



## **International Awareness: Public Confidence in Official Statistics**

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### **AIM AND OBJECTIVE**

The international component of the Public Confidence in Official Statistics Project attempted to identify:

- whether there are research methods in use across other countries that could be adopted in the UK
- whether quantitative measures of public confidence in other countries are produced that could be used to benchmark the UK experience
- irrespective of whether research is conducted, are activities undertaken to improve public trust in official statistics that could be used in the UK

### **METHODOLOGY**

The international branch of 31 National Statistical Offices were approached.

### **SUMMARY**

Of the 31 countries approached 18 responded (58%). The main conclusions are:

- there is considerable agreement that understanding the factors underlying confidence in official statistics is important
- beyond the Nordic countries little research appears to have been conducted
- of those countries that conduct research, the results have no direct input into publicity campaigns
- it is considered very difficult, at least in the short-run, to influence the level of confidence in official statistics
- further work is required to assess whether it is appropriate to benchmark the UK against any of the countries surveyed

## **SUMMARY OF COUNTRY RESPONSES**

### **Finland**

As the research is aimed to get a picture of attitudes concerning Statistics Finland (SF) it is not considered appropriate for SF to conduct it themselves. A commercial research firm undertakes it on their behalf.

The survey consists of a set of questions on people's knowledge and attitudes concerning SF and statistics in general. The questionnaire was designed in 1975 and redesigned in 1999. The contents vary a little from time to time but in general time series have only one break (1999).

The questions are structured in the following way:

1. Here is a list of organisations, which one of them do you know?
2. If the respondent identifies SF, there is a question on what he/she thinks it is doing. If the respondent cannot answer or is clearly wrong, he/she is classified among those not knowing SF. (87 % know SF)
3. There follows a set of structured attitude questions:
  - is SF useful for society or only for a part of it or is it a useless organisation? (64 % say it is useful for the whole society)
  - do SF promote its activities enough, too much or too little? (58 % say it promotes too little)
  - do SF's statistics report on important matters? (86% say that most of them report on important matters)
  - is SF's information reliable? (87 % trust them)
  - are SF's statistics timely enough? (84% say that they are)
  - is SF's information impartial? (75% say they are most often impartial)
  - is statistical information in general easy to understand? (67% say it is easy to understand)
  - do you get enough information on what different statistical figures mean? (25% think that statistical information is not well explained)
4. Last question is not structured: If you needed statistical information, where would you search for it? (45% say that they would go to the internet)

The research firm provides tabulations and SF produce a short report. The results are part of SF's reporting routines. The figures themselves do not constitute a basis for specific activities and it is considered very difficult to have an effect on certain numbers with a campaign or project. The figures have, however, functioned as an argument for development projects: in the 70's they were a first sign of the need to establish a press service, in the 80's they identified the beginning of marketing development, in the 90's they were a basis for development of better reporting and customer education on statistics, now they have shown the importance of the development of internet services.

## Sweden

Statistics Sweden (SS) conducts an "Image Survey" - The Public's Opinion of Statistics Sweden. It is an annual survey (used to be biannual) and is part of the omnibus survey that SS carry out. Several different topics share the same questionnaire, with a standardised sampling, data collection and estimation plan making the survey relatively cheap to conduct. The results are used mainly in a "barometer" fashion, in that no action will be taken if the situation is "OK". A report is compiled for each survey (only in Swedish). Some examples of questions are:

- How important do you find statistics to be in society as a basis for decision making, research and debate? (23% very important, 13% not that important, 2% not important at all, 11% not available)
- If you were asked, would you consider providing information about the following
  - Health (68%)
  - Personal interests (79%)
  - Employment (77%)
  - Income and expenditure (60%)
  - Political views (55%)
  - Working environment (75%)
- Each month SS published data on price changes. How accurate a picture do you find them of reality? (Almost always correct 16%, sometimes correct, sometimes not 65%, Almost always incorrect 3%)
- Do you find SS to be an objective and impartial government agency? (Yes, mostly 55%, Yes, partly 20%, No, not at all 3%, na 22%)
- Do you believe that information you have provided about yourself can be used in way that you disapprove of? (yes 6%, maybe 34%, no 45%, na 15%)
- What is your general view of SS? (very positive 11%, fairly positive 36%, indifferent 34%, fairly negative 2%, very negative 1%, na 16%)

It is considered difficult to influence results, which have been fairly stable over the last 5-10 years.

## Denmark

A question on confidence is included in the "citizen survey", which is carried out every second year. In this survey a sample of citizens 16 years and over is asked seven questions on knowledge of and attitude to Statistics Denmark.

One question is phrased: "In your opinion, does Statistics Denmark work objectively and politically unbiased, or are the figures dependent on political interests?"

When the survey was last carried out in 2002, the response pattern was:

71%: "Almost completely objectively and politically unbiased"

12%: "Partly objectively and politically unbiased, partly dependent on political interests"

4%: "Almost completely dependent on political interests"

13%: No answer

This response pattern has changed very little since the survey was first carried out in 2000, with a slight tendency towards improvement.

Statistics Denmark have not analysed the crucial factors behind trust in official statistics, but think that one factor certainly is to react without hesitation, when our figures are misused or misinterpreted. This is part of Statistics Denmark's daily press routines.

## **Australia**

The Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) has not conducted research into the factors underpinning public trust and confidence in official statistics. ABS does undertake a number of specific actions aimed at ensuring high public trust in statistics. Some of these are:

- being very public about compilation methods through publication of information papers and concepts, sources and methods documents for all major statistics
- usually providing public information on any changes to methodology
- providing public information about how they maintain secrecy of data collected. See "frequently asked questions" on the ABS website ([www.abs.gov.au](http://www.abs.gov.au))
- responding vigorously to any unwarranted criticism of ABS statistics or confidentiality of data. The Media and Public Affairs Unit plays a key role in managing these situations with the subject matter concerned
- meeting regularly with the Australian Privacy Commissioner to assure that ABS continues to meet their guidelines for handling data and disclosure, as well as to seek advice on any proposed work that may have privacy implications (eg linking of datasets).

## **OTHER RESEARCH**

The United Nations (UN) Fundamental Principles on Official Statistics were developed to identify the conditions to ensure the credibility and usefulness of official statistics. In 2003 the UN Statistics Commission surveyed National Statistical Offices on the extent of their compliance with the UN Fundamental Principles of Statistics

Is regular feedback of user satisfaction with statistical products and services actively sought? Over two-thirds of countries responding reported they sought user feedback. Some examples were:

- Periodical surveys of users on the quality of the statistical yearbook and which indicators should be added
- All publications contain addresses, telephone numbers, website information etc. and submitting comments is encouraged

- Each program is required to obtain and analyse user feedback on its outputs
- Regular and ad-hoc meetings with different stakeholders and user groups
- Regular and ad-hoc user satisfaction surveys
- Annual 'Open house' event
- Monthly 'Meet the User' sessions during 'A day with clients'
- In each publication a questionnaire is enclosed to enable the users to give their feedback on the product.

A paper by Fellegi (2004) "Maintaining the credibility of official statistics" describes factors considered important in retaining confidence in a National Statistics Office. These are summarised into three dimensions:

Structural: legislative and organisational arrangements within which the office operates.

Statistical: the way the office collects, processes, publishes and measures quality.

Reputation: ensuring users (including the media and general public) see and appreciate the outputs of the agency deserve to be trusted. Credibility is seen, to a considerable extent, a matter of perception. There is no discussion of how to measure these factors.

## **REFERENCES**

Fellegi I (2004). Maintaining the credibility of official statistics – Conference of European statisticians. Statistics Canada (unpublished).