

Statistics Need To Be Interpreted



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THE WHOLE BUSINESS of statistics, especially federal statistics, has been much on our minds in recent months. Until a few years ago — let us face it, until the Nixon administration came into office — federal statistics were accepted, if not uncritically, at least confidently. Professionals generally regarded the data from U.S. agencies as the best such data in the world.

This high reputation was partly owing to the integrity of Ewan Clague, who set an example in the Bureau of Labor Statistics for all agencies to follow, but other career statisticians also had a hand in maintaining the standard of excellence.

Over the past couple of years, several disturbing incidents have come along. The BLS, acting on orders from an uptight White House, stopped holding monthly briefings by the professional staff. Former director Geoffrey H. Moore was unceremoniously dumped. George Hay Brown was eased out as director of the Census, and over the protest of every professional organization in the field, Vincent R. Barabba was named to take his place.

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AN UNEASY feeling has developed that federal statistics, especially in the economic area, demand closer scrutiny these days than they have had in the past. Wisconsin's Senator William Proxmire overstates the situation when he describes it as a "crisis of credibility," but the point needs to be made that Barabba in the Census and Edward D. Failor as new head of the Social and Economic Statistics Administration have a demanding task before them.

We of the press — because most of us are not trained in statistics — have a spe-

cial need for expert, non-partisan interpretation of the statistics that swamp us every day. Moore provided an example of such interpretation in four essays on unemployment data, published recently by the American Enterprise Institute.

Except for the Cost of Living Index, no federal figures command greater attention than statistics that deal with unemployment. They are constantly cited to prove how poorly President Nixon is doing; they carry great weight in legislation affecting blacks, teen-agers and women. Yet as Moore makes clear, some of the figures, notably those on black unemployment, have to be treated cautiously. The problem of jobless blacks is undeniably serious, but because of the margin of error in a small statistical sample, month-by-month fluctuations may be much less significant than they seem.

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MOORE suggests a new and more revealing index on unemployment that would reflect (a) the number of jobless persons and (b) how long they had been out of work. On this "severity index," the record of the Nixon administration looks not so bad. The rate of unemployment is relatively high, but people seem to find new jobs. In grappling with the stubborn and intractable problems of unemployment, Mr. Nixon merits more credit than his foes have been willing to give him.

One often hears that there are "lies, damned lies, and statistics." It is a foolish saying. Every advocate, of course, will try to turn statistics to his own best advantage, but if raw figures are reliable, and if they are honestly interpreted by non-partisan professionals, the public is not quite so likely to be deceived.