

example, Ebenstein's treatment of Hayek's time at the Committee on Social Thought—seemed to me particularly useful. Ebenstein has been exceptionally diligent in tracking down and making good use of a range of sources. The volume concludes with a useful guide to some of the literature on Hayek's work.

While the biography is in general readable, it could have done with some editing. At times Ebenstein's extensive citation of primary sources becomes annoying. Occasionally, Ebenstein's text reads awkwardly as a consequence of putting too much information about his sources into the text. For example, when commenting on the background to Hayek's first marriage, Ebenstein writes:

Bill Letwin, a student of Hayek's in London and Chicago, recalls that he [Hayek] once mentioned something like, 'I didn't have the wit to say [to his childhood sweetheart], "Let's get married."' when both he and his cousin, Helene, were young in Vienna. He then departed to America for over a year, and when he returned, she was in another relationship. According to Stephen Kresge, general editor of Hayek's *Collected Works*, in words reviewed by Hayek's son, through "some misunderstanding of his intentions," Hayek's cousin married someone else' (pp. 32-3).

All told, however, while there are some awkwardnesses in the book, and a few points with which the specialist might quibble, this does not diminish from the worth of Ebenstein's volume. It would be excellent if someone were to do for Hayek what Hacohen has done for Popper, but until that occurs, the specialist student of Hayek's work, and the reader with a more casual interest, will happily have recourse to this volume, and it deserves to be a success.

One final note. This is a book that readers with an interest in Hayek will want not only to read, but also to keep on their shelves, and to consult on an ongoing basis. The publishers, however, have printed it on paper that calls to mind cheap paperbacks and telephone books.

I wonder how long it will last without turning brown and brittle, and why it was not produced on decent acid-free paper that would give the physical volume a lasting character that would match the value of its contents.

*Reviewed by Jeremy Shearmur*

***Damned Lies and Statistics:  
Untangling Numbers from  
the Media, Politicians,  
and Activists***

*By Joel Best*

University of California Press,  
2001, 190pp, \$US19.95,  
ISBN 0520219783

The main contention of this book is that statistics 'are products of social activity' and as such are susceptible to errors. Instead of assuming that statistics are facts that simply exist, readers are cautioned to be vigilant in their acceptance of their use. 'To sort out the good statistics from the bad', Best counsels his readers to think about three things every time they encounter a new statistic: who created it, why was it created, and how was it created? The purpose of this book is to help readers make sense of their answers to those questions in order to develop a more critical approach to the interpretation of statistics.

The book begins with a brief introduction to the rise of social statistics and their uses in the construction of social problems. The book then turns to a discussion of 'the most common problems' concerning the creation and interpretation of statistical data. These concern the creation of spurious numbers based on poor definitions (for example, false negatives and

false positives), erroneous and sometimes fraudulent estimates, the context and wording of questions in public opinion polls, and sampling error.

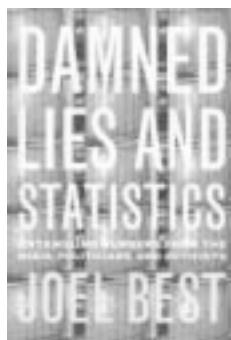
Of course, even accurate statistics can be made erroneous as people interpret and relay information incorrectly, often unintentionally. To that end, in one of the more interesting passages of the book, Best deals with the topic of mutant statistics and describes the ways in which these numbers are created. These occur by drawing inappropriate generalisations from a statistic; 'taking a number that means one thing and interpreting it to mean something different', confusing the meanings of more complicated statistics, and compounding errors in subsequent mutations.

The problem of mutant statistics is neatly illustrated in the book by the following example. An article published in a scholarly journal claimed that 'every year since 1950, the number of American children gunned down has doubled'. According to this statistic, even if one child had been 'gunned down' in 1950 the number killed in the year the article was published would have been 35 trillion. The origin of this mutant statistics was the much less spurious claim that 'the number of American children killed each year by guns has doubled since 1950'. Simply by trying to repeat the original figure, the anonymous author had fundamentally transformed its meaning.

Chapter five looks at some debates over statistics—including a timely review of US debates on the collection of the Census. The book closes by making a case for a more critical approach to the

review and interpretation of numbers based on an appreciation of 'the inevitable limitations that affect all statistics'.

For a book that argues against the use of spurious evidence to advance arguments, *Damned Lies and Statistics* seems to wage a few arguments without evidence of any kind. From the outset, Joel Best implies that the use of numbers as





social tools encourages their deliberate misuse—especially by ‘activists’ who wish to draw attention to social problems.

At one point, the author argues that when forced to make estimates concerning the numerical extent of social problems (for example, the number of homeless people, the number of non-reported crimes), activists will err on the side of exaggeration largely because they have an incentive to do so. In another section, it is claimed that in constructing statistical definitions, those wishing to draw attention to social problems are also more inclined to support broader definitions that exaggerate a problem (and are therefore less concerned with false positives than false negatives).

All of these claims, including the overall argument regarding deliberate falsehoods, are made without much supporting evidence. To me, this detracts from the book, especially because the argument is not at all necessary. It would have been sufficient for the author to flag the potential sources of error, noting some examples of those errors, rather than claim that there is a systematic tendency by some people to generate certain types of error. After all, in the interests of a critical approach, readers should be somewhat sceptical of all statistics.

Those criticisms aside, the book provides a good overview of the principal flaws in the development of descriptive statistics in a very readable and non-technical fashion. It is filled with numerous examples of bad statistics—though not many examples of good statistics—making it a clear guide to what not to do. For these reasons, it is probably most relevant to those people who frequently encounter statistical evidence, but who feel unable to evaluate its veracity.

By contrast, this book is not likely to interest those readers who have either studied statistics at some point in their careers—as distinct from attending a course on statistics—or for whom statistical scepticism is commonsense, although many of the examples are entertaining. The sources of errors reviewed in the book are not new and are covered by most introductory courses and textbooks on the subject.

Moreover, the book deals only with ‘the sorts of statistics typically addressed in the first week or so of an introductory statistics course’. The book is also very repetitive and could easily have made its case more succinctly. I would have preferred it if, in the space saved by more rigorous editing, the author had extended his gaze beyond descriptive statistics to look at the errors involved in inferential statistics. After all, it is usually with respect to inferential statistics, in which claims are made about correlation and causal relationships, that the lies are most damned.

*Reviewed by Walter Forrest*

***Social Policy, Public Policy:  
From Problem to Practice***  
by Meredith Edwards with Cosmo  
Howard and Robin Miller  
Allen & Unwin, 2001, 232 pp,  
\$35, ISBN 1 86448948 0

**S***ocial Policy, Public Policy* is a book written by a policymaker for policymakers. Meredith Edwards, a distinguished public servant in various social policy portfolios, has compiled four case studies designed to show the policy process ‘from problem to practice’.

The case studies are the Youth Allowance (AUSTUDY), the Child Support Scheme, the Higher Education Contribution Scheme and the Working Nation programmes. Edwards chooses examples that led to long-term policy breakthroughs. Not surprisingly, she emphasises the merit in pursuing the problems that underlay these schemes and the actual success of bureaucracy in delivering them. Her intent is clearly to affirm the good that government can do and more particularly, the pioneering efforts of Australian administrators in social policy. There are strong grounds for these claims. A HECS style system, for instance, is unique in the higher education sector.

The reader will note more than a tinge of partisanship in the book. All four case studies are chosen from Labor’s time in office with contrasts drawn to the approach of a Liberal administration. The chapter on higher education is titled HECS and not Fees. The chapter on the Working Nation programmes employs an analyst’s quote as ‘a very valuable social experiment which was aborted for political reasons’ (174). In the chapter on the Child Support Scheme, Edwards underlines the government’s eagerness to ‘make its mark in moulding public attitudes towards quality family life’ (58). There is undoubtedly a strong theme throughout the book that the reforms were pursued, and were successful, in part because of their ideological character.

Edwards’s main focus, though, is on the mindset and method of policymakers. Each of the four reforms are presented under the various headings of ‘history and context’, ‘putting the problem on the agenda’, ‘data and research’, ‘developing options’, ‘consultation’, ‘publicity’ and ‘evaluation’. The nexus of policy and politics is captured well through this structure. The ability to clearly identify both the conflict and progression of elite thought on all four of these complex policy areas is a credit to both this method and the level of detail.

Unfortunately, the book lacks the theoretical observations that would attract a wider audience and give the case studies greater depth. Edwards does not attempt to weave the first chapter’s rather thin consideration of normative policymaking issues into the case studies. While the accent on the players and the process is quite appealing, it is at the expense of the policymaking literature. The work of notable writers—Lindblom, Wildavsky, North, March and Olsen—is not considered in light of the case study findings. On the evidence Edwards presents, there is cause to question Lindblom’s famous characterisation of ‘the science of muddling through’. The impression given from the four case studies is of a high level of bureaucratic structure and coordination.

One of the main conclusions of the book is how policymakers have successfully