

CONFERENCE OF EUROPEAN STATISTICIANS

UNECE Work Session on the Communication and Dissemination of Statistics
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Topic – Managing communication and credibility

The shoe problem – and what we are doing to prevent it

Submitted by Statistics Sweden¹

Background

1. In August 2008 the Price Statistics Unit at Statistics Sweden discovered a calculation mistake for shoes in the Consumer Price Index (CPI). At first they did not know the magnitude of the error or why it had occurred.
2. After a couple of days the calculations showed that the effects for shoes were substantial, and that the error also affected the total CPI for several months. As a result, the inflation rate was overestimated by 0.3 percentage points. On the Friday before publishing, Statistics Sweden decided to publish the new results together with the ordinary publishing of the CPI on the following Tuesday. This would give the unit time to prepare thorough information about the error and to do all the necessary recalculations.
3. The reaction upon publishing was, of course, negative. The media discussed the effects of the mistake and also speculated if the information could have reached the users earlier. A side effect was that the figure for this month is used for calculating important transfers in Swedish society, and the Government had made these decisions based on too high an inflation rate.

Project to handle and prevent errors

4. We started a project at Statistics Sweden consisting of three parts:
 - What did we need to do according to the overall processes for producing statistics?
 - What to do at the Price Statistics Unit to guarantee this would not happen again, and finally
 - How should we act when errors occur and the statistics are published?
5. I will concentrate on the last part here.
6. The basic principle for Statistics Sweden's ways of handling errors is openness. Corrections are made quickly in an uncomplicated and unified manner to give good service to our customers. There are three parts: preventive measures, routines for what to do when errors happen and reporting with follow-ups.

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Preventive measures

7. First of all it is important to identify the critical days and plan the staffing accordingly. Everyone working with publishing needs to get the right information regularly and when errors happen we need to draw the right conclusions from the mistakes.

What to do when errors happen

8. It is important to determine if the error is a mistake in the actual data or in the publishing process, the kind of statistics, and how serious the error is. Then we know how to correct, when to correct, with whom and when information should be distributed.

9. The basic rule is to correct mistakes in published data immediately. Incorrect data will be removed as soon as possible. If corrected data has not been able to be calculated, a point of time for publishing will be given. If there is less than 24 hours before the next publishing for these statistics, the correction will coincide with the ordinary publishing.

10. If the data is published too early, the rule is to publish as fast as possible in all the media channels. If the publishing is delayed it is important to give information on when the data will be published. The basic rule is to stick to the publishing time point 09:30 and inform what day it will be published or to give information at 09:30 on what time it will be published.

11. We have identified the statistical products that affect the market, of which there are ten such products. Out of these ten, three of these, the Consumer Price Index (CPI), the Labour Force Survey (LFS) and Gross Domestic Product (GDP), are said to be especially important. This affects the way information is spread internally and externally. A number of defined users like the ministries get information that an error has occurred and there is more information on the website.

12. Information about errors in statistical products which are not said to affect the market will be spread depending on the scope of the error. If it is a large error that seriously affects the users, there will be information on the start page and a correction letter for printed publications. Information channels, both internal and external, are defined.

13. Less serious errors are corrected on the website, but not on the start page. The corrections can be seen. There are also errors which are corrected without informing users, like spelling mistakes.

Reporting with follow-ups

14. In order to use the errors to improve our work, a routine for reporting errors has been implemented. The reporting is a joint venture among the producers and the people who perform the publishing. The Process Department is responsible for follow up-and works to avoid mistakes in the future.

Other actions

15. Statistics Sweden has had problems with delays in the publishing. This autumn we hope to have a better solution, where we will use one server to prepare publishing and then switch to another server at 09:30:00 to make the publishing process faster and safer.
