

***[Note to editors: ASA members are available to provide background and other information on data access and personal privacy. Contact Rosanne Desmone at [rosanne@amstat.org](mailto:rosanne@amstat.org) to request contacts.]***

## **Statisticians Can Help Limit the Risks of Confidential Data Dissemination, Says American Statistical Association**

**ALEXANDRIA, VA (PRWEB) MARCH 25, 2009** – The American Statistical Association (ASA), the nation's preeminent professional statistical society, has released a statement that provides the association's perspective on the risks associated with data dissemination and an overview on how statisticians can help limit that risk. The statement urges distributors and users of data, particularly sensitive public health and biologic data, to consult with statistical professionals when necessary regarding these risks. ASA also urges the media to be mindful of these issues when it presents data to the public.

"The traditional way of protecting privacy has been to aggregate information and report it in tables in order to mask information that might specifically identify anyone," said Sally Morton, ASA president. "By cross-referencing different databases, however, an individual with the right skills, a computer, and access to publicly available databases can breach the protection. One example of such a breach occurred in 2001 when a student at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, using Cambridge (MA) voter lists and medical insurance claims records of state employees, was able to re-identify the records of the state's governor even though his personal identifiers had been removed from the insurance records.

"ASA recognizes that risk assessment and confidentiality protection are not simple matters," Morton said. "Today, we have statistical tools that help ensure the proper assessment of risk and also of confidential information, so that confidential facts do not become public knowledge through the apparently harmless release of aggregated data or de-identified micro data. Statisticians, working with computer scientists and others, can help guarantee access to research data while protecting the privacy of the individuals whose data are included."

The text of the ASA statement reads as follows:

"Access to high quality data is essential to advancing science and improving the human condition. Robust new sources of data on human behavior allow researchers to ask and answer complex questions and hence guide policy decisions. Powerful and sophisticated electronic technologies have made much of this data readily accessible to the public.

"At the same time, much of this data contains personal information, so these electronic tools for combining and analyzing publicly accessible data pose a distinct threat – in perception if not in reality -- to privacy, as well as a potential for inflicting great harm on persons and establishments. The protection of personal privacy is of paramount importance in engaging the cooperation of respondents, and thus in producing and distributing the high quality data needed for research. Fortunately, modern statistical tools have been developed to help ensure the appropriate treatment of confidential information while still making useful data available for public policy and scientific advancement.

"This statement is intended to provide the American Statistical Association's (ASA) perspective on the assessment of the risk associated with data dissemination and an overview of the way in which statisticians can help limit that risk.

“The ASA urges distributors and users of data, particularly sensitive data such as public health and biologic data, to familiarize themselves with risk assessment, and to consult with statistical professionals when necessary. The ASA further urges the media to be mindful of these issues when it presents data to the public.”

**About the American Statistical Association**

The American Statistical Association (ASA), a scientific and educational society founded in Boston in 1839, is the second oldest continuously operating professional society in the United States. For more than 160 years, ASA has been providing its 18,000 members serving in academia, government, and industry and the public with up-to-date, useful information about statistics. The ASA has a proud tradition of service to statisticians, quantitative scientists, and users of statistics across a wealth of academic areas and applications. For additional information about the American Statistical Association, please visit the association’s web site at <http://www.amstat.org> or call 703.684.1221.

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