



AMERICAN STATISTICAL ASSOCIATION

Promoting the Practice and Profession of Statistics®

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May 22, 2020

The Honorable Roy Blunt
Chair, Appropriations Subcommittee on
Labor, Health and Human Services,
Education, and Related Agencies
United States Senate
Washington DC, 20510

The Honorable Patty Murray
Ranking Member, Appropriations
Subcommittee on Labor, Health and
Human Services, Education, and
Related Agencies
United States Senate
Washington DC, 20510

Dear Chair Blunt and Ranking Member Murray,

I write in support of the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS), the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), and the National Center for Health Statistics (NCHS) for your consideration as you draft the FY21 Labor, Health and Human Services, Education, and Related Agencies appropriations bill.

For BLS, thank you for your strong support of its programs through the FY20 level of \$628 million. The additional funding enables BLS to carry out and continue to improve its ongoing programs and better understand the impact of the digital economy on our workforce. I also convey our strong support for the administration's request of \$645 million for the FY21 program budget in addition to the \$13 million for the BLS relocation to Suitland, Maryland. As you know, the BLS produces economic data that are essential for evidence-based decision-making by businesses and financial markets, federal and local officials, and households faced with spending and career choices. The BLS, like every federal statistical agency, must modernize in order to produce the gold standard data on jobs, wages, skill needs, inflation, productivity and more on which our businesses, researchers, and policymakers rely heavily. BLS' modernization efforts have been hampered by its \$73 million (12%) loss of purchasing power since FY09. (See enclosed graph.)

The administration's request level is a positive step towards the restoration of BLS resources. We fully support the proposals, including for the Job Openings and Labor Turnover Survey

(JOLTS). The increased sample size for JOLTS will enable state-level data and more detailed industry data, which will be especially helpful to governors, regional economic development organizations, and other policymakers in the Covid-19 recovery period. We also support the proposed investments for the Consumer Expenditure program. This program is overdue for a new design given its burden on respondents. Resources now feasible through big data and technological advances have the potential to improve inflation and poverty measurement. These improved programs will be especially informative as our country recovers from the Covid-19 pandemic.

For the NCHS, we recommend a funding level of at least \$189 million—an increase of \$14.6 million and realignment of \$14 million in ongoing transfers—which would restore NCHS’ budget to its inflation-adjusted FY 2010 funding level. While NCHS work has been critical to monitoring deaths due to Covid-19, recent events, including the opioid crisis, have made clear that our public health data surveillance systems are challenged in many ways, as reported this spring in a National Academies’ seminar.¹ For example, current systems are slow to alert us to “change in key indicators so that interventions can be implemented early in a crisis...” They need to be redesigned for automatic reporting and for flexibility to adjust quickly to new crises and to data collection disruption. The recommended funding level would help NCHS to address these challenges.

For the NCES, we echo our requests in a [March 23 joint letter](#) to you with the American Educational Research Associations, two former NCES commissioners, and two former chief statisticians of the United States:

To ensure NCES continues serving its vital mission, we request inclusion of provisions in the FY21 appropriations bill that would enable NCES to rebuild internal capacity through hiring full-time, permanent staff. We also urge at least a 5 percent budget increase for the NCES statistics account that would partially redress its more than 20 percent loss in purchasing power since FY09.

We reiterate points from that letter in the next three paragraphs. The NCES has an [ongoing staffing crisis](#) that has reached a point this year likely to result in terminations and cutbacks of critical statistical information programs. All federal statistical agencies conduct some of their work with government staff resources and contract with others—often specialized profit-making firms, but sometimes other federal agencies—to conduct the remainder. The NCES has an exceptionally high budget-to-staff ratio, \$3 million/FTE, which is nine times the median of other federal statistical agencies. This means a higher proportion of the critical statistical data collection design and analysis—normally expected of federal employees—is, instead, performed by contractors. Compared with other statistical agencies, NCES staff resources are

¹ <https://www.nationalacademies.org/event/05-08-2020/cnstat-public-seminars-deaths-of-despair-and-the-future-of-capitalism>, at minute, 1:22.

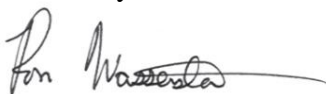
disproportionately allocated to overseeing contractors who perform many of these essential statistical activities. We believe this shift has gone too far for THE NCES to be a healthy statistical organization and strongly recommend Congress take explicit actions to address this condition in the FY2021 appropriation process. A set-aside allocation of 20 additional staff would provide a good start to rebuild NCES staff resources.

We also urge the NCES statistics account be funded at a level of at least \$115 million. As shown in the enclosed graph, this account has lost more than 20 percent of its purchasing power since FY09, when its budget was \$116 million. The loss of purchasing power is even greater since FY10–FY12, when the account was at \$125 million or higher. (Our recommended level does not include the \$3 million in the administration’s request that is transferred from the statewide longitudinal data systems for the Privacy Technical Assistance Center.) The requested increase of at least 5 percent will help NCES’ ability to track emerging education trends, reduce respondent burden, and provide more timely and regional data—efforts that are currently taxed due to both the loss of the agency’s purchasing power and its staffing crisis.

Among the surveys that should be prioritized for continuation are the School Survey on Crime and Safety (SSOCS) and the Fast Response Survey System (FRSS), which we understand may be discontinued until staff and funding are in place. SSOCS’ estimates of school crime, discipline, and disorder—as well as associated programs and policies—are essential to ensuring our schools provide safe learning environments for our nation’s children. FRSS was established to collect data quickly, with minimum response burden, to inform new policies and would be especially helpful in getting our schools back on track as we recover from the Covid-19 pandemic. Increased funding will also be necessary to create and maintain the Postsecondary Student Data System, a major new project in the College Affordability Act of 2019 currently working its way through Congress for reauthorization of the Higher Education Act.

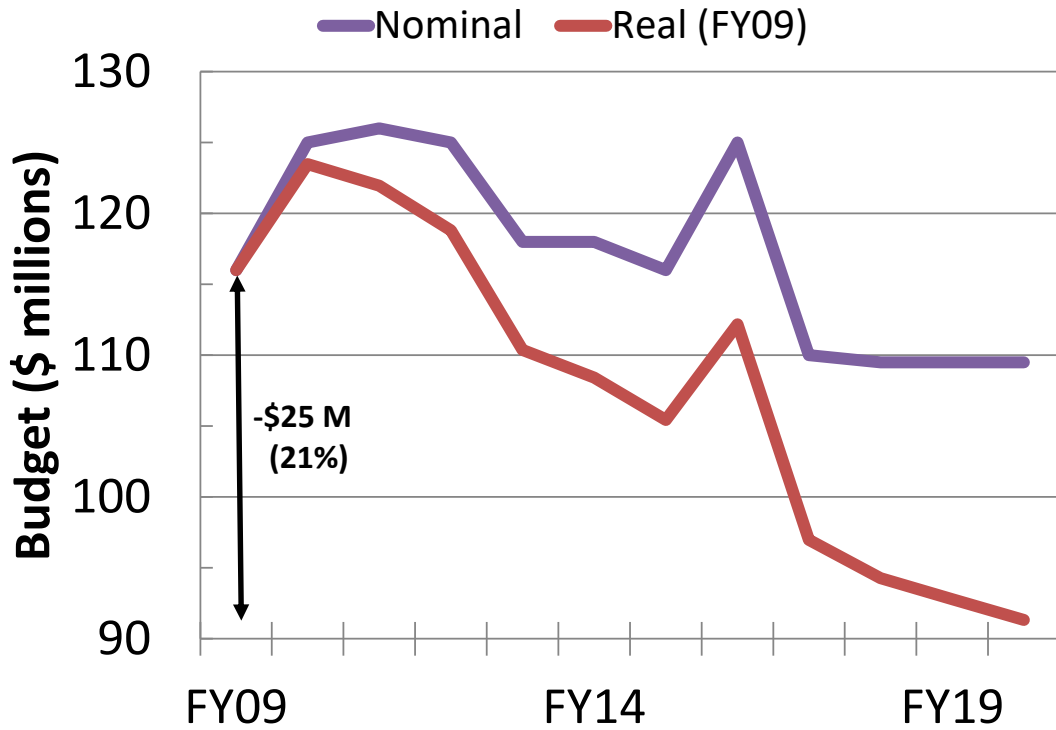
Finally, thank you for your strong support for the National Institutes of Health. We also strongly support the NIH budget.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read "Ron Wasserstein", with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Ron Wasserstein
Executive Director

NCES Statistics Funding



BLS Funding

