

FSS Modernization Project

Meeting 2 (August 19, 2025) Summary¹

September 5, 2025

Background

The overall objective of the Federal Statistical System (FSS) Modernization Project is to develop and communicate actionable recommendations for modernizing and strengthening the federal statistical system in the current policy environment. A modern and stronger FSS is needed to better inform US decisionmaking. The FSS Modernization Project is hosted by the American Statistical Association. The project intends to host three meetings with thought leaders between June and October 2025 to inform strategic communication with decision makers.

Two meetings have been held to date. The first meeting was held on 6/24/25. Its objective was to assess the advisability and policy appetite among former leaders and other experts in the FSS for various structural changes to address both long-standing and more recent challenges to the FSS. Accordingly, meeting invitations were sent to thought leaders with particular experience and insight into the structure of the federal statistical system and its related policy history, challenges, and opportunities.²

A second meeting with nonfederal thought leaders was held on 8/19/25. The objective of the second meeting was to identify data user needs and their relationship to a modern, user-driven FSS in light of the current policy environment. Participants at this meeting were asked to name changing needs, emerging innovations, and the features of the federal statistical system (including the broader national statistical infrastructure) that would provide best value in meeting this demand.

The following summary captures feedback from this component of a collaborative effort to evaluate, and potentially steer toward, structural and other policy changes that could support statistical agency modernization, independence, efficiency, and adaptability. One additional meeting with complementary objectives is anticipated.

Method

The objective and therefore participant list for the second meeting was distinct from the first meeting. Accordingly, the meeting invitations were extended to private-sector, public-sector, and academic statistical data user representatives who were familiar with

¹ Adobe AI and ChatGPT5 generated a summary of meeting output materials, which were subsequently edited by members of the FSS Modernization steering group for accuracy and suitability for a general audience.

² A list of meeting participants and a summary of the meeting outcome can be found on the ASA website [here](#).

the federal statistical system.³ Particular effort was made to ensure broad coverage of subject domain and to include users of state-, local-, and national-level data products.

In advance of the meeting, participants were sent a detailed agenda and thought exercise to frame the meeting's discussion. The detailed agenda included breakout group discussion questions. The thought exercise⁴ initiated the discussion on data use cases. The meeting was governed by Chatham House rules. A combination of panel presentations, breakout groups, and polls were used to facilitate participant discussion.

1st Half Findings: Using the Current FSS

The first half of the discussion asked participants to describe current uses of federal statistical data; attributes of useful data products; barriers to usefulness; and how these barriers have been or could be addressed through augmentation of data products, analyses, or innovation.

Uses of Federal Statistical Data Products

Participants described how federal data products power business decisions, policymaking, advocacy, and public awareness by providing reliable, standardized, and large-scale information.

Essential Attributes of Useful Federal Statistical Products

Panelists identified several important attributes of useful federal statistical products. Useful federal statistical products are well-documented, independent, transparent, accurate, linkable, accessible, and responsive to diverse user needs. These attributes already exist – to varying degrees – in current FSS products.

- *Clear Documentation:* Products should include thorough, user-vetted documentation that explains methodology, definitions, and limitations clearly. This helps users interpret the data correctly.
- *Political Independence:* Data should be free from political influence.
- *Linkability:* Data should integrate well with private sector sources and allow linkages across datasets. Open infrastructure and APIs are key for enabling researchers and organizations to connect different data streams.
- *Accuracy & Transparency:* Accuracy and completeness are crucial for building user trust with sufficient sample sizes and transparent communication about

³ A list of meeting participants can be found on the ASA website [here](#).

⁴ The prompt was, "Think about the data products that you (or your constituencies) use most often. From your perspective as data users (and representatives of data users), what attributes of these products make them most valuable to you? Do you have an example or two of how data products (particularly from federal statistical agencies) have increased in value for your work? Decreased their value? Can you name one enhancement or new data product that would provide very high value for your work?"

reliability and constraints.

- *Accessibility & Privacy Protection:* Data should be easy to access and consistently updated, with protections in place to safeguard sensitive information.

Desirable Attributes of Modernized Data Products

Participants felt strongly that modern federal data products should be more integrated, supplemented with private data, governed transparently, trusted, legally protected, and coordinated across statistical agencies. (Several of these features align with provisions of the Evidence Act.)

- *User-Centered Design:* Agencies need to better define diverse user groups and be responsive to their specific needs. This ensures products are designed with end-users in mind, not just technical requirements.
- *Interoperable Products:* Products that enable linking datasets within and across agencies (e.g., for family well-being) would improve usability and provide broader insights.
- *Public–Private Partnerships:* Leveraging private sector data to supplement federal surveys with low response rates and creating public-use data products from private data would fill gaps in coverage.
- *Data Governance & Transparency:* Strong governance frameworks are needed to ensure safe and appropriate data use, with transparency about how data are collected, linked, and applied.
- *Trust & Branding:* Suggestions included creating a common branding across statistical agencies to build public trust and ensuring political independence in operations.
- *Legal & Ethical Safeguards:* Some advocated for laws penalizing inappropriate use of data and promoting radical transparency and data minimization to protect individuals.
- *Stronger Coordination:* Proposals included empowering the Chief Statistician to coordinate across agencies for uniformity, consistency, and transparency in data products.

Current Barriers

Participants felt the biggest barriers to achieving a modern FSS are limited local relevance, strict data-sharing rules, declining response rates, timeliness issues, weak documentation, funding cuts, trust deficits, and technical access difficulties.

- *Lack of Local Detail:* Federal data often lack sufficient state and local granularity, making it hard for policymakers, businesses, and researchers to apply findings at community levels.
- *Data-Sharing Restrictions & Privacy Concerns:* Strict federal restrictions limit data linkages across states and agencies. Privacy concerns, especially when data could be repurposed for enforcement, make advocacy for linkage more difficult. MOUs with and between statistical agencies are complicated and delayed by the need to involve their parent departments' attorneys.
- *Declining Survey Response Rates:* Lower participation undermines reliability of surveys like the ACS and CPS, while inconsistent business statistics across agencies create comparability issues.
- *Timeliness & Frequency Issues:* Many federal products are not released frequently enough and lag behind rapidly changing economic and social conditions.
- *Metadata & Documentation Gaps:* Inadequate metadata and inconsistent definitions across agencies make aggregated data less credible and harder to use.
- *Resource Constraints:* Budget cuts and staffing shortages hinder agencies' ability to maintain completeness, consistency, and innovation in data production. These concerns are particularly acute for the smaller agencies, which lack the economies of scale and scope achieved by the larger agencies and rely more on available services provided by their parent departments.
- *Credibility & Trust Issues:* Some participants expressed concerns about political manipulation of data and declining trust in government statistics.
- *Technical & Access Barriers:* Participants noted reduced access to public and restricted datasets due to agency cutbacks. In the absence of a FSS to provide these data, researchers may attempt to buy private data. To the extent that occurs, federal agencies will have difficulty showing their value. It also could become a data access issue. Additionally, tools like *data.census.gov* were criticized as harder to use compared to earlier platforms.

Proposed Solutions

Participants proposed several solutions to modernize the FSS. The solutions focus on better linkages, private data partnerships, stronger governance and coordination, improved accessibility, and greater coordination/funding — all aimed at making federal statistical products more timely, trustworthy, and usable. Table 1 presents barriers identified in the prior section and proposed solutions.

Table 1. Current Barriers and Proposed Solutions for Federal Statistical Data Products

