



Omnibus Survey: Initial Findings on Public Confidence in Official Statistics

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Key findings

- On average, most respondents neither trusted nor distrusted official figures.
- Respondents were far more trusting of the quality of official figures than the integrity of official figures.
- Survey respondents' degree of trust in government institutions, and their age, were the two most important characteristics in predicting trust or distrust in official figures.

Introduction

This report presents preliminary findings on the level of confidence the UK public has in official statistics. It is based on data collected from the July 2004 National Statistics Omnibus Survey and provides information on the:

- level of trust survey respondents had in official figures;
- reasons respondents trusted or distrusted official figures; and
- personal characteristics of respondents who trusted or distrusted official figures.

To ensure the questions asked on the Omnibus Survey made sense to the general public, and elicited the information required, focus groups and cognitive interviews were used to develop the questions. Focus group and interview participants showed diverse levels of knowledge and interest in statistics, and varied in their ability to give informed opinions on the subject. Participants showed limited awareness of the amount and range of official statistics produced and of the organisations which produced them.

The survey questions therefore focused on a variety of official statistics produced by a range of government institutions. The term 'figures' rather than 'statistics' was used as participants found this less intimidating. Questions focused on trust in particular statistics rather than the specific institutions that produced them due to participants' lack of knowledge in this area. For example, rather than asking about their level of trust in the Office for National Statistics (ONS) - of which around half of respondents had heard of prior to participating in the survey - the questions focused on well known statistics produced by ONS, in this case, unemployment. In addition, a broad range of statistics were chosen, covering a variety of subjects with which respondents may have been familiar.

The data collected on the Omnibus Survey is part of a joint ONS/Statistics Commission project to understand better the nature of confidence in official statistics. Other strands of the project include (additional) focus groups with the general public, interviews with 'opinion-formers' and a review of international experiences. A report

will be published in early 2005 bringing together the findings from the various strands, including more in-depth analysis of the Omnibus data.

Trust in official statistics

A number of questions on the Omnibus were designed to measure the extent of trust in particular official figures. Respondents were asked about their level of trust in the official figures published on:

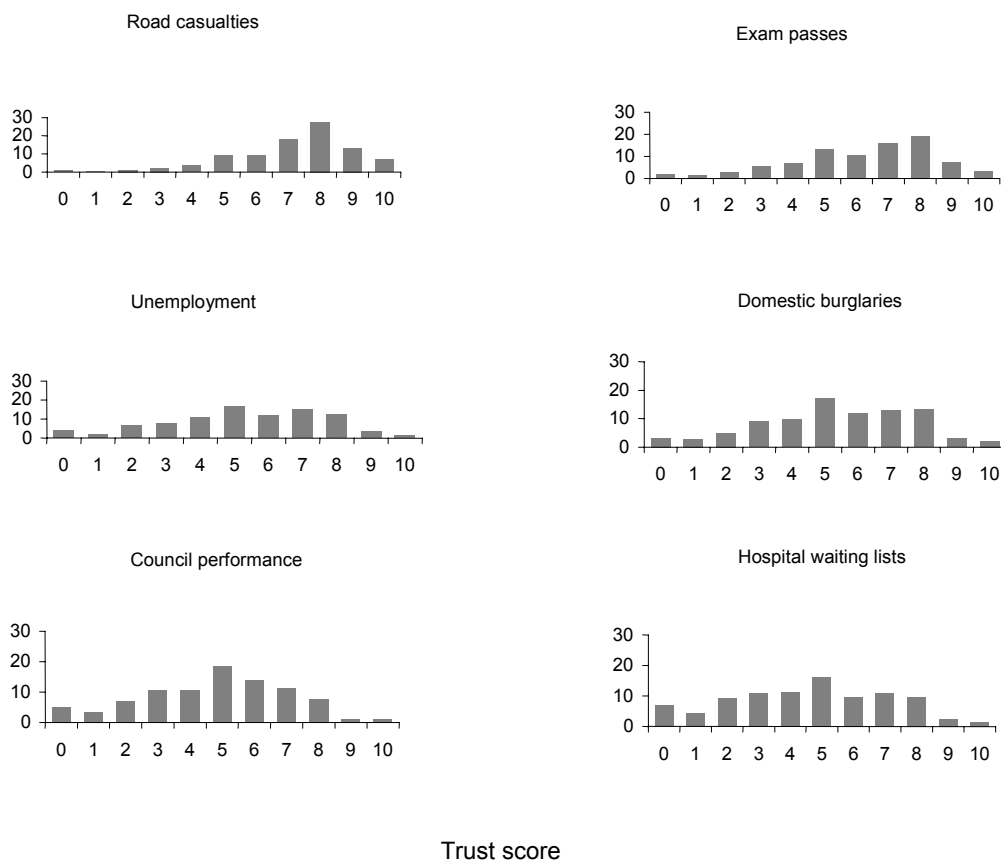
- road casualties;
- exam passes;
- unemployment;
- domestic burglaries;
- council performance; and
- hospital waiting lists.

