

Outline and explain two practical limitations of using official statistics in sociological research (10)

One practical limitation of using official statistics in sociological research is the way in which official statistics are collected. Statistics are often collected using a variety of means, such as questionnaires, employer data, structured interviews and reports from internal companies. This can be very time-consuming to collate and means that often by the time statistics are compiled they are already out of date. For example, the census collects data once every ten years by asking households a series of questions in order to gain data on the number of people living in a household, their religious background, marital status, employment status and ages, amongst other information. The process of collecting this information takes up to a year and the collation and publishing of this data into the form that it can be presented as statistics takes a further year at least. This means from the first responses to the publication of the data, many social changes could have occurred which render the data invalid. Whilst the validity of statistics is a theoretical issue, the time taken to collate and convert the data into statistics that sociologists can use is a practical factor as it is so time-consuming, particularly on a large scale.

A second practical limitation of using official statistics is access to official statistics. Whilst most official statistics in the UK are provided by the Office for National Statistics and available online, should a researcher be making global comparisons between issues between countries this could be problematic. There is no guarantee that statistics for employment in the developing world will be available in the manner that they are available in the UK and furthermore, there is no guarantee that they will have the same level of reliability. For example, the birth rate in the UK is recorded relatively accurately as it is a legal requirement for people to register the birth of a child, but this is not the case elsewhere. Locating records of births may be problematic in other areas of the world, e.g. Sudan, Yemen, Syria, where records may have been displaced or destroyed due to conflict and therefore they may be unable to create a comparison. Furthermore, other nations may not record or publish statistics on certain topics, e.g. LGBT communities in

Islamic countries. This would be a practical issue as it would require further investigation and possibly expensive to conduct.