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## For whom the Bell Curves

Research Programme on statistics and government practice

## A PROJECT OVERVIEW:

Historical analyses tell us that statistics as mathematical specialty and governmental practice evolved in interaction with the emergence of the modern state. These analyses take us to about the 1970's. Since then, we have seen:

- an explosion in computer power,
- a swing away from government planning and towards submission to the "invisible hand" of the market, and
- the erection of "firewalls" (however leaky) around our personal data.

In this project we ask how those changes, and others, may be affecting the practices of public statistics. We explore current micro-practices of gathering, storing, sorting, classifying, analyzing, and deploying statistics. We ask how these practices impact on practices of governance and on the lives of citizens – For whom does the bell curve?

Our study focuses on five areas:

- Classification of populations into contested categories, such as race.
- Health databases and statistics-based diagnostics.
- Criminal justice databases and statistics practices.
- Statistics in municipal governance.
- Analysis of algorithms found in the four above-listed areas.

### IDENTITY CATEGORIES:

As individuals, we are infinitely different and complex. Yet some traits take on larger social meanings. Sex or skin colour may have a biological base, but their social significance doesn't stop there. Socially, they are mechanisms for distributing privileges and burdens. Should statistics be sorted according to these categories? Sorting might help us track discrimination, and plan means of ending it. Sorting might also legitimate the categories, further entrenching discrimination. In this project we compare four countries, asking how sorting (or not) relates to distributory policies and personal identities.

### HEALTH STATISTICS

Statistics are used extensively to manage health services, research health and illness, and evaluate the safety and effectiveness of treatments. However, it is often difficult to apply aggregated statistics in decisions on individual patient cases. In this project we focus on one disease – osteoporosis. Here population statistics have been built into the diagnosis itself. We wish to study how this diagnosis has been transformed in the latter half of the twentieth century, how it is debated, how it is practiced, how it relates to the experience of broken bones, and how it impacts on people's lives.

### ALGORITHMS AND KNOWLEDGE

What do statistical formulas mean mathematically speaking? What do they mean to those whose job it is to gather and analyse public data? And what meanings do they take on when deployed into society? We are familiar with the linking of quantitative representation and a standard hypothetical-deductive approach to science and knowledge, but is that what

statistics always mean? In this project we explore the mathematical and political meanings inscribed through the logic and history of mathematics, meanings inscribed through the formalization of statistics practices, and meanings ascribed in political and everyday discourse.

### CRIMINAL JUSTICE

Is crime increasing or decreasing? Do police efforts reduce crime? Are probability-based identification technologies helping in finding and convicting the right suspects? These important questions all depend on production and deployment of statistical data. We will ask whether, where, and by whom contestations around the production and usage of crime statistics are being made, how the records are constructed and structured, what they contain, how they are accessed and their contents analyzed, and how they are being applied in policy formation and policy learning contexts.

### MUNICIPALITIES

There have been important changes in the organisation, governing and practices of public sector the last years: Non-hierarchical organisation, result based contracts, benchmarking and dynamic interaction between empowered employees are central cues here. As a parallel process there has been a growing stress on measurements of (especially) output-variables, and active use of the numbers as incitements to improve quality and productivity. The project investigates the functions and effects of these new practices of statistics, with Norwegian municipalities as empirical case.