

Symposium on

THE USE OF OFFICIAL STATISTICS FOR
THESIS TOPICS IN THE FIELD OF SOCIOLOGY

Report of a Panel Discussion

INTRODUCTION

CLYDE V. KISER

As part of its work during 1963–1964, the Committee on Social Statistics of the Eastern Sociological Society¹ planned a panel discussion on “Thesis Topics and Official Statistics,” which was held April 12, 1964 at the Annual Conference of the Eastern Sociological Society in Boston, Massachusetts. It was believed that a discussion of this question by carefully chosen panelists might serve a useful function. In departments of sociology throughout the country, there is the perennial problem of selecting thesis topics. And although a student faces this problem but once or twice, the harried faculty member may have to face it anew with each class of students. Yet it appears that many students and even some faculty members have no clear conception of the types of data available in published or unpublished form in the Census Bureau, in the National Center for Health Statistics, or in the state and city departments of health and registration offices.

Four qualified people were invited to serve as chief participants. Each was asked to present a 10- to 12-minute opening statement prior to the general discussion.

The initial paper, by Dr. Edward G. Stockwell of the University of Connecticut, presents the needs for official data for thesis topics from the standpoint of the college. This is followed by Dr. Paul C. Glick's description of census materials available for thesis topics, and by his imaginative listing of specific subjects worthy of study on which census data are available. Next, Mr. Theodore Woolsey describes the materials available in the National Center for Health Statistics. He cautions students not to expect too much in the way of unpublished data or special services since the Center conceives of its first obligation as that of compiling and publishing its regular series of data for all users. Finally, Dr. Carl Erhardt discusses the types of data available in state and city health departments. He emphasizes the advisability of having students in training work up plans for, and get some experience in, the collecting and processing of data from individuals and households.

In the discussion following these presentations sympathy was expressed with the viewpoint that the first responsibility of any official agency is to publish a series as accurately, as adequately, and as promptly as possible. However, several challenged the assumption that the administrators of the agencies are the ones best qualified to decide which data are "worth using." In reply, the point was made that actually many government agencies follow a policy of periodically asking users of statistics what types of data and breakdowns they prefer. There was agreement that sociologists should follow the example of demographers and economists in seeking better communication between the producers and users of statistics.

Several expressed the view that the usage of official statistics for thesis topics by students need not deprive them of training in the principles and methods of sample design, data collection, etc. Despite one speaker's emphasis on the possibility of doing solid social research on the basis of official statistics alone, probably in most cases the official data constitute only part of the materials presented. They are often used for purposes of background of, and comparison

with, data which the student has collected in the field or from other sources. There was agreement that it would not be well to neglect the training of students in the principles and methods of data collection. But neither would it be well to neglect the training of students in the use of official data for sampling frames, for testing the validity of other data, for background and interpretation, and for direct testing of formulated hypotheses of a sociological nature.

Dr. Thomas P. Monahan pointed out that official data may sometimes be tabulated but remain unpublished in all their rich detail, and that some means should be found to establish an inventory of such unpublished statistics. With modern microfilming preservation, such untapped sources could be made easily accessible. A related enrichment from this kind of material would be the purposeful enlargement of the unpublished but tabulated sector of statistical studies, utilizing to the fullest the processed data and the facility afforded by modern machines.

Finally, there was general agreement that the four panelists had performed a substantial service in outlining the types of data available in published or unpublished forms. The four papers follow.

REFERENCE

¹ The Committee on Social Statistics of the Eastern Sociological Society has the responsibility of keeping abreast of conditions and developments affecting the availability and quality of social statistics in the area served by the Society. During recent years it has been mainly concerned with certain problems affecting the quality of official statistics, such as the absence of certain Eastern States from the Marriage and/or Divorce Registration Area, the threat to the retention of questions on race and color on registration forms and public documents, and the impact of high-speed computers on social statistics. During 1963-1964 the Committee consisted of Dudley Kirk, Everett S. Lee, S. M. Miller, Thomas P. Monahan, Eleanor Bernert Sheldon, and Clyde V. Kiser (Chairman).