

22 September 2005

No change in public confidence in official statistics

People are more likely than not to believe official figures are accurate according to the latest survey on public confidence in official statistics published today by the Office for National Statistics. This is no significant change from a survey in 2004.

The figures show that 37 per cent of people agree that figures are generally accurate while 31 per cent disagree – 32 per cent are unable to give an opinion.

However, only 17 per cent of people believe that official figures are produced without political interference and only 14 per cent say the government uses official figures honestly.

The figures come from a survey of 1,700 people aged 16 and over in Great Britain who were asked about the level of trust they had in government statistics, government institutions and certain public officials.

Some statistical series, institutions and officials were trusted more than others. The most frequent reason given for trusting figures was that they were easy to measure or that there was a perceived absence of any vested interest in their production.

The most common reasons for not trusting statistics are that they contradicted someone's personal experience or that they are perceived to be open to manipulation.

Overall, the level of trust in government institutions was lower than that for official statistics.

In 2005 people were additionally asked about trust in five important officials. A key feature of the responses was that a significant proportion of people had not heard of the posts – Registrar General, National Statistician, Auditor General, Chief Medical Officer, and Chief Scientific Officer.

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However, those that had heard of these officials had relatively high levels of trust in each of them,

People were asked about trust in six statistical series – hospital waiting lists, road casualties, internet users, census of population, domestic burglaries and consumer prices indices. The most likely to be trusted were road casualty figures and the least likely to be trusted were hospital waiting lists.

Respondents were also asked how much they trusted various institutions – the Civil Service, the UK government, the police, the courts, and the National Health Service (NHS). The UK Government was the least trusted, along with the Welsh Assembly and the Scottish Executive in their respective countries.

Although hospital waiting lists produced by the NHS were the least trusted set of figures, the NHS was the most trusted institution.

Asked for their sources of opinions, 71 per cent said television, 59 per cent newspapers, and 43 per cent family and friends (respondents could choose more than one source). Seventy per cent of people thought statistics were important in decision making.

However, respondents don't show a lot of trust in each other – 56 per cent said 'you can't be too careful in dealing with people'.

BACKGROUND NOTES

1. The full report is available at:
http://www.statistics.gov.uk/about/data/public_confidence/downloads/OmnibusMarch05.pdf
2. Details of the policy governing the release of new data are available from the press office.
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