So far, the research methods we have considered above involve the researchers collecting **new** data. This is known as **primary** data. However, sometimes sociologists will make use of **existing** data (that is, data which has already been collected by other researchers). This is known as **secondary** data.

Secondary data can include both **quantitative** and **qualitative** sources. The **official statistics** are an example of secondary data which is quantitative. An example of secondary data which is qualitative would be somebody's diary.

Qualitative secondary data
Personal and life documents

Personal and life documents include personal diaries, memoirs and letters that can be used to gain a greater insight into people's way of life and to help us understand their behaviour. Where participant observation is not possible, then using life documents may be the best alternative. Because personal documents are written for personal purposes they tend to be high in validity, but sociologists need to remember that they may contain personal biases and may have been written with an audience in mind (e.g. politicians' diaries). There is no way of knowing how representative a personal document is or of evaluating its accuracy or validity. Personal documents also do not reflect the full spectrum of society, tending to derive from more literate and intellectual members.

Willmott and Young (1961) persuaded families to keep detailed diaries recording how they spent their days. However, how many people keep regular diaries anyway, let alone hour-by-hour accounts of everyday life? In addition, the very fact that they are being used for research may make them less valid, as this awareness might influence what people do and include in their diaries.

1. Explain one strength of using personal documents for research.

2. Explain one weakness of using personal documents for research.

Quantitative secondary data
Official statistics

The official statistics are collected by government departments and include a wide range of data on various social issues including crime, education, employment, health and housing. Therefore, they are an important source of data for sociologists. They are easily accessible as the data is archived online.

Of particular interest to sociologists are the crime statistics. Data includes the number and types of crimes committed, who commits crime, where crimes occur and who are the victims.

However, not everybody will report crimes and not all police will choose to make arrests. This is because they may have an idea of who is the 'typical criminal' and focus on catching those! This makes the statistics **socially constructed**.

1. Can you think of any reasons why people may choose not to report a crime?

Evaluation of the official statistics

Advantages	Disadvantages
• They have already been collected • You can look at data on past events and see how things have changed over time • They are quick and cheap • Provide large amounts of data, sometimes of the whole population	• There could be biases in how they were collected • Some events/crimes do not get recorded • There is no depth or detail

2. Explain one strength of the official statistics. Link this to **representativeness**.

3. Explain one weakness of the official statistics. Link this to **validity**.