Chapter 11
New Issues in Human Rights Statistics

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Abstract The traditional Western conception of human rights has focused upon political and civil liberties. Recent trends are bringing social and economic rights to the fore. This chapter considers the kinds of contributions that statisticians might make in this area and how issues of equity might be framed from a mathematical perspective. The emphasis is upon identifying problems and proposing methods, rather than analysis of specific applications.

11.1 Introduction

When the statistics of human rights began, the cold war was hot. Most attention focused upon civil and political rights—the right to vote, the right to freedom of religion, and the right to citizenship. But there has long been another thread, holding that people have a right to food, education, and medicine. This chapter focuses upon the statistical aspects of these social and economic rights.

Obviously, statisticians can play and have played a major role in tracking trends in the standard of living over time. We have participated in model building for economic input–output models that speak to the mechanisms of improvement. We have helped to invent quality of life measures that are pertinent to this area, and we have documented the impact of war on civilians. And there are new challenges that are arising in this arena—the 2005 G8 summit is trying to rescue Africa from poverty, the eight Millennium Development Goals (see www.un.org/millenniumgoals/) require statistical documentation to support funding, and new models of philanthropy require metrics for progress.

Additionally, there are other kinds of contributions that statisticians may be able to make. Some involve decision-theoretic aspects related to the philosophical foundation of human rights; others involve adjudication of grievances and balancing of competing interests. This chapter addresses a subset of those possibilities.

The members of the American Statistical Association are diverse in their backgrounds and broad in their thought. These new opportunities in the social and economic sphere provide the kind of challenge that our profession should welcome.
11.2 A Brief History

The evolution of human rights seems to move from the general to the specific. In the US, the Declaration of Independence suggested some basic principles: life, liberty, and pursuit of happiness. This perspective got lightly codified in the Constitution, and then detailed more particularly in the Bill of Rights. Subsequent court decisions have created a large body of highly specific rights.

The US law applies fully only to citizens; foreign nationals and prisoners of war have different status. Such exceptions seem contrary to the initial broad vision in the Declaration of Independence, and that discomfort with narrowness was mirrored in philosophical writings by Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill. The slow evolution of their thinking, drawing upon Hume, Locke, and Rousseau, combined with the world’s reactions to the horrors of the Holocaust and a burgeoning internationalism, eventually crystallized in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UN General Assembly Resolution 217 A (III), 1948). This document declared that citizens in all countries that were signatory to the United Nations signatory countries enjoyed common freedoms. Among the 30 enumerated freedoms were political freedoms, such as the following:

Article 13

1. Everyone has the right to freedom of movement and residence within the borders of each state.
2. Everyone has the right to leave any country, including his own, and to return to his country.

Article 15

1. Everyone has the right to a nationality.
2. No one shall be arbitrarily deprived of his nationality nor denied the right to change his nationality.

There were civil freedoms, such as the following:

Article 4

No one shall be held in slavery or servitude; slavery and the slave trade shall be prohibited in all their forms.

Article 5

No one shall be subjected to torture or to cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment.

Article 20

1. Everyone has the right to freedom of peaceful assembly and association.
2. No one may be compelled to belong to an association.

There were economic freedoms, including the following: