

Statistics can reveal insights

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OTTAWA - Numbers are impersonal. When Statistics Canada reports on social programs such as low income or unemployment, you find out the numbers of persons affected but little about the factual hardships they faced and whether they recovered.

This gap between poverty or job loss as presented in cold and clinical language by statisticians and what these social catastrophes mean in human terms will never disappear. But statisticians are finding that the study of individual experiences with such social problems, taken at several points over time, can provide new insights.

As one would expect, there is a high-powered statistical name for this new kind of information - longitudinal micro-data. Simply stated, it means returning to the same data source (a single group of people, households, farms or business establishments) several times after the initial contact, seeing how things have changed as time has passed.

This kind of statistical bird-dogging a turn up information that isn't provided by the more usual cross-section surveys. For example, it can pinpoint the events that triggered a descent into poverty,

show how long the condition lasted and what happened to enable a recovery. Keeping tabs on individuals exposed to a health risk could show its effects over the years. Watching the history of small firms could show the number of jobs created as they mature and how their productivity and profitability developed over the years.

Cross-sectional surveys do not produce this kind of information. The individuals or firms participating in each survey change over time. Even in rotating surveys such as those for the labour force or employment, payroll and hours, individual respondents are "in" for just six

months a year, not long enough to monitor change properly.

An example from the U.S. points up the value of longitudinal data. Information on U.S. poverty in the 1970s indicated the numbers and characteristics of poor families remained about the same over time.



Police auction

That's it! That's the one I'm taking home. Darrel Esau, 10, of Norval and friend Greg Barr, 10, of Georgetown shopped through about 150 bikes at the Halton Regional Police auction last Friday at the Indoor Mall on Guelph Street. Every item was auctioned off. (Herald photo)

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