
THE ROLE OF OFFICIAL STATISTICS WITHIN THE DATA ECOSYSTEM

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ABSTRACT

The need for informative and up-to-date high-quality data on the economy and society has rarely been greater than during the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. In addition to the Federal Statistical Office as a reliable and established statistics producer, other actors have increasingly become involved in meeting the need for relevant data. This article describes administrative statistics and data of private providers which, together with official statistics, form a triangle within a data ecosystem. It analyses their differences from official statistics and examines whether they meet the requirements in terms of neutrality, quality and functional centralisation that have to be satisfied by official statistics.



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1

Administrative statistics, private data providers and official statistics – the triangle of the data ecosystem

“Germany – a data backwater with no clear economic policy” was the headline of a Handelsblatt article on the data situation in Germany during the Covid-19 pandemic (Handelsblatt, 2020). This criticism may appear surprising at a time when it is seemingly possible to obtain information on all aspects of life with little effort. A shortage of data surely cannot be the root of the problem. During the current Covid pandemic, for instance, many administrative bodies are producing more and more so-called administrative statistics, which serve political decision-makers as a basis for their actions. Administrative statistics used to be merely a by-product of administrative processes in public authorities and state organisations, whereas now they are increasingly used to optimise the administrative processes. There is growing public interest in administrative statistics due to their increasing importance and the resulting reporting opportunities. Administrative statistics are increasingly taking on the role of “quasi” official statistics, without actually being official statistics in the conventional sense.

Alongside the administrative bodies which compile administrative statistics, there are now more and more companies, journalists and research institutes that generate data and produce statistics in their work. These private data providers are one factor behind the increasing diversification of the data landscape in Germany – making the headline quoted at the beginning even more surprising. Walter Radermacher, the former Director-General of the European statistical authority Eurostat and former President of the Federal Statistical Office, refers instead to an “ocean of information” in this context (Radermacher, 2017).

Official statistics, administrative statistics and private data providers form a triangular data ecosystem. The Federal Government’s data strategy defines data ecosystems as follows: «*Data ecosystems describe the various stakeholders, services and applications (software) that use and share data for economic or social purposes*» (Federal Government, 2021, here: page 108).

But neither administrative statistics nor private data providers are official statistics providers, as they have no legal mandate in many cases; objectivity, neutrality and scientific independence are thus not legally anchored to the same extent as in the official statistics system. Yet any assessment of the quality of all forms of statistical survey must be measured against the fundamental criteria of official statistics, at least when the survey is in the public interest or it is used as the basis for political action.

Despite the diversity of the data, one aspect that can lead to the impression of Germany being a data backwater is the independent collection of administrative statistics by the authorities in which the administrative processes occur. The result is a fragmented and uncoordinated data landscape in Germany. Furthermore, the production of data is not coordinated and harmonised among the private data providers. The lack of data transparency also reinforces the negative perception.

The following article provides information on the possible role of the official statistics system in the German data ecosystem. Aimed at achieving greater data transparency and thus improving the data situation in Germany, it highlights various quality assurance methods. Chapter 2 presents the pillars of official statistics, and chapter 3 then explains the relationship between administrative and federal statistics. Chapter 4 highlights the role of private data providers, while chapter 5 goes on to measure administrative statistics and statistics supplied by private providers in terms of the pillars of official statistics. The conclusion contains a summary of the benefits to be obtained by the increased use of federal statistics, and not only with regard to the data situation during the Covid-19 pandemic.

2

The pillars of official statistics

Policy measures should be discussed on the basis of high quality data that are objective, neutral and scientifically independent. The Federal Statistical Office is legally mandated to carry out the methodological and technical preparation and development of statistics for federal purposes (federal statistics) in consultation with

the statistical offices of the Länder (Section 3(3) Federal Statistics Act). Federal statistics thus form a neutral basis for assessing social phenomena and political decisions. In order to meet this requirement, federal statistics are compiled on the basis of five pillars: legality, decentralisation, functional centralisation, neutrality and quality.

