

Previous Assessments of the Federal Statistical System

For 120 years, the decentralized federal statistical system has been studied by presidential commissions, working groups, individuals, and committees of such organizations as the American Statistical Association (see Table C-1 for key points about the major reviews and Box C-1 for references for further reading). The formation of the Department of Commerce and Labor in 1903 (subsequently split into two departments in 1913) was a catalyst for such studies, as it brought together BLS and the newly established permanent Census Bureau, plus the Bureau of Statistics (a predecessor to BEA formerly in the Treasury Department) into the same cabinet department. This development led to studies of the pros and cons of combining these agencies into a single statistical bureau of some kind.

Many reviews addressed not only the organization of the federal statistical system but also such issues as coordination of the decentralized system, ways for statistical agencies to share confidential microdata for statistical purposes, and methods for regular evaluation of the system. The 17 studies listed in Table C-1 shared two characteristics: they were one-off efforts as opposed to regular monitoring, and few of their recommendations were adopted. In particular, no recommendation to reorganize or consolidate the federal statistical agencies has ever been adopted.

Reasons for the lack of consolidation of statistical agencies in the United States have not been studied in depth but seem to boil down to turf factors. In some instances, nonstatistical agencies have been fearful that a combined statistical agency would dominate their department (the reason for rejecting consolidation of the forerunner of BEA, the BLS, and the Census Bureau when they were all part of the combined Department of Commerce and Labor from 1903–1913). In some instances, statistical agencies have not wanted to be combined, particularly with the Census Bureau given its huge size vis-à-vis the other statistical agencies. In some instances, congressional committees and subcommittees have not wanted consolidation if they would lose jurisdiction over an agency (e.g., different committees oversee the appropriations for the Department of Commerce and the Department of Labor—see Supporting Materials: B).

A handful of consequential initiatives resulted from recommendations in one or another of the reviews of the statistical system (see Table C-1). They include: the establishment in 1933 of the Central Statistical Board, the predecessor to the office of the chief statistician in OMB (recommended by COGSIS); the establishment of the Committee on National Statistics at the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine in 1972 (recommended by the Wallis Commission); the establishment of the Council of Professional Associations on Federal Statistics in 1980 (recommended by JAHCGS); and the passage of the Foundations of Evidence-Based Policymaking Act of 2018 (implementing many of the recommendations of the Commission on Evidence-Based Policymaking).

Calls for regular monitoring of the statistical system have gone unheeded. CNSTAT performs essential functions for the federal statistical system by reviewing particular programs and agencies, identifying data needs in various subject areas, looking to the future of federal statistics, and every four years updating its flagship publication, *Principles and Practices for a Federal Statistical Agency*, which is now in its 7th edition. COPAFS provides valuable time for user communities at its quarterly meetings to hear from and provide feedback to the federal statistical agencies. It also hosts a major annual conference on behalf of the Federal Committee on Statistical Methodology, which is an important learning and networking event. However, neither CNSTAT nor COPAFS systematically monitors or appraises the statistical system as a whole.

TABLE C-1.
Major reviews of the federal statistical system

YEARS IN EXISTENCE	REVIEW GROUP/MISSION	RECOMMENDATIONS	OUTCOME
1903–1908	Commission appointed by Secretary of the Treasury	Recommended consolidation of some statistical units but against centralization	No action taken
1908	Interdepartmental Committee on Statistical Reorganization appointed by Secretary of Commerce and Labor; charged to consider consolidation of statistical agencies in the department	Against consolidation of Census Bureau and former Treasury Department Bureau of Statistics (predecessor to BEA); recommended a coordinating committee	Coordinating committee established but inactive
1919–1922	Bureau of Efficiency (federal agency 1916–1933); charged to review duplication of statistical work	Recommended centralized Bureau of Statistics	Report referred to Advisory Committee on the Census (members nominated by the ASA and AEA), which rejected centralization; no action taken
1933–1937	Committee on Government Statistics and Information Services (COGSIS) established by ASA and SSRC	Recommended a Central Statistical Board (CSB), established in 1933, to coordinate and modernize federal statistical programs	CSB in 1939 became the Division of Statistical Standards in the Bureau of the Budget (now OMB)
1948	Hoover Commission on government organization asked NBER to study the statistical system (NBER study chaired by F. C. Mills and C. Long)	Recommended centralizing repetitive, large-scale surveys in the Census Bureau and establishing separate Office of Statistical Standards in Executive Office of the President (outside of OMB)	No action taken
1955	Bureau of the Budget conducted internal review of Mills-Long recommendations	Pointed out problems of centralization	No action taken
1966	Committee on Federal Statistical Data established by Bureau of the Budget to address storing and accessing government statistics; charge expanded to consider organization of statistical system (Carl Kaysen, chair)	Recommended gradual centralization of surveys and a National Data Center plus director of federal statistical system in Executive Office of the President, who would head up the Census Bureau	No action taken

1970–1971	President's Commission on Federal Statistics (W. Allen Wallis, chair; Frederick Mosteller, vice chair); charged to address practical methods for the statistical system to improve and self-renew	Recommended broadening scope of statistical coordination, authorizing data sharing of confidential microdata between statistical agencies for statistical purposes, requiring Census Bureau to establish a business list, establishing an independent advisory board on privacy and confidentiality, and establishing Committee on National Statistics (CNSTAT) at the National Academies to advise OMB	CNSTAT was established in 1972 but does not formally advise OMB or audit; the Census Bureau established a master establishment list, but it is not shared with other agencies; no other action taken
1970s	Subcommittee of Council of Economic Advisers	Recommended some consolidation of statistical agencies, strengthening of Office of Statistical Policy, and appointment of Committee of Outside Advisors	No action taken
1971	President's Departmental Reorganizational Proposals	Recommended consolidation of domestic functions into four departments; the Department of Economic Affairs to include BEA, Census Bureau, BLS, NASS, and ERS	No action taken
1976	Joint Ad Hoc Committee on Government Statistics (JAHCGS) established by AmSocA, ASA, FSUC, NABE, and PAA, with an APHA liaison to consider statistical system coordination, data access and dissemination, advisory committees, and use of statistics in legislation	Recommended more centralization and better coordination, and regular monitoring by professional associations; asked CNSTAT to commission a report to conduct a more thorough review of what JAHCGS reviewed	CNSTAT report completed in 1978 (Eckler-Mills Report); supported JAHCGS recommendations; COPAFS established in 1980 to hear from and provide feedback to statistical agencies but does not "monitor"; no other action taken
1977–1980	President's Reorganization Project (James Bonnen, director)	Recommended enlarged and more powerful Office of Statistical Policy as a separate entity in the Executive Office of the President	President Carter submitted legislation to enact the recommendations; no other action taken
1985	Bruce Chapman, deputy assistant to the president and former director of the Census Bureau, advised Edwin Meese, counselor to the president	Recommended a new U.S. statistics agency to include Census, BEA, BLS, NASS, EIA, NCHS, NCES, and BJS and Statistical Advisory Board of Government officials	No action taken
1990	Working Group on Statistics of the Cabinet Council for Economic Policy, established by CEA chair Michael Boskin, who chaired the working group	Recommended budget increases for economic statistics, data sharing legislation, and business establishment lists for use by all the statistical agencies	President's budgets for several years reflected Boskin Working Group's recommendations, but no further action taken
1995	Janet Norwood, former commissioner of BLS, published <i>Organizing to Count—Change in the Federal Statistical System</i> (Urban Institute Press)	Recommended consolidation of OMB statistical policy office, BEA, BLS, and Census Bureau into a Central Statistical Board, with responsibility for coordinating and reviewing other statistical agencies	No action taken
2012	President's reorganization project, headed by OMB deputy director for management; included a piece on statistical system	Recommended consolidation of BEA, BLS, and Census Bureau	No action taken
2016–2017	Commission on Evidence-Based Policymaking (congressionally mandated to study how existing government data can be used to improve government policies and programs) (Katharine Abraham and Ron Haskins, co-chairs)	Recommended National Secure Data Service (NSDS), statistical official in each department, codification of Statistical Policy Directive No. 1, greater availability of federal data to statistical agencies and of statistical agencies' data for evidence-building	Many recommendations adopted in Foundations of Evidence-Based Policymaking Act of 2018; CHIPS and Science Act of 2022 funded pilot projects for the NSDS

NOTES: 1930s COGSIS and 1970s JAHCGS efforts involved the American Statistical Association, which has studied other issues of federal statistics, such as the decennial census, and has representation on COPAFS. AEA = American Economic Association; AmSocA = American Sociological Association; APHA = American Public Health Association; ASA = American Statistical Association; BEA = Bureau of Economic Analysis; BLS = Bureau of Labor Statistics; CEA = Council of Economic Advisers; COPAFS = Council of Professional Associations on Federal Statistics; FSUC = Federal Statistics Users' Conference (defunct); NABE = National Association of Business Economists; NBER = National Bureau of Economic Research; PAA = Population Association of America; SSRC = Social Science Research Council

SOURCE: For 1903–1990 studies, adapted from Norwood (1995, Table 2.2); see also, *Commission on Evidence-Based Policymaking* (2017, Appendix H)

Box C-1.

For Further Reading

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