

Ethical and Political Dimensions of Data Manipulation in Government: Disparities Between Official Narratives and Field Reality in Indonesia

Alif Firdaus Zamzam^{1*}, Yendra Erison², Bambang Amir Al Hakim³

^{1,2,3} Universitas Islam Darul 'Ulum, Lamongan, Indonesia

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received January 08, 2024

Revised February 11, 2024

Accepted March 30, 2024

Available online April 15, 2024

Keywords:

Data manipulation, Poverty
measurement, Institutional ethics,
Socioeconomic disparities,
Information integrity

ABSTRACT

This study examines the systemic divergence between official government data narratives and documented realities in Indonesian socioeconomic conditions, specifically poverty and unemployment trends during 2023–2025. While Badan Pusat Statistik reports declining poverty (from 9.03% in 2023 to 8.47% in March 2025) and decreasing unemployment (from 5.55% in 2023 to 4.85% in August 2025), independent research reveals substantially different ground realities. The Prakarsa Institute estimates that 42.9% of Indonesia's population remains economically vulnerable, while Celios identifies hidden unemployment at 7–8%, considerably exceeding official figures. Using hermeneutic phenomenological analysis, this study examines how methodological choices in poverty measurement, annual data adjustment practices, and normalization of such adjustments contribute to significant divergences between statistical representation and lived socioeconomic experience. Findings reveal that data manipulation operates not as technical failure but as a systematic feature of governance where political imperatives to demonstrate policy success override commitment to factual accuracy. This article contributes to understanding how institutional actors rationalize and normalize practices that distort information crucial to democratic accountability and effective policymaking.

1. INTRODUCTION

Democratic governance fundamentally depends on accurate information regarding institutional performance and social conditions. Yet Indonesia's experience during 2023–2025 reveals systematic divergence between official government statistics on poverty and unemployment and independently verified field conditions. This divergence raises profound questions about institutional truthfulness and democratic possibility (König, 2021; Liu, 2022; Bok, 1979).

Official narratives present contrasting picture from ground reality. Badan Pusat Statistik (BPS) reported poverty rates declining to 8.47% in March 2025 from 9.03% in 2023, with unemployment dropping to 4.85% in August 2025 from 5.55% in 2023 (BPS, 2025; CNBC Indonesia, 2025). Government officials celebrated these statistics as evidence of policy success. However, independent research by The Prakarsa Institute reveals that when accounting for economically vulnerable populations above the official poverty line, approximately 42.9% of Indonesia's population remains in precarious economic circumstances (The Prakarsa, 2025). Similarly, Celios research indicates that actual unemployment, when including hidden joblessness and

*Corresponding author
E-mail addresses: author1@email.com

underemployment, reaches 7–8%, approximately 45–65% higher than official figures (Celios, 2025; Magdalene, 2025).

This research employs hermeneutic phenomenological analysis combined with institutional ethics theory to illuminate the ethical and political dimensions of data practices in Indonesian governance (Gadamer, 2004; Keshavarz, 2020; Al-Raisi et al., 2020). Rather than cataloging all data inaccuracies, this approach examines how institutional actors meaningfully construct and rationalize narratives about data practices, how these narratives maintain institutional authority, and how such practices emerge from and reinforce particular power structures that privilege political imperatives over factual accuracy (Heidegger, 1977).

Research Significance. Understanding data manipulation requires frameworks capable of examining both technical statistical processes and the ethical dimensions through which institutional actors rationalize such practices. Multiple theoretical resources illuminate this dynamic. Fricker's concept of "epistemic injustice" describes how government institutions systematically privilege official statistics over field-based knowledge despite superior accuracy of field evidence, thereby committing injustice against citizens as knowers (Fricker, 2007). Foucault argues that statistical knowledge serves power functions through which institutional authority constitutes reality according to political needs (Foucault, 1980). When statistical narratives diverge substantially from observable conditions, citizens cannot meaningfully evaluate government performance, policymakers cannot design effective interventions, and democratic accountability becomes impossible (D'Ignazio & Klein, 2020).

