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Deegan, Mary Jo, "Social Surveys" (2004). *Sociology Department, Faculty Publications*. 320.
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Deegan, Mary Jo. 2004. "Social Surveys." Pp. 685-687 in *Poverty in the United States: An Encyclopedia of History, Politics, and Policy*, Vol. II, edited by Gwendolyn Mink and Alice O'Connor. Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO.

Social Surveys

Social surveys are the systematic collection of data on a specific subject. From approximately 1890 to 1935, social surveys in the United States often encompassed broad topics, a whole city, or a very large sample of a target population. After World War II, surveys increasingly became more quantitative, narrower in their definition of populations, and more focused. Surveys were initially relatively infrequent events and were conducted face-to-face, but surveys now permeate daily life and increasingly occur over the telephone.

The earliest social surveys were done by governments taking a census of their people. Great Britain conducted an early count of its population and was the origin of many concepts associated with empiricism and methodology to collect data. Starting in 1790, the U.S. census has occurred every ten years and provided information affecting government services and funding.

In France from the middle to late nineteenth century, the work of Frederick LePlay focused on family budgets and social amelioration. At the end of this period, Emile Durkheim attacked LePlay's approach, and Durkheim's emphasis on objective science combined with statistics was accepted as more valid than LePlay's applied work. Durkheim's definition was increasingly accepted by many survey researchers in the United States during the 1930s.

In Britain, Charles Booth's seventeen-volume study of *The Life and Labour of the People in London* (1889–1903) became a landmark survey that mapped the relationship among poverty, work, community, and social life. Booth's work influenced many sociological surveys until the mid-1930s. This can be clearly seen in the seven-

volume *New Survey of London Life and Labour* (1930–1934) conducted by the London School of Economics.

Booth's work profoundly influenced the writing of Hull House residents, who surveyed their Chicago neighborhood to help people in poverty understand their social patterns and become empowered to initiate social changes. *Hull-House Maps and Papers* (1895) helped legitimate what is called "the social survey movement," which followed this model of connecting everyday people with data collection about social issues affecting them. Women played a central role in these surveys and in using them to empower the people whose lives were studied, as well as to advocate for social reform. Thousands of social surveys were conducted; some of the most famous ones concerned urban crime. By linking the occurrence of social problems to objectively measured social and economic conditions, the survey movement played an important role in debunking the widely held notion that poverty and other social "pathologies" could be blamed on the behavior of the poor.

The government often helped organize and fund these massive studies. Thus, the nineteen-volume *Report on Condition of Woman and Child Wage-Earners in the United States* (1910–1913) was a model of such an effort. Government bureaus—for women, children, immigrants, and labor—amassed data and connected it to governmental decisions and politics. Women often staffed these bureaus and continued the social survey tradition in a wider public arena.

A split between academically based social sciences and other fields, such as social work and urban planning, appeared during the 1920s and 1930s. These groups debated the nature of objectivity and expertise and the relationships to "respondents" and funding. Philanthropic foundations such as the Russell Sage, Ford, and Rockefeller Foundations also increasingly paid for massive social surveys over this period.

Until the mid-1930s, broadly defined social surveys often included a combination of firsthand investigation using the case method and statistics to analyze various aspects of a community. This blend of qualitative ground-level research and more detached, quantitative research had theoretical and ameliorative consequences—among them, a capacity to interpret statistical findings through the lens of day-to-day community experience. By the 1930s, the use of strictly quantitative techniques was becoming more common and was increasingly associated with a Durkheimian definition of science, "objectivity," and the expert. Survey researchers less frequently allied themselves with the poor and the populations studied and increasingly aligned themselves with powerful interests.

This distance between researchers and respondents rapidly increased after World War II. The growth in statistical sampling techniques and computers combined to popularize a redefinition of social surveys as methods to collect numerical data on a population. Researchers and other experts in politics, government, and policy-making used these data with little or no input from the poor.

Survey institutions emerged during this period and focused on obtaining funding for continuous surveying of many groups, particularly those experiencing what experts called "social problems." They defined these pathologies as emerging from the poor and not from the economy, racism, or sexism. Concepts such as the "culture of poverty" explained the poor as people with faulty ways of life and ideas. Ghettoization of segregated populations of the poor, of African Americans, and of female-headed households also grew. During the 1960s, the differences between social surveyors and the poor sometimes exploded into angry confrontations. Poor people increasingly suspected the motives of researchers who took data from the people they studied but returned little if anything.

In the 1970s, a "poverty research industry" became more established and continues to this day. This bureaucratic enterprise has increasing prestige within the academy, which sponsors

survey institutions to garner billions of dollars in grants from a wide range of agencies, foundations, and private donors. Academic training is allied with and often subsidized by this process.

On a smaller scale, a "participatory action research movement" coexists with this industry and continues the alliance between social surveyors and community interests. Feminist methods for data collection, problem solving, and politics also create an alternative arrangement between experts and the poor. Once again, community action aligns with training and social research for and by the poor, which they can use for their own liberation. Such training increasingly crosses national boundaries and is part of the international effort to decolonize nation-states. Massive amounts of data are increasingly available over the Internet and can potentially help poor people gain access to social facts affecting their lives. These vital efforts are offset, however, by the widespread conservative attitudes and politics that dominate the contemporary poverty research industry.

Mary Jo Deegan

See also: Hull House; *Hull-House Maps and Papers; The Philadelphia Negro;* Pittsburgh Survey; *Poverty;* Poverty Research; *Survey* and *Survey Graphic*

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