EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Federal statistics are essential U.S. infrastructure. Produced by 13 principal federal statistical agencies and other statistical programs, they are the official facts and figures on which countless government, personal, and business decisions depend. The importance of this infrastructure goes beyond commerce. Federal statistics are a core democratic institution, supporting free and fair elections, fair and impartial courts, informed civil discourse, and other vital functions that are not easily replicated by the private sector (see Boxes ES-1 and ES-2). Further, high-quality official statistics are essential to understanding flows of trade, investment, and people with other nations.

> ***The return on investment in the federal statistical system is enormous. Similarly, the cost of neglecting our statistical agencies would be tremendous. Their data inform everything from the federal government's setting of interest rates and measurement of inflation to an entrepreneur's next venture and a community's health, education, and safety.***
>
> MICHAEL STRAIN, DIRECTOR, ECONOMIC POLICY STUDIES, AMERICAN ENTERPRISE INSTITUTE

Box ES-1:

Federal Statistics Are Critical for Our Nation

If federal statistical agencies cannot produce accurate and timely data, policymakers and legislators such as members of Congress will not have trustworthy information or evidence to make essential public policy decisions or administer important programs. The following examples are from among the large number that could be used as illustrations. They highlight selected decisions about essential programs that required high-quality federal statistics.

SUPPORTING THE ECONOMY

The Bureau of Economic Analysis (BEA) needs data on all sectors of the economy on a quarterly basis to develop accurate, timely estimates of Gross Domestic Product (GDP), which in turn are key to effective government policymaking. Prior to 2009, the Census Bureau collected quarterly data on only a few industries in the service sector. It had requested but not received funding to expand coverage (e.g., for finance, insurance, real estate). Consequently, initial estimates of the decline in GDP from the Great Recession were significantly short of the actual decline, which left policymakers assuming that the programs enacted to boost the economy were adequate instead of falling short. (See Reamer, 2014.)

SETTING STANDARDS TO PROTECT PUBLIC HEALTH

The National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey (NHANES), first fielded in the early 1960s by the National Center for Health Statistics (NCHS), combines surveys with physical examinations and tests. NHANES results enabled the federal government to eliminate lead from gasoline and food and soft drink cans, with a decline in elevated blood lead levels of more than 70% since the 1970s. It also provided data to create the growth charts used nationally and worldwide by pediatricians to evaluate children's growth and inform ongoing national programs to reduce high blood pressure and cholesterol levels. NHANES - About the National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey (cdc.gov)

ALLOCATING SCHOOL FUNDING FOR DISADVANTAGED CHILDREN

Since 1965, the federal government has annually allocated billions of dollars of Title I funds ($20.5 billion for FY 2024) to elementary and secondary school districts to provide services to students in low-income families. The allocations use estimates of school-aged children in families with incomes below the federal poverty line from the Census Bureau's Small Area Income and Poverty Estimates (SAIPE) program. SAIPE combines survey and administrative records data (food assistance program and tax data from the principal statistical agency within the Internal Revenue Service [IRS], Statistics of Income [SOI]), to produce up-to-date annual estimates. Small Area Income and Poverty Estimates (SAIPE) Program (census.gov)

ESTABLISHING PRIORITY INVESTMENTS IN SCIENTIFIC RESEARCH AND DEVELOPMENT

Policy analysts used data from the National Center for Science and Engineering Statistics (NCSES)' National Patterns of R&D Resources to inform federal investment priorities on research and development, such as in the CHIPS and Science Act of 2022.

UPDATING THE COSTS OF THE THRIFTY FOOD PLAN, USED FOR SNAP BENEFITS

The Agricultural Improvement Act of 2018 required the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) Food and Nutrition Service (FNS) to update the composition and cost of the Thrifty Food Plan, which sets benefits in the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP, formerly food stamps). FNS worked with the Economic Research Service (ERS), one of USDA's two statistical agencies, to analyze retail scanner data to price foods purchased by consumers; FNS also used NCHS data from the What We Eat component of NHANES. The 2021 Thrifty Food Plan represents the first update in 45 years in the plan's purchasing power and ability to meet the population's nutrition needs. Thrifty Food Plan, 2021 (azureedge.us)

> ***BEA's GDP accounts are required for budget formulation, fiscal policy, monetary policy, international trade and investment policy and are used to allocate over $300 billion in federal funds.***
>
> J. STEVEN LANDEFELD, DIRECTOR, BUREAU OF ECONOMIC ANALYSIS, 1995–2014

Box ES-2:

Why the Nation Needs Federal Statistics

Federal statistics are a public good. Just like our national defense and national parks systems, the public is best served when the federal government collects and disseminates critically needed data. The private sector may produce many useful statistics, but businesses do not commonly have an economic incentive to produce the kinds of comprehensive, high-quality data produced by federal statistical agencies. In fact, private firms rely on federal statistics, not only for their own planning uses but also when they add value to federal data for resale.