Barrier	Proposed Solution / Modernization
Lack of Local Detail	Use modeling for small-area estimates; move beyond census geographies to flexible units (squares, hexagons).
Data-Sharing Restrictions & Privacy Concerns	Enable secure linkages (Census PIK, Coleridge Initiative, BLS Wage Records Program); adopt privacy-enhancing technologies; create public-private governance frameworks to ensure safe and transparent data use and common standards for input data.
Declining Survey Response Rates	Supplement surveys with administrative and private sector data (e.g., Esri, RESET project, Revelio, ADP); develop register-based statistics to reduce reliance on surveys.
Timeliness & Frequency Issues	Use real-time private datasets to complement federal releases; expand APIs and infrastructure for faster integration.
Metadata & Documentation Gaps	Improve documentation and metadata standards across agencies to ensure comparability and clarity.
Resource Constraints (Funding & Staffing) and Silos	Increase funding and staffing; increase multi-year funding; empower the Chief Statistician to coordinate across agencies for consistency, interoperability, and efficiency. Enable cross-agency sharing of services.
Credibility & Trust Issues	Establish common branding for statistical agencies; enforce political independence; penalize misuse of data while promoting radical transparency.
Technical & Access Barriers	Build virtual data enclaves for secure access across all statistical programs; improve user interfaces like <i>data.census.gov</i> ; publish ACS data with reliability indicators for broader audiences.

2nd Half Findings: Toward A Modern FSS

The second half of the discussion asked participants to reflect on their current communication and relationship with the federal statistical system and how changes in the FSS to improve products could be best managed to sustain both trust and usefulness. They were also asked which statistical program and product enhancements (e.g., filling gaps, reducing duplication, improving timeliness and granularity, improving accessibility and transparency) would be most important to accomplish and why.

Modernizing with Sustained Trust and Usefulness

Participants argued that managing change in the FSS requires balancing trust (through transparency, independent oversight, and guardrails against misuse) with usefulness

(through timely, accessible, and innovative products). If agencies commit to two-way engagement, broader accessibility, careful integration of new technologies, and sustainable resource strategies, they can modernize while maintaining public confidence.

- *Strengthen Communication & Transparency:* Provide clear, plain-language explanations of methods, revisions, and limitations. Establish two-way feedback loops with researchers, policymakers, and the public. Employ professional communicators and modern tools (AI chatbots, FAQs, visualizations).
- *Institutionalize Independent Oversight:* Restore and codify advisory committees for continuity and independence. Consider moving the Chief Statistician role to the legislative branch (such as creating a Congressional Statistical Office) to safeguard against politicization. Build guardrails against data misuse and weaponization.
- *Prioritize User-Centered Product Design:* Serve broader audiences: policymakers, educators, students, and the public—not only expert researchers. Enhance timeliness, frequency, and granularity of data products. Deliver data in modern, machine-readable formats (beyond PDFs).
- *Leverage Technology & Data Integration:* Use AI tools to support user engagement and improve accessibility. Integrate administrative and private data (e.g., real-time payroll) responsibly. Develop collaborative platforms (e.g., USG Kaggle-style hubs) to share tools and code. Work with the private sector to develop data and technology standards to improve data quality, better protect privacy, and lower reporting burden.
- *Protect Privacy While Expanding Access:* Apply privacy-preserving methods while reducing reliance on PII. Focus on preventing data misuse, not just disclosure risks. Communicate protections clearly to bolster public trust.
- *Ensure Sustainable Resources & Quality Assurance:* Secure adequate budgets to fund modernization and third-party data sources. Distribute resources equitably across agencies, not concentrated in a single entity. Apply continuous improvement frameworks (e.g., Lean Six Sigma) for efficiency and trust.

Plenary Poll

All participants were asked to participate in a poll, asking “Where would you put money to improve FSS data products?” Participants could select up to three. See Figure 1.

Participants expressed concern regarding the generalizability of the results to the broader population of federal data users. Poll results may be more likely to reflect one particular group of data users—researchers. In contrast, participants felt that the

American public is more concerned with privacy, and business data users want more granular and timely data.



Figure 1. Poll results, “Where would you put money to improve FSS data products? Choose up to 3.”

Refocusing on the Purpose of an FSS

In addition, some participants expressed a strong desire for clarity about whom the FSS currently serves now, and whom it should serve. This led to a discussion of the purposes of the FSS. Participants felt that the FSS exists to be the trusted source of truth that informs policy, serves the public, supports science, enables comparisons, and ensures government accountability — making it the foundation of the national data infrastructure.