Respondents answered on a scale from 0, meaning 'do not trust at all', up to 10, meaning 'trust completely'.

As Figure 1 illustrates, the responses were well distributed across the full range of this scale, although most responses ranged between three and eight.

Figure 1: Level of trust in six official figures, scored 0-10, July 2004

Great Britain
Percentages



1 Where 0 means 'do not trust at all' and 10 means 'trust completely'

The average trust score for each of the six official figures that respondents were asked about in the survey is shown in Figure 2. At 5.6, the overall average is approximately mid-scale – though slightly more to the trust end of the scale.

Figure 2: The average level of trust in six official figures, scored 0-10¹, July 2004

Great Britain	
	Average score
Road casualties	7.2
Exam passes	6.2
Unemployment	5.3
Domestic burglaries	5.3
Council performance	4.8
Hospital waiting lists	4.6
Overall average	5.6

1 Where 0 means 'do not trust at all' and 10 means 'trust completely'

These findings indicate that people did not simply trust or distrust official figures, but that there was a sliding scale of trust with most respondents, on average, neither trusting nor distrusting official figures. There were also different degrees of trust in different figures.

Reasons given for trusting or distrusting official statistics

Survey respondents were asked to choose from a list of reasons why they either trusted or distrusted particular official figures.

Of the figures respondents were asked about, road traffic casualties were the most trusted. The two main reasons given for this were that these figures were easy to measure (28% of respondents), and there was no benefit in manipulating them (20%).

Exam passes were the next most trusted figures. There was an above average level of trust in these figures based on respondents 'personal experience' (16%) and belief that these figures were easy to measure (14%). However, a number of respondents (16%) felt that 'the figures were accurate, but alone do not tell the whole story'.

Respondents had a slightly below average level of trust in official unemployment and domestic burglary figures. The main reasons for distrusting unemployment and burglary figures were the belief that they were difficult to measure (12% and 20% respectively) and distrust in how they were collected/produced (14% and 12% respectively). For unemployment figures there was also a relatively high proportion (12%) of respondents who did not trust 'politicians use/presentation of these figures'.

The most common reason for distrusting local council performance figures was the 'council's use/presentation of these figures', with 18% of respondents choosing this reason. Sixteen per cent did not trust these figures due to 'personal experience'.

Finally, hospital waiting list figures were the least trusted of the official figures asked about in the survey. 'Personal experience' was the most common reason for

distrusting these figures, with 26% of respondents choosing this response. Around 13% had 'heard/read something bad' about the figures, and 12% did not trust the 'department's use/presentation of these figures'.

General views about official statistics

Respondents were also asked to agree or disagree with several statements about official figures. The results are shown in Figure 3.

When asked about the general accuracy of official figures there was a roughly even split between those who thought they were accurate and those who did not. This indicates an equal distribution of respondents who trusted or distrusted the quality of figures. However, the majority of respondents believed official figures were changed to support a particular argument (68%), that there was political interference in their production (58%), and that mistakes were suppressed (69%). This suggests that respondents were more concerned about the integrity of figures than their quality.

Respondents were also asked to agree or disagree with the statement 'The Government uses official figures honestly when talking about its policies'. The majority of respondents (59%) disagreed with this statement. The level of distrust in the Government's use of figures is similar to the level of distrust in other aspects of integrity.

Figure 3: General views about official figures, July 2004

Great Britain	Percentages		
	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree
Official figures are generally accurate	34	30	36
Official figures are changed to support whatever argument people want them to	68	20	12
Official figures are produced without political interference	17	25	58
If a mistake had been made when producing official figures the public would not be told about it	69	16	14
The Government uses official figures honestly when talking about its policies	15	25	59

Respondents' views regarding the quality and integrity of official figures were assessed against their average level of trust in official figures (see Figure 4). Respondents were categorised into three groups based on an average of their level of trust in each of the six official figures asked about in the survey; those with high, medium or low levels of trust in official figures.

For most respondents, their view on the quality of official figures mirrored their level of trust in official figures. The majority of respondents with a high level of trust in official figures generally believed that the figures were accurate, while those with a low level of trust generally did not.

Views regarding the integrity of figures present a different picture. As expected, those with low levels of trust in official figures were more likely to believe that the figures were changed to support a particular argument, that there was political interference in their production, that mistakes were suppressed, and that the Government did not use figures honestly when talking about its policies. However, those with medium and high levels of trust, on balance, also held these beliefs. Around 70 per cent of those with medium levels of trust in official figures, and around 57 per cent of those with high levels of trust, believed that figures were changed to support a particular argument and that mistakes would be suppressed. Around 59 per cent of those with medium trust, and around 40 per cent with high trust, believed that there was political interference in the production of figures and that the Government did not use figures honestly when talking about its policies.

These findings indicate that respondents' average level of trust in official figures reflected their view on the quality of official figures, however, it did not reflect their view on the integrity of figures. Despite some respondents' high level of trust in the figures, and particularly the quality, they still distrusted the integrity of figures.

Figure 4: General views about official figures, by average level of trust in official figures, July 2004

Great Britain		Percentages		
		General views about official figures		
		Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree
Official figures are generally accurate				
Average level of trust in official figures	High ¹	62	25	13
	Medium ¹	32	35	33
	Low ¹	9	24	67
Official figures are changed to support whatever argument people want them to				
Average level of trust in official figures	High ¹	57	25	19
	Medium ¹	69	20	11
	Low ¹	81	12	7
Official figures are produced without political interference				
Average level of trust in official figures	High ¹	26	33	42
	Medium ¹	16	25	58
	Low ¹	9	13	78
If a mistake had been made when producing official figures the public would not be told about it				
Average level of trust in official figures	High ¹	56	23	22
	Medium ¹	71	15	14
	Low ¹	85	8	7
The Government uses official figures honestly when talking about its policies				
Average level of trust in official figures	High ¹	31	31	39
	Medium ¹	13	27	60
	Low ¹	5	11	83

¹ Respondents are categorised according to their average trust score for each of the six official statistics asked about in the Omnibus Survey.

Which groups of people are more likely to trust official statistics?

The level of trust in official figures varied across different groups.

As stated, respondents were categorised into three groups - high, medium or low - based on an average of their level of trust in official figures. For each group of respondents various personal characteristics were considered such as age, sex, socio-economic status, trust in others, and trust in institutions. Figure 5 shows those personal characteristics which were most strongly associated with trust in official figures.

There is a strong association between trust in official figures and trust in government institutions. As with official figures, respondents were asked about how much they trusted various institutions, namely the local council, civil service, Welsh Assembly, Scottish Executive, UK Government, police, courts and National Health Service. An average of their score was used to classify them as having high, medium or low levels of trust in government institutions. The majority of respondents that showed high levels of trust in government institutions also showed high levels of trust in official figures. Conversely, the majority of those with low levels of trust in government institutions had low levels of trust in official figures.

Age was also strongly associated with trust in official figures. Generally, the younger and older age groups were more likely to trust official figures.

Although respondents' trust in institutions and respondents' age were the two most important characteristics in explaining their propensity to trust or distrust official figures, there were other characteristics that were associated with levels of trust in official figures. Respondents were asked about how trusting they were of other people. Those who trusted others were more likely to trust official figures, although the association was not as strong as for trust in institutions and for age. Respondents' level of interest in politics and how important they thought official figures were for decision making were also associated with levels of trust. The greater their interest in politics, or the importance they placed on figures for decision making, the more trusting they were of official figures.

Figure 5: Characteristics of respondents, by average level of trust in official figures, July 2004

Great Britain	Percentages		
	Average level of trust in official figures		
	High ¹	Medium ¹	Low ¹
Average level of trust in government institutions			
High ²	55	40	6
Medium ²	24	58	18
Low ²	6	34	60
Age			
16 to 34	30	51	19
35 to 54	22	49	29
55 and over	31	43	26
Trust in other people			
Generally trust others	34	47	19
It depends	29	50	20
Can't be too careful	24	46	30
Level of interest in politics			
A lot	31	45	24
Some	29	47	25
Not very much	26	51	23
None at all	24	42	34
Importance of official statistics			
Very important	38	38	24
Fairly important	30	50	20
Neither	14	53	33
Fairly unimportant	12	46	42
Very unimportant	9	35	56
All persons	27	46	25

1 Respondents are categorised according to their average trust score for each of the six official statistics asked about in the Omnibus Survey.

2 Respondents are categorised according to their average trust score for each of the eight government institutions asked about in the Omnibus Survey.