

# Sociology Factsheet



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## Does Sociology Need Statistics?

Sociology tries to understand how society operates and how different aspects of society work together to maintain a stable society. It is also concerned with describing and explaining the patterns of inequalities, deprivation and conflict which are a feature of nearly all societies.

Therefore, if sociology involves studying individuals and groups, why does it need statistics?

This Factsheet will look at both sides of this debate: Sociology needing and not needing statistics. The information in this Factsheet will be useful when answering theory and methods questions, but it can also be applied to different topic areas within the specifications, e.g. Family and households, education, and crime and deviance.

### Sociology Does Need Statistics

**Positivist sociologists** believe that sociology does need statistics.

This is an approach in sociology that believes society can be studied using similar scientific techniques to those used in the natural sciences such as biology, chemistry and physics.



Positivists believe the aim of sociology should be to study social facts which could be observed and measured quantitatively and in statistical form. The feelings, emotions and motives of individuals cannot be observed or measured, and therefore should not be studied.

They need evidence, otherwise it will not be possible to replicate studies to check findings, establish the causes of social events, or make generalisations.

Durkheim (1858 –1917), a positivist, believed that most things in society could be observed and measured quantitatively – in number and statistical form.



#### Activity

Find out about some of the work of Durkheim and summarise what he found in different areas of sociology.

Sociological research is more likely to involve large scale or macro research on large numbers of people and this type of research is more likely to produce statistics for analysis.

Research methods that are used by positivists and produce quantitative data include:

- Experiments
- Social surveys
- Structured questionnaires
- Formal/structured interviews

#### Activity

Why do positivists use these research methods?  
Make a list of the advantages of these methods.  
What are some of the limitations of using these methods?

Examples of the positive approach might be studies of whether people in some social classes achieve poorer exam results, suffer more illnesses, or commit more crime than people in other social classes.

### Studies where statistics have been used Education

A study by Halsey, Heath and Ridge found clear class inequalities in education. They used a sample of 8,000 males born between 1913 and 1952, and divided them into three main groups based on their fathers' occupations:



1. The service class (professionals, administrators and managers)
2. The intermediate class (clerical or sales workers, the self-employed and lower grade technicians and foremen)
3. The working class, including manual workers in industry and agriculture

The research showed that an individual from the service class, as compared to one from the working class, had four times as great a chance of being at school at 16, eight times the chance at 17, and ten times the chance at 18; the chance of an individual from the service class attending university was eleven times greater than one from the working class

### Family and Households

A survey conducted by Opinium in 2011 found that although 59% of married couples say they consult each other on all financial issues, less than 44% of working women were mainly responsible for making financial decisions for the family, compared to 53% of working men.



#### Activity

Explain the importance of statistics in these pieces of research.

### Official Statistics

Official statistics are a major source of data for sociologists. Official statistics are collected by national and local governments and other official agencies including the census data, statistics on birth, marriages and deaths, employment/unemployment, education, crime, and health statistics.

#### Activity

Do some research and find out about the different types of statistics available for each of these areas. Add what you find to the table below.

Area	Statistics available
Education	League tables
Crime	Prison population
Health	NHS waiting lists
Family and households	Birth rates
Welfare	Unemployment rates

**Why Do We Use Official Statistics in Sociology?**

- Official statistics are readily available
- They are often comprehensive in coverage, using either large samples, making them more representative, or they use the whole population (e.g. the census).
- They often cover a large timespan and therefore allow the examination of trends over time.
- They allow intergroup and international comparisons to be made, e.g. comparing genders or divorce rates in different countries.
- They are frequently the only available source of data in a particular area.
- They provided useful background material when sociological researchers are deciding what issues should be studied.

**Activity**

Despite these advantages for using official statistics, there are some limitations to using official statistics.  
Make a list and explain these limitations.

Positive sociologists therefore believe that statistics are necessary in order to measure individuals and groups within society.

