

Principal Statistical Agencies: Rising to the Challenge by Working Together

Priorities for the 117th Congress and 2021-2025 Administration

Federal Statistical Agencies:

- Produce trusted data for public and private decision-making
- Strive for highest standards of data quality and objectivity

They need:

- Legislation to bolster independence from political interference; penalize data users for breaches of data confidentiality; and eliminate barriers to sharing of data among agencies
- Increased staffing and resources to support innovation and blending of data from multiple sources (e.g., surveys, administrative records)
- Strengthened federal statistics oversight, support for collaboration, and research on system-wide needs, all in the service of higher quality, more relevant statistics

Mission

The nation's 13 principal statistical agencies have long been a trusted source of timely, accurate, relevant, and objective statistical data and information that businesses, governments, and the general public regularly use and rely on to make informed decisions. Statistical agencies actively embrace a common set of professional standards and operational practices designed to ensure the integrity, quality, and credibility of their statistical activities. They diligently strive to maintain a position of independence from undue external influence and to avoid even the appearance that their internal data collection and analysis processes might be manipulated for political purposes. The data they produce are a public good that are available to all.

Federal statistical agencies are part of a broad collection of departments and agencies, which, in turn, are overseen by many Congressional committees. Each statistical agency confronts challenges arising from its individual circumstances such as mission, budget, and size. These agencies also share many challenges with one or more sister agencies that they often address cooperatively. Agencies work together, for example, to establish definitional comparability across data sets by developing shared economic and demographic classification standards; they collaborate in operational and policy areas such as the establishment of common confidentiality protections; they work to develop and adopt common approaches to data management, data delivery and data access, and data sharing; and they share staff training and development activities.

The Interagency Council on Statistical Policy (ICSP) includes the heads of each principal statistical agency (who also serve as Statistical Officials under provisions of the Evidence Act), together with Statistical Officials in departments that do not have a principal statistical agency. It is fundamental to enabling

discussion around common challenges and in supporting multi-agency collaboration. The ICSP is chaired by the US Chief Statistician who also leads the Statistical and Science Policy staff (SSP) in the Office of Information and Regulatory Affairs at OMB. The SSP and the ICSP together sponsor the Federal Committee on Statistical Methodology, which addresses topics of importance to the statistical system and serves as a means for sharing expertise across agencies. Members are accomplished career federal employees selected by OMB based on their individual expertise and dedication to improving statistical methods employed by all agencies.

Opportunity

Interest in data-driven, evidence-based policymaking is escalating, most notably with the recent enactment of the bipartisan Foundations for Evidence-Based Policymaking Act (Evidence Act). The Evidence Act focuses on the role and value of principal statistical agencies, increasing their visibility, responsibilities, and opportunities. Further, the Evidence Act explicitly recognizes the value and elevates the importance of principal statistical agencies by designating their heads as the Statistical Officials for their respective parent departments or agencies.

As data science has advanced and statistical agencies increasingly gather, process, and disseminate data from multiple sources, they have looked for ways to attract and retain people with new skills, partner with the private sector and academia, and obtain access to modern, high speed, high capacity, highly secure computing environments. Statistical agencies have made it a priority to bring together data scientists, statisticians, subject matter experts, and information technology experts to modernize the ways in which federal statistics are produced and disseminated while maintaining the agencies' core values. But the principal statistical agencies currently lack the staff and budget resources needed to take advantage of the explosion of data sources and the rising demands for more timely and accessible statistics.

Challenges

- Many statistical agencies face serious, long-term shortages of staff trained in data analytics, statistical and data science, data communications, and data management. Staffing shortages have severely limited agencies' abilities to take advantage of advances in statistical and data science necessary to modernize their statistical programs.
- At a time when the nation's demand for more timely and accessible data and information has been exploding, budgets of statistical agencies have been in decline while requirements have increased, and contract support and data collection costs have been rising.
- The constraints on staffing and budget combine to prevent statistical agencies from pursuing opportunities to:
 - ✓ conduct deeper analyses that make better use of existing data;
 - ✓ fill data gaps by launching data collections in new and important areas of study;
 - ✓ more fully support participation in cross-agency partnerships that would increase the quality, utility, and accessibility of data; and
 - ✓ explore data sharing and linkages to make existing data more complete and useful.
- Barriers to sharing data among statistical agencies also constrain statistical agencies' ability to produce timely, high quality data for policy needs.

- Threats to privacy and confidentiality protection require legislation to place penalties on data users for confidentiality breaches commensurate with those already on statistical agency staff so that the agencies can more readily balance privacy protection with data utility.
- Distrust of government and attempts to unduly influence agencies' programs make it challenging for statistical agencies to retain credibility with data users, trust among data providers, and independence from political and other undue external influence.

Priorities

- Strengthen federal statistical agencies' staffing and funding
 - ✓ Address federal statistical agency staffing shortfalls by increasing allocation of permanent staff, by developing skills of current staff in areas needed to take advantage of emerging opportunities, and by hiring people with the needed skills.
 - ✓ Fully support the mission of the Federal statistical system by increasing budget allocations
- Improve data quality, relevance, and utility
 - ✓ Task agencies to enhance outreach and partnerships with non-statistical agencies and state and local governments and provide resources for state and local governments to modernize and standardize their data systems and take other steps to increase the utility of their data for use by the statistical agencies.
 - ✓ Task agencies and provide resources for them to improve survey response rates to increase efficiency, improve accuracy, and decrease bias.
 - ✓ Provide resources for agencies to develop linked data sets that combine survey data with administrative or other non-survey data and standard ways to measure and communicate the quality of the resulting blended data.
- Strengthen the statistical system as a whole to enhance coordination, collaboration, and utility
 - ✓ Fully support requirements associated with the Evidence Act and Federal Data Strategy.
 - ✓ Increase currently limited staff and budget resources available to the US Chief Statistician for the support of information policy activities that enable collaboration among statistical agencies and leverage data assets, protect confidentiality, and enhance quality.
 - ✓ Elevate the position of the Chief Statistician—for example, to a second Deputy Administrator position in OIRA—to better support coordination among the statistical agencies, establish a stronger evidence-based policymaking effort in the administration, and reflect the broad portfolio, responsibilities, and profile of the Chief Statistician.
 - ✓ Task the ICSP to develop ways to improve awareness of the resources and capabilities of the federal statistical system within and outside of the federal government.
 - ✓ Task agencies to coordinate and integrate statistical programs across agencies when appropriate to provide the most relevant data for policy and other uses.
 - ✓ Strengthen the trust, credibility, and political autonomy of all statistical agencies through legislation, as appropriate, OMB statistical policy directives, departmental MOUs with constituent statistical agencies, and support for the Statistical Official in each department. For example, amend the Evidence Act to include protections for agency scientists and to prohibit political appointees other than the agency head in all statistical agencies.

- Balance data access and respondent privacy
 - ✓ Improve secure research access to confidential data by establishing a secure data service as proposed in the Evidence Act to carry out linkages of data sets for statistical, research, and policy evaluation purposes.
 - ✓ Amend the Evidence Act to impose penalties on users (including other federal agencies and their contractors) for willful breaches of confidentiality and uses of statistical data for nonstatistical purposes, such as law enforcement actions against individuals. Add language to the Evidence Act that charges federal statistical agencies and units, which already face penalties for disclosure of confidential information, to appropriately balance confidentiality protection and utility and accuracy of statistical data.

Supporting Organizations

American Statistical Association
 Consortium of Social Science Associations
 Council of Professional Associations on Federal Statistics

The 13 Primary Federal Statistical Agencies

1. Bureau of Economic Analysis, Department of Commerce
2. Bureau of Justice Statistics, Department of Justice
3. Bureau of Labor Statistics, Department of Labor
4. Bureau of Transportation Statistics, Department of Transportation
5. Economic Research Service, US Department of Agriculture
6. Energy Information Administration, Department of Energy
7. National Agricultural Statistics Service, US Department of Agriculture
8. National Center for Education Statistics, Department of Education
9. National Center for Health Statistics, Department of Health and Human Services
10. National Center for Science and Engineering Statistics, NSF
11. Office of Research, Evaluation, and Statistics, Social Security Administration
12. Statistics of Income Division, IRS
13. US Census Bureau

Supporting materials

- Statistical Programs of the United States Government (<https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/statistical-programs-20192020.pdf>)
- Principles and Practices for a Federal Statistical Agency: Sixth Edition (<https://www.nap.edu/catalog/24810/principles-and-practices-for-a-federal-statistical-agency-sixth-edition>)
- Foundations for Evidence-Based Policymaking Act of 2018 ("Evidence Act"), Pub. L. No. 115-435, 132 Stat. 5529 (<https://www.congress.gov/115/plaws/publ435/PLAW-115publ435.pdf>)
- Memorandum for Heads of Executive Departments and Agencies, M-19-23, *Phase 1 Implementation of the Foundations for Evidence-Based Policymaking Act of 2018: Learning Agendas, Personnel, and Planning Guidance* (<https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/M-19-23.pdf>)

- Advancing Information Policy and Use at the Office of Management and Budget (https://www.napawash.org/uploads/OMB_Information_Policy_and_Use_Working_Group.pdf)
- Statistical Policy Directive No. 1: Fundamental Responsibilities of Federal Statistical Agencies and Recognized Statistical Units (<https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/FR-2014-12-02/pdf/2014-28326.pdf>)
- Statistical Policy Directive No. 2: Standards and Guidelines for Statistical Surveys (<https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/FR-2006-09-22/pdf/06-8044.pdf>)
- Statistical Policy Directive No. 3: Compilation, Release, and Evaluation of Principal Federal Economic Indicators (https://www.whitehouse.gov/sites/whitehouse.gov/files/omb/assets/OMB/inforeg/statpolicy/dir_3_fr_09251985.pdf)
- Statistical Policy Directive No. 4: Release and Dissemination of Statistical Products Produced by Federal Statistical Agencies (<https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/FR-2008-03-07/pdf/E8-4570.pdf>)
- Federal Committee on Statistical Methodology (<https://nces.ed.gov/FCSM/index.asp>)

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For other federal statistical agency priorities, please visit <https://www.amstat.org/ASA/Science-Policy-and-Advocacy/home.aspx#resources> or <https://copafs.org/activities-initiatives/>. For any questions on these documents, or to have your organization added as an endorsing or supporting organization, please contact Steve Pierson (pierson@amstat.org) or Paul Schroeder (paul.schroeder@copafs.org).