

## Book and Software Review

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Statistical Methods for Human Rights	
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**Jana Asher, David L. Banks, and Fritz J. Scheuren (eds).** *Statistical Methods for Human Rights*. New York: Springer, 2008. ISBN 978-0-387-72836-0 (pbk.). 339 pp, \$39.95.

*Statistical Methods for Human Rights* (SMHR) identifies statistical issues related to civil, political, economic, social, and cultural aspects of human rights including

- Freedom of speech and assembly,
- Freedom from slavery and torture,
- The right to a fair trial,
- Equal wages for equal work,
- Limited work hours,
- Rights to social security, free education, physical and mental health, and participation in a community's cultural life.

Abuses of human rights are defined as violations of international laws and are related to human rights which must be enforceable by police and a court system. Such laws are applicable during times of both war and peace.

In SMHR, “statistical methods” implicitly include aspects of survey and social science research such as data collection and language translation in addition to statistical analysis and design. Discussions of data collection and analysis involve primarily coding or manipulating existing qualitative data via multiple systems estimation (use of separate, incomplete lists to estimate population size), and random sample surveys. Statistical components are generally understandable for anyone with a basic statistics background. Most chapters introduce humanitarian contexts in which statistics are used, rather than focusing on the complexity of statistical techniques. The book is clear about the fact that data collection in human rights situations is messy, and hence avoids any pretention of clear-cut answers.

Historically, SMHR is situated subsequent to, and is more basic and current than, the edited volume on *Human Rights and Statistics* (Jabine and Claude 1992). Relative to *Studying Human Rights* (Landman 2006), which covers both qualitative and quantitative methods, the focus of SMHR is more singularly quantitative. It is similar in style to

*Statistics and Public Policy* (Spencer 1997), although the latter includes broader components of public policy.

In the first of four sections, Chapter 1 introduces human rights, nongovernmental organizations, the relationship of quantitative projects to qualitative data, and random sample surveys. Methodologically, I would recommend more attention to recent developments such as Axinn and Pearce (2006) discussion of data collection and designs for cross-lingual measurement. Chapter 2 emphasizes the role of numbers in genocide, the process of calculating casualties, the role of motive in determining whether or not an event constitutes genocide, and the question of whether analyses can identify motives. Chapter 3 explains why direct and indirect casualties of war should be estimated, and discusses ways in which the *rule of proportionality*, requiring care to minimize civilian deaths, needs to be expanded in relationship to the current technology of warfare. Chapter 4 considers the nature of information sources, differential increments (between test countries which violate human rights and control countries which do not), and time series data with concomitant (preexistent and covarying) variables.

Chapter 5 begins with a section on recent projects. Regarding missing Guatemalans unidentifiably buried in a municipal cemetery, a spike in the longitudinal trend indicates an unusual event such as mass murders. Chapter 6 discusses mortality related to conflicts in Timor-Leste where Human Rights Violation and Graveyard Census Databases were used when working with the Commission on Reception, Truth and Reconciliation. In the discussion of don't know responses relative to calendar dates in the Retrospective Mortality Survey, I would suggest use of salient events on event history calendar interviews to stimulate memory recall. Chapter 7 is very clearly written on the topic of Afghan Refugee Camp Surveys conducted in 2002, discussing sample design, questionnaire design, survey sample management, design effects, and paradata. Chapter 8 discusses an experiment by the international Metagora human rights measurement project on methods for evidence-based assessment of human rights and related issues, particularly regarding government indicators. Regarding the Afghan language questionnaires, I would be concerned that a single back-translation may have been insufficient to confirm concept or construct equivalence, in light of recommendations that iterative or collaborative processes be used to ensure comparable meaning beyond semantic sentence-level (see Harkness et al. 2008).

Chapter 9 begins with a section on history and future possibilities by addressing the rights of statisticians themselves, particularly for those who have disappeared or lost their lives while serving human rights causes. Chapter 10 promotes the use of statistical and demographic evidence in the International Criminal Court. Chapter 11 examines recent issues in human rights statistics from the perspective of economic and social models such as cost-benefit analysis and game theory.

In the third section, Chapter 12 is the book's penultimate and builds towards the climax of the final chapter. Primary emphasis is on the need for empirical evidence in impact or program evaluations of attempts to reach the United Nations' Millennium Development Goals (i.e., specific goals to be attained by 2015 which focus on human development as the means to sustained social and economic progress). Issues discussed include: absence of baselines, quality data collection, quality analysis, and willingness to conduct experiment-based evaluation. Reasons for lack of rigorous evaluations include fear that an evaluated

program will be found lacking relative to claims of organizations that have not conducted evaluations; and methodological challenges of macro-level evaluations relative to framing counterfactuals. The chapter suggests that donor organizations could offer matching grants for programs that spend money from their own budgets on evaluation. Statisticians could monitor study execution, interpret results, promote official statistics, train people in data collection and survey sampling, and offer *pro bono* services.

The final chapter addresses the risk of vulnerable subgroups being identified when *meso* level data is inappropriately disclosed. A list of eighteen cases in which data has been used to target groups or individuals is provided, and by itself makes purchase of the book worthwhile! The authors describe situations in which government agencies behaved inappropriately in the U.S. and in other countries. The first author admirably cites his own lack of attention to threatened integrity within a statistical system. A general emphasis encourages members of institutions to discuss all possible threats to integrity, even if publicly doing so could negatively influence future response rates. The final recommendation is the establishment of a register in which problematic incidents that have successfully been withstood could be recorded.

It is inevitably difficult to document events for which minimal formal information exists. One of the book's strengths is its many references to primary source documents and letters. Partly as a result of this feature, some published items could not be located as referenced. In a portion of these cases, simply changing a page number or author enabled a reference to be located. A list of acronyms and a more complete index would be helpful to readers.

I found the book highly engaging and pertinent to its stated goal of introducing the study of human rights contexts in which statistics are used. Audiences that could benefit from the book include not only evaluators, statisticians, and survey methodologists but also other human rights workers who want to understand the role of statistics and research methods in connection with substantive issues. The book provides a straight-forward reading experience, and flows compellingly toward the last two chapters where calls are given for impact evaluation and for attention to the potential misuse of meso-level information in identifying respondents.

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