

SJIAOS Discussion Platform

Launch of the seventh discussion topic: Misuse of Statistics: Time to speak out.

The seventh discussion focuses on Misuse of Statistics. It aims to centre around comments and contributions around the need for trustworthy information to guide decision making and enable citizens to understand issues that affect their health and livelihoods.

Misuse of statistics is a phenomenon as old a statistics it self. Regulatory systems like the Fundamental Principles for Official Statistics, statistical laws and rules for ethical behavior of statisticians aim to avoid and whenever needed correct forms of misuse of statistics. The data revolution, new data sets (Big Data) and open data all cause an even more complex society with an increasing number of stakeholders that is supposed to comply with these official statistics quality and behavioral requirements. Times of crisis like we are now in at a world-wide scale, ‘invites’ even more than in normal times those who have an interest in specific figures to massage, manipulate or even falsify information. The impact of misuse of statistics or false statistics is apparent.

All this makes a discussion on Misuse of statistics even more current, and surely justifies the second part of the title: Time to speak out.

Discussion can be held at a theoretic level. However, reality is much harder and ask for very strong leadership and support mechanisms to prevent misuse. The many and almost unstoppable list of occurrences shows that the commitment from policy makers is most relevant and cannot even in developed countries not always be trusted. Any situation also in developed countries shows that the use and misuse of statistics is an issue that is occurring.

Background for the statements for this discussion can be found in the five contributions in this issue of the Journal but also in earlier work that has been done in this field. This recurrent and evidently very important theme has also been the theme of two events that took place during the last six months. A webinar hosted by the International Association for Official Statistics (IAOS) on 6 October 2020 as a side meeting to the UN World Data Forum (UN-WDF) and on 22 February

2021 a side meeting to the UN Statistics Committee (UNSC) brought together many voices on this issue, describing specific cases, their impact but also the way this misuse currently is, can and should be treated.

This discussion will come on line, with specific statements around the 22nd of February 2021. See www.officialstatistics.com.

Other ongoing discussions on the SJIAOS Discussion platform (www.officialstatistics.com)

Special discussion:

Crises, politics and statistics: Official statistics in the context of the COVID-19 crisis. The COVID-19 discussion is rejuvenated with new statements

A *special* discussion on the SJIAOS discussion platform (www.officialstatistics.com) focusses on the roles of Official Statistics in the context of the COVID-19 crisis. It states the important role that official statistics will have to play in the phase of world-wide recovery from the pandemic and the rapid investments and actions that are needed to fulfill properly this role. It also emphasis the importance of investing in achieving the objectives of the SDG indicators, the need to develop new statistics and using modern data sources, and last but not least the establishment of a new role of official statistics in the public statistical infrastructure.

See: <https://officialstatistics.com/news-blog/official-statistics-methods-need-investments-be-robust-enough-maintain-sufficient-product>.

The first set of statements in the special discussion on the SJIAOS discussion platform focused on the roles of Official Statistics in the context of the COVID-19 crisis. It stated the important role that official statistics will have to play in the phase of world-wide recovery from the pandemic and the rapid investments and actions that are needed to fulfill properly this role. With the second set of statements we want the discussion to focus now on the impact of the pandemic on statistical methodology and especially the effect the of the strong economic downturn on techniques and time series data used for estimations in now- and forecasting.

Official statistics methods need investments to be robust enough to maintain sufficient product quality in times of economic downturns

Official statistics has not properly researched and understood how its methods and models behave at times of downturns (and potentially in the corresponding situation of similarly paced (unpredictable and fast) growths – though these seem to be infrequent compared to downturns). There is generally a wish to make methods robust to unusual changes, but these are often tackled situation by situation. Production of official statistics during COVID-19 has necessitated some radical changes in both data collection and statistical methods; these have been introduced with admirable speed and dedication, but this process would have been made easier with a body of research already in place to draw from.

This discussion on the SJAOS discussion platform is based statements extracted from the article ‘**Robust official business statistics methodology during COVID-19-related and other economic downturns**’ by Paul A. Smith and Boris Lorenc (respectively. University of Southampton; Bright Lynx Research; European Network for Better Establishment Statistics). This article is available as blog on: <https://officialstatistics.com/news-blog/robust-official-business-statistics-methodology-during-covid-19-related-and-other>.

The sixth discussion on the discussion platform: Successes and challenges of regional cooperation and capacity building in Statistics: the example of the Asia-Pacific region

The sixth discussion on the discussion platform centers around innovations and transformations in official statistics production and dissemination. The four statements are based on experiences from Asia-Pacific countries as reflected in the special section on the Asia-Pacific Statistics week in Volume 36 (2020) Nr. 4: <https://content.iospress.com/articles/statistical-journal-of-the-iaos/sji200771>.

The discussion aims to highlight, beyond the results and successes, challenges, problems and pitfalls of national and international initiatives to improve the national statistical systems of low and middle income countries. Participants will be invited to reflect on the role and impact regional organizations like UN ESCAP, international statistical organizations (for example custodian agencies for the SDG’s) and support from individual donor countries can have. The discussion will emphasize experiences and lessons with deploying methods and tools to support the development of

national statistical systems at the policy, organizational and individual levels.

