

Empowering society: How statistics serve the public good

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Abstract

Join the UK Office for Statistics Regulation (OSR) as we showcase findings from our research programme, exploring how official statistics serve the public good. In this presentation we delve into how official statistics serve society, and invite you to join the conversation. We share findings from our research, situating this within a wider discussion on what it means for statistics to serve the public good and why this is important to understand.

Our evidence covers a range of perspectives, including views from members of the UK public who shared their perspectives on the public good with us through a series of public dialogues. We also set out evidence on how official statistics serve society through government and policy making, providing new insights and a fresh perspective on a topic that is often taken for granted. Additionally, we speak about ongoing research exploring the role of official statistics in decision making by individual members of the public, shining a light on relatively hidden uses of official statistics that are crucial to explore if we wish to fully understand their role in society.

We use our wide-ranging research findings to present a compelling illustration of how official statistics are an invaluable tool for society. In doing so, we share not only theoretical insights but also practical advice. We invite you to listen to our evidence and share your perspective as well; together we can help official statistics reach their full potential in serving the public good.

Keywords: Public good, value, society

1. Introduction

Official statistics have the power to benefit society at numerous different levels. Governments can use them to understand societal needs and design policies that benefit their citizens; the media can use statistics to hold these powerful actors to account in their actions and claims; and individual members of society can use the insight gleaned from official statistics to undertake actions which enrich their personal and professional lives. At the Office for Statistics Regulation (OSR), we refer to such uses of official statistics as statistics serving the public good.

The OSR is the independent regulator of official statistics in the United Kingdom (UK). In this role, we have the statutory objective of 'promoting and safeguarding the production and publication of official statistics that serve the public good' (Statistics and Registration Service Act, 2007), and we have adopted a vision of 'statistics that serve the public good' (Office for Statistics Regulation, 2019). We deliver this vision through regulatory tools such as our

statutory Code of Practice for Statistics (Office for Statistics Regulation, 2022), which is where we set out expectations for official statistics and their producers. We assess statistics against the pillars of Trustworthiness, Quality and Value set out in the Code and accredit those which we find to meet these standards. Our regulation goes beyond the Code though; for example, we also investigate when individuals raise a concern with us, or when we identify a concern ourselves, regarding the production and use of statistics.

To support our regulatory work, we have invested in a research programme that seeks to deepen our understanding of our vision. This paper explores the need for statistics to serve the public good and then shares insights from our research programme. These insights span perspectives from the UK public to academic literature, to present an initial view on how official statistics may serve the public good. The conclusion outlined in this paper is not a final stance, and we invite readers to share their perspective to further develop understanding in this space.

2. Background

The clearest way to demonstrate the importance of statistics for the public good is to consider the alternative: official statistics as a tool for government alone. While this would allow for monitoring, evidence-informed policy and resource allocation, it would be far from ideal. In a world where official statistics were solely for government, there is information asymmetry, with ordinary people lacking critical insights into social, economic and environmental trends. For individuals, choices such as where to live are more difficult without information about different communities or house prices. Academics struggle to conduct unbiased research, and businesspeople or investors are hindered in their planning and risk assessment. At a government level, decision-making around policies, resource allocation and governance occur behind closed doors, with citizens lacking access to the information they need to evaluate government actions. This means holding governments to account is nearly impossible, and those in power can act to their own advantage and selectively release or manipulate information to suit their narratives. Overall, public trust could crash, weakening civic engagement and damaging democracy.

When statistics are solely for government, the picture is bleak. To prevent the situation described above, the Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics were established, which enshrine the need for compiling and making available official statistics to honour citizens' entitlement to public information (United Nations General Assembly, 2014). However, these principles do not guarantee that official statistics are used to their full potential. There is a middle ground that seems far more likely to play out in reality. Here, statistics are made

available to the public, but true accessibility is an afterthought and meeting the public's needs is seen as 'nice to have' rather than 'essential'.

Agreements such as the Fundamental Principles may safeguard against a scenario where official statistics benefit government alone, but striving to achieve a world where statistics serve the public good is what keep us from falling into the very real possibility of mediocrity.

3. Methods

OSR has four research publications that shed light on how official statistics serve the public good and are currently undertaking two further projects.

Our first research publication was a literature review on 'the public good of statistics: what we know so far' (Office for Statistics Regulation, 2020). The literature review explored the concept of public good in the context of statistics, and discussed four approaches: legislative, empirical research, economic value, and social value. The legislative approach highlighted UK legislation relevant to statistics serving the public good. The empirical research section set out evidence that may be relevant to the public good of official statistics, exploring value, trust and communication of statistics as key themes. The economic and social value approaches considered how these sides of value may be understood.

Our second research publication described analysis exploring how researchers applying to access public data perceived their work as serving the public good (Office for Statistics Regulation, 2021). In the UK, there are two groups that researchers can apply to if they wish to access public data: the National Statistician's Data Ethics Advisory Committee (NSDEC) and the Research Accreditation Panel (RAP). In this research, we analysed applications to these panels both qualitatively and quantitatively to understand how researchers conceived the public good in their applications. The analysis revealed a focus on public benefits related to providing an evidence base for public policy decision-making or decisions benefiting the UK economy, society, or quality of life.

Our third research publication concerned a series of discussions with members of the public across the UK using a method known as public dialogues (Office for Statistics Regulation, 2022). This was procured in collaboration with Administrative Data Research UK, and presents insights into how the UK public perceives the public good of data for research and statistics. It highlights the diversity of public perceptions and the importance of understanding these perspectives in the context of statistics, research and data.

Our fourth and most recent research publication aimed to synthesise the findings from the first three projects, and to bring in external evidence to complement this (Office for Statistics Regulation, 2024). This publication is a think piece, that proposes an initial answer to how statistics can serve the public good.

These publications complement each other by providing a broad understanding of the public good in the context of statistics. They explore the concept from different perspectives - legislative, empirical, economic, social, researchers, and the public - and collectively contribute to a holistic understanding of how statistics can serve the public good.

In addition to these four publications, we are currently undertaking two further pieces of research that are currently unpublished. The first is a mixed-method project exploring through qualitative and quantitative approaches how members of the public use statistics in their daily lives. The findings from this will be crucial in shaping how our regulation can support the public as statistics users. The second ongoing project is a literature review into the role of official statistics in public policy. This will include examples of how statistics have been used in public policy, alongside facilitators and barriers for this. These two ongoing projects each add a new perspective to the overall picture we are building of official statistics serving the public good.

4. Conclusions

As referenced above, our research has explored how statistics can serve the public good so that we may identify practical steps which can be taken by us and others across and associated with the statistical system in pursuit of our vision. From synthesising this research, we have concluded that official statistics serve the public good as public assets that provide insight, which allows them to be used widely for informing understanding and shaping action (Office for Statistics Regulation, 2024). There is a large body of supporting evidence set out in our 2024 publication which explains how we arrived at this statement and what the practical implications of it may be.

Our conclusion about how official statistics serve the public good reflects an initial position and will evolve as further evidence is collected. Such evidence includes views from those within the international statistics community, gleaned through interactions at conferences such as the European Conference on Quality in Official Statistics 2024. Our paper and associated presentation is an invitation for you to join the conversation.

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