The primary task of the network of the Federal Statistical Office and the statistical offices of the Länder (statistics network) is the production and provision of statistics. In addition to [legality](#) and the [federal organisational structure](#), this gives rise to the third pillar of [functional centralisation](#). The statistical offices can thus concentrate exclusively on statistical production and benefit from corresponding synergies and economies of scale.

[Neutrality](#) is anchored in Section 1 of the Federal Statistics Act. It ensures that the statistics network can produce and publish statistical results without any influence from third parties. In addition, Section 1 of the Federal Statistics Act obliges the statistics network to obtain data “by making use of scientific findings and by employing appropriate methods and information technology”. This provides the first basis for the next pillar, [quality](#). This is laid down in the national quality standards of the official statistics system. Furthermore, federal statistics are embedded in a European system of statistics, which provides the second basis for the quality pillar. This obliges the statistics network to fulfil the statistical quality criteria set out in the [European Statistics Code of Practice](#)¹. The European Commission regularly checks the degree of fulfilment of the criteria in so-called peer reviews, the results of which are published.

¹ See also the discussion paper by the Central Statistics Office of Ireland (2021) on the importance of the Code of Practice for safeguarding the relevance of official European statistics.

3

Differences between administrative and federal statistics

3.1 Definition and development of administrative statistics

In the following, administrative statistics are defined as statistics that arise from an administrative process of public authorities or government agencies and for which there is no specific statistical legal basis as set out in Section 5 of the Federal Statistics Act. The following applies to all administrative statistics: The data are obtained during the course of the administrative or business process and are not created and provided by organisations exclusively charged with data production, unlike the statistics network.

The use of administrative statistics in the reporting process is not new, but it is becoming increasingly important due to the new technical possibilities for integrating external data into statistical production. Thus, administrative statistics often provide important supplementary information to the data of the statistics network. This currently includes the data on the Covid-19 case numbers from the Robert Koch Institute.

More and more administrative processes are being automated and digitalised as a result of technical progress. Statistics are not only processed more quickly and produced on an ongoing basis, but are increasingly part of the administrative tasks themselves. The growing number of possibilities for administrative bodies to produce and use data in their administrative processes is also generating data of public interest. In addition, laws increasingly include a mandate to evaluate or at least report on the impact of the laws. These evaluation mandates in turn generate new data which then have further potential uses. Examples of this include the evaluation of measures taken by the Federal Office for Migration and Refugees, and the reporting on the expansion of private pension provision in the area of pension policy.

If authorities have delegated the production of statistics to the Federal Statistical Office, these, too, are designated as administrative statistics. However, many

administrative statistics are produced by the respective administrative authorities themselves. This article therefore distinguishes not only between the federal statistics (as described above) and administrative statistics, but also between two different types of administrative statistics: original and delegated administrative statistics.

In the case of **original** administrative statistics, the data is provided by the administrative bodies which are therefore responsible for the results of the statistics, whereas the Federal Statistical Office is not involved in the process.

In the case of **delegated** administrative statistics, these can be commissioned only by administrative bodies of the Federation. They transmit the data which regularly accumulate in their own administrative area to the official statistics system. Such data are not primarily collected for statistical purposes; the aim is therefore to process them and render them usable for statistical purposes. In legal terms, the delegation is based either on the Federal Statistics Act or a separate legal regulation. Section 8 of the Federal Statistics Act makes it fundamentally possible for an administrative body to have its data processed statistically by the Federal Statistical Office. Alternatively, the compilation of administrative statistics may also be explicitly mandated in a law.¹² Delegated administrative statistics thus represent a legally commissioned form of data processing. A stipulation can be included for the data of the individual reporting bodies to be transmitted directly to the Federal Statistical Office, which then prepares and evaluates the data centrally. As a rule, only federal results are reported, with no detailed regional breakdowns.

