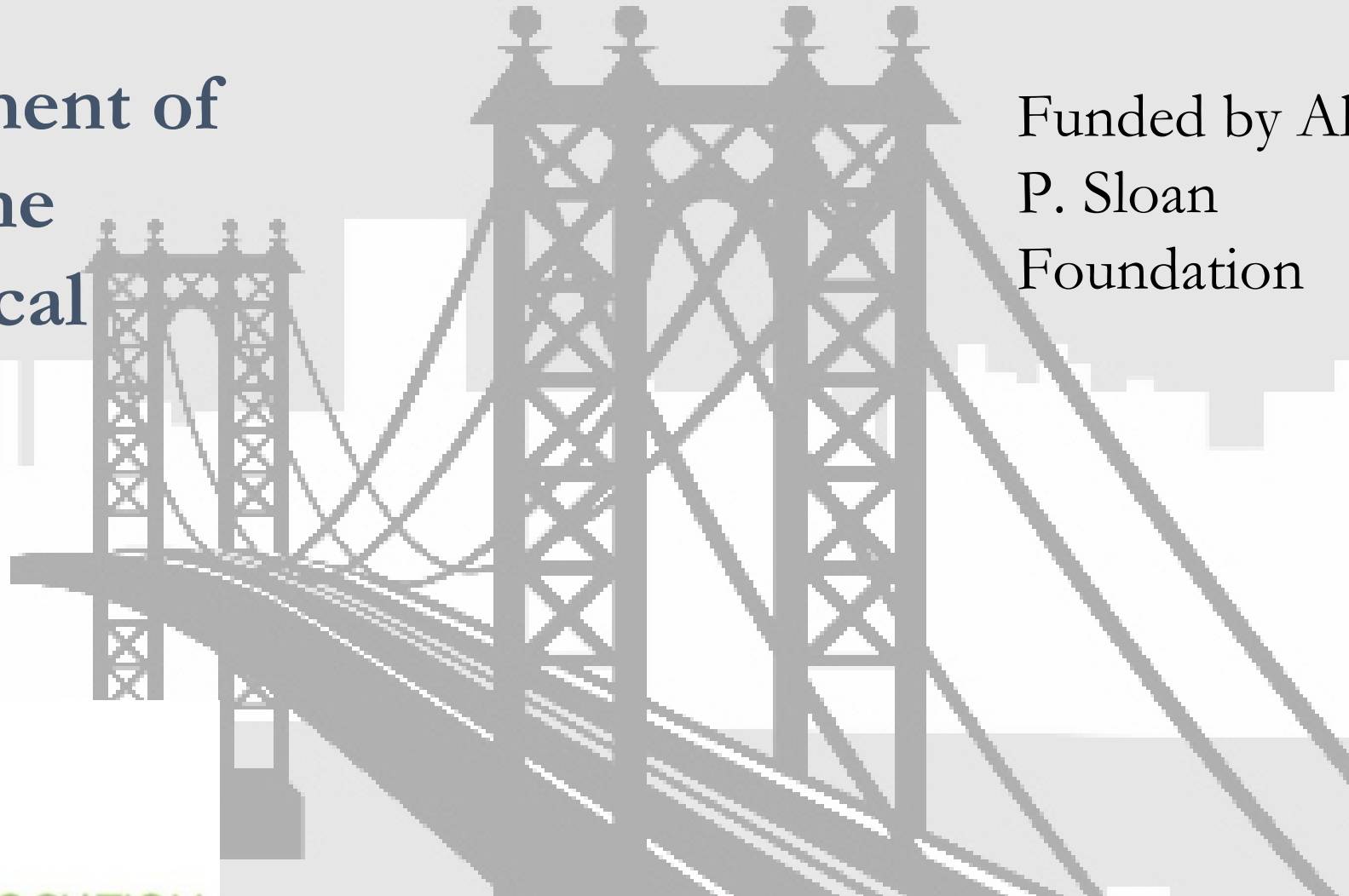


The Nation's Data At Risk

Meeting America's Information Needs for the 21st Century

A First Assessment of
the Health of the
Federal Statistical
Agencies

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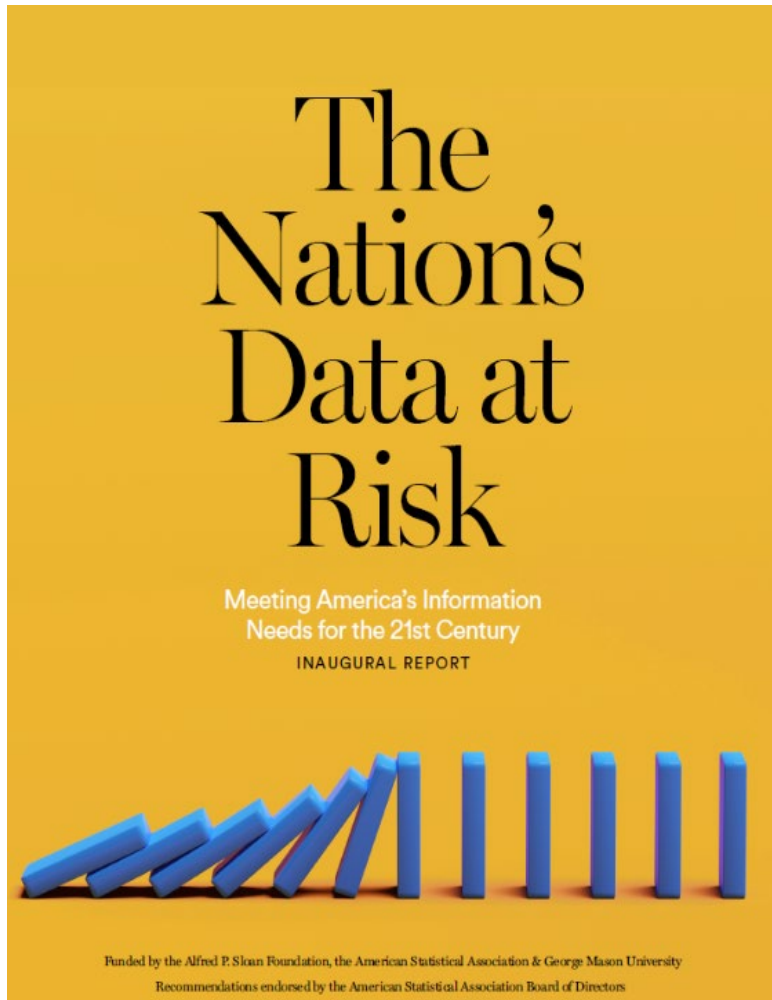


Federal Statistical
Agencies
are
the **backbone** of US
data infrastructure

Just as our
transportation
infrastructure supports
the US economy,
governance, and
society...

... **so too do the federal
statistical agencies ...
and both need regular
assessment.**

Inaugural Report released July 9th, 2024



Assesses capacity of 13 principal statistical agencies and chief statistician's office to serve the nation's data needs.

Assesses the support required to enable these statistical agencies to meet their missions in the 21st century.

Goal is annual report with active dissemination to increase visibility and motivate stakeholders to ACT

Study Sponsors and Disclaimers

A New Effort to Assess the Health of the Principal Federal Statistical Agencies & Chief Statistician's Office in OMB

Report Authors

Jonathan Auerbach, Claire McKay Bowen, Connie Citro, Steve Pierson,
Nancy Potok, Zachary Seeskin

