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Dubious Data and Difficult Conversations: Review of *No BS (Bad Stats): Black People Need People Who Believe in Black People Enough Not to Believe Every Bad Thing They Hear about Black People*, by Ivory A. Toldson.

Abstract

Ivory A. Toldson. 2019. *No BS (Bad Stats): Black People Need People Who Believe in Black People Enough Not to Believe Every Bad Thing They Hear about Black People*; (Boston, Brill). Paperback ISBN 978-90-04-39702-6. E-book ISBN 978-90-04-39704-0.

Ivory A. Toldson is a professor of Counseling Psychology at Howard University and the current editor-in-chief of the *Journal of Negro Education* (founded in 1932), and offers an unapologetic critique of how statistical malpractice has misrepresented the situation of Blacks in the United States. Readers of *Numeracy* should find his examples and analysis both interesting and thought-provoking.

Keywords

African Americans, blacks, statistics

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Cover Page Footnote

Joel Best is a professor of sociology and criminal justice at the University of Delaware. His books include *Damn Lies and Statistics* (University of California Press, 2001), *More Damned Lies and Statistics* (University of California Press, 2004), *Stat-Spotting: A Field Guide to Identifying Dubious Data* (University of California Press, 2008), and *American Nightmares: Social Problems in an Anxious World* (University of California Press, 2018). His papers in *Numeracy* include a perspective (“Birds—Dead and Deadly: Why Numeracy Needs to Address Social Construction”) in the journal’s first issue (Jan. 2008).

I bought this volume to add to my shelf of books on social statistics, which includes some critiques of statistical malpractice, as well as some assemblages of numbers that promote particular points of view (e.g., celebrating the achievements of particular sectors of society, such as women or gays and lesbians, or supporting some particular political ideology). *No BS (Bad Stats)* resembles some of those other books, but its tone sets it apart. The first chapter begins by announcing:

. . . good Black stats won't come from emulating White scholars. WARNING: I cook my research in a rusty pot, with lots of spice, and serve it ostentatiously on two turntables and a mixer. You can acquire a taste for my tone, or let it offend your sensibilities. I'mma be steadfast with my hustle until they start emulating me (3).

That declaration comes from an author with solid academic credentials: Ivory A. Toldson is a professor of Counseling Psychology at Howard University and the current editor-in-chief of the *Journal of Negro Education* (founded in 1932). He has some things to say that should be of interest to *Numeracy's* readers.

At various points, Toldson deconstructs statistics that portray the situation of black Americans. Take an example that I've heard countless times: the claim that there are more black men in jail than in college. He traces this claim back to a 2002 report from the Justice Policy Institute (JPI) that included the sentence: "Nearly a third more African American men are incarcerated than in higher education." The authors apparently used statistics on enrollment from the National Center for Education Statistics' Integrated Post-Secondary Education Data System—basically an annual survey of higher education institutions. While this might seem to be an authoritative source, Toldson notes a teeny problem:

In 2001, only 2,734 colleges and universities reported having at least one Black male student, with more than one thousand not reporting any data at all. When perusing through the list of colleges with significant Black male populations today, but reported none in 2001, I noticed several historically Black colleges and universities . . . and my own alma mater, Temple University. Ironically, I was enrolled at Temple as a doctoral candidate in 2001. Therefore, it seems that I, along with hundreds of thousands of other Black male college students, were not counted when JPI estimated that there were more Black men in college than in prison (36–37).

Once exposed, this is a glaring error. I can see how it could happen: somebody wants a figure on college enrollments and takes a number from a presumably authoritative federal survey—no doubt the figure for inmates was produced in much the same way—without really understanding the database's limitations. Less excusable was the reluctance to acknowledge the error once it was identified. (Toldson quotes a 2012 press release insisting that JPI "stands by" its 2001 data [37].) People become invested in what's proved to be a punchy sound bite, and they don't want to let it go. But what's really telling is that this mutant statistic lives on, bad statistics being harder to kill than vampires.

No BS (Bad Stats) adopts the same critical approach to about a dozen other familiar statistical claims: one-third of black males will serve time in prison; a majority of black high school students drop out; and so on. Notice that these claims are likely to have broad appeal. They can be used as evidence to support claims that more ought to be done to improve the situation of African Americans, but they also can support critiques of black culture. Thus, there are plenty of people willing to repeat these statistics, and relatively few moved to think critically about these numbers.

Toldson points out that there are a lot of these dubious figures thrown around. Here he is quoting the opening paragraph of a *Huffington Post* piece (Simmons 2011). The parenthetical, capped edits are Toldson's, the ellipses mark material that he did not choose to quote, and Toldson chose to capitalize Black and White):

If a Black boy is born in the US today, he will have a 33 percent (FALSE) chance of going to prison in his lifetime. . . . It has become a sad normality, almost a backwards rite of passage, for Black young men to enter the penal system (MYTH). . . . Black men represent 8 percent (FALSE) of the population of the United States but comprise 3 percent (FALSE) of all college undergrads, 48 percent of inmates in prison (TRUE) and are five times more likely to die from HIV/AIDS than White men (OUT OF CONTEXT). Fifty percent of Black boys do not finish high school (FALSE), 72 percent of Black male dropouts in their 20s are unemployed and 60 percent of Black male dropouts are eventually incarcerated (FALSE IF YOU BELIEVE THE 50% FIGURE) (19–20).

How, without assuming that people are deliberately falsifying claims, can we interpret such erroneous statistics about race. A little numeracy might help. Blacks constitute roughly 13 percent of the population—about an eighth. So we might expect—if all things were equal—to find blacks accounting for about that percentage when we looked at all sorts of measures. But, of course, we usually discover that blacks have less than an eighth on measures of social advantage (e.g., they hold far less than an eighth of wealth) and more than an eighth on measures of social disadvantage (e.g., as noted above, they constitute nearly half of prison inmates).

This should be straightforward, but notice that it can lead to confusion. Thus, in the quotation above, Simmons claims that African American males constitute 8 percent of the population, which seems unlikely on its face: if blacks are 13 percent of the population and we assume that the numbers of males and females are roughly equal, then the true percentage should be closer to 6.5 percent. A moment's thought should have caused Simmons to question that number.

In most cases, it is more helpful to compare whites and blacks on some measure (e.g., percentage with a college degree or life expectancy). Again, this usually allows us to recognize patterns of racial disadvantage. The very fact that we often encounter such statistics may help explain why Toldson has so many “bad stats” to debunk. If we are familiar with the idea that blacks are more likely

to go to prison and less likely to complete college, a claim that there are more African Americans in prison than on campuses may strike people as plausible.

A third approach is to track changes, comparing, say, white and black test scores or life expectancies across time. This method is often the best way of understanding whether things are getting better, staying the same, or getting worse. Often these allow for competing interpretations. Thus, scores on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (which bills itself as “the nation’s report card”) show that (a) white students routinely post higher reading and math scores than black students, but (b) the gap between the two groups has been narrowing. This finding in turn invites glass-half-full claims that things are getting better, as well as glass-half-empty claims that a gap remains. Still, measuring changes allows a more complicated understanding of the situation.

But other, more problematic measurements are also possible. Toldson flirts with one of them when he notes, “In fact, the United States has nearly 4 million more White children in single-parent households than Black children” (57). This rhetorical device—comparing the numbers of cases in two populations of very different sizes—is often used to argue that black America’s problems are exaggerated. Thus, you can find commentators pointing out that whites outnumber blacks on welfare rolls, and so on. This is easily recognized as a flawed construction. Toldson, to be fair, does go on to state, “The percentage of Black children in single-parent homes is more than three times higher than the percentage of Whites. However, in the context of social impact, total incidents are unequivocally more important than with group percentages” (57). That is, one might suspect that whites—because they account for more cases—are responsible for more of the social costs of single-parent families.

Toldson makes missteps of his own. For instance, he declares, “According to the U.S. Census, since 1970 there are 3.9 million less White males and 2.5 million more Black males, ages 15–25, in the U.S. population” (18). This seems unlikely on its face; after all, if the population is growing, can the actual number of young white males be shrinking? Well, not so far as I can determine. According to the government figures I could find on the Internet, there were 15.2 million white males, ages 15–24 in 1970 (Centers for Disease Control n.d.), compared to 16.2 million “white alone” males, ages 15–24 in 2010 (Census.gov 2016; recent censuses allow respondents to declare more than one race, so that “white alone” is presumably a somewhat narrower category than the earlier “white.” so an apples-to-apples comparison might show a greater increase). These data suggest that the white population continues to grow, although—as many commentators have observed—whites are growing at a lower rate than other ethnic groups, so that their share of the entire population is shrinking. According to the same sources, the black male population has grown from 3.1 to 3.3 million—an increase far

lower than the 2.5 million Toldson cites. I have no idea what might account for our different figures; the sentence quoted above lacks precise citation.

The second half of *No BS (Bad Stats)* consists of arguments that paint a bright picture for African Americans, and these chapters may be of less interest to *Numeracy*'s readers. But the first half of the book offers several useful examples. This book reminds us that numbers that gain broad, uncritical circulation may be seriously flawed. Toldson has done everyone a service by pointing out the slipshod use of statistical evidence in discussions of race, a conversation that is sufficiently difficult without BS.

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