In the past, public authorities delegated the statistical processing of their data to the Federal Statistical Office, as they could not easily produce high-quality statistics from their own administrative data due to a lack of technical resources. Today, the technical infrastructure available at the Federal Statistical Office is less decisive in this regard. Rather, the resulting reduction in workload and the use of specialist competences make the delegation of administrative statistics an attractive proposition

2 Examples can be found in Section 66 of the Food and Feed Code, Section 34 of the Tobacco Tax Act, Section 157 of the Spirits Monopoly Act, Section 27 of the Beer Tax Act, Section 63 of the Energy Tax Act and Section 15 of the Aviation Tax Act.

for administrative bodies. They do not have to process the data themselves to obtain the desired information and consequently do not have to maintain the know-how, personnel and material resources necessary for statistical production.

Neither administrative statistics produced by the authorities themselves nor those delegated to the Federal Statistical Office actually count as federal statistics. Accordingly, the legal requirements for federal statistics contained in the Federal Statistics Act do not apply to them. Basically, administrative statistics do not have to meet the strict requirements of neutrality, objectivity and professional independence. Conversely however, they are disadvantaged by the fact that regulations concerning the use of supplementary statistical information do not apply – for example, no access is granted to the statistical register as provided by Section 13 (1) of the Federal Statistics Act.

3.2 Use of administrative statistics for an organisation's own information needs

Administrative statistics are only compiled for specific administrative tasks. They help clients in their planning, or serve as the basis for impact assessments for concrete legislative projects. The primary – and exclusive – group for the use of administrative statistics is the administrative bodies whose administrative processes generate the data. Administrative statistics provide them with more up-to-date figures and more specific data than the usual series of publications issued by the Federal Statistical Office.¹³ Administrative statistics are primarily used as a managerial instrument. For example, the Federal Ministry of Finance can use its specially compiled tax administration statistics to estimate the effects of tax law changes on the public budget and intervene more effectively accordingly (Zifonun-Kopp, 2012).

However, the statistics are taken from highly specific tasks, which gives rise to a number of disadvantages with regard to their quality and usability. The narrowly

3 In addition to the trade tax statistics compiled every three years as federal statistics, annual administrative statistics were compiled for the Federal Ministry of Finance from 2004 to 2011. Trade tax statistics are now compiled annually as federal statistics following the amendment of the Tax Statistics Act of 25 July 2014 (Federal Law Gazette I p. 1266). The compilation of additional administrative statistics is thus no longer necessary.

defined use provides an equally restricted definition of the situation and the information at hand. Definitions, however, can and do change frequently. Thus, amendments to legislation, discontinued and new processes as well as new categories (of measures requiring evaluation, for example) can help bring about (short-term) improvements in the administrative processes. However, this can pose major challenges for use outside the authority that compiled the administrative statistics, especially when it comes to scientific use or providing time series or data bases for evaluations.

The main task of federal statistics, by contrast, is to provide information on social, economic and ecological interrelationships for use by the state and society – with the appropriate continuity, detail and quality (Section 1 of the Federal Statistics Act). Federal statistics thus always serve the public interest and are therefore an indispensable source of information for political decision-making.

3.3 Obligation to publish

Another difference between federal and administrative statistics is the obligation to publish. Federal statistics include a legal mandate to publish and present the results of the data processing for general purposes (Section 3 (1) number 3 of Federal Statistics Act). Self-determination regarding the manner of publication, oriented towards functional statistical criteria, is the foundation upon which the neutrality, objectivity and professional independence of the statistical offices of the Federation and the Länder are based. For administrative statistics, on the other hand, the decision regarding publication of the results lies – in the absence of explicit publication regulations – with the respective administrative body (Section 8 (1), sentence 2 of the Federal Statistics Act). Administrative statistics are therefore not directly available to the general public. In cases where the statistics are of minor relevance to the general public, this is of little consequence. However, if there is public interest, there would be an urgent need for publication. One example is the Federal Government's gender equality statistics, for which express permission for publication has been granted. The results of these statistics may be

used to create an index which is published regularly on the website of the Federal Statistical Office.¹⁴

