

Comment: The Democracy of Facts

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Knowledge will forever govern ignorance: And a people who mean to be their own Governors, must arm themselves with the power which knowledge gives (James Madison).

AT THE HEART OF REPRESENTATIVE DEMOCRACY IS the freedom of the citizen to choose. How that freedom is exercised depends, of course, on many factors—religious, cultural, philosophical, and personal—that can never be counted or weighed or reduced to any form of objective measure. But choice can also turn on considerations of more or less, cost or benefit, advantage or disadvantage. And wherever the society's ultimate choices emerge from public debate, their wisdom is bound to reflect the quality of the information that informed the debate.

The point is illustrated twice over by the current debate on the adequacies and inadequacies of our educational institutions. On one level, the debate attests to a lively public awareness that the skills needed for developing and synthesizing knowledge are essential to the

preservation and advancement of a free and prosperous society. On another, it points up the fact that the debate itself sprang from statistical surveys indicative of the extent to which those same institutions have failed our young people. It is significant, however, that the debate is not about the data on reading levels, test scores, and other measures of educational attainment. All parties to the debate have accepted the validity of the data. The argument is, as it should be, about how to improve our educational system.

When America was small and agrarian, the family was largely self-sufficient, and individual decisions predominated. When we became an industrial society, the sphere of activity that had to be brought within the range of community action grew larger, and now that we are being transformed into a technological society, that sphere is larger still. As complexity has grown, so has the range of the thousands of decisions that have to be made in order to protect the national security, promote economic growth, and preserve social stability. For representative democracy to continue to succeed in the remainder of this century and in the next one, an informed citizenry must arm itself with the power which only the *increase* of knowledge can give.

In the United States, the past fifty years have seen a remarkable flowering of national data sources. The facts, figures, and sophisticated analysis made possible thereby reduce uncertainty, eliminate conjecture, and make it less likely that a given policy will have harmful side effects. But for the contribution of these informational resources in narrowing the range of debate, the political process would long since have been overwhelmed. Many political decisions that would once have generated controversy are now so much simplified by the availability of generally accepted data that they no longer require wide debate. At the extreme ends of the political spectrum factual data will never change dogma, but for the vast majority of decisions access to the facts reduces the necessity for reliance on guesses, hunches, and preconceptions.

As Dr. Bonnen explains in the preceding article, we are now the fortunate beneficiaries of a great variety of high quality, national statistical systems widely used as the basis for decision making by the federal government and state and local governments as well as by industry, labor, and a vast number of interest groups. The census, for example, and the intervening population surveys are drawn upon by a host of program-planning activities at every level. They guide

the decisions of education and health care institutions. They are indispensable to the market research conducted by industry. They tell us what is happening to us as a nation and a people.

Our national compilations of vital statistics provide information on fertility rates, population growth and mortality, and changes in family composition. Mortality data and the death index are invaluable tools for the discovery of emerging health problems, leading in turn to important opportunities for biomedical research. Our debt to the Center for Disease Control for the surveillance systems that have helped to conquer measles, Legionnaire's disease, toxic shock syndrome—and now, it is to be hoped, AIDS—is beyond calculation.

The Consumer Price Index, as we all know (and some of us regret), is an integral part of union-management wage negotiations, public and private pension adjustments, tax reductions, and Social Security benefit increases. There was a time not long ago when the only way in which Social Security benefits could catch up with the cost of living was on the political auction block. Shelved in off-years and turned into a Christmas tree in election years, amendments to the Social Security Act bore only incidental relevance to changes in costs or poverty levels. They were arrived at, moreover, with little debate as to their effects on national economic trends.

Lacking high quality statistical systems, we could not plan for the future. We would not know when or how far to intervene in national, state, municipal, or industrial problems. Without reliable data, how would we become aware of the decline of smokestack industries, the loss of topsoil, the depletion of energy resources, or the increase in single-parent families? How could we gauge the success of efforts to cope with crime, housing shortages, hunger, environmental pollution, or military readiness? We often argue about what to do, but we rarely question the basic facts generated by our statistical systems. The reason, quite simply, is that we have learned to trust their integrity. We have come to expect not only that we will always have access to good information, but that, as time passes, its comprehensiveness and quality will continue to improve. Indeed, the availability and quality of government statistics are taken so much for granted that the users have dangerously relaxed the vigor of their insistence upon maintaining and strengthening our data-gathering agencies.

