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## Defenders of Data Take the Offensive

Statisticians seek to restore trust in a profession that's been under assault

President Donald Trump's efforts to dismantle many long-standing Washington practices has included methodically purging data collected by government agencies from their websites.

Last year, for instance, the Agriculture Department took down data on animal abuse that it had gathered. The EPA has scrubbed data on climate change, deleting references to it as well as guidance for state and local officials on how to cope with it.

The American Statistical Association, a professional society for statisticians, last month launched a new initiative aimed

at bolstering public trust in data by reaching out to journalists, business organizations, lawmakers and others in government.

The group says it is responding directly to attacks on trust in government data. "What really put us over the top was when [Office of Management and] Budget Director [Mick] Mulvaney questioned the accuracy of the unemployment figures," says Ron Wasserstein, the association's executive director.

Mulvaney, speaking on CNN last March, accused Barack Obama's administration of "manipulating the numbers" to make

the nation's unemployment rate "look smaller."

Sean Spicer, White House spokesman at the time, then reiterated the point.

"We just feel that when those very important figures are called into question by others, and especially when those others are other officials in the government, someone needs to be able to speak to that," says Wasserstein.

Mulvaney was referencing the fact that the unemployment rate reflects only people looking for a job and therefore is lower than it would be if it counted those who've given up the search. By

all accounts, many millions of Americans did that following the 2007-09 recession, a fact that other federal statistics capture.

But Wasserstein points out that, while the way the unemployment rate is measured is worth debating, there's no evidence the Obama administration manipulated the statistic, which has long been the standard.

Trump himself cited the rate in his State of the Union address last month when it suited his purposes to boast about the low unemployment rate of African-Americans and Hispanics.

A number of other groups have signed on to the statisticians' effort, including the pollsters at the American Association for Public Opinion Research; the American Sociological Association, a professional society; and the Bipartisan Policy Center, a think tank.

Wasserstein recently wrote to lawmakers to introduce the initiative. He notes that federal statistics provide insight into public health, economic trends, community issues, public safety and the environment, and should be bolstered, not denigrated.

The move comes as the Trump administration is working on putting together the 2020 census. The president has proposed asking a question about citizenship status, which advocates for immigrants believe will scare them away from participating.

Another dispute centers on whether the census will inquire about lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender status. Last March, the Census Bureau said it didn't plan to inquire about that, but then reversed the decision in September.

— Shawn Zeller