↳ Excursus

In addition to the Federal Statistical Office and the statistical offices of the Länder, other national institutions also participate in producing European statistics as so-called Other National Authorities (ONAs). These include the Deutsche Bundesbank and the Federal Employment Agency. Here the Federal Statistical Office carries out a coordinating function as the “national statistical authority” and, in accordance with Article 5 of Regulation 223/2009, acts as the sole point of contact with the Statistical Office of the European Union (Eurostat). There is shared responsibility regarding the development, production and dissemination of European statistics; the Federal Statistical Office and the ONAs work together in a spirit of partnership and trust in fulfilling their tasks and obligations. The ONAs are important partners of the Federal Statistical Office in implementing the European Statistical Programme at the national level, especially with regard to quality, methodology, data transmission and communication. Statistics compiled on the basis of this partnership thus also count as official statistics and are not therefore included in this study (ec.europa.eu).

4

Differences between private data providers and official statistics producers

The group of private data providers consists of all providers of data which are not state institutions. The spectrum is wide and ranges from opinion research institutes whose sole purpose is to produce data, to research institutions for whom it is essential to collect research data, through to enterprises which generate data as part of their administrative processes. The increasing digitalisation of administrative processes is one reason why more and more private actors are entering the data provider market. In addition, advances in information technology have greatly simplified both the collection and analysis of data. Almost anyone can now design an online survey.

4 The Gender Equality Index Report is prepared regularly on behalf of the Federal Ministry for Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth. The index measures the equal participation of women and men in leadership positions in the supreme federal authorities on 30 June of each year: www.destatis.de

Calculating regression, or even more complex models, used to be the preserve of experts, while such procedures are now offered in all common statistical software. In other words, the cost of producing statistics has fallen significantly in recent decades, as have the market entry barriers. This has led to a significant increase in the number of data providers (Decentralised Information Asset, 2020). A new profession – that of the data journalist – has even emerged among the data providers in recent years (Lowrey and others, 2019).

The private data providers can thus be divided into two groups, analogous to the state institutions: The first group is made up of institutions whose profit-making purpose is the collection of data and the production of statistics. They are the private sector counterpart to the official statistics system. There is functional centralisation here with regard to data collection and evaluation. They are not legally obliged to be independent, yet positioning themselves as independent data providers that publish high-quality statistics gives them a competitive advantage and is therefore often regarded as desirable.

The second group includes enterprises and institutions whose administrative processes generate data and for whom the production of statistics is a by-product of their actual business operations. This group is similar to the authorities that produce the administrative statistics described above from their administrative processes. With regard to the differences to official statistics, the above description therefore applies to this group by extension.

5

Measuring administrative statistics and statistics from private data providers against the pillars of official statistics

Administrative statistics and statistics from private providers must be measured against the pillars of official statistics in order to assess their suitability for depicting and assessing political actions.

5.1 Neutrality

The neutrality of federal statistics is regulated in the Federal Statistics Act. However, it is also a result of the way in which the federal statistics system works: it covers issues that the relevant statistical authorities of the Federation and the Länder themselves have no influence over. For example, the Federal Statistical Office measures and publishes the development of the gross domestic product, but does not decide economic policy. This minimises the risk of conflicts of interest. Such conflicts of interest cannot be ruled out if an authority decides on certain measures in sensitive areas and generates its own statistics on these measures from its administrative processes. This endangers the neutrality and independence, even if they are enshrined in a law.

The mere suggestion of potential conflicts of interest can damage the credibility of administrative statistics in the public eye, even if the relevant administrative bodies collect the data reliably and uphold high standards.¹⁵ No “seal” can be issued by a disinterested third party and doubts about the results linger. By contrast, the federal statistics system takes on the role of a neutral third party and thus raises the credibility of the results.

In the case of private data providers from the research sector, it can generally also be assumed that there is

⁵ For example, the Deutsche Bundesbank is currently filling the data gaps in its commercial property price indices with data from private third-party providers. It does, however, point out that despite the data being of high quality, they cannot replace those from official sources in the long term. This is because, from the Bundesbank’s point of view, any analyses used for regulatory economic interventions must be based on official data (Melzer/Dotzler, 2021, here: p. 85).

no conflict of interest between the production of data and their other activities. Furthermore, the freedom of science, research and teaching is firmly anchored in Article 5 of the Basic Law. However, problems can arise with this independence if the private data providers are financially dependent on a client.⁶ In principle, private data providers are not bound by the regulations of the European Statistics Code of Practice, nor is their independence regulated by law.

5.2 Quality assurance

The functional specialisation in the statistical offices of the Federation and the Länder has a positive effect on the quality of the surveys in itself. In addition, the quality is documented transparently and verifiably for third parties in the quality reports and in regular reviews by the European Commission. Administrative statistics are not subject to these constraints.

In the absence of precise legal requirements, the compiling authority or the commissioning body (in the case of delegated administrative statistics) defines the requirements for the compilation of administrative statistics. This in itself gives administrative statistics greater flexibility, as any changes do not require a legislative procedure and decisions can be taken quickly and ad hoc. Private data providers have this same advantage. A closer look, however, reveals that any benefit gained from greater flexibility comes at the expense of a significant reduction in quality. The quality of a set of statistics is contingent upon its being compiled according to uniform methods and in line with standardised statistical quality criteria. Federal statistics are guided by the European Statistics Code of Practice and the [quality standards of official statistics](#), whereas administrative statistics are governed solely by the requirements of the authorities – unless otherwise regulated by law.

Private data providers are also not subject to the quality criteria of official statistics. They can choose to use them as orientation, but are not obliged to do so. In response to open data initiatives, efforts are being made to achieve greater transparency in the creation of data, especially at research institutes, although there is no guarantee regarding the success of such efforts.

⁶ For example, a study funded by a confectionery manufacturer concluded that chocolate has beneficial health effects (Miebach, 2019).

The lack of a legal basis also poses a problem for private providers, as this prevents them from conducting surveys which include an obligation to provide information. This “privilege” is reserved for the official statistics system under strict conditions – especially with regard to the burden on respondents⁷. Given the declining willingness to participate in surveys (Krüger, 2019), this represents a systematic disadvantage for the quality of statistics from private providers.

If the implementation of administrative statistics is delegated to the Federal Statistical Office, there may be various reasons for any deviations from established quality principles. Any methodological shortcomings that arise during the course of the statistical production process could be due to the legislative process itself. The risk is particularly high if the mandate to compile administrative statistics is issued in a non-statistical law. The legal obligation to produce statistics ultimately lies with the Federal Statistical Office with its specialist knowledge, yet the risk that it is not (sufficiently) involved is particularly high in such cases. As a consequence, the precise commission is then often worded too generally and sometimes lacks clarity (because the obligation to provide data is formulated too vaguely, for example).

Another problem is the comparability of the data. In federal statistics, it is essential that data from different reference periods are mutually comparable. In the process of building up time series, any changes or additions should therefore be kept to a minimum. The comparability of the reporting periods suffers considerably if [administrative statistics](#) are to be produced regularly over a longer period of time yet there are frequent changes in their production specifications. In the case of private data providers, data comparability must be viewed in a differentiated manner. Economic research institutes in particular offer established products whose added value often lies precisely in their comparability over time.⁸

⁷ For a discussion on the burden imposed by official statistics on respondents, see Vorgrümler and others (2011).

⁸ An example of this is the time series of the [Ifo Business Climate Index](#).

5.3 Functional centralisation

The principle of functional centralisation applies not only to official statistics, rather to all administrative actions, with the intention of yielding specialisation advantages in the individual administrative areas. According to this principle, statistical tasks should be performed in bundled form by the statistical offices of the Federation and the Länder. Within the official statistics system this makes it possible to bundle both qualitative and quantitative resources and to raise competence levels in the statistical representation.

This centralisation means that the statistical offices of the Federation and the Länder dedicate themselves almost exclusively to the task of producing statistics. For other authorities, however, producing statistics is not their primary purpose, merely a by-product. In these authorities, the compilation of statistics is thus usually in competition with the primary task. This can have a negative effect, both quantitatively and qualitatively, on the resources actually required for the production of statistics, since the authorities prioritise primary tasks over secondary tasks. According to the criterion of functional centralisation, it is less efficient for other authorities to produce statistics than for the statistical offices of the Federation and the Länder.

