

Statistical experts warn of looming threats to vital official data

July 9 2024



Credit: CC0 Public Domain

As the nation wraps up celebrations of its birth 248 years ago, a first-ever comprehensive report about the status of the federal statistical

system—informing and powering the progress of the world's oldest democracy since the first census in 1790—issues a clarion call with concerns for the future of official statistics.

Today, the American Statistical Association released a 90-page report, two years in the making, that details serious threats to America's ability to continue producing trusted, nonpartisan and essential statistics that serve every community in the nation.

Titled "[The Nation's Data at Risk: Meeting America's Information Needs for the 21st Century](#)," the report assesses the core of the federal statistical system—the 13 principal statistical agencies that produce official statistics as their primary mission and the chief statistician's office in the Office of Management and Budget.

The report found statistical agencies are experiencing significant weaknesses in at least one of three critical supports needed to strengthen our nation:

- Many agencies lack statutory protection to sustain a high degree of control over how they collect and disseminate trusted statistics.
- Not all agencies have strong support from the cabinet department or independent agency ("parent agency") in which they reside.
- Most agencies have suffered a decline in resources in real dollar terms over the last 15 years so they are stretched to carry out basic responsibilities.

"A consequence of weaknesses in the three critical supports is that long-standing statistical series that produce important economic indicators, such as the [unemployment rate](#), are prone to become outdated in content and methods because of the statistical agencies' inability to invest in continuous testing and improvement.

"In other cases, essential programs have been cut, delayed, or otherwise curtailed without due consideration of the consequences to data users outside the parent agency," according to the report.

Compounding these challenges, the authors of the report found "... data collection methodology is rooted in 20th century technology and survey-taking techniques. But the public is less cooperative, and agencies are hampered by legal and other barriers in their abilities to more rapidly develop and implement new data collection methods and tap other public and private data sources to sustain quality and timeliness, increase efficiency and productivity, and keep up with policy areas of interest."

The expert authors of the ASA report, written in collaboration with George Mason University and with support from the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation, provided 15 specific recommendations for Congress and the executive branch to head off the looming threats to the nation's most trusted data.

"We collectively face a narrowing window of opportunity to reverse these trends and bring our federal statistical system into the modern era," said Nancy Potok, former chief statistician of the U.S. and a report co-author.

The experts strongly believe their "... 15 recommendations would fill important gaps in existing legislation and regulations to bolster statistical agencies' professional autonomy, data-sharing authority, and resources, which are critical if we are to continue to provide relevant, accurate, timely, detailed, and credible data for the public and policymakers," said Connie Citro, a report co-author and senior scholar for the Committee on National Statistics.

The ASA Board of Directors endorsed the report's recommendations.

The ASA—composed of 15,000 professionals in academia, government, research and business and with the mission to promote the practice and profession of statistics—led and oversaw production of the report and intends to update it annually.

"Our professional judgment is that these [federal statistical] agencies have been overlooked in investment and innovation, which we have known for several years but feel now is the time to raise the alarm with data users and taxpayers that the system is at risk," said Steve Pierson, a co-author of the report and director of science policy at the ASA.

Researchers from George Mason University examined a wide range of information, from budget cuts to delayed survey operations.

"The data show a number of concerning patterns," said Jonathan Auerbach, a co-author of the report and assistant professor of statistics at George Mason University. "If present trends continue, future generations may no longer have access to the [public information](#) we rely on today."

The [report](#) includes assessments from almost two dozen former leaders of these agencies, data users and Capitol Hill veterans. Several provided dire warnings about the future of the system.

"We are only a few short years from unreliable unemployment numbers on the 'first Friday' of every month without serious interventions to modernize the underlying data collection (the Current Population Survey)," said William Beach, former commissioner, Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2019–2023; a senior fellow in economics, Economic Policy Innovation Center.

"Lousy data beget lousy decisions. It is no exaggeration to say that Americans' well-being and the vitality of the U.S. economy rely in no small part on the quality of information provided by our federal

statistical system," said Erica Groshen, commissioner, Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2013–2017; senior economics advisor, Cornell University School of Industrial and Labor Relations.

"One of the most important functions of Congress in conducting oversight is to assess the performance, need and value of federal programs. Timely, high-quality data from the federal statistical system is essential in carrying out this important function, across every committee and for every Member," said Paul Ryan, speaker, U.S. House of Representatives, 2015–2019.

"The value to the taxpayer and the public of creating high-quality statistics by blending data from multiple sources is blindingly clear. If the federal statistical system does not act quickly and decisively to create that value, it will be marginalized and its products replaced by lower quality but cheaper, timelier, and more actionable information. It will take vision, leadership, and determination. But the time to stop talking and start acting is now," said Julia Lane, cofounder of the LEHD program of the U.S. Census Bureau, the STAR METRICS/UMETRICS program, the Democratizing Data project, the NORC Data Enclave, and the Coleridge Initiative; initiator of New Zealand's Integrated Data Infrastructure and Patentsview.

More information: The Nation's Data at Risk: Meeting America's Information Needs for the 21st Century (2024), www.amstat.org/policy-and-advocacy/the-nation's-data-at-risk-meeting-american's-information-needs-for-the-21st-century

Provided by American Statistical Association

Citation: Statistical experts warn of looming threats to vital official data (2024, July 9) retrieved

5 August 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2024-07-statistical-experts-looming-threats-vital.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.