The fifth discussion on the discussion platform centers around statements taken from Volume 36 (2020), Nr. 3, The Future of economic statistics.

<https://content.iospress.com/articles/statistical-journal-of-the-iaos/sji209007>.

The discussion focuses on the four inter-related and mutually reinforcing building blocks of the emerging new statistical business model for economic statistics: outreach and user consultation; statistical framework; institutional and statistical operations, and data stewardship; and statistical infrastructure and data solutions

Under the purview of the United Nations Statistical Commission, consultation activities and discussions with the representatives of the national and international statistical organizations and senior economists led to the acknowledgement that the future system of economic statistics needs to be more responsive and agile to better meet the collective needs of users. Greater responsiveness of the statistical system can be achieved by allowing the statistical and institutional operations and supporting infrastructure greater experimentation, and by increased collaboration and co-investment in the areas of data access, data sharing and exchange, new data solutions and technological resources. The COVID 19 pandemic and its global impact has provided the official statistical community an opportunity to meet this challenge for official statistics collectively in demonstrating its resilience, maintaining its relevance, and proving its responsiveness.

The four statements focus on the most important elements of a new statistical business model that is needed to achieve such a more responsive and agile system of economic statistics. Main question is if we official statisticians and our environment are sufficiently up for the challenges, and adequately focused and resourced to make this new statistical business model a reality.

The fourth discussion on the discussion platform, launched in June 2020, centers around statements taken from the article by Andreas Georgiou. ‘Pre-release access to official statistics is not consistent with professional ethics’

Vol 36 (2020), Nr. 2: <https://content.iospress.com/articles/statistical-journal-of-the-iaos/sji200620>.

Pre-release practice to official statistics varies across and within countries, with pre-release practiced widely: pre-release access by government and pre-release access by the press. In defending their policies and prac-

tices countries argue for and against specific pre-release options. Relevant questions in this discussion will be for example if advertised pre-release access by policy makers preclude the possibility of pressure (or the perception thereof) on the independent production of statistics to serve political/policy interests? Is pre-release to government impartial when it gives at least a head start to the party in power relative to its opposition? Does pre-release access by the press adequately protect the level playing field for market participants, and does not lead to profiteering by some? Do the benefits of pre-release outweigh the costs associated with the risks? Is there a need for strengthening the existing movement away from pre-release access and a tightening of the guidelines in codes of practice for official statistics?'

The third discussion on the SJAOS discussion platform launched in March 2020, focusses on the Population and Housing Censuses.

You are invited to take position on questions like if the census should be defined by its unique methodology or are the outputs the main element of its definition? If the criteria of individual enumeration, universality, simultaneity, defined periodicity, and capacity to produce small-area statistics, are still that relevant as essential features of a census? On the necessity of a census methodology the theoretical soundness of the register based census is questioned. The readers are also invited to give an opinion on to what extent the limited use of census results, in particular for evidence-based policy making, is still worth the huge costs. The background for this discussion is the special issue on the 2020 Round of Population and Housing Censuses: see: <https://content.iospress.com/journals/statistical-journal-of-the-iaos/36/1>.

You are invited to contribute to the discussions on: www.officialstatistics.com.

Earlier (closed) discussions

The first discussion, kicked off in September 2019 is closed for contributions. The closing article for this discussion is published in the December 2020 issue (Vol36, 2020, Nr. 4, pp. 1299–1306).

See: <https://content.iospress.com/articles/statistical-journal-of-the-iaos/sji200722>.

The second discussion 'Reflections on the future of official statistics in a digital and globalised society' was

kicked off in December 2019 and will be closed with a closing article in the June 2021 issue (Vol37, 2021, Nr. 2).

Some background on the SJAOS discussion platform

In August 2019 the Statistical Journal of the International Association for Official Statistics (SJAOS) launched the new on-line platform for discussion on topics of significant relevance for official statistics (www.officialstatistics.com) as part of the SJAOS website. The discussion platform invites you to contribute to important discussions at a time of your own choosing.

The ISI World Statistics Conference, the IAOS conference and Journals like the *Statistical Journal of the IAOS*, are the traditional platforms where views on new developments and important issues in Official Statistics are exchanged. However, conferences occur only a few times per year, journal issues are released maybe four times per year and typically only reach specific interest groups. This new on-line discussion platform of the SJAOS is an opportunity for anyone working or interested in official statistics, to contribute to topical discussions, at your own convenience.

Every three months there is a new discussion item. With each issue of the SJAOS, a new discussion topic will be launched via a leading article. Statements from this article will then invite you to post your opinion and arguments. Each discussion will run for a year and be closed with a concluding commentary by the article author(s). When fully up and running (after four journal issues), there will be four different discussions topics open for your contribution at any one time.

The discussion platform can be found on a prominent place on the new SJAOS website (www.officialstatistics.com). Contributions have to be in English, have to be clear and concise, specifically addressing one of the statements and should not exceed 25 lines. When considered useful, references to a longer text (article, paper) can be added as an attachment. Contributors are required to register on the discussion platform. Anonymous contributions are not appreciated.

The SJAOS discussion platform editor (James Whitworth) moderates the discussions and the quality of the contributions (but of course not on the positions taken), takes decisions on the integrity of the arguments and is available for support when needed.