**Sociology Does Not Need Statistics**

Interpretivist sociologists believe that, because people's behaviour is influenced by the interpretations and meanings they give to social situations, the researcher's task is to gain an understanding of these interpretations and meanings, and how people see and understand the world around them. Statistics will not show the meanings behind people's behaviour, and therefore interpretivists are not in favour of using research methods that produce statistics.

The interpretivist approach emphasises that people have consciousness involving personal beliefs, values and interpretations, and these influence the way they act. They do not simply respond to forces outside them and therefore cannot be measured by statistics.

People are active, conscious beings who act with intention and purpose, and in order to investigate individuals, research needs to be more in-depth (micro research) on small numbers of people. Interpretivists do not want to generalise their ideas to the whole of society.

They do not believe that statistics can give this insight that is needed to understand people, so interpretivists use methods that produce qualitative data. This consists of words giving in-depth description and the meanings and interpretations they give to events.

These methods include:

- Participant and (sometimes) non-participant observation
- Informal/unstructured interviews
- Open ended questionnaires
- Personal accounts, e.g. diaries and letters

**Activity**

Why do interpretivists use these research methods?  
Make a list of the advantages of these methods.  
What are some of the limitations of using these methods?

**Studies Where Qualitative Research Methods Have Been Used:****Bernstein (1971)**

speaking

According to Bernstein, there are two speech codes:

Elaborated code	Restricted code
Used by middle classes	Used by working classes
Complex sentences	Simple sentences
Greater vocabulary	Limited vocabulary
Correct grammar	Grammar mistakes

Bernstein argues that the elaborated language code provides significant advantages for middle-class children entering education where the elaborated code is used by teachers.

**Activity**

How do you think speech patterns affect the educational achievement of children from different social classes?  
Make a list of the different ways speech can influence educational success and then write a detailed paragraph using the points from your list.

**Activity**

Choose one of the following topics and show how Bernstein's speech patterns are relevant within this topic:

- Mass media
- Power and politics
- Crime and deviance

Moore (2008) studied the attitudes of a local community to street drinkers who spent most of their time gathering in the high street of an inner-city area. Members of the community formed action groups to force the authorities and police to take some action. Moore attended all the action group meetings and made notes of what was happening. After the meetings, he spoke to various speakers about their attitudes. He also spent time with professionals who worked with the street drinkers.

**Activity**

Explain the importance of collecting qualitative data in these pieces of research.

You will see that there are advantages and disadvantages for using statistics in sociology. Sociology needs statistics, but it also needs detailed information to support and explain the statistics.

**Methodological Pluralism**

Although positivists generally use quantitative data and interpretivists prefer qualitative data, in practice many studies combine both types of data. This is known as methodological pluralism. Combining research methods allows you to:

- Check reliability of the data produced
- Fill in the gaps where the main research method cannot produce all the necessary data
- Use different methods to obtain different perspectives from research participants
- Use qualitative research to understand the relationship between variables revealed in quantitative research
- Study different aspects of a topic

**Examples of Methodological Pluralism****Education**

Wright (1992) used the following four combinations of methods to investigate racism in primary schools:

- Classroom observation to see how teachers actually behaved
- Examination of documents about test results to examine the effects of racism

- Formal interviews with the head teachers to investigate school policies
- Informal interviews with teachers to uncover unobserved attitudes

**Beliefs in Society**

**The Kendal Project** was conducted in Kendal, Cumbria between October 2000 and June 2002 by researchers from the University of Lancaster studying modern society’s approach to, and practice of, religion and spirituality. They used a combination of research methods:

- Observations were used to observe church services
- Congregational attendance counts were used to confirm the numbers attending church services
- Case Studies and interviews and questionnaires were used to find out more about the meaning of faith in people’s lives



**Exam Hint:** Showing a clear understanding of methodological pluralism and the advantages of using it will gain you evaluation marks in the exam.

**Exam Hint:** It is important to know both sides of this debate and show that you can use evidence to support your argument. Summarise both sides of the debate and the evidence in a table similar to the one below.

Sociology needs statistics	Evidence
Sociology does not need statistics	Evidence

Write a conclusion summarising your argument.