Statistical systems are not sexy, nor do they capture the special concern of any segment of interest groups. They do not tug at the

heart as does the plight of a child in need of a liver transplant; unlike illiteracy among high school graduates, the discovery of their deficiencies does not sound a clarion call to action. Yet it is the statistics that tell us when liver transplants have become viable and that our teenagers cannot read.

As Dr. Bonnen makes irrefutably clear, our statistical capability is nearing a "disaster or a disgrace." He warns that there is no longer a focus of statistical policy and coordination at the national level. I would add to his concern an equal concern about diminishing support for certain national statistical systems, about the inadequate size of the samples, and about retrogression in the availability of regional, state, and local data. Scarcely less shortsighted has been the neglect of the social and economic research that is intrinsic to our ability to use the data, to weigh and balance alternatives, to conduct cost-benefit analyses, to evaluate programs, and, thus, to improve the chances that our choices will be wise.

In discussing the coordination of statistical policies, Dr. Bonnen also addresses three fundamental prerequisites for the use of data in decision making:

- The quality and integrity of the data;
- The competence of the people who provide and analyze the data; and
- The objectivity and independence of the data.

From the perspective of the first of these prerequisites, it is apparent that the coordination of statistical policy and administration is vital to statistical quality and integrity. Coordination assures consistency in definitions; it enhances the validity of sampling frames and samples; it encourages the monitoring of methodology; it prevents duplication and overlap in data collection and promotes the sharing of data, thereby conserving resources. Coordination identifies the gaps in knowledge that no one agency alone can identify and makes possible the setting of priorities for filling these gaps. Such priorities are no less necessary in the collection of data than in the effort to meet other national needs, for resources are always constrained. A strong coordinating mechanism can assure that the claims of different users are fairly assessed and that the data essential to rational policy decisions are timely, of high quality, and available to all users. Coordination is

also necessary to overcome the inconsistencies among statistical systems that impair our ability to project long-term demographic, environmental, and economic trends.

In the case of the second prerequisite, coordination raises the overall level of competence of the people who provide knowledge-related services by reducing the fragmentation of data collection and hence the dilution of talent. Coordination gives talent a wider impact by requiring high and uniform standards for the design of data systems and the interpretation of the facts they generate. Lacking such coordination, statisticians are as prone as other bureaucrats, public or private, to build empires and battle over turf. Fragmentation, moreover, fosters the propensity of program agencies to let data collection be influenced by self-serving motives.

In every field, the best professionals are attracted to working environments that demand high standards. In the last few years the federal statistical enterprise has experienced the disturbing loss of a large number of nationally regarded statisticians and analysts—some because of cuts in data collection and statistical coordination activities, others because they perceive a deterioration in their working environment brought about by a decline in regard for the value of objective data. The development and maintenance of large statistical systems is an arduous endeavor. It requires steadfast interest, a large store of patience, and sustained support. Unless the current trend can be checked by attracting new, qualified people to federal statistical programs, the long-term consequence will be a depressing impact on the availability of necessary knowledge.

Every administration finds itself under pressure from the proponents of individual programs who wish to collect their own data in order to evaluate their own accomplishments, uncover developing needs, and use these findings to justify the program's continuation or expansion. This is where the third prerequisite—the objectivity and independence of the data—comes in. Objective and independent national data bases create barriers to the proliferation of data collection and protect the public from duplicative questionnaires and reporting requirements. They also provide insurance against the tendency to manipulate data in a way that promotes a specific categorical need or program.

This nation's data sources have gained credibility over the decades because the data gathering and coordination agencies have been independent and nonpartisan. It is reassuring that Dr. Bonnen has not

found evidence of any change in this tradition of independence. We should be concerned, nevertheless, lest the slippage in the quality of personnel and in the coordination process that oversees the use of data may ultimately lead to the politicization of the systems themselves.

As the preceding article shows, the threats to the development and coordination of federal statistics are not new. The erosion has been going on for a long time. We have now reached the point, however, where the sea threatens to engulf the beach. The Congress is no less culpable than the executive for having allowed this threat to develop. The users of data in the states and the private sector, meanwhile, have not, thus far, raised their voices. If their silence is interpreted as acquiescence in the sabotage of federal data systems, they will deserve their own share of blame for the loss of an irreplaceable resource.

As de Tocqueville noted almost 200 years ago, we are a nation of interest groups; we are joiners and activists. It is time that we joined together and became active on behalf of a strong, independent agency with the capacity to coordinate our national data-gathering resources. It is time that government, business, and labor united in protecting the independence and promoting the excellence of these resources. We, the people, have greater need for them than ever before. Our freedom of choice—which is to say our freedom itself—has never so much depended on them.

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