
Policy-Oriented Research in Britain Some Institutional Mechanisms

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Introduction

In Britain initiatives for policy-orientated survey research come from the the major departments of state with social responsibility - for example Departments of Employment, Education, Health and Social Security, and the Home Office. The research itself is sometimes carried out within government agencies, sometimes it is contracted to outside agencies and sometimes it is a collaborative effort. There are no completely consistent criteria which determine where the research should be undertaken - the decision usually depends upon the nature of the research, where the expertise lies, the nature of the policy which gives rise to the research, the availability or resources within and outside government and what trade-offs the commissioning department wishes to make between speed, cost and quality.

As in many countries of the world, quantitative social research for policy purposes in Britain relies upon a number of data sources - that collected by surveys, by population and housing censuses, administrative records and so on. Because of the different strengths and weaknesses of each data source, they are used in different ways in the social policy framework. For example data needed for *immediate* input to policy invariably need to come 'of the shelf' and so tend to come from existing administrative sources, census material or from multi-purpose household surveys - and most of these data and the research tend to be in government. But data needed for longer term, strategic policy initiatives - or for policy monitoring or evaluation purposes - may often depend upon more directly 'tailor made' research work and for this the research may be undertaken within government or it may be commissioned from outside government. Where data are needed quickly and do not already exist, it is sometimes possible to meet the need to a limited extent by buying questions on one of the 'omnibus' surveys run by commercial research agencies.

Mechanisms outside government

Outside government there are three main alternatives that might be used by policy departments to undertake survey research: academic researchers within universities, specialised research institutes, and market research

companies. Generally the universities and research institutes have limited or no operational facilities to mount large scale data collection exercises. Where the research requires this they will need to work collaboratively with government or market research agencies which do maintain these capabilities.

For example some years ago the British Treasury contracted an academic economist from a British university to carry out research into the incentive/disincentive effects of direct taxation on labour supply. The research required high quality data for the development of an econometric model and to obtain such data the researcher approached the specialised government survey organisation, Social Survey Division (SSD) of OPCS, to collect and process the data and to produce machine readable tapes. This was a successful collaborative exercise in which the divisions of labour were clear: the research was designed and analysed by the academic expert while the technical operations were undertaken by the specialised organisation within government.

In recent years the government statistical service as a whole and the statistical activities of OPCS have been subject to a number of reviews by scrutineers appointed by government. One of the recommendations has been that there should be moves to put more survey research out to contract with the private sector. The latest estimates available are that probably over 90 percent of all government surveys are done by outside agencies although because most of the large surveys are still carried out by SSD, the amount contracted out, by cost, is about 50%. Of the amount contracted, over half is done by market research companies. The rest is commissioned from academic researchers, private consultants, research institutes and the like.

The links between university based social science and practical based survey research, are probably less developed in Britain than in a number of other countries. However there have been a number of initiatives intended to reduce the gap. For example there is now an 'academic link' scheme whereby facilities are made available to enable academic social scientists to spend some time observing operations in specialist survey research organisations to gain direct experience of the practicalities of carrying out surveys. Also the Economic and Social Research Council maintains a data archive, located at the University of Essex, in which are lodged

nearly all the main social data sets including population censuses and surveys. The Archive makes these data available for secondary analysis purposes by academic researchers.

Much more recently plans have been announced to establish, also at the University of Essex, an Interdisciplinary Research Centre (IRC) to bring together teams of social researchers working on a variety of projects connected with the measurement and analysis of social change. An important element of the IRC work will be to set up a new panel study of some 5000 households a year who will be re-visited over a number of years to produce new sets of data for longitudinal analysis on a variety of topics - many of which will be of direct relevance to policy interest of government. The plan is to launch the new survey in 1990 and it may be in time that the IRC will develop its own operational capabilities.

Mechanisms within government

Within government there are research units within policy departments and there are specialist government agencies so it is helpful first to look at the way government statistics and research are organised. In Britain government statistics are largely decentralised so that each policy department has its own statistical division and these collectively, and with the Central Statistical Office, the Business Statistics Office, and the Office of Population Censuses and Surveys make up the government statistical service. In addition a number of these departments also have their own research units such as the Home Office Planning and Research Unit, expert in criminological and penal research, and the research units in departments such as Health, Social Security and Employment. These research units are responsible for initiating and carrying out policy related research for the departments in which they are sited, but they do not possess operational research facilities for data collection and processing activities. For that they need either to commission one of the commercial research agencies or the Social Survey Division of OPCS. Whichever option is chosen the departments, through the research or statistical divisions, (and sometimes through the policy/administrative divisions) may either commission the whole research job including design, analysis and preparation of interpretative reports, or they may contract out just those technical activities such as data collection, that they do not have facilities to do for themselves.

Frequently departments will call up SSD for advice and assistance in handling the contracting arrangements. This advice may cover various stages of the process including consideration of which organisations to invite to submit tenders, drawing up research specifications, interviewing tendering organisations about their bids, evaluating tenders and, sometimes, monitoring the performance of the successful organisation in carrying out the work.

Social Survey Division of OPCS

SSD is the government's own specialised survey research organisation. It began in 1941 as a separate organisation within government for carrying out survey research work. In 1970 it was amalgamated with what was then the General Register Office to form OPCS and it is now a division of that Office.

Nowadays most major government household surveys are undertaken by SSD and for most projects SSD is responsible for all stages of the survey enquiry, including the original definition and clarification of the survey objectives, project design, sample selection, data collection, processing and finally the production of a report on survey results. The full cost of work carried out has to be paid for by departments whether it is commissioned from SSD or contracted out. It is frequently the case that contracts are subject to competitive tender and it is now possible for SSD to submit tenders and so compete directly with private agencies.

