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Office for Statistics Regulation's Areas of Research Interest



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3. Used

Used: Protect the role of statistics in public debate

3.1 Background

When a statistics producer releases a statistic or other data, it does not exist in a vacuum. People may access the statistic, try to understand its insights, use it, form judgements based on what they have learnt, and ultimately make decisions and take certain actions. Statistics are central to public debate – in the media and in policy decisions. Consequently, how a statistic is accessed and used is as important as its production for determining whether it serves the public good.

OSR has already commissioned some research into how statistics are understood by the public, such as Jessica McMaster's [review on statistical literacy \(https://osr.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/publication/statistical-literacy-research/\)](https://osr.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/publication/statistical-literacy-research/). However, we want to further enrich our understanding of consumption of statistics, including how statistics are used by individuals and organisations. We have greater knowledge in some areas, for example we have a programme of work on [Analytical Leadership \(https://osr.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/analytical-leadership/\)](https://osr.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/analytical-leadership/) in government which (in part) seeks to uphold the integrity of analytical evidence and support robust evidence in policy development, but we are seeking a wider and more detailed picture of the role of evidence in decision-making by a range of users.

A deeper understanding of the role of statistics in public debate better enables its protection and promotion. However, as a regulator we must also understand the threats to the role of statistics. Whilst we have investigated misinformation, and we intervene directly in instances of misuse, this is a fast-changing environment and additional research is always welcome.

3.2 Questions

In OSR, we are seeking to develop our understanding of how we can best protect the role of statistics in public debate, and in addition to general interest in the area we have identified specific questions we are interested in learning more about:

3.2.1 Use of statistics

- Who is using official statistics, where do they find them, how are they being used, and what influences this?
- What do people look for in statistics or data being used as evidence to have confidence in using them, and how can we build this confidence?

3.2.2 Misuse of statistics

- What makes a statistic or data vulnerable to misuse, in what contexts is this more likely (including who is most susceptible to this and why), and how is this best addressed?
- What are the impacts when statistics or data are misused, how does misinformation propagate?
- How can public confidence in statistics or data be maintained in the face of misuse?

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