

The likely impact of government expenditure on demographic statistics and population studies

Report of BSPS members' survey and decisions of Council, January 2011

Ludi Simpson

1. Implementing the agreement at October 2010 Council, BSPS members were asked to complete an online questionnaire on 'The likely impact of government expenditure on demographic statistics and population studies'. Sixteen members responded, including many of the most experienced of users of ONS statistics. Those that gave their name for possible further contact are listed in Appendix 1.

Office for National Statistics work programme

2. The first two questions were explicitly concerned with helping BSPS formulate its response to ONS consultation on its work programme, in the context of the government target to reduce ONS expenditure by 18% in real terms between 2010/11 and 2014/15. BSPS officers also helped ONS consultation at a successful public meeting at the Royal Statistical Society on November 24th. Tiziana Leone co-organising the meeting, for the Statistics Users' Forum, and Ludi Simpson chaired it.
3. The BSPS response that was submitted to ONS on its consultation was agreed by BSPS officers and is circulated to Council in parallel with this report. It noted, among other concerns of BSPS members, that microdata from the Census and surveys should be maintained, that ONS small area statistics had become fundamental to research and planning in the government and the university sectors, and that the review of the Census should not assume that the known difficulties of survey and administrative sources for monitoring social trends could be overcome.

Reductions in statistics outside ONS

4. The third question Of the BSPS online survey asked for members to "list any reductions, or proposals for reductions, in demographic statistics or analysis in the UK, as a response to changed government expenditure", other than those of ONS. Concerns about possible reductions were given rather than specific cuts, as it is likely reductions will be mainly from the financial year 2011/12. Co-ordination across the UK was a concern, to maintain or create as much consistency in series, for example of sub-national projections. The major reorganisation of the health service was cited as reason for especial concern for the maintenance of evidence of health information. One local authority respondent expects a 50% reduction in capacity for demographic analysis in that organisation.
5. Reductions already implemented in the current financial year are most likely to involve dropping studies that were still in the process of being commissioned, rather than the curtailment of existing series. Some feedback will be available from Freedom of Information requests to government departments and agencies, to be released in February on the 'Reduced Statistics' blog mentioned by two BSPS respondents (<http://en.wordpress.com/tag/reduced-statistics/>). Early returns from these requests show for example that evaluation of Academy Schools and various planning regulations are not to go ahead. However, the returns from ONS and health services are not yet available.

Can official statistics be provided outside government?

6. The fourth and final question asked members to “identify official government output which you feel would be appropriately and effectively provided by the academic or business sectors”. Six respondents gave no opinion.
7. Six respondents suggested topics that could be provided outside the UK government, ranging from crime to business statistics, and analytical or visualisation services. One pointed to some statistics already produced outside the UK government which they presumably regard of sufficient quality, including migrant statistics and ethnic group projections from Leeds University.
8. Six respondents commented that the provision of official statistics outside government raised issues of “quality control”, “clarity and open-ness in methodology”, and “serious doubts” in particular about the quality of social and demographic data currently offered by commercial organisations.
9. One respondent suggested that the business sector might contribute to statistics mainly produced for their use.

Discussion

10. The UK governments’ spending reviews will affect budgets in particular from the financial year beginning April 2011.
11. However, early signs are that demographic and social statistics will not be protected in proportional terms.
12. The context for government expenditure reductions is the poor response of commercial and government economic levers to social need, for example inappropriate loans in the housing sector. This suggests the need for increased scientific study of social needs and their satisfaction rather than its reduction.
13. Current and expected reductions in government expenditure will lead to an increased deficit in the information required for government planning to satisfy social and economic needs.

Decisions of BSPS Council

14. That our submission to ONS be put on the BSPS website, along with this report, without naming respondents.
15. That members be asked to report changes in scope and quality of demographic statistics and analysis as a result of changed government expenditure, through the next BSPS newsletter.
16. That officers prepare and distribute a short statement of concern, based on this report, to the Statistics Users Forum, the Academy of Social Sciences, and other relevant bodies.
17. That a short note of thanks is sent to those who responded to the survey, referring to the decisions of Council.