**Godalming College**

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**Sociology Department**

Statistics



WORKBOOK 3- RESEARCH METHODS FOR PAPERS 1 AND 3

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| Name: | Set: | Group: |

**What the specification says**

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| AQA Specification  Research Methods  Students must examine the following areas:   * Secondary sources of data: **official statistics**; different sources of **official statistics** * the relationship between positivism, interpretivism and sociological methods; the nature of ‘social facts’ * the theoretical, practical and ethical considerations influencing choice of topic, choice of method(s) and the conduct of research. |

**STATISTICS**

Statistics are a form of numerical data where the objective is to quantify some aspect(s) of an individual, group or society. Statistics provide a wide variety of data that would normally be inaccessible to the sociologist (due to the cost of collection, for example). We can note two main sources of statistical data, although we shall focus predominantly on official statistics in this booklet:

**1. Official statistics** refer to numerical data collected and published by Governments (for example, crime or marriage statistics). Here, we can also distinguish between hard and soft statistics:

* **Hard official statistics** are statistics which cannot be manipulated or changed, such as, statistics on births, marriages and deaths. These are collected and published by the Office for National Statistics.
* **Soft official statistics** are statistics which can be manipulated or changed based on the way categories are created. These include statistics on crime, poverty and unemployment e.g. in the 1980s and 1990s the government changed the method to measure unemployment over 20 times.

**2. Non-official statistics** refers to numerical data collected and published by a variety of public and private organisations (the Rowntree Foundation, for example, publishes statistics on poverty). These statistics can cover a wide range of issues. Much of this data is collected using surveys e.g. market research.

** Activity:** Looking at the range of statistics below determine whether you think they are Official/Non Official and then hard/soft (for official statistics).

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| **Statistical data** | **Official/ Non official** | **Hard/Soft** |
| The marriage rate in the UK in 2000 was 5.1 per 1000 of the population. This compares to 7.1 per 1000 of the population in 1981. |  |  |
| In households containing dependent children the average number of children declined significantly from 1960 to 1980 but has been relatively stable at 1.8 since 1981. |  |  |
| On Monday 30th November Tescos had 1,175,000 baskets cheaper at the checkout, as compared to Asda which had 734,500. |  |  |
| In 1961 the average age of marriage in England and Wales was 25.6 years for men and 23.1 years for women. By 2000 this had risen to 30.5 and 28.2 years respectively. |  |  |

**Advantages of using statistics**

A number of advantages exist when it comes to using official statistics, some of which are discussed below.

* Official statistics are frequently the only available source of data. For example, Emile Durkheim, in his study of *Suicide* (1897), used official statistics drawn from coroners' reports from different societies to establish that suicide rates varied within and between societies.
* They are readily available and cheap to use. Also, as not much time is spent on primary research, analysis will be fairly quick so the results are fairly up to date. The ready availability of official statistics means the researcher does not have to spend time and money collecting his/her own information.
* Official statistics are often comprehensive in coverage, using either large samples – therefore increasing **representativeness** – or the whole population.
* They often cover a long time-span, and therefore allow the examination of trends over time, such as on levels of educational qualifications or crime.
* They can be used for ‘before and after’ studies, for example, to judge the effect of government policies on reducing inequalities in health or educational achievement.
* Statistics are ideal for the **comparative method** in sociology, because they allow intergroup and international comparisons to be made. One might want to look at working-class and middle-class family sizes, or educational levels, divorce and crime rates in different countries.
* They can provide useful background material when sociological researchers are deciding what issues should be studied, and can help in identifying a **hypothesis** for further investigation.
* They avoid any ethical issues, as they are publicly available, and unlikely to breach personal confidences or cause harm to individuals

**Disadvantages of using statistics**

Many sociologists would argue any statistics, especially official statistics, can’t be taken at face value as they are **socially constructed**, that is, reflecting the ideas of those constructing the statistics. The following criticisms are often levelled at official statistics:

* Official statistics are collected for administrative purposes rather than for purposes of sociological research – so the definitions and classifications adopted may be unsuitable for that research.
* Official statistics are produced by the state. This means statistics made public may be ‘massaged’ – be not completely accurate or not provide a completed picture – to avoid political embarrassment to the government. For instance, governments might collect statistics on welfare claimants rather than tax evaders.
* Interpretivists argue that statistics are not **objective** facts but simply social constructions: the product of a process of interpretation and decision-making by those with authority.
* Interpretivists argue they are not **valid** because they only provide an overview or snapshot of an issue, rather than the meaning behind the statistics. They also may suffer from a ‘dark figure’, whereby some data is missing e.g. in 2011 the Crime Survey found only 38% of crimes revealed by the survey were actually reported to the police. The ‘dark figure’ is the missing 62% of crimes not reported to the police.

**Example 1: Crime statistics**

As we have established, many sociologists use official statistics in their research. There are many reasons why using official statistics can be useful: they are cheap, readily available, and provide detailed quantitative data which is **reliable** and often **representative**. Official statistics also provide data for the whole country. This said, official statistics such as crime statistics have to be treated very carefully by sociologists, because they do not show the full extent of crime in society. This is illustrated in the short *YouTube* video entitled ‘Crime Statistics & the Dark Figure’.

**Activity**

Watch the video ‘Crime Statistics & the Dark Figure’ (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jzdTiM5wS_c>) and answer the questions listed below:

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| 1. What does it mean to say that statistics are ‘social constructions’? 2. What is necessary for crimes to be recorded as ‘crimes’ and entered into the statistics? 3. Why might people be reluctant to report crime? 4. What is the term for the ‘unknown figure’ of crime? 5. Can you think of any way of getting more accurate measures of crime (e.g. victim survey)? |

**Example 2: Suicide Statistics**

The topic of suicide has received a disproportionate amount of attention from sociologists. The first sociologist to write on suicide was Emile Durkheim (1897) in his book *Suicide: A Study in Sociology*. Durkheim took advantage of the availability of suicide statistics and believed that they could be used to find the sociological causes of suicide. Durkheim believed he had found a causal relationships between two **social facts,** the level of social isolation and the rate of suicide – the higher the level of social isolation, the greater the likelihood of suicide. Suicide statistics could also be used for a comparative method, making it possible to compare the suicide rates of different countries. For instance, he found that suicide was more common in Protestant countries than Catholic countries,

Atkinson (1978) and other interpretivists are wary of using suicide statistics as a **valid** measure of suicide. This is because they are simply social constructions reflecting the behaviours of coroners, doctors, relatives etc. and their definition of suicide. Coroners, for example, have a picture of a typical suicide and a typical suicide victim. Road deaths are rarely seen as suicides whereas deaths by drowning, hanging, gassing and drugs overdose are more likely to be interpreted as suicides. The typical suicide victim is often seen as lonely, friendless, isolated individual with few family ties. Marxists are also critical of how official statistics serve capitalism. John Irvine argues that statistics can be used to help maintain the power of the Bourgeoisie. To summarize, suicide statistics they tell us more about the decision-making processes of the living than the intentions of the dead and the real number of statistics.

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| **QUESTIONS**   1. How does Durkheim’s study illustrate Positivism? 2. How does Atkinson’s study illustrate Interpretivism? |

**PET: STATISTICS**

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| **Define the**  **method** |  | | | | |
| **Example(s)** |  | | | | |
| **Circle correct** | **Quantitative** | **Qualitative** | **Positivist** | **Realist** | **Interpretivist** |
|  | **Strengths** | | **Weaknesses** | | |
| **Practical** |  | |  | | |
| **Ethical** |  | |  | | |
| **Theoretical** |  | |  | | |

**AS Exam Practice:**

4 Mark Questions

Outline two problems with using official statistics in sociological research [4]

Outline two reasons why a sociologist might need to use statistics [4]

Outline two advantages of using official statistics in sociological research [4]

Outline two reasons why positivists favour the use of statistics [4]

Outline two practical factors that can influence the collection of statistics in sociological research [4]

Outline two problems with using non official statistics in sociological research [4]

Outline two differences between official and non-official statistics [4]

16 Mark Questions

Evaluate the problems of using official statistics in sociological research [16]

Evaluate the advantages of using non official statistics in sociological research [16]

Evaluate the advantages of using official statistics in sociological research [16]

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**A Level Exam Practice:**

10 Mark Questions

Outline and explain two problems with using official statistics in sociological research [10]

Outline and explain two reasons why a sociologist might favour using statistics [10]

Outline and explain two advantages of using official statistics in sociological research [10]

Outline and explain two reasons why positivists favour the use of statistics [10]

Outline and explain two differences between official and non-official statistics [10]

20 Mark Questions

Evaluate the view that official statistics pose too many problems in sociological research [20]

Evaluate the view that official statistics offer more advantages of than other methods in sociological research [20]

**Methods in context - Truancy**

**Item**

Truancy – unauthorised absence from school – is closely linked to educational under-achievement. Pupils doing badly at school are more likely to truant, and persistent truants tend to leave school with few qualifications. Truancy is also linked to juvenile delinquency.

Some sociologists may use official statistics to study truancy. The government collects statistics from every school, and these show national trends and patterns, such as that truancy peaks in year 11 and is more common among pupils receiving free school meals. Truancy statistics can also be used to discover the effect on pupils of factors such as changes in educational policies. However, some schools may redefine ‘truancy’ so as to meet government targets or to present a better public image.

Other sociologists may use participant observation to study truancy. This can allow the researcher to discover pupils’ reasons and motives for truanting and what school attendance means to them. The researcher can also witness first hand any peer pressure on pupils to truant. However, an overt participant observer may find problems fitting in with truants, and so it may be necessary to adopt a covert role such as that of truancy officer.

**Applying material from the item and your own knowledge, evaluate the strengths and limitations of using official statistics to investigate truancy from school. (20 Marks)**

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| **Introduction**  • Apply **WWWE**   * **W**hat? – What is the method in the question? Define and apply detail about the method. * **W**ho? – Who would use it? (Positivist, Interpretivist, Realist) * **W**hy? – Why would they use it? – Relating to the context in the question – in this case truancy. * **E**valuate – Who wouldn’t use it? Why? |

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| **Paragraph 1 – Strength**  • Level 1 – identify strength  • Level 2 – link to general topic area  • Level 3 – expand and link to truancy (be specific) |

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| **Paragraph 2 – Weakness**  • Level 1 – identify weakness  • Level 2 – link to general topic area  • Level 3 – expand and link to truancy (be specific) |

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| **Paragraph 3 – Strength** |

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| **Paragraph 4 – Weakness** |

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| **Paragraph 5 – Strength** |

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| **Paragraph 6 – Weakness** |

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| **Conclusion**   * Summarise strengths and weaknesses (in relation to the topic of truancy) * Would an alternative method be more suitable? |