FIVE ESSENTIAL FEATURES OF FEDERAL STATISTICS

Without federal statistical agencies, the private sector would not likely produce high-quality data that:

1. Cover the nation's entire population of people or businesses.
2. Include nationally important but small sectors, such as science and engineering.
3. Are provided consistently over time and with full transparency when needed changes are made.
4. Are accompanied by documentation and quality evaluations so that users can determine if the data are fit to use for their purposes.
5. Are comparable not only across states and other geographic units in the United States but also with other countries, particularly in areas of trade, manufacturing, population, and migration. To facilitate comparability, data quality standards, and other cross-national initiatives, federal statistical staff participate in such bodies as the United Nations Statistical Commission and the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD).

Box ES-3:

Components of the Federal Statistical System

The United States has a decentralized statistical system, in contrast to many other countries—there is no "Statistics USA." As interest grew in having the federal government develop policies and programs in such areas as agriculture, education, labor, and others, cabinet departments were established that included a statistical agency. The chief statistician's office performs an invaluable standard-setting, coordination, and leadership function across the agencies.

THE CHIEF STATISTICIAN'S OFFICE IN THE U.S. OFFICE OF MANAGEMENT AND BUDGET (OMB) COORDINATES:

13 Principal Federal Statistical Agencies—

Department of Agriculture—Economic Research Service (ERS); National Agricultural Statistics Service (NASS)

Department of Commerce—Bureau of Economic Analysis (BEA); Census Bureau

Department of Education—National Center for Education Statistics (NCES)

Department of Energy—Energy Information Administration (EIA)

Department of Health and Human Services—National Center for Health Statistics (NCHS)

Department of Justice—Bureau of Justice Statistics (BJS)

Department of Labor—Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS)

Department of Transportation—Bureau of Transportation Statistics (BTS)

Department of the Treasury—Statistics of Income (SOI)

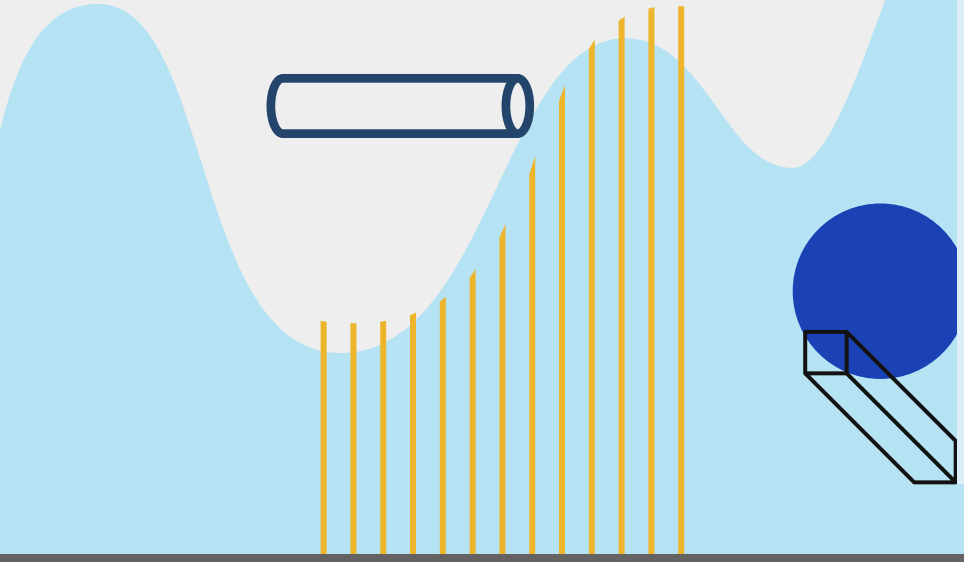
National Science Foundation—National Center for Science and Engineering Statistics (NCSES)

Social Security Administration—Office of Research, Evaluation, and Statistics (ORES)

3 recognized statistical units, ~100 programs with statistical content (e.g., surveys) with appropriations of at least $500,000 annually, and 13 statistical officials in departments and independent agencies that do not have a principal statistical agency or recognized unit.

The United States' founders recognized the importance of data infrastructure when they enshrined a decennial census in the U.S. Constitution. Since the first official census in 1790, America's data infrastructure has expanded—like other core democratic institutions—to include multiple agencies spread across a decentralized system (see Box ES-3). Available statistics cover the economy, population change, employment and unemployment, energy, criminal justice, health, education, transportation, agriculture, science and engineering, income, consumption, and wealth, and other areas of public policy interest. Federal statistics are a unique public good, and the agencies that produce them are and need to be accountable to the taxpayers, subject to rigorous scientific and ethical standards, and overseen by democratically elected officials. Federal statistics are widely cited, used, and trusted for decision-making. Their existence and quality are taken for granted even though the agencies that produce them are not, for the most part, visible to the public or policymakers.

Adding to the demands on the federal statistical system is the bipartisan movement to base policies and programs as much as possible on strong evidence of their merit. The Foundations for Evidence-Based Policymaking Act of 2018 specifically directs federal agencies with data assets to make them available to statistical agencies for evidence-building and informing the public. In addition, it (a) directs the statistical agencies to produce relevant, timely, credible, accurate and objective statistical information (hereafter "trusted, quality data," statistics, or information) and make their data as accessible as possible while protecting the confidentiality of individual respondents; and (b) requires their parent departments to enable statistical agencies to meet high standards of trusted, quality data. The act tasks the chief statistician to craft regulations to implement these provisions.



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.

ERICA GROSHEN, COMMISSIONER, BUREAU OF LABOR STATISTICS, 2013–2017; SENIOR ECONOMICS ADVISOR, CORNELL UNIVERSITY SCHOOL OF INDUSTRIAL AND LABOR RELATIONS

CALL TO ACTION

This report is the result of a year-long project to evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of the 13 principal federal statistical agencies and the chief statistician's office. Most importantly, we assessed their capacity to serve the nation in the years ahead in response to the movement for evidence-building; the changes in our population, economy, and society; and the increased demand for more frequent, timely, and granular information. Our bottom-line assessment is that federal statistics are at risk. Federal statistical agencies face increasing challenges to their ability to produce relevant, timely, credible, accurate, and objective statistics and to innovate to the extent necessary to meet the nation's information and evidence requirements in the 21st century. The chief statistician's office is under-resourced for its necessary functions to coordinate a decentralized system. Immediate action is needed to put the agencies and the chief statistician's office on a firmer footing so that federal statistics remain widely trusted and useful to a society that is saturated with information from many sources, credible and not.

ASSESSMENT

Below is a high-level overview of our findings (see Box ES-4 at the end of the executive summary for our specific findings).

The federal statistical agencies are increasingly at risk.

- Although federal statistical agencies are fulfilling their responsibilities as required by law and developing important new data programs and products, they are handicapped in their ability to respond fully to the increased information needs of a rapidly changing society. Statistical agencies are experiencing significant weaknesses in at least one out of three critical supports. These supports are:

  - **A high and sustained degree of professional autonomy** (i.e., decision-making authority) regarding statistical methods and processes for data collection, estimation, and dissemination to assure data quality and protect against inappropriate political interference. (See Box 9 in the report for a definition and discussion of professional autonomy.)

  - **Strong support from the cabinet department or independent agency** ("parent agency") in which the statistical agency resides—from the unit to which it reports up to the department head—so the statistical agency can exercise its autonomy appropriately, obtain adequate budget and staffing, and do its best work.

  - **Sufficient resources** (both budget and staffing levels) to carry out, not only basic responsibilities but also the testing and development to meet demands for new, revised, and more detailed information.

> ***Today, the GDP accounts are challenged by the impact of new, disruptive, and hard-to-measure technologies and a myriad of other changes in the economy. Without new and updated metrics, the nation's GDP will fall behind in its ability to act as a reliable yardstick for the economy.***
>
> J. STEVEN LANDEFELD, DIRECTOR, BUREAU OF ECONOMIC ANALYSIS, 1995–2014

- One consequence of weaknesses in the three critical supports is that long-standing statistical data 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. Lack of authorization for multi-year funding is a major impediment to continuous 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. The condition of the federal statistical agencies and their stature within the federal government fails to reflect their everyday importance to Americans.

- Challenges in their environment also threaten the ability of the principal federal statistical agencies to fully meet the data needs of today and into the future. Much of the data collection methodology used by the agencies is rooted in 20th century technology and survey-taking techniques. But the public is less cooperative, and response rates continue to drop despite federal statistical agency surveys historically achieving high response rates. Agencies are hampered 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.

- Another challenge for statistical agencies is protecting confidentiality of respondents' information in a time of increased risks of disclosure—while still serving their fundamental responsibility to provide data that are fit for users' needs. Increasingly, statistical agencies are reducing available data content or taking other steps that threaten equitable data access.

- Federal statistical agencies remain vulnerable because of weaknesses in their professional autonomy to political meddling and improper influence, as has been attempted in the past. Such interference, if successful (as has occurred in some countries), would undercut the federal statistical agencies' ability to support informed civil discourse and policymaking in the public and private sectors, as well as compromising public trust in the data, both domestically and abroad.

- The chief statistician's office lacks sufficient resources to fully carry out its myriad responsibilities. Sixty years ago, the chief statistician's office had upwards of 40 staff; today, it has 12 staff positions supplemented by staff on short-term details from the statistical agencies. The unit is remarkably productive given its small size, but it 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) across agencies, and issue timely standards and regulations. Adding staff with subject matter expertise in different policy areas in the chief statistician's office could help ensure that data gaps are filled and improvements are coordinated across relevant agencies and within OMB so that the decentralized federal statistical system can operate more seamlessly to support the nation's data needs.

Immediate action is needed to assure that the federal statistical infrastructure is able to adapt and evolve in its role as a core democratic institution that meets society's information demands.

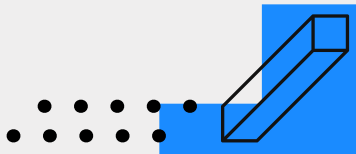
Americans are increasingly saturated with information from many sources, both credible and not. Federal statistical data can be an important tool in fighting disinformation and misuse of AI and other information dissemination technologies. The ability of professional statistical agency staff to meet scientific standards and produce objective information in a timely, relevant, and transparent way requires continued government attention and investment. Such investment is necessary for a system in which public data and statistics are produced by apolitical professionals, who are accountable to Congress, their parent agency, and data users, and are widely trusted as a basis for decision-making.

Statistical agencies themselves need to step up their investment to understand the needs and views of data users, their parent agencies, policymakers, and the general public, recognizing that they are stewards of the data they produce for the public good.

- Engaging more proactively with data users and the "open-data" and evidence-building communities is necessary for agencies to prioritize areas for innovation and modernization and to work effectively with others who are creating information from a variety of data sources.
- This more proactive engagement is required by the Evidence Act in order to build broad collaborative communities of practice that can give feedback to the agencies on the usefulness of their data.
- Such engagement has major benefits but requires adequate support beyond the support needed to produce and disseminate trusted, quality data.

RECOMMENDATIONS

We identified actions that Congress, parent agencies where the statistical agencies reside, OMB, and the statistical agencies themselves should take now. Each of these bodies has an important role to play in ensuring the nation's information needs are met. We urge, to the extent possible, collaborative work toward this goal. Our recommendations are summarized below (see the report, including the supporting materials, for background and the full text of the recommendations). They are all high priority for immediate action.



In a world where "fake news" is everywhere, where disinformation is proliferating, and where good data are harder to collect, the reliability and timeliness of federal statistical data are more important than ever. They are the bedrock of democratic accountability.

ANNE CASE, ALEXANDER STEWART 1886 PROFESSOR OF ECONOMICS AND PUBLIC AFFAIRS, EMERITA, PRINCETON UNIVERSITY; ANGUS DEATON, DWIGHT D. EISENHOWER PROFESSOR OF INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS, EMERITUS, PRINCETON UNIVERSITY

CONGRESS

1. Enact legislation that accords all principal statistical agencies autonomy over data collection and analysis, as well as other professional autonomy components specified in this report, and explicitly authorizes those statistical agencies that lack specific authorization (BEA, ERS, NASS, ORES, SOI). For the three agencies that lack authority to use their appropriations to balance in-house and contractor staff (NCES, NCSES, and BJS), authorize the use of a new appropriations line for salaries and expenses.

2. Enact legislation to extend the authority in the Foundations for Evidence-Based Policymaking Act for data sharing between statistical agencies and from other federal and state agencies to the statistical agencies. To meet user needs, agencies require access to alternative data sources to blend with data from surveys, which the public is increasingly less willing to answer. Yet the Evidence Act, for example, does not provide for sharing of business data to all the statistical agencies or for sharing of state data with the federal statistical agencies.

3. Make budget levels and authority commensurate with responsibilities. Adequate funding levels as well as authority for multi-year funding are essential to enable statistical agencies to regularly update and supplement long-running data series and to test and implement data collection improvements. Budget levels should also support continual improvements to statistical agencies' IT and data infrastructure to align with ever-changing security requirements and data user needs.

> ***Federal statistical agencies must be able to report the truth regardless of who is in power. This is even more important when you don't agree with the party in power. Therefore, lawmakers must ensure they provide independence to agencies when they are in power.***
>
> JAMES WOODWORTH, COMMISSIONER, NATIONAL CENTER FOR EDUCATION STATISTICS, 2018–2021

4. Enact legislation to help build a shared culture of responsible data access and confidentiality protection among the statistical agencies and their data users. Legislation that extends existing penalties for statistical agency staff to anyone who willfully misuses federal statistics to identify an individual or business is needed for statistical agencies and data users to strike a reasonable balance of access and protection for federal statistics.

5. Ensure informed monitoring and oversight through annual or more frequent meetings of relevant congressional members and staff directly with statistical agency leadership.

> ