Kommentar

Use and misuse of data on Roma: A comment on the Salford study on Roma migrants

It is generally agreed that census data under-report Roma ethnicity. Several large-scale household surveys have examined social deprivation among Roma (e.g. FRA & UNDP 2012), but accurate data on the number of Roma in individual countries are still missing. The Council of Europe routinely cites a speculative range of 10–12 million Roma in Europe (see for example Council of Europe 2012), but targeted data collection on Roma often evokes associations of surveillance (cf. MG-S-ROM 2000): On the one hand, data might be necessary to monitor policies or to prove discrimination. On the other hand, there is a risk that open discussion of data (and migrant population estimates especially) might trigger expressions of fear, hostility and xenophobia.

The rationale of recent work by a team based at the Sustainable Housing & Urban Studies Unit (SHUSU) at the University of Salford (UK) is that data on Roma migrants are useful in order to underline the need for resources to support them. Having previously examined planning issues in Traveller sites in Britain, the team was invited by Migration Yorkshire, a consortium of local authority and voluntary sector agencies, to partake in a small-scale survey of attitudes toward Roma (cf. Brown et al. 2012). They were then commissioned by the Black Health Agency, a Manchester-based charity, to assess an EU-funded project on Roma migrants by interviewing those who commissioned the assessment, i.e. the funding beneficiaries themselves. The key finding was that “it was difficult to argue for additional financial resources to provide support to communities when they were unable to accurately state the size of the population they were required to support” (Scullion/Brown 2013, p. 42). So in October 2013 the team released a report with the aim of providing “hard data about the number of migrant Roma” (Brown et al. 2013, p. 6).

The team sent questionnaires to 406 local authorities across the UK and asked them to estimate the number of Roma migrants in their localities. They received a total of 151 responses, of which only 51 (ca. 12 % of those targeted) provided a number. The identity of the respondents is not disclosed in the report “to ensure anonymity” (ibid., p. 14). The report also refrains from specifying which services the respondents represented, which kind of data on ethnicity was available to the respondents, how frequently and in what capacity respondents had contact with Roma, or indeed which criteria the respondents employed to identify Roma. The latter is important given the confusion in terminology in the UK, where institutions often use the wholesale label ‘Gypsy/Roma/Travellers’. Practitioners also routinely confuse ‘Roma’ with ‘Romanian’ and many are unaware of particular identifiers of Roma such as language. No information is provided as to which local authorities responded (except for a breakdown by region and type of authority) and it is reported that many based their responses on information obtained from others (cf. ibid., p. 25–27), limiting comparability even further. The authors even withhold the actual estimates that they received from the respondents.

Several layers of opacity thus render the data inaccessible and unverifiable. Instead, the authors deliver their own estimate of the total number of Roma migrants in the UK: First, they take the figures provided by the respondents at face value. Second, they report that, using a statistical method to profile the respondents’ communities on the basis of “a series of demographic indicators” listed in an appendix, they “scaled up” the data by predicting the “potential location and size of Roma communities elsewhere” (ibid., p. 29). On this basis, the authors estimate “at least 197,705 migrant Roma” in the UK (ibid., p. 7). Predictably, they conclude that there is “a strong demand from local authorities for help in working with migrant Roma communities.” (ibid., p. 45).

The team took some rather unusual steps to give their message publicity: Lead author Phillip Brown gave an “exclusive” interview on national television on 30 October 2013, and a group of parliamentarians was lobbied to table a motion in which they described the study as “pioneering research”. As if flagging the estimate as “conservative” wasn’t enough, the authors added that “it is likely that this population will continue to increase ” as a result of the relaxation of employment restrictions on citizens of Romania and Bulgaria, due to take effect in January 2014, within two months of publication (ibid., p. 7). Unsurprisingly, for several weeks immediately following the release of the report, UK media and politicians used the study to warn of a danger of an uncontrolled ‘influx’ of immigrants. Some targeted Roma directly, accusing them of ‘intimidating behaviour’ and insisting that their presence in UK cities triggered insurmountable problems.

We now know that there was no major influx in January 2014. But there are several lessons to be learned from the Salford study. First, it shows the risks of abstract projections. The Salford team did not speak to Roma and they had no tools with which to predict their settlement patterns and so no real instrument with which to fill the gaps left by a low rate of unreliable responses. ‘Big Data’ analyses offer statistical correlations as a substitute for qualitative interpretation of causal relations (cf. Mayer-Schönberger/Cukler 2013), but they require transparency, which the Salford study lacks. Finally, the study was apparently intended to assist an interest group of voluntary sector practitioners to lobby for resources, and for this reason it was 'marketed' rather aggressively. But the strategy backfired, for the Roma became the scapegoats. The authors' later reference to 'media hysteria' notwithstanding (cf. Brown et al. 2014, p. 30), the Salford study clearly illustrates the risks of producing and marketing estimates in this way.

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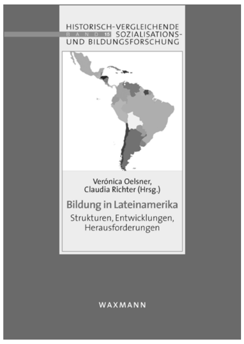
HISTORISCH-VERGLEICHENDE SOZIALISATIONS- UND BILDUNGSFORSCHUNG
Verónica Oelsner, Claudia Richter (Hrsg.)
Bildung in Lateinamerika
Strukturen, Entwicklungen, Herausforderungen
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