

DISCUSSION

Harry Sharp, The University of Michigan

Dr. Bowman and his associates have given us a highly competent review of the state and prospects of social statistics in the United States. Their comment about the presence of a wealth of useful statistics, particularly in the Current Population Surveys, which is not used because the researcher does not know of its existence, is quite true. I would argue with the authors' contention, however, that the fault lies primarily with government researchers. Generally, I feel that the users of government statistics do not employ nearly enough effort to seek out the data which are available to them.

My main feeling about the inadequacy of CPS data was touched on in the paper. Many of us would like to see the government provide such information for relatively small areas. In my own case, CPS data on the ten or twelve largest communities in the United States would be accepted most gratefully.

Perhaps purposefully, Bowman, Gall and Rubin appear to me to be overly critical of the scope of the social statistics which are presently provided by the federal government. For example, they cite the need for data bearing on such important sociological concepts as social status, social mobility, ethnic status, and migration history. It seems a bit unfair to hold the government even partly responsible for definitions of these terms when social scientists, who use such concepts with complete impunity, cannot agree on generally acceptable definitions.

The authors list several areas wherein a greater depth of data is needed, and imply that the government may be criticized for not supplying this information. However, I do not feel we can blame the Bureau of the Census, for example, if recently it has become more cautious in the selection of new areas around which to collect data.

The census people worked industriously to include a question on religious preference in the 1960 decennial census. As the authors indicate, the "public disapproval" of the inquiry, although expressed by only a few well-intentioned groups, was sufficiently organized so that this important question was not asked in 1960. Moreover, publication of CPS data which did relate to this question was severely restricted, through no fault of the Bureau of the Census.

I agree with the authors that a large body of important data remains to be collected, but I doubt that, at least in the near future, we can look to the government to supply a major share of such information. Nongovernmentally financed research probably will continue for many years to give us social statistics that necessarily will be unobtainable through government agencies. The question of costs is an important one, of course. Without a tremendous increase in the allocations for data collections, the only way that more data of the type described in this paper can be made available is to cut-back on the data now being supplied. It would be difficult indeed to obtain agreement on just what forms of presently available data should be dropped, so that different forms can be added. In addition, the very fact that a governmental agency wishes to collect many badly needed types of data will make such action politically, if not economically, unfeasible.

Finally, I sympathize with the authors for not attempting to define "social statistics." But I am not completely clear as to what is or is not social statistics. I thought at first that they were distinguishing between "economic" and "social" statistics. Later I was not so sure. Perhaps they would agree with this definition paraphrased slightly from their paper: social statistics are any statistics which are "used to delineate social...conditions."