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Official and unofficial statistics for the public good?

Abstract

The purpose of official statistics is to describe society and inform decisions about society. As such, they provide a window on society, characterised by the familiar dimensions of relevance, accuracy, timeliness, accessibility, and coherence. They are “official” because they come from official sources. But things are changing. Increasingly, alternative sources of data describing society are becoming available. These alternative, often commercial, sources rely on the same dimensions of relevance, accuracy, and so on, but typically for purposes different from those of official statistics. Nevertheless, they can often be used to create alternative measures to the official ones. Real value can be gained by triangulating these two approaches, taking the strengths of each, and using each to compensate for the weaknesses of the other. But care must be exercised.