

Sir Michael Scholar
UK Statistics Authority
Statistics House
Tredegar Park
Newport
South Wales
NP10 8XG

1 October 2010

Dear Sir Michael,

Re: Statistics from Department for Work and Pensions

I am writing to request your opinion on whether there has been a breach of guidance on official statistics by the Department for Work and Pensions in recent press releases.

My query is on behalf of Full Fact, an independent, non-profit organisation campaigning for greater transparency and accountability in the public debate.

On Monday 27 September several media outlets, including the Sun and the Daily Mail, reported figures from the Department suggesting that one in five claimants of three types of benefit (Jobseekers Allowance, Incapacity Benefit and Income Support) had received support for over five years.

However there was no mention of these figures on the Departmental website, nor was the press release published.

Though we have since obtained a copy of the press release which circulated the figures, the DWP media team explained that the data, while based on the Work and Pensions Longitudinal Study, was produced by fresh analysis of the database, and thus the statistics specific to the story were not publicly available when released to the press.

This is not the only time that such an approach has been taken to releasing statistics. On 13 September, a press release was circulated highlighting figures suggesting that 1.4 million people of working age had never worked.

Again, neither the press release nor the figures were reproduced on the DWP website, and when my organisation requested the figures, we were simply sent the original press release because the figures were not publicly available.

The press release actually included a link to the bulletin of official worklessness statistics, but the bulletin did not include the type of figures quoted in the release.

Given that the 2009 guidance issued to Government departments by Sir Gus

O'Donnell included a reminder that officials "must not selectively quote favourable data from any unpublished dataset", I wish to know if the press releases could be deemed contradictory to such guidance.

I note that you yourself have raised the issue of quoting unpublished data with the current Government in your letter to the Prime Minister dated 12 May, which stated:

"The Cabinet Secretary's existing guidance on statistical practice requires all officials and advisors, not only government statisticians, to observe the Code of Practice for Official Statistics; to consult professional statisticians when preparing publications; not to quote selectively from unpublished datasets".

In light of these comments I have enclosed a copy of the releases sent to the press in order to establish:

- i) If the figures could be deemed official statistics, and if not, whether this was made sufficiently clear in the press release; and
- ii) If the inaccessibility of the data itself is considered a breach of the guidance mentioned above.

Given the centrality of reforms to the welfare state in the debate on reducing the deficit, I am in no doubt that you will agree it is vital the public have confidence in the statistics that are being circulated on the issue.

Yours Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Patrick Casey', with a long, sweeping flourish extending to the right.

Patrick Casey
Full Fact

Press Release for reports appearing in the media on 27 September

More than 1.5m people have spent the last five years workless and on benefits

More than one and a half million people have spent the last five years or more claiming at least one of the three main out of work benefits - underlining the extent of Britain's worklessness crisis

1.750m people of working age have spent at least five years continuously claiming Jobseekers Allowance, Incapacity Benefit or Income Support/Pension Credit or one of these three benefits in combination with something else.

While the numbers who have spent five years or more on the headline unemployment benefit - Jobseeker's Allowance - may seem low at 4,870, they hide the underlying problem - with well over one and a half million on some combination of incapacity benefit or income support.

Employment Minister Chris Grayling said:

"These are people the last Government fast tracked onto a lifetime of benefit dependency. Thousands of people who with the right help could be making a contribution to the economy, have instead been written off with the taxpayer asked to foot the bill.

"The Work Programme we are bringing in next year will give people that help - when they need it, to make sure that those who can work do so."

The new Work Programme will come on stream next year and offer tailored support to a wide range of customers – from Jobseeker's Allowance recipients who have been out of work for some time, to customers who may previously have been receiving incapacity benefit for many years

It will be delivered by the best providers from across the private, public and voluntary sectors to ensure people get the right help at the right time to get off benefits and back into work.

Background

Working Age Client Group Caseload (Thousands) : Benefit combination by Duration of oldest current claim

Time Series=FEB10

	Total Caseload (Thousands)	Duration of oldest current claim						
		Up to 3 months Caseload (Thousands)	3 months up to 6 months Caseload (Thousands)	6 months up to 1 year Caseload (Thousands)	1 year and up to 2 years Caseload (Thousands)	2 years and up to 5 years Caseload (Thousands)	5 years and over Caseload (Thousands)	Unknown duration Caseload (Thousands)
Jobseekers	1526.01	626.13	353.81	311.43	199.63	30.14	4.87	-
Incapacity Benefits	2614.76	153.75	117.74	167.68	222.7	473.85	1479.04	-
Lone Parents	692.02	43.33	47.02	86.4	123.35	180.84	211.08	-
Carers	110.93	7.27	6.88	11.61	16.57	27.61	41	-
Other Income Related Benefits	191.35	29.51	24.84	29.82	39.88	53.52	13.78	-
TOTAL	5135.07	859.99	550.29	606.94	602.12	765.96	1749.77	

DEFINITIONS AND CONVENTIONS: "-" Nil or Negligible; "." Not applicable; Caseload figures are rounded to the nearest ten; Some additional disclosure control has also been applied. Average amounts are shown as pounds per week and rounded to the nearest penny. Totals may not sum due to rounding.

SOURCE: DWP Information Directorate: Work and Pensions Longitudinal Study.
Duration of oldest current claim The duration on the oldest benefit currently in receipt of JSA, IB/SDA, IS, PC.

Press Release for reports appearing in the media on 14 September

“Plight of the 1.4m who have never worked

New figures from the Department for Work and Pensions highlight that there are 1.4m people in the UK who have never worked. This figure includes 0.6m under 25s who are not in education of any sort and 0.8m between 25 and 64 who have never worked.

The figures suggest that worklessness is endemic in many areas of the country, with whole communities suffering from a culture of welfare dependency.

The startling new figures come ahead of the next set of unemployment statistics – due on Wednesday, and on the back of last week's figures from the ONS which highlighted that there are almost four million households across the country where no one is currently working.

Ministers feel that this is further evidence of the unfairness in the current system - both to those who've been trapped on benefits without the right type of support and to those taxpayers who fund the system.

Commenting on the figures Employment Minister Chris Grayling said:

"This is a shocking waste of human talent and a dreadful legacy that the current government has inherited. It cannot be right to leave so many people to in all likelihood spend their whole life on benefits without challenging and pushing them to do something better.

"Of course not everyone will be able to work, but for all those who can our new Work Programme will be vitally important. For the first time people will get access to a unified system of support which will treat them as individuals and will get them off welfare and into work."

The new Work Programme will come on stream next year and offer tailored support to a wide range of customers – from Jobseeker's Allowance recipients who have been out of work for some time, to customers who may previously have been receiving incapacity benefit for many years

It will be delivered by the best providers from across the private, public and voluntary sectors to ensure people get the right help at the right time to get off benefits and back into work.

Background

1. The number of individuals aged 16-64 who have never worked, excluding those aged under 25 and in education, is estimated at 1.4 million in the UK in April-June 2010.
2. This includes 0.6 million aged under 25 but not currently in education. And 0.8 million who are aged 25-64.
3. There are a further 2.0 million 18-24 year olds who have never worked but are in full or part time education

4. The latest figures on the numbers of workless households in the UK were published by the ONS on 08 September and can be found at:

<http://www.statistics.gov.uk/StatBase/Product.asp?vlnk=8552&Pos=1&ColRank=2&Rank=224>

5. These show there are 3.9m households (around 19%) in the UK which are currently workless.”