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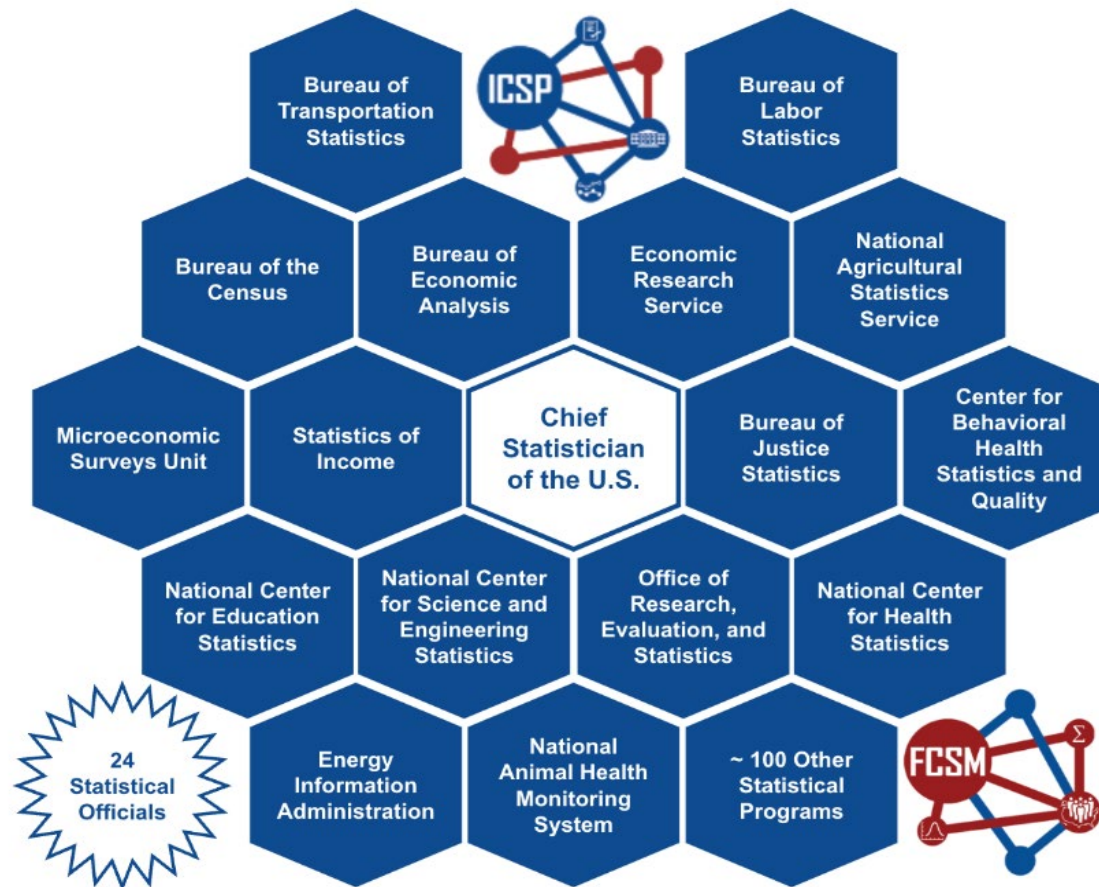
American Statistical Association and George Mason University

Presentation Outline

- Overview, Motivation, and Methods (Claire)
- Findings and Recommendations (Connie)
- Discussion and Next Steps (Nancy)

Overview, Motivation, and Methods

The study examined a portion of the US Statistical System: 13 Principal Statistical Agencies and Chief Statistician's Office



Overview: Study Goals and Objectives

- To assess the capacity of 13 principal statistical agencies to:
 - meet their missions as required by law
 - support the needs of a modern society
- Plan to regularly assess the needs, capacity, and support of statistical agencies (annually)
- Context: Evidence Act and Trust Regulation
- Context: **Changing data landscape and data user needs at all levels**

Framing: Uncover Challenges and Threats

Current challenges and threats for statistical agencies include but are not limited to:

- undue political interference (meddling in operations, gutting staff)
- shrinking budgets (declining purchasing power, unfunded mandates)
- environmental challenges (declining response rates, barriers to data sharing)
- demand for more timely, granular, and frequent data

Framing: Guided by Six Questions

1. Does the agency consistently produce relevant, timely, credible, accurate, and objective statistics?
2. Is the agency trustworthy and accountable?
3. Does the agency have sufficient support in three key areas:
 - professional autonomy
 - parent-agency support
 - budget and staffing

Framing: Guided by Six Questions

4. What are the challenges and threats the agency faces and their magnitude and potential consequences?
5. Is the agency agile? What is its record with innovation and with opportunities to respond to future data needs?
6. Is the agency responsive to user needs and transparent about its data products and decisions that affect users?

Methods: Data Collection

- ☑ Conducted listening sessions with 13 principal agencies, US Chief Statistician
- ☑ Surveyed the principal statistical agencies
- ☑ Collected public information from agency websites, OMB, OPM and Data Watch
- ☑ Held an in-person workshop in November 2023
 - ☑ Participants included 12 agencies, 11 agency heads, Chief Statistician and staff

Governance and Reviews

- ☑ Received guidance from a **Scientific Advisory Board** of federal statistics experts
- ☑ 11 report reviewers
- ☑ Various consultations throughout the system
- ☑ Pulse checks with the statistical agencies

Findings and Recommendations

Findings: Federal Statistical Agencies Do Great Things

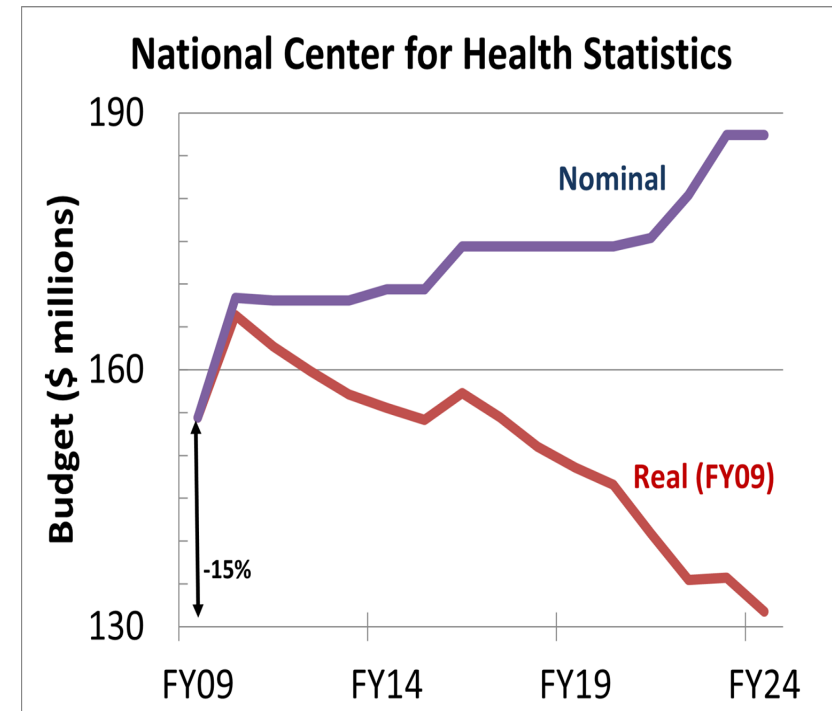
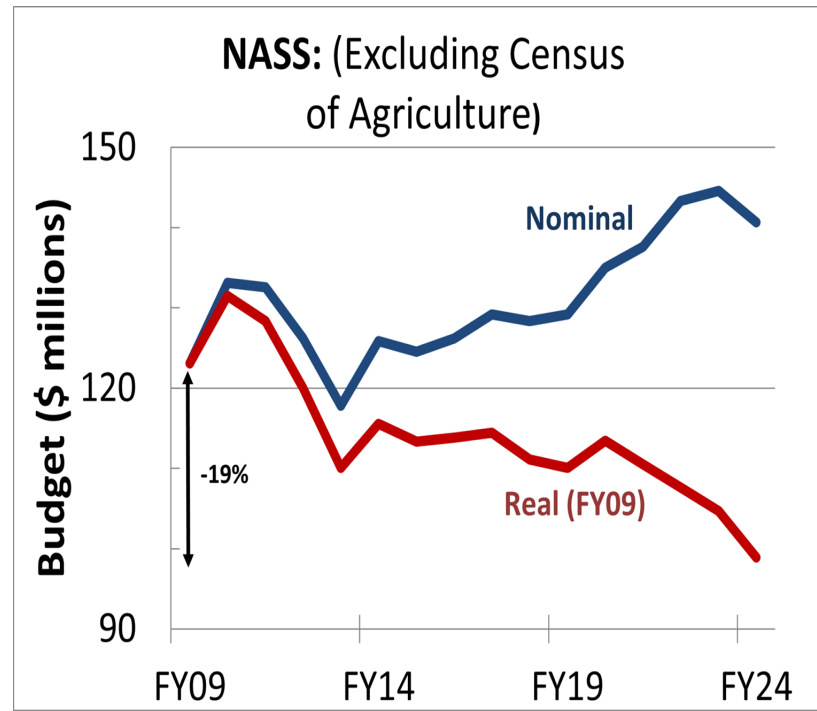
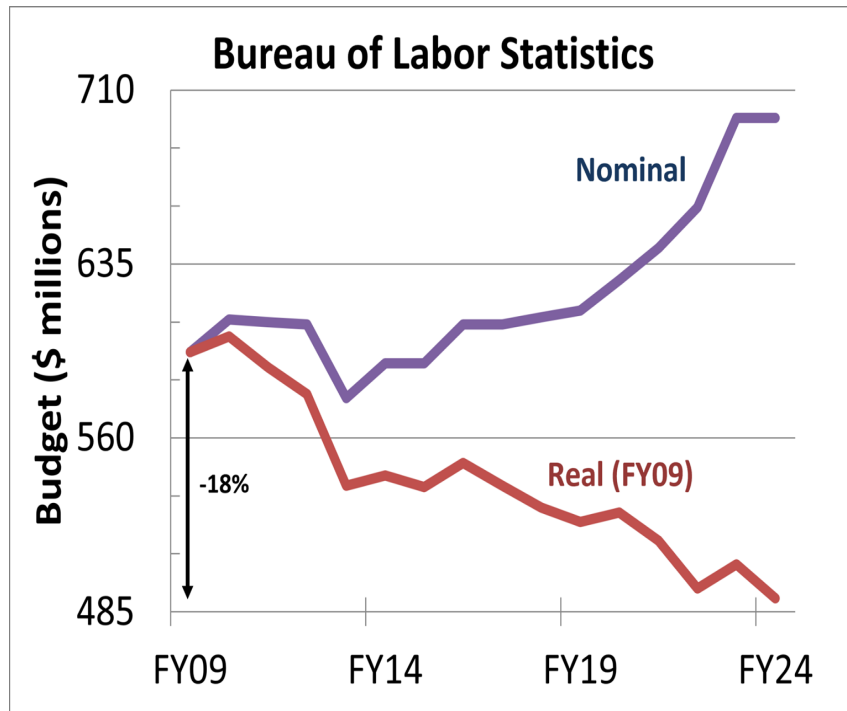
- Federal statistical agencies have many strengths—timely production of key economic and social indicators; innovative data to respond to Covid-19
- We highlight historical and recent innovations (see agency profiles and piece on innovation in supporting documents)

BUT ...

Findings: Federal Statistics Are At Risk

- Most, if not all, statistical agencies have a significant weakness in at least one of three critical supports:
 - Weak legislative protection for “professional autonomy”—makes agencies vulnerable to political meddling as has happened in other countries; also weakens accountability
 - Lack of strong support from cabinet department or independent agency (“parent agency”)
 - Insufficient resources (budget and staffing levels - often woefully so)

Findings: Federal Statistics Are At Risk



NASS: National Agricultural Statistics Service; GDP deflator used to adjust for inflation; total nondefense discretionary domestic budget increased by 16% in real terms over same period

Findings: Federal Statistics Are At Risk

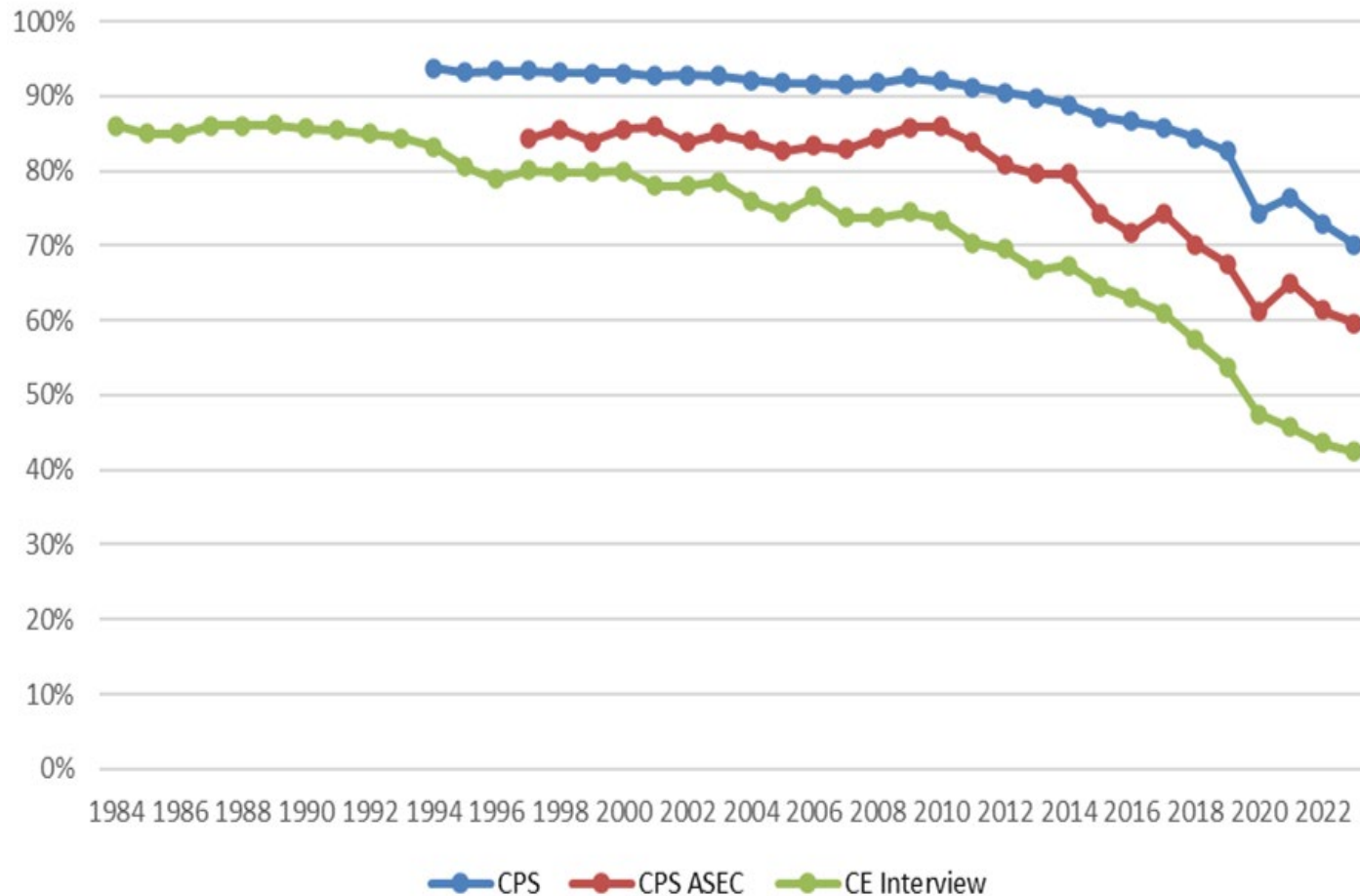
- Long-running series for key economic and social indicators prone to become outdated in content and methods—e.g., Current Population Survey (CPS) unemployment rate, consumer spending...
 - Agencies lack resources for testing, improvement, concurrent series
- Essential programs cut without full consideration of user needs—e.g.,
 - CPS sample size cut; Commercial Energy Consumption Survey delayed; School Survey on Crime and Safety cancelled; County estimates for crops and livestock cancelled...

Findings: Federal Statistics Are At Risk

- Environmental headwinds drive up survey costs, degrade quality, and make “blended data” solutions hard to achieve
 - Survey response rates declining here and abroad
 - Costly to strive to maintain response rates
 - Other data sources could help (e.g., administrative data, commercial data), but barriers (legal, regulatory, cost) often stand in the way
- Increasing threats to privacy and confidentiality; agencies pulling more data into limited access research centers, limiting equitable data access

Findings: Declining Response Rates

CPS, CPS ASEC, & CE Interview - Response Rates



- **Current Population Survey** produces monthly unemployment rate
- **CPS Annual Social and Economic Supplement** produces yearly poverty rate, median household income
- **Consumer Expenditure Survey** produces market basket weights for the CPI

Findings: Federal Statistics Are At Risk

- Chief statistician's office lacks sufficient resources to fully carry out its myriad responsibilities—only 8 statistical policy staff plus detailees
- Office is remarkably productive given small size, but lacks capacity to
 - Conduct meaningful strategic planning
 - Expedite and coordinate needed innovation in cross-cutting topic areas—e.g., education, health, labor force, economic well-being
 - Handle full plate of standards and regulations on a timely basis

Findings: Federal Statistics Are At Risk

- Statistical agencies obtain input from advisory committees, user conferences, and other means
- But not investing enough to inform decisions on data programs and innovation priorities by understanding the needs/views of data users, parent agencies, policymakers, and the public (they are data “stewards”)
- The Evidence Act requires proactive engagement to obtain broad feedback on the utility of agencies’ data

Findings: Agency Support Strength Ratings

Agency*	Resources	Staffing applicable only to BJS, NCES & NCSES)	Professional Autonomy	Parent-Agency Support
BEA	Mixed	—	Challenging	Good
BJS	Weak	Challenging	Mixed	Mixed
BLS	Challenging	—	Mixed	Good
BTS	Challenging	—	Weak	Challenging
Census	Mixed	—	Weak	Good
EIA	Challenging	—	Good	Strong
ERS	Challenging	—	Challenging	Good
NASS	Challenging	—	Challenging	Good
NCES	Challenging	Weak	Weak	Weak
NCHS	Challenging	—	Mixed	Mixed
NCSES	Mixed	Challenging	Mixed	Mixed
ORES		—	Challenging	
SOI	Challenging	—	Challenging	Mixed

Recommendations: 15 Actions to Strengthen Federal Statistics

Directed at Congress, parent agencies, statistical agencies, and OMB to:

1. Protect and enhance professional autonomy;
2. Facilitate data sharing beyond the Evidence Act;
3. Provide adequate budget and staffing support for baseline work and innovation;
4. Conduct more effective communications between statistical agencies and Congress/parent agencies;
5. Develop proactive outreach to data users; and,
6. Strengthen the Chief Statistician's ability to lead.

Recommendations: Congress

Enact legislation to:

1. Accord **professional autonomy** to each agency

3. Provide adequate **multi-year funding**

2. Expand **data sharing authority** beyond Evidence Act

4. Extend privacy and confidentiality violation **penalties to the public**

5. Congress should **meet at least annually with agency leadership**

Recommendations: Parent Agencies

6. Proactively promote and support **professional autonomy** to each agency

8. Request and provide adequate **multi-year funding** and resources

7. Provide **shared services** expeditiously to support IT and hiring

9. Hold **regular meetings** with statistical agency leadership

Recommendations: Statistical Agencies

10. **Interact proactively** with **parent agency and Congress** to prioritize information needs

11. Reach out more proactively to **data users and other stakeholders to incorporate valuable feedback** on information needs and quality

12. Provide **more and better information on methods and methodological decisions** to users and stakeholders, particularly on controversial decisions

Recommendations: Office of Management and Budget

13. **Finalize the “Trust Regulation”** and other regulations as required by the Evidence Act (OMB leadership)

14. Develop a **strategic plan and vision** for the Federal Statistical System and implement it (Chief Statistician and ICSP)

15. Provide the Chief Statistician’s office **sufficient resources** to provide substantive leadership and carry out statutory duties (OMB Leadership)

Discussion and Next Steps

Year 1 Report Follow Up

Phase 1

- Media: NYT, AP, and numerous other outlets
 - Our message: urgent but house not on fire
 - Focus on economic statistics, some education and agriculture
- Chief Statistician and Agency Heads feedback

Phase 2

- Parent Agencies - with statistical agency input
- Congress - Authorizers and Appropriators

Agency Head Feedback

Some compliments; some brickbats:

- Uncomfortable with our publicly identifying their challenges
- Ratings of agency support (budget/staff, parent agency, professional autonomy) appeared to be comparisons so were not appropriate
- At least one agency head thinks the Statistical Official role is an unfunded mandate

We are currently following up

Topics for the Second-Year Report

Likely directions for future work:

1. Continue and enhance assessments of 13 principal statistical agencies
2. Assess health of broader statistical ecosystem— opportunities for more cross-cutting synergy
 - including other 16 members of the ICSP
3. Data User perspective on health of agencies

⇒ Include parent agency and international perspectives

- Inaugural report
 - Establishes framework and foundation
 - Identified and documented weaknesses, challenges, strengths, ...
 - Recommendations for Congress, agencies, parent agencies, OMB
- Year 2: monitor, expand, and deepen
- Goal: Long-term impact through annual, proactive monitoring
 - Congressional and executive branch decision-making slow and deliberative (with turnover)
 - Influence through continued updates, spotlights, awareness building

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Questions

Please send your recommendations, comments, and questions:

Contact: spierson@amstat.org

Feedback: bit.ly/NationsDataAtRiskFeedback

Report: bit.ly/NationsDataAtRisk

