

What are the seven signs of potentially misleading statistics?

Learn how to identify data used to advance a view while concealing the full picture.

1. Just the numbers

A single number alone doesn't provide context. What is the size of the data set? How has that changed over time? How does it compare to related data?

2. Cherry-picked data

Statisticians rely on three basic figures – mean (average), median (center of the data) and mode (the number that appears most often) – to provide context. If someone offers just one it's hard to see the whole picture.

3. Half-truth statistic

Something may be true for a small subset of the population but not all.

4. Anecdote

Relying on individual stories and experiences without demonstrating how those compare to the population as a whole.

5. Watch the scale

Statistics and trends can seem larger or smaller than they really are by manipulating the scale on a chart. Always check the fine print.

6. Coincidence

Correlation is not causation. Things often happen randomly at the same time – it doesn't mean they are linked or that one necessarily causes the other.

7. Meaningless statistic

Numbers don't always tell us why or how something is happening and may lead us to believe something is important because it's associated with a large number.