- *Inform Policy and Decision-Making:* Provide trusted, authoritative data to guide macroeconomic, social program, and budgetary policy. Support fund allocation and evidence-based decisions at all levels of government.
- *Serve the American People:* Deliver information that helps states serve their public and ensures comparability across states. Enable the public to hold the government accountable with transparent, accessible data (e.g., election data).
- *Support Science and Research:* Provide data that help understand social, economic, and environmental trends, causes, and consequences. Act as an infrastructure for researchers and scientists to study phenomena over time. Help compare U.S. performance with other countries, fostering global competitiveness and benchmarking.
- *National “North Star” for Data:* Serve as a public good for data analysis, not only to government but also to citizens, businesses, and researchers, providing validation, benchmarks, weights, methodological innovations, and widely accepted “truths.” If it fails to serve as the source of truth, the quality and coherence of all other national data suffers.

Toward Investment Priorities for a Modern FSS

A way forward within the current environment and cost constraints must consider the unique value of the FSS and priority improvements for data usefulness and sustained trustworthiness. Table 2 summarizes actions recommended by participants in the form of short- and long-term priorities. Participants noted that several of these proposed investments were underway through enacting recent policy requirements; innovations at particular agencies; and/or the collaborative federal statistical agency efforts supporting the National Secure Data Service.

Table 2. Recommended Investment Priorities for a Modern FSS

Focus Area	Investment Actions	Impact	Timeframe
Strengthen Core Data Products	Improve timeliness, granularity, and frequency; modernize outputs (machine-readable, APIs, interactive)	High usefulness for policymakers, researchers, and public	Short-term
Improve Accessibility & User Experience	Fund feedback systems, visualization tools, APIs, and science communicators	Builds trust through transparency & usability	Short-term
Protect Privacy & Guard Against Misuse	Invest in privacy-preserving methods; prevent misuse (reconstruction, weaponization)	Sustains public confidence in data	Short-term

Focus Area	Investment Actions	Impact	Timeframe
Leverage Administrative & Private Data	Integrate payroll, tax, health, and business data; engage with public/private governance organizations to lower reporting burdens and promote interoperability, relevance, and privacy protections	Modernizes & expands data infrastructure	Long-term
Build Statistical Literacy & Public Trust	Fund literacy programs, national campaigns, advisory committees	Long-term trust resilience & public engagement	Long-term
Sustained, Shared Resources & System Leadership	Secure budgets; increase multi-year funding; share branding and services; create interoperable products and collaboration platforms; centralize and empower FSS leadership (Chief Statistician/Congressional office)	Ensures stability & coherence across FSS	Long-term

Conclusion

Participants drew from their varied experiences and constituencies to describe attributes of a modern federal statistical system most desirable to data users and the steps needed to achieve it. Although concern was expressed that the views of some federal data user groups were not sufficiently represented, there appeared to be wide agreement on current value, challenges, and the steps needed to sustain trust and credible data during a period of change.

Post-Meeting Feedback: Survey

The Steering Group requested feedback from participants through a meeting survey. Participants were also welcomed to submit additional input by email. A summary of these views is provided below.

Q1. Given how the August 19 conference unfolded (presentations, discussions, topics, who attended, and so forth), did the conference meet your expectations? How did it fall short or exceed what you expected?

Respondents generally agreed the meeting met or exceeded expectations. However, some respondents questioned if the meeting focus and prompts were on target for a discussion of modernizing the FSS in the current policy climate. The discussion of desirable data attributes seemed out of sync with wider system challenges and

changes, including potential consolidation. (NB: A wider discussion of structural change can be found in the [Meeting 1 background document](#) and [Meeting 1 Summary](#).)

Q2. How could we have better prepared you for the discussion?

Generally, respondents indicated that they were prepared for the meeting discussion. One respondent would have liked more material in advance regarding the core purposes of federal statistics and the unique role of the federal government in their production, as they felt that discussion (which occurred at the end of the day) was particularly insightful. One respondent would have preferred both discussion topics to focus on the future, rather than the past. Another respondent suggested one on one interviews before the meeting, and then using the meeting event to focus on areas of disagreement.

Q3. What should the 3rd meeting cover?