SSD carries out surveys on a wide range of subjects for government departments which have responsibilities for social policy. Most of these surveys are of a point in time, or *ad hoc*, nature, but some are longitudinal, visiting the same sample over several points of time, and others are conducted on a continuous basis throughout the year and every year. The division is responsible for 6 major continuous surveys.

a. The Family Expenditure Survey (FES) has run continuously since 1957 and seeks interviews at just over 11,000 private households in Great Britain a year. The main content of the survey is household income and expenditure and the chief purposes are to provide up-to-date expenditure weights for the Retail Prices Index and to enable government departments to analyse the economic and social effects of policy changes in taxation and social security benefits.

b. The National Food Survey (NFS) has run since 1940 and currently seeks interviews with around 15,000 housewives a year. The main content of the survey is the purchase of food and the data are used mainly to calculate consumer expenditure on food for national accounts purposes and for economic and nutrition analysis.

c. The General Household Survey (GHS) has run since late 1970 and has a set sample of around 12,500 private households in Great Britain a year. It is truly a multi-purpose undertaking and has no dominant subject theme. The main areas covered are demography, housing, employment, education, health and income but there is too a great variety of subsidiary topics which are included from time to time such as leisure activities, dental health, burglary, smoking and drinking behaviour.

d. The International Passenger Survey (IPS) began in 1961 and is a multi-purpose enquiry carried out at all major airports and seaports in Britain. It collects information from an achieved sample of about 165-180,000 travellers each year. Data from the survey are used for a

wide range of statistics on tourism, for estimating the tourism component of the balance of payments and for statistics on international migration.

e. The Labour Force Survey (LFS) started in Britain in 1973 as part of an already established series carried out biennially for the European community. From 1983 it has become an annual enquiry. The sample for the survey comprises some 15,000 households a quarter with a 'boost' of 45,000 extra households during March to May to give a total sample of 60,000 for that quarter.

f. The National Travel Survey (NTS) is a continuous travel survey that started in the summer of 1988. The set sample is around 5,000 households each year and the survey is to provide a continually up-dated set of data about personal travel in Great Britain.

Altogether the continuous surveys account for about three-quarters of the total SSD budget. However the *ad hoc* side of SSDs activities cover far more projects in number although the sample sizes are nearly always much smaller. It is possible to distinguish several kinds of *ad hoc* projects.

1. There are those which deal with the physical condition of the population. For example a major survey programme was carried out between 1985 and 1988 to provide estimates of the prevalence and conditions of disabled adults and children. The results will be used to help determine policy on state benefits payable to the disabled. Other examples of surveys under this heading are those on dental health, drinking, smoking, nutrition, and the heights and weights of the adult population. Results from these surveys are used for a variety of policy purposes including health education and prevention medicine.

2. There are those which deal with social circumstances. Recent examples here have included the effects of unemployment on family living standards, the financial (and other) consequences of divorce, and the circumstances of people who have recently moved into privately rented accommodation.

3. Thirdly there are surveys designed to seek out people's opinions and attitudes. Examples here include surveys to understand better why children smoke, the attitudes of women to maternity services, and to provide estimates of the demand for higher education.

4. Finally there is a miscellaneous group of *ad hoc* surveys. This includes job content studies on particular groups such as junior hospital doctors and community nurses, enquiries of visitors to public facilities such as museums and galleries to help management plan and improve the services provided, and census related studies such as question wording tests and post enumeration studies. In addition there are studies which monitor administrative practices in local offices to provide information on the extent to which central policy or guidelines are being followed locally: examples of this are enquiries into the way electoral registers are compiled

Surveys carried out by SSD are characterised by emphasis on minimising non sampling errors² For example samples are nearly always random, self weighting probability samples and for samples of the general population the frame used is the Postcode Address File (PAF) - a virtually complete listing of every address in the country, available centrally in machine readable forms. In fieldwork emphasis is placed on using the best calibre interviewers (approximately 6-7% of applicants pass through all stages of recruitment and training to become part of the regular fieldforce) and training. All surveys are voluntary and considerable attention is paid to achieving the highest response rates possible. It is also standard practice to carry out pre-tests and pilot studies of questionnaires and proposed overall survey designs before embarking on the main stage of surveys.

Work concerned with the development and evaluation of government campaigns of social persuasion and communication (on subjects such as drinking and driving, drugs, safety, and recruitment to the uniformed services) is not done by SSD. This is carried out by the Central Office of Information (COI) which is the department responsible for government publicity and advice on publicity. The COI does not have its own fieldwork resource and so is a major contractor of work to the private sector.

The population census

The population census in Britain is carried out on compulsory basis every ten years. The census is conducted by OPCS using conventional drop-off/pick-up methods with over 100,000 temporarily recruited enumerators. There is no field sampling but data processing is on a 10% only basis for the most difficult to code items such as occupations.

Results are made available mainly either in the form of pre-determined statistical abstracts (published or unpublished) or in the form of specially ordered tabulations. So far in Britain there is no access to individual records although discussions are currently in progress about the possibility of making available samples of anonymised records for the next census in 1991, and for establishing on-line access to the census data base such that tabulation parameters can be fed in and tables obtained.

It is possible to use the census as a sample frame for identifying particular groups of the population for more detailed enquiries - for example particular occupation groups. The fact that the Social Survey and Census are two divisions of the same Office makes follow-up enquiries simpler to do without arousing public anxiety about infringing the confidentiality undertakings given at the time of the census.□

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²Barnes - Non sampling errors: some approaches adopted in major government surveys in Britain. *Journal of Official Statistics*, 1987.4. Statistics Sweden.²