The above distinction between private providers whose main purpose is to collect data and publish statistics and those providers for whom statistics are only a secondary purpose leads to a similar situation in this regard. The functional centralisation promotes greater efficiency and quality in the statistics. There is no guarantee of this in the case of providers whose main purpose is not producing statistics.

6

Conclusion and outlook


The purpose of statistics is to fashion an objective picture of the effects of political and social action – especially during the current Covid-19 pandemic. This is the goal of the statistics generated by the federal statistics system. Administrative statistics, on the other hand, can give rise to the following problems:

- › Neutrality and objectivity suffer when administrative statistics are used to provide a representation of an organisation's own actions.
- › The information from a set of administrative statistics primarily serves the purposes of the administrative body which commissioned it and not the representation of social phenomena.
- › In comparison to federal statistics, some legal possibilities are not available (for example, the combining of data).
- › Compliance with the quality principles is hampered by a lack of transparency and controls.
- › Non-statistical authorities have less specialist knowledge.
- › Non-transparent changes in specifications lead to reduced comparability of data sets over time.
- › Administrative statistics suffer from under-resourcing and insufficient specialisation in the respective authorities.
- › There is no obligation to publish the data, as stipulated in the Federal Statistics Act.

In general, efforts should consequently be made to conduct statistics as federal statistics in order to maintain neutrality, objectivity and professional independence within the political process. Only limited use should be made of administrative statistics. Any sets of statistics that are essential for society and that cannot be produced as federal statistics should be delegated to the Federal Statistical Office as administrative statistics. Administrative statistics should therefore only be used in instances where these are absolutely necessary for the respective administrative body to perform its functions. Efforts should also be made in the political process to ensure that minimum functional requirements are included in the legal commission for administrative statistics (production requirements). The details should be specified in an administrative agreement or specification.

Federal statistics should be the first choice for assessing political decisions and social phenomena. This also reflects the spirit in which the official statistics system was established in Germany and in Europe. It is also the only way to ensure that political decisions are assessed on the basis of high-quality statistics that enjoy public

trust due to their independence, neutrality and professionalism.

It is a defining feature of our form of society that the supply of data is not monopolised by the state. Therefore, the requirement to delegate important administrative statistics to the official statistics system cannot be extended to private data providers. The difficulty here lies not in the supply of the data itself – indeed, this is to be welcomed – but in the lack of transparency in the data ecosystem that has arisen due to the entry of many new data providers into the data “market”. Solving this problem is at the heart of the proposal to set up a data transparency unit at the Federal Statistical Office, the implementation of which has been included in the Federal Government’s data strategy (Federal Government, 2021, here: page 99). The aims of this unit are to ensure transparency in the data supplied by private providers as well as to carry out qualitative assessments of the offers received, based on official statistics standards. In future, anyone searching for data on a particular topic should be able to enlist the help of the transparency unit. The transparency unit will thus make an important contribution to transforming and refreshing the data backwater that is Germany while avoiding burdening respondents with multiple surveys. 

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Abbreviations

| | | |
|----------|---|---|
| WISTA | = | Wirtschaft und Statistik |
| JD | = | annual average |
| D | = | average (for values which cannot be added up) |
| Vj | = | quarter of a year |
| Hj | = | half-year |
| a. n. g. | = | not elsewhere classified |
| o. a. S. | = | no main economic activity |
| St | = | piece |
| Mill. | = | million |
| Mrd. | = | billion |

Explanation of symbols

| | | |
|--------|---|---|
| – | = | no figures or magnitude zero |
| 0 | = | less than half of 1 in the last digit occupied, but more than zero |
| . | = | numerical value unknown or not to be disclosed |
| ... | = | data will be available later |
| X | = | cell blocked for logical reasons |
| I or — | = | fundamental change within a series affecting comparisons over time |
| / | = | no data because the numerical value is not sufficiently reliable |
| () | = | limited informational value because numerical value is of limited statistical reliability |