Respondents were somewhat mixed. If the steering group's recommendations have already been established, then the third meeting should focus on strategic planning to implement those recommendations and include both short term and longer term actions. A draft paper describing this strategy could be circulated in advance. One respondent suggested that one element of this strategy could examine how the coordinating role of the chief statistician be used to merge (or link) data.

One respondent felt, if the recommendations have not already been established, the third meeting should feature differing policy views from other actors in the data ecosystem. Another respondent suggested a discussion evaluating the deterioration in quality of federal statistics due to political interference. (NB: The [Data Index.US](#) Project, the [Data Rescue Project](#), and several others are tracking this information.)

Q4. Who should be invited (either specific individuals or category of stakeholder) in a subsequent convening or other engagement (e.g., report review), either for substantive or strategic input?

Respondents felt a wider range of expertise and policy perspectives should be sought for the next meeting. They noted that experts from domains other than economics should be represented, more experts from state and local data users, and more policy maker perspectives. They also recommended including more actual data users, rather than representatives of data users, and also representatives of the individuals and entities directly impacted by the data collected and its use.

Another respondent wondered if convenings were necessary. Instead, the draft paper could be circulated for comment and robust discussion.

Q5. Do you have other comments or suggestions for the steering group?

One respondent voiced strong concerns regarding the privacy and confidentiality implications from increased linking of data. The respondent noted that the means taken by the Census Bureau to manage disclosure risk are not sustainable and will affect the full federal statistical system and its products. The respondent felt a practical and comprehensive approach to disclosure avoidance across the federal statistical system was necessary as one critical element of modernization.

One respondent recommended that the steering group be broadened to include additional perspectives beyond those reflected in recent statistical policy. Doing so would ensure that recommendations made were not (merely) redundant of past proposals.

Post-Meeting Feedback: Emails

Participants were also encouraged to email additional feedback to the organizers. Below is a summary of themes noted.

Strengthen Management

A participant urged empowering the US Chief Statistician and his/her office. This would include broadening the role over other federal agencies, possibly with several deputies each managing the statistics from a few agencies. Another statistician would lead integration across the departments, assuming consolidation occurs.

The participant noted it could be useful to examine bottlenecks and share potential efficiencies across statistical agencies. This examination could include US and other national statistical offices.

Leverage Legislative Branch

The participant also urged consideration of moving the Office of the US Chief Statistician out of the Executive Office of the President into the legislative branch as a means to guard against undue political interference. A Congressional Statistical Office could be modeled on the Congressional Budget Office. As an independent office, the Congressional Statistical Office would:

- Provide external validation of statistical integrity and methodology
- Investigate complaints about political interference in data collection or release

- Offer independent analysis of controversial statistics when disputes arise
- Report directly to Congress and be immune from executive pressure

Another participant noted that greater involvement with the legislative branch may provide other solutions. For example, Congressional oversight via annual hearings on each of the agencies as well as the Chief Statistician office could be useful, especially given recent questions that some have had about the integrity of federal data. These hearings could be informative to the other branches of government as well as the public. Additionally, to address concerns about violations of data privacy, privacy [and confidentiality] laws could be revised to penalize the public as well as lawmakers [and executive agency staffs].

Integrate High Value Data

One participant urged prioritizing improved data linkages and administrative data integration. This would deliver higher quality data currently unavailable to the public in a manner that lessens reliance on surveys). As an example, the current measurement of the independent workforce is incomplete and relies on data of differing scope produced by different federal statistical agencies (BLS' CPS and Census' NES, respectively. Linking to IRS records would provide more comprehensive data. This is policy significant because, absent comprehensive federal statistical data, the public relies on the private sector.

Another participant noted possible IT solutions to integration and communication with the public. For example, a web interface could facilitate data integration across datasets and agencies (perhaps functioning similar to www.kaggle.com). Additionally, an LLM could be leveraged to answer some public queries to agencies and/or direct the public to other sites for more information. (NB: The National Secure Data Service Demonstration project is currently testing similar approaches to benefit the FSS.) LLMs could also be leveraged to detect data anomalies.

The participant noted that there wasn't much talk about election data. The participant urged providing election data to the public in a machine-readable format as very important to ensure public trust in elections.