FEDERAL STATISTICS, NON-FEDERAL STATISTICIANS

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The first of "three basic questions" in the President's charge to his Commission on Federal Statistics was, "What are the present and future requirements for quantitative information about our society?" The Commission was enjoined to "identify the major problems of today and tomorrow for which information is or will be needed." As Eckler (American Statistician, April 1972) has noted, however, "the content [emphasis added] of the federal statistical system" is an "important subject receiving only a limited amount of attention" in the Report of the Commission proper (Volume I).

I, for one, do not know how the Commission might best have responded to the directive to "indicate the important gaps in economic and social statistics," given a period of less than a year to accomplish this and other tasks. In the Commissioners' shoes, many of us might have proceeded in the ways that they did: pointing out how the "convulsive nature of political events rules out orderly specification of statistical requirements"; incorporating in Volume II, with appropriate disclaimer of endorsement, a consultant's review of developments and desiderata in the field of social indicators; exhorting the Statistical Policy Division (Office of Management and Budget) and the National Science Foundation to continue work that will "insure the long range development of social statistics to serve the needs of the nation"; and recommending the establishment of a continuous outside review committee by the National Research Council.

In his evaluation of the Commission report, to which reference has been made, Eckler looked particularly at the report's treatment of issues relating to activities of the federal statistical agencies. I, too, adopted a particular perspective in scanning the text of the report: that of an academic statistical social scientist who generates some statistics, is a user of others, and from time to time gains a mere inkling of small parts of the "Federal statistical system." I wondered if the Commission was as aware as it should have been of the importance, actual and potential, of non-federal sources of "federal statistics." I was satisfied on this score and pleased that the Commission noted some of the special difficulties under which non-federal producers operate (see pp. 55-59, Vol. I).

The Commission's typology of "user groups" is instructive, highlighting as it does the diversity of interests in and claims upon the products of a statistical system. Too often the uses of statistics are assumed to be solely those of the "program manager." In this report, however, his somewhat circumscribed function is distinguished from that of the "policy maker," one of whose functions is the definition of problems, which involves translating public perceptions of situations into political terms. The policy-maker's plight, vis-a-vis statistics, is depicted in terms of the necessity to react to crises without time to plan for the collection of relevant information. But as to the public, whose role is crucial in this recurrent dilemma, the Commission finds: "Statistics ... enter, in diverse ways, into the formation of the citizen's perception of the world he lives in."

The aim of the whole game, I suppose, is that through improvements in statistics we make the citizen's perceptions more nearly true, the policy-maker's definitions more enlightened, and the program managers' and other users' actions more efficacious. The Commission did not fail to understand the open-ended nature of the process, as the reader realizes (among other ways) upon encountering the perceptive discussion of the notion of statistical "gaps." A paradoxical conclusion is implicit in the tenor of this discussion: the number of gaps you perceive varies directly, and not inversely, with the amount you know already. Thus, in recommending the upgrading of exploratory social science research to produce (with federal funding) more and/or better primary data, the Commission surely sensed that a major by-product will be more numerous and more prominent "gaps" in our knowledge of what is going on in the society.

There is a great deal that policy-makers need to know, but the report quotes a perceptive official to this effect: "... the government is simply not good at defining what it wants to do in terms of needed social science research. ...the government, in general, can only articulate the area in which it needs information..." I would go even further and argue (if pressed to do so) that there is more that government needs to know than it necessarily wants to know. This brings us back to the citizen and his "perception of the world he lives in." For it is the changes in both the world and the perceptions of the world, as communicated by the citizenry to politicians and bureaucrats, that drive the processes of democratic government.

Responsive as the federal policy-maker must be to changes in the citizen's perceptions, for reliable knowledge of which he must have statistics, it does not follow that the needed "federal statistics" are necessarily federally-collected statistics. Indeed, precisely insofar as perceptions of the citizenry are at stake, one has to be a little, or more than a little, suspicious of the potential bias of auspices.

Consider the following statistics that ought to be of the highest interest to at least some policy-makers. My colleagues at the Institute for Social Research report (ISR Newsletter, Winter 1972) "a massive erosion in the trust the American people have in their government," as evidenced, among other things, by the decrease from 62 to 35 per cent in the proportion of the public expressing a "high" level of trust in government between 1964 and 1970.

This grim intelligence raises at least two questions for statisticians: If the populace is losing its trust in government in general, is it also losing its trust in that part of the government that carries out population enumerations and sample surveys? Moreover, if policy makers should come to acknowledge the importance of this kind of data, would they do better to ask the Bureau of the Census to collect them, or to rely upon a third party, such as ISR or another reputable survey or polling organization?

Let me cite another example. In a current project we have responses to the following question, asked of probability samples of the metropolitan Detroit population in 1958 and 1971: "Do you feel that someone who doesn't believe in God can be a good American, or not?" In 1958, 57 per cent said he can; in 1971, 77 per cent. If not the "policy-maker," then someone in government needs to understand that the American public increasingly dissociates Christian theology from American democracy, public political ceremonies to the contrary notwithstanding. To me, at least, it seems evident that this is one small piece of statistical information--admittedly a small one indeed, adduced only for illustrative purposes--that ought to be in the hands of the Congress as it debates a bill for federal aid to parochial schools or the President as he decided whether to sign or veto such a bill.

The issue for federal statistics, of course, is that no federal statistical agency has any business whatever inquiring about anyone's religious beliefs, even though information about the distribution of beliefs in the population is pertinent to various federal policies. Again we must concur with the Commission that the scope of "federal statistics"--meaning, the domain of statistical intelligence useful to federal officials--exceeds the scope of statistics produced by federal statisticians. To the reasons given by the Commission for this state of affairs, I have tried to all one, to wit, that some kinds of subject matter are, or surely should be, beyond the competence of the government to include in questions put to, or records compiled about, the individual citizen.

If we should happen to become serious about the matter of social indicators in the manner suggested by the Commission's consultant (Vol. II, Ch. 7) or in some other substantial way, we can only anticipate that the relative importance of these subjects, off limits to the federal statistician, will increase. The personal life of the citizen and his "perception of the world he lives in" are precisely what some of the most informative social indicators will be about. Social indicators are needed, both by the policy maker and by the citizen in his several capacities, because of the increasing complexity and interdependence of the society and the accelerated pace of social change. Our recognition of problems for policy often depends on how this change impinges upon the personal lives of individuals, both in those respects that government has an acknowledged right to look into--criminal behavior, for instance--and in respects that are no business of the government vis-à-vis the individual citizen but are relevant to government's relations with the aggregate of the citizenry.

I feel, therefore, that the Commission was well advised in acknowledging the role of the non-federal producers of some statistics useful in governance. The Commission might well have done even more to delineate appropriate roles for such producers. The report does appropriately touch on the matter of statistical standards in the work these producers carry out under contracts or grants. As the Commission notes, statistics so procured are supposed to be subject to review by the Statistical Policy Division, but under present conditions such review does not provide adequate control. It is not clear to me that increasing the number of SPD personnel assigned to this function and extending its authority to scrutinize "research" as well as "information collection" will, by itself, resolve the problem of variable and substandard quality of non-federal statistical work undertaken with federal funds.

What is really at stake is the development and diffusion of suitable standards --standards that would apply to all serious

research for public consumption and not only that part of it undertaken at federal behest. Just as a suggestion for further consideration, it seems to me that the Committee on National Statistics established by the National Research Council in response to a Commission recommendation might put this issue on its continuing agenda. We need, first of all, some good documentation of the nature of the problem and estimates of its current and forseeable magnitude. Then, I suppose, there would be a basis for discussions and studies involving selected non-federal producers of statistics, the SPD, and CNS.

If the times appear suitable for a cooperative effort, we might envision the establishment under CNS or other appropriate auspices a National Conference for Standards of Social Measurement. I would envision this as an organization of individuals and non-federal research units engaged in producing social statistics. Their purpose would be to develop and disseminate recommendations for standard procedures to be used routinely in carrying out and reporting statistical studies, in the absence of sufficient and explicit reason to the contrary.

The Conference would have no police powers and should be chary of the exercise of even informal sanctions. Its authority would derive from the careful staff work and thorough discussions directed toward defining the "state of the art" with respect to each facet of study design. In particular, the Conference should move toward recommendations for standard definitions of those social categories and variables which are used in a routine way in a variety of studies. At the present time one of the most annoying obstacles to the cumulation and comparability of statistical intelligence is the capricious variation from one survey to another in definitions of such elemental items as educational attainment, religious affiliation, or political party preference. In principle, it is not an insuperable problem to suggest criteria for the choice among alternative forms of these questions in the context of general-purpose surveys. The mere announcement that a competent national body recommends a particular alternative might go far toward reducing the current level of chaos.

There would, of course, be other kinds of tasks for a National Conference on Standards of Social Measurement. What I am suggesting, I suppose, is an effort directed to the broad non-federal statistical community so as to accomplish for it something of what the Commission recommendations are intended to accomplish for federal statistics in the narrow sense.