This study analyzes institutional mechanisms generating data divergence, the ethical rationalizations through which officials normalize problematic practices, and implications for democratic governance and public trust in Indonesian institutions (Setiawaty et al., 2023; Mendy, 2023).

2. METHODS

This hermeneutic phenomenological analysis employs qualitative interpretation of institutional documents, media reports, and academic research (Maurice & Merleau-Ponty, 2005) regarding poverty and unemployment data in Indonesia during 2023–2025. Data sources include:

- a. Official Statistical Data: Badan Pusat Statistik publications on poverty rates (Garis Kemiskinan Nasional) and unemployment rates (Tingkat Pengangguran Terbuka)
- b. Independent Research: Analysis from Prakarsa Institute, Celios (Center for Strategic and International Studies employment unit), academic researchers
- c. Media Investigations: BBC Indonesia, Metrotv, CNBC Indonesia, and other news sources documenting field conditions contradicting official statistics
- d. Institutional Documentation: Government statements from Sekretariat Negara and ministerial announcements

Hermeneutic phenomenology provides methodological resources for understanding how meaning is constructed within institutional contexts, how institutional actors experience contradictions between official statistics and documented conditions, and how they rationalize participation in systems producing misleading information (Ricoeur, 2000; Introna, 2017). The phenomenological dimension examines lived experience of institutional actors and citizens confronting divergence between official narratives and actual conditions. The hermeneutic dimension illuminates the interpretive frameworks through which institutional actors

come to understand and justify their participation in data systems diverging from field reality (Anand et al., 2004).

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Result

a. Official Data Narratives Versus Field-Based Evidence

Poverty Data Divergence. Official BPS data from March 2025 indicates poverty rate of 8.47%, down from 8.57% in September 2024 and 9.03% in 2023, translating to 23.85 million Indonesians classified as officially poor (BPS, 2025; CNBC Indonesia, 2025). Government officials interpreted this as evidence of policy success. Minister Prasetyo Hadi stated that declining poverty rates reflected collective effort across government sectors, celebrating policies including Makan Bergizi Gratis (Free Nutritious Meals) and Koperasi Desa/Kelurahan programs as generating poverty alleviation (Sekretariat Negara, 2025).

However, The Prakarsa Institute analysis reveals substantially different assessment. While BPS classifies 8.47% as officially poor, an additional 34.43%—totaling 42.9%—should be considered economically vulnerable when accounting for those living just above poverty line, lacking adequate social protection, facing unstable employment, or experiencing significant economic precarity (The Prakarsa, 2025). This methodological distinction proves critical: individuals classified above poverty line but lacking healthcare access, facing irregular employment, or experiencing economic vulnerability remain vulnerable to poverty descent.

Media analysis from BBC Indonesia documented additional methodological concerns. Analysis noted that Garis Kemiskinan Nasional (poverty line) increases annually, mechanically reducing poverty percentages by definition even when household circumstances remain unchanged (BBC Indonesia, 2025). When poverty line increases from IDR 433,500 per capita monthly (September 2024) to IDR 454,300 (March 2025), individuals with unchanged income of IDR 440,000 move from "officially poor" to "officially non-poor" without experiencing any improvement in actual economic condition. This technical mechanism permits poverty statistics to decline while actual household economic circumstances remain constant or deteriorate.

Unemployment Data Divergence. Official BPS data reports unemployment rate (Tingkat Pengangguran Terbuka) of 4.85% in August 2025, representing approximately 7.28 million unemployed persons (CNBC Indonesia, 2025). Yet Bhima Yudhistira (Celios Executive Director) argues that official statistics significantly underestimate actual joblessness. Celios research indicates that when accounting for hidden unemployment (workers without employment seeking work), underemployment (workers employed part-time seeking full-time employment), and workers in subsistence activities lacking reliable income, actual joblessness likely reaches 7–8%—a divergence of 40–65% from official figures (Celios, 2025b)(Magdalene, 2025). This distinction proves crucial because official unemployment measures only those explicitly seeking work and unable to find employment, excluding discouraged workers who abandoned job search after prolonged unemployment and those in unstable informal employment lacking security or living wages (Metrotvnews, 2025).

Synthesizes the fundamental divergence between official government statistics and field-based evidence in Indonesia, revealing that official narratives

systematically underestimate poverty vulnerability by 500% and unemployment by 45-65%. The table demonstrates that data divergence occurs not through isolated measurement errors but through systematic institutional mechanisms that aggregate across poverty measurement, employment classification, and methodological adjustments (BPS, 2025; CNBC Indonesia, 2025; The Prakarsa, 2025; Celios, 2025b; Magdalene, 2025; BBC Indonesia, 2025; Trading Economics, 2025).

Table 1: Institutional Data vs Field-Based Evidence 2025 Summary

Data Category	Official Statistic	Independent/Field Analysis	Divergence	Source
Poverty Rate	8.47% (March 2025)	42.9% including vulnerable	500% difference	BPS vs The Prakarsa
Unemployment Rate	4.85% (Aug 2025)	7-8% including hidden	45-65% undercount	BPS vs Celios/Academia
Urban Poverty	6.73% (March 2025)	Higher with informal labor	Undercount invisible poverty	BPS vs Metro TV/BBC
Rural Poverty	11.03% (March 2025)	Stagnant/worsened conditions	Mechanical decline only	BPS vs Field research
Youth Unemployment	12.48% (Aug 2024)	52.6% of total joblessness	Demographic concentration	BPS official data
Regional Competitiveness	Stated as improving	Highest in SE Asia at 4.76%	Worst regional position	Trading Economics
Employment Quality	Formal employment 66.2%	60% informal, low-wage	Aggregate masks precarity	BPS vs Celios
Poverty Line Mechanism	Adjusted annually upward	Exceeds actual inflation for poor	Mechanical improvement	BBC Indonesia analysis

b. Institutional Mechanisms Generating Data Divergence

Methodological Distortion Through Poverty Line Adjustment. The annual adjustment of poverty line thresholds represents primary mechanism mechanically generating poverty rate decline without corresponding improvement in actual household conditions. BBC Indonesia analysis specifically emphasized this phenomenon: poverty rates declined while actual living standards and access to necessities remained stagnant or deteriorated. Furthermore, poverty line adjustments reflect official inflation estimates that many observers argue underestimate actual cost-of-living increases for poor households, since essential commodities for low-income populations—particularly food, transportation, and housing—increase at rates potentially exceeding official inflation calculations (BBC Indonesia, 2025).

Sectoral Masking and Informal Employment Classification. Official employment statistics classify workers in Indonesia's massive informal sector (estimated at 60% of total employment) as "employed," aggregating them equivalently with formal sector workers. This aggregation conceals systematic precarity: while 60% of employment is informal, part-time, or subsistence work without contracts, social protection, or adequate wages, such workers contribute to employment statistics identically to stable formal sector employees. Poverty decline is assessed as inconsistent with field reality, with particular emphasis on informal workers experiencing deteriorating conditions despite official poverty decline (Idnfinancials, 2025).

Additionally, fundamental methodological problem undermines unemployment statistics: exclusion of discouraged workers who ceased actively seeking employment. In many developing economies, prolonged unemployment leads discouraged workers to abandon job searches while remaining jobless and without income security. Since they no longer actively seek work, they do not appear in official unemployment statistics despite representing actual joblessness.

Youth constituted 52.64% of total national unemployment despite representing smaller percentage of workforce, indicating that official statistics substantially obscure severe joblessness affecting younger demographic cohorts. International comparison further reveals problems: according to Trading Economics and IMF World Economic Outlook, Indonesia's unemployment rate of 4.76% ranked highest among Southeast Asian nations during February–March 2025, exceeding even Brunei Darussalam (4.7%), Malaysia (3.0%), Vietnam (2.24%), and Thailand (0.89%) (Idnfinancials, 2025; Mckinsy, 2025; Trading Economics, 2025). This regional comparison contradicted government's implicit suggestion that employment conditions were improving competitively relative to regional economies. Despite government narrative implying competitive improvement. This regional positioning contradicts government claims regarding employment condition improvement.

Table 2: Comparative Unemployment Rates Southeast Asia 2025

Country	Unemployment Rate (Feb-Mar 2025)	Source
Indonesia	4.76%	Trading Economics, BPS, IMF, McKinsey
Brunei	4.7%	Trading Economics, Morgan Stanley
Malaysia	3.0%	Trading Economics, McKinsey
Vietnam	2.24%	Trading Economics, McKinsey
Thailand	0.89%	Trading Economics, McKinsey
Filipina	3.7%	Trading Economics, Morgan Stanley
Singapura	2.1%	Trading Economics, McKinsey
Myanmar	3.0%	Trading Economics, Morgan Stanley

Discussion

Institutional Pressure and Data Adjustment. Divergence between official statistics and field reality reflects not primarily technical failure but systematic institutional pressure favoring politically favorable data over accurate representation (Setiawaty et al., 2023). Government officials faced structural incentives to present statistics demonstrating policy success, maintaining public confidence, and justifying continued leadership. Sekretariat Negara's official response made government credibility dependent on continued statistical decline in poverty rates and employment improvement. Within such conditions, institutional pressure necessarily operated toward maintaining downward statistical trends regardless of actual field conditions.

Milgram's experimental research on obedience demonstrates that ordinary individuals comply with authority directives causing harm when operating within hierarchical structures that diffuse responsibility and emphasize role compliance over independent ethical judgment (Milgram, 1974). Applied to institutional contexts, this research suggests that data manipulation reflects not individual moral weakness but predictable response to institutional conditions creating pressure for compliance with authority directives. In Indonesian bureaucratic contexts particularly, where hierarchical authority structures are pronounced and challenge to superior directives

carries career consequences, such pressure becomes intensified (Argyris & Schön, 1996).

Rationalization Through Methodological Justification. Institutional actors defend statistical practices through reference to established methodologies. Poverty line adjustments follow standard technical procedures; unemployment definitions conform to international labor organization standards; employment classifications utilize universally accepted categorizations. By emphasizing methodological legitimacy, officials can present data products as outputs of neutral technical processes rather than as expressions of political choices or institutional pressure. This methodological framing permits participation in potentially misleading statistical systems while maintaining self-understanding as professional practitioners applying established procedures (Bandura, 1991).

The Institutionalization of Moral Disengagement. The psychological separation maintained by officials is deeply facilitated by institutional structures that enforce compartmentalization. This phenomenon mirrors what research in organizational ethics terms moral disengagement (Bandura, 1991), where the institutional context provides the necessary mechanisms—such as the euphemistic labeling of data adjustments or the diffusion of responsibility across large bureaucratic structures—to suspend personal moral standards. By strictly adhering to their role-based identity and prioritizing loyalty to hierarchical authority over independent professional judgment, officials are not necessarily acting as morally deficient individuals; rather, they are making a predictable response to a system designed to reward compliance and penalize ethical dissent. The pressure intensifies in pronounced hierarchical contexts like Indonesia, where challenging superior directives carries tangible career consequences (Argyris & Schön, 1996). This systematic institutionalization of moral disengagement is the core mechanism transforming technical statistical adjustments into a moral problem, as it allows for the perpetuation of statistically misleading narratives without significant internal organizational resistance.

The Perversion of Accountability and Epistemic Injustice. The institutional rationalization described has profound implications for the very concept of democratic accountability. When government credibility becomes dependent on maintaining specific statistical trends (e.g., poverty decline, employment improvement), the formal accountability system is effectively inverted: accountability shifts from being truthful to the public to being compliant with the political narrative. This systemic divergence between official statistics and field reality results in epistemic injustice (Fricker, 2007), defined as the wrong done to citizens in their capacity as knowers. Field-based knowledge produced by civil society (like The Prakarsa Institute and Celios) is effectively marginalized, even when more accurate (Celios, 2025a; The Prakarsa, 2025). This denial of factual ground truth fundamentally undermines the human capacity to contribute knowledge to democratic deliberation, making democratic legitimacy impossible to sustain.

Research on Indonesian bureaucratic ethics documents that institutional cultures systematically privilege loyalty to hierarchical authority over independent professional judgment or factual accuracy, with officials developing narratives reducing personal responsibility and replacing individual accountability with role accountability (Argyris & Schön, 1996). Field-based knowledge from civil society organizations, affected communities, and independent researchers becomes epistemically marginalized relative to official statistical authority, even when field knowledge more accurately represents actual conditions—as demonstrated in Tables

1 and 2 where independent research by Prakarsa Institute and Celios reveals substantially more accurate assessment than official BPS statistics. This epistemic injustice undermines fundamental human capacity to contribute knowledge to democratic deliberation and democratic legitimacy becomes impossible when citizens recognize institutional dishonesty in statistical representation (Merry, 2016).

The ethical dimension of this data adjustment problem transcends technical failure to become an issue of systemic morality rooted in institutional structures. Officials, driven by hierarchical compliance pressure and incentives to project political success (Setiawaty et al., 2023), engage in what Milgram (1974) documented as blind obedience, where individual ethical responsibility is diffused into role obligation within the chain of command. The normalization of this practice allows for methodological rationalization, where neutral technical procedures serve as a shield to mask political choices and moral deviance—a form of ethical dispensation that permits participation in misleading systems while maintaining a positive self-understanding. The implications of these practices extend into the epistemic and democratic realms. As Foucault (1980) documented how knowledge and power are intertwined, governmental statistical authority functions as a tool to produce a "regime of truth" that excludes and marginalizes field-based knowledge from civil society, creating testimonial injustice as defined by Fricker. When institutions systematically erode public trust through dishonest data representation, it violates a fundamental principle of moral truthfulness. According to Sissela Bok (1979), this institutionalized secrecy and deception not only damages data validity but also corrodes the foundation of social trust vital for the effective functioning of democratic deliberation, making democratic legitimacy impossible to sustain.

Independent research institutions, such as The Prakarsa Institute and Celios, fulfill a crucial role as an epistemic counterweight to state statistical authority. In a system rife with incentives for data distortion, their efforts are not merely about producing alternative figures, but constitute an act of restorative epistemic justice. Through transparent, field-based methodologies (e.g., broader estimation of economic vulnerability or measurement of hidden unemployment), these organizations generate counter-knowledge that challenges the institutionally produced "regime of truth". Their contribution enables informed democratic deliberation by providing a more accurate factual basis concerning socioeconomic realities. Therefore, the existence and recognition of independent research is a fundamental prerequisite for overcoming systematic statistical manipulation and restoring substantive accountability to the public.

4. CONCLUSIONS

These findings carry significant implications. Democratic governance fundamentally depends on accurate information regarding institutional performance. Reform of institutional data practices requires recognizing that statistical accuracy constitutes democratic necessity rather than technical preference. Individual officials cannot maintain ethical commitment to factual accuracy within institutional structures creating powerful pressure toward data adjustment; meaningful reform requires structural change addressing incentive systems that reward favorable statistics and protecting those challenging data distortion.

Civil society organizations, academic researchers, and independent media have produced more accurate information regarding actual conditions than official statistical agencies. Strengthening institutional capacity for independent information

production, protecting civil society investigation independence, and ensuring media access to data sources represent crucial components of governance reform. Without institutional commitment to truthfulness, citizens cannot participate meaningfully in governance, policymakers cannot design effective interventions, and democratic accountability becomes impossible.

5. ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Research on institutional ethics in Indonesia's governance has benefited from ongoing scholarship examining bureaucratic cultures, data practices, and democratic accountability. The authors acknowledge intellectual contributions from critical scholarship on epistemic justice, institutional ethics, and hermeneutic phenomenology that provided frameworks for understanding data manipulation not as individual moral failure but as systematic feature of institutional conditions and power structures.

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