

Conrad Taeuber, Georgetown University

Those of you who have not known Phil Hauser as long as I have may not find it strange, as I do, to have him express a sense of inferiority about his field. He makes a bow in the direction of economic statistics as being better developed, more systematically integrated, and more subject to policy and programmatic use. One could gain the impression that he overlooks the fact that much criticism is currently being levelled at use of GNP as an indicator of national well being. True, there is no counterpart which clearly points out the gaps in our statistical system, as the GNP has done. There is also less hesitation on the part of public figures to venture into social policy than into economic policy without a firm basis of statistical information. But given the diversity of goals for social policy, it is doubtful that we are ready for one synthetic index which might be thought of as the Comprehensive Social Welfare Index.

It is valid to assume that the growing concentration of our population in clusters which we designate as metropolitan creates a setting in which government and other organizations have a growing role to play. Given the multiplication of human contacts in the urban society, there is little doubt that we will see more governmental intervention and that private organizations of many kinds will play an ever increasing role. All of them will call for more information, for it will become increasingly apparent that the knowledge which an individual gains through his own contacts is insufficient as a basis for action, and that more and more the administrator will recognize a need for an array of firmly established facts.

We have already witnessed changes in the attitudes toward the maintenance of privacy and no doubt there will be further developments in this field. As Hauser points out, the computer has opened up new possibilities and given rise to concerns over the possibilities of abuse, because of its ability to bring together, store, and retrieve vast amounts of information. However, the suggestion of huge data banks available for both administrative and statistical purposes may be going further than we would be prepared to go in the foreseeable future. It is easier to visualize two sets of data collection and storage, with one devoted to statistical activities and the other devoted to individual rights and benefits. The former should have access to the latter but not vice versa. I believe we are going to be willing to pay the price of some duplication in order to maintain this degree of separation.

One possibility which opens new fields for analysis and raises additional fears about the invasion of privacy is that involved in longitudinal studies, i.e., the ability to follow a person, a family, a firm, etc., over a period of time. The cross sectional analyses which are the major sources of information about change cannot do what is possible from an analysis of data that follow a person or a cohort through an appropriate time period. No doubt we will lose some of our sensitivity about providing a basis for such longitudinal analysis, and also lose some of the fear

of a data bank which has "everything about everybody." But in saying this I am reminded that in Sweden, with its population register which follows a person from the cradle to the grave, there have recently been widespread vocal concerns over the alleged intrusiveness of the government in seeking information which is considered to be in the private domain. On the other hand, a visitor to that country can hardly refrain from voicing surprise at how little analysis has been done with the rich body of data that is located in the population register.

A great deal of work is required to make even the currently available data sets useful for public policy. No doubt that will be done, for the demands for information are growing rapidly and there is a great need for better ways of extracting information from sets of data.

One may be permitted the hope that by the year 2000 the new generation of policy makers will be less concerned with race and ethnicity than we are now, though concern with minority groups in the society no doubt will continue to be high on our list of national priorities.

If the social changes projected by Professor Hauser actually occur, this will not be because they just happened but rather because actions were taken to adjust to social change or to initiate and promote certain changes. Statisticians also need to play an active role. If the statistical system is to meet its obligations, it is necessary that there be far more attention to underlying assumptions and concepts than has been the case in recent years. There are many situations in which the statistician must help the policy maker define the areas for which information is desired. There is an obligation here which has been inadequately fulfilled in the past and which will require more concerted attention in the future. Too often the matter of reviewing and revising concepts which underlie statistical series has been neglected. There is a need for far more attention to the question whether the definitions used reflect the reality for which measurement is desired. Professor Hauser has called attention to his efforts to provide a more adequate measure of underemployment, a concept which has been largely neglected in the official statistics of this and other countries.

This is only one illustration of the need for rethinking the assumptions that underlie our statistical series. The rate of social change is not likely to be less over the next quarter century than it has been in the last one. The social realities which our statistics are intended to reflect are likely to change at a rapid rate. Unless the statistics are continually adjusted to these changing realities, they do not fulfill their proper function and may actually be misleading.

A new element will enter the official statistical picture between now and the year 2000. That is the provision for a Census of Population every five years instead of every ten, as in the past. The Act providing for that Census carries with it the injunction to take full account of data available from other sources. Much of the discussion preceding the approval of that Census centered on

the expectation that the middecade census would become the focal effort around which a whole program of current statistics would be developed and that the consequence would be a more rational and more effective program of demographic and related data. The realization of the proposed integration of census and current data collection remains to be worked out, but it is clear that there are new possibilities which need careful planning.

The last twenty five years have witnessed significant changes in the social statistics which are becoming available, both as to scope and quantity. There have been marked improvements in the ability to extract information from data collection activities. There is no reason to assume that in this respect we "have gone about as far as we can go."