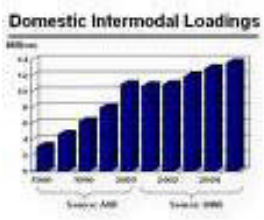
Official statistics are a major source of secondary quantitative data. It's useful to note ideas relating to official statistics can also be applied to other forms of statistical data.

Two main sources of official statistical data in Britain.

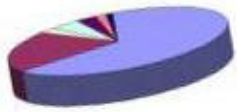


Sources

Government Departments
Example: The Department for Education and Skills

Government Agencies
Example: The Police

Statistics



Governments produce demographic data to inform policy-making (how many teachers we will need in 10 years time, for example) and for information / accountability purposes (for example. how much is spent on defence or schooling each year).

Advantages

Cost

The researcher does not have to spend money (and time) collecting data because it already exists.

Trends

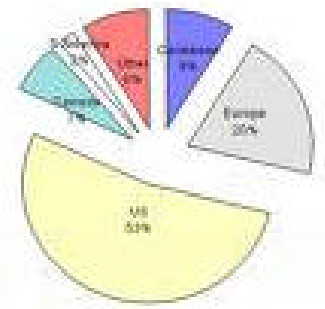
Using data drawn from different years it's possible to see how something (such as educational achievement) has changed. Patterns of behaviour can also be identified using statistical data collected over a number of years.

Availability

Official statistics may be the only available source in a particular sociological area, such as historical or cross-cultural analyses.

Comparison

Statistics can be used for inter-group and cross-cultural comparisons where this kind of information may be too expensive and time-consuming for the sociologist to collect personally.



Disadvantages

Validity

Official statistics, apart from not providing any great depth or detail, may have validity problems associated with what governments include (or exclude) from their published data. In other words official statistics may only give us a partial picture of reality. **Examples**: Crime, Unemployment or Disability statistics.

Definitions

Definitions used by governments may not be the same as those used by the sociologist. Governments may also change the definition of something (what counts as "car crime", for example) over time. This may create a reliability problem.

Interpretation

Although quantitative data is normally seen as more objective than qualitative data, the significance of any data has to be interpreted by the researcher (to decide what the data *means)* - and this involves subjective judgements.