CENSUSES, SURVEYS AND PRIVACY

Also edited by Martin Bulmer

SOCIOLOGICAL RESEARCH METHODS: AN INTRODUCTION
SOCIAL POLICY RESEARCH

CENSUSES, SURVEYS AND PRIVACY

Edited by

Martin Bulmer

*Lecturer in Social Administration
London School of Economics and Political Science*

Selection, editorial matter and Chapter 11 © Martin Bulmer 1979
Softcover reprint of the hardcover 1st edition 1979

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be
reproduced or transmitted, in any form or by any
means, without permission.

First published 1979 by
THE MACMILLAN PRESS LTD
London and Basingstoke
Associated companies in Delhi Dublin
Hong Kong Johannesburg Lagos Melbourne
New York Singapore and Tokyo

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

Censuses, surveys and privacy.

1. Social science research – Great Britain
 2. Privacy, Right of – Great Britain
 - I. Bulmer, Martin
- 323.44 H62

ISBN 978-0-333-26223-8 ISBN 978-1-349-16184-3 (eBook)
DOI 10.1007/978-1-349-16184-3

This book is sold subject to the standard conditions of the Net Book Agreement.

The paperback edition of this book is sold subject to the condition that it shall not, by way of trade or otherwise, be lent, resold, hired out, or otherwise circulated without the publisher's prior consent in any form of binding or cover other than that in which it is published and without a similar condition including this condition being imposed on the subsequent purchaser.

Contents

<i>Preface</i>	viii
----------------	------

<i>Contributors</i>	xi
---------------------	----

Part One

INTRODUCTION

1	The Impact of Privacy upon Social Research	3
	MARTIN BULMER	
2	Privacy in Modern Industrial Society	22
	EDWARD SHILS	
3	Does Research Threaten Privacy or Does Privacy Threaten Research?	37
	BRITISH ASSOCIATION STUDY GROUP	

Part Two

SOCIAL SURVEY RESEARCH AND PRIVACY

4	Introduction	57
	MARTIN BULMER	
5	Survey Research and Privacy	68
	SCPR WORKING PARTY	
6	The Issue of Privacy in Public Opinion Research	87
	ROBERT O. CARLSON	

7	Resistance to Community Surveys
ERIC JOSEPHSON	96
8	Is the Public Acceptability of Social Survey Research
Declining?
AMERICAN STATISTICAL ASSOCIATION	112

Part Three

POPULATION CENSUSES AND PRIVACY

9	Introduction
MARTIN BULMER	123
10	Census Confidentiality in Britain
C. HAKIM	132
11	Parliament and the British Census since 1920
MARTIN BULMER	158
12	Invasion of Privacy: the Case of the United States Census
CONRAD TAEUBER	170
13	The Protection of Privacy and the United States Census
WILLIAM PETERSEN	176
14	Census-taking and the Debate on Privacy: a Sociological
View
DAVID R. COPE	184

Part Four

PROTECTING PRIVACY AND SAFEGUARDING SOCIAL RESEARCH

15	Maintaining Public Confidence in Quantitative Social
Research
MARTIN BULMER | 201 |
|----|---|-----|

16	Strengthening Public Confidence in Social Survey Research: the British Case SCPR WORKING PARTY	209
17	Protecting Statistical and Research Data from Improper Use UK DATA PROTECTION COMMITTEE	220
18	Methods for Assuring Personal Integrity in Social Research: an Introduction ROBERT F. BORUCH	234
	<i>Further Reading</i>	249
	<i>Notes and References</i>	261

Preface

Privacy is a contemporary issue of increasing general concern. Pressure groups, the media, politicians and the public are from time to time exercised about it. The continuing growth of big government and corporate industry, together with the invention and development of the electronic computer, have created potential threats to privacy on a hitherto undreamt of scale. Yet these same trends produce ever-increasing requests for personal information from the citizen, for purposes as various as taxation, employment, credit-rating, automobile registration and many others. As a result, society's 'need' to know these personal particulars has to be balanced against the individual's claim to privacy about his personal affairs. Striking this balance is a delicate and intractable task to which there is no easy solution.

Social research and inquiry constitutes one kind of request for personal information directed to the citizen. In social surveys and population censuses, members of the public are asked questions about their social and economic characteristics, their personal histories, their social attitudes and their social behaviour. Public co-operation is forthcoming for several reasons, including a belief that the results of research will be of public benefit and a willingness to talk about oneself. Also very important is a tacit recognition of the integrity of social scientists and statisticians conducting the research. Such inquiries are conducted according to certain rules.

The most important of these are that all *individual* data collected in social research are confidential, and information about identifiable individuals is never published from censuses and surveys. The social investigator is interested only in the *aggregate*, or general, picture. In addition, data collected are held in confidence by the

person or persons collecting them, are kept secure once they are collected, and are not released in identifiably individualised form outside the research organisation. In the case of censuses, there are strong legal safeguards to ensure both the privacy of the information given and its absolute security thereafter.

Social research and statistical inquiries are ultimately justified in terms of the greater good which will result, in the long term, from greater knowledge and information about the state of society and its workings. For example, knowledge about the size and structure of the population, as well as how it is changing, is basic to the planning of social services such as education, housing and health. Public policy, to be well informed, needs adequate data about the condition of the population. Yet population censuses and social surveys have aroused concern about encroachments on privacy. The censuses held in several countries in 1970–71, in particular, produced protests of a kind not hitherto encountered by census-takers. Some of this concern was of an exaggerated and even demagogic kind, exploited for political ends. But whatever its quality, such protests cannot be ignored by those who do social research. The conduct of surveys and censuses depends ultimately on public co-operation. This is a necessary condition for their existence and continuation.

This book examines the problems which censuses and surveys pose for preserving privacy, and which privacy poses for the conduct of censuses and surveys. It is divided into four sections. Parts 2 and 3 consider specifically social surveys and population censuses. Part 1 is a general discussion of the problem of privacy as it affects social research. Part 4 considers means by which the existing safeguards for privacy in the conduct of social research may be strengthened. The contributors are all themselves professional social scientists, social researchers or government statisticians, all with first-hand acquaintance with their subject. Their concern with privacy problems reflects the fact that it is the members of the social-research community themselves who are at the forefront of moves to safeguard privacy in social research.

Privacy and social research are both very large fields. Several features of the present book should be noted. Firstly, it is intended as an *introduction* to the subject accessible to the non-specialist; its content is not highly technical. Secondly, it focuses upon quantitative research by means of censuses and surveys. Experimental research on the one hand and observational and ethnographic studies on the other are not

covered. Nor is it primarily concerned with the protection of statistical data derived from administrative records in bureaucracies, recently treated in D. H. Flaherty's important five-country study, *Privacy and Government Data Banks* (London, Mansell Scientific, 1979). The large literature on privacy and computing is included in the Further Reading section at the end, but this is not primarily a study of that field.

The material brought together here provides some new perspectives, from quite different standpoints, upon a difficult problem. It is one which continues to exercise the social science and statistical communities, as major international conferences at Paris in 1974, Haselby Slott in 1976, Bellagio in 1977 and Cologne in 1978 on different aspects of privacy and social-research data demonstrate. This is a continuing discussion, which is likely to intensify as the 1980-1 round of population censuses approaches. It is one which has major implications for the public acceptability of social science and social inquiry.

Carrying out censuses and surveys is specialised work for highly-trained technical experts. Social surveys and censuses, however, also depend upon the co-operation of the individual respondent, who probably knows nothing whatever about these technical matters but does have views of his own about research, however vague. Even in census-taking, respondent co-operation cannot be taken for granted today to the extent that it could in the past. Critics of censuses, in particular, have alleged that such inquiries are unnecessarily extensive, intrusive and onerous, and that the data collected are not necessarily secure. The onus is now upon those who conduct censuses and surveys to show that they take privacy problems seriously, and that they have effective means of safeguarding the interests of the individual citizen at all stages of the research process. The argument of this book, and the material which it contains are intended to show that they do.

September 1978

MARTIN BULMER

Contributors

DR ROBERT F. BORUCH is Professor of Psychology and Director of Methodology and Evaluation Research at Northwestern University, Evanston, Illinois. A statistician and psychologist by training, his principal research interest is in the design and analysis of field experiments for testing social policy. His publications include *Social Experimentation* (with H. W. Riecken, 1974), *Experimental Testing of Public Policy* (with H. W. Riecken, 1975), *Assuring Confidentiality in Social Research* (with J. S. Cecil, 1979), more than thirty journal articles and contributions to symposia on applied social research, and a forthcoming monograph on *Secondary Analysis of Evaluative Data*. He was the second President of the Council for Applied Social Research, of which he remains a member of the Board of Directors, and is current Chairman of the Social Science Research Council Committee on Program Evaluation. He gave evidence on behalf of the American Psychological Association to the Privacy Protection Study Commission.

MARTIN BULMER lectures in the Department of Social Science and Administration at the London School of Economics and Political Science. His main teaching and research interests are in the methodology of social research and the application of social research to public policy. His publications include *Social Policy Research* (editor, 1978), *Sociological Research Methods* (editor, 1977), *Mining and Social Change* (editor, 1977) and *Working Class Images of Society* (editor, 1975).

DR ROBERT O. CARLSON is Dean of the Schools of Business at Adelphi University, Garden City, New York, and was for many years Chairman of the Editorial Board of the *Public Opinion Quarterly*. For eighteen

years he worked on management problems for Standard Oil Company (NJ) (now EXXON) in the Middle East, Africa, the Far East and Europe. He is a past President of the American Association for Public Opinion Research, former Executive Officer of the American Sociological Society, and a former President of the Public Relations Society of America. He has taught at Columbia, Fairfield and New York Universities and was a consultant to the Rand Corporation. He is the editor of *Communications and Public Opinion* (1975).

DAVID R. COPE is lecturer in Social Planning at the Institute of Planning Studies, University of Nottingham, where he teaches population studies, urban sociology, forecasting, computing and social statistics to postgraduate students. He is Treasurer of the Census Research Group, a national organisation of researchers using census data, and is a member of the Office of Population Censuses and Surveys Research Advisory Committee on the 1981 Census. Apart from privacy and official statistics, his main research interests are the sociology of fertility and the environmental and social consequences of coalmining in the East Midlands. He has published on these topics in journals such as *New Society*, *Nature*, *The International Journal of Environmental Studies* and *Futures*.

DR C. HAKIM is Principal Research Officer in the Department of Employment, London, but was previously on the staff of the Office of Population Censuses and Surveys, London. Her research work has included studies of education and employment in developing and industrialised societies.

DR ERIC JOSEPHSON is Director of the Center for Socio-Cultural Research on Drug Use at Columbia University, New York City, and Senior Research Associate at its School of Public Health. His main research interests lie in the field of deviant behaviour and social policy. Among his publications are *Drug Use: Epidemiological and Sociological Approaches* (with Eleanor E. Carroll) and *Man Alone: Alienation in Modern Society* (with Mary Josephson).

DR WILLIAM PETERSEN is Robert Lazarus Professor of Social Demography at Ohio State University. Previously he taught in the Department of Sociology at the University of California, Berkeley. One of America's leading social demographers, his main research interests

are public policy on population growth and the relation of ethnic composition to social structure. His publications include *Planned Migration* (1955), *The Politics of Population* (1964), *Population* (1969) and *Japanese Americans: Oppression and Success* (1971).

EDWARD SHILS is Distinguished Service Professor of Sociology and Social Thought at the University of Chicago. He is also a fellow of Peterhouse, Cambridge University. He founded and edits *Minerva: a review of science, learning and policy*. His publications include *Center and Periphery: Essays in Macrosociology* (1975), *The Intellectuals and the Powers* (1972), *The Torment of Secrecy* (1956) and *Towards a General Theory of Action* (co-editor with Talcott Parsons, 1951).

DR CONRAD TAEUBER has been Professor and Director of the Center for Population Research, Georgetown University, Washington, DC, since 1973. Previously, from 1951 to 1973, he was Associate Director of the United States Bureau of the Census. A former President of the Population Society of America, his main research interests are in demography and allied statistical fields. His publications include *The Changing Population of the United States* (1958) and *The People of the United States in the Twentieth Century* (1971).