May, T. (1997)

Gloria Odiase

are useful, therefore should not be over criticised as in some social issues official statistics are the only data available.



**Bibliography**

Allan, G. and Skinner, C. (1993) Handbook for Research Students in the Social Sciences Bristol: British library

Coleman. C and Moynihan. J, 1996 Understanding crime data: haunted by the dark figure Buckingham: Open University Press,

Kershaw. C, 2000 The 2000 British crime survey: England and Wales London: Home Office, Research, Development and Statistical Directorate

Levitas, R. and Guy, W. (eds) 1996 interpreting Official Statistics. London: Routledge

May, T. (1997) Social Reserch issues, methods and process: second edition Philadelphia: British library

Povey. D, 1999 Recorded crime statistics: England and Wales, Prime London: Home Office, Research, Development and **Statistics** Directorate

Squires, P. (1990) Anti- Social Policy: Welfare, Ideology and the Disciplinary State. London: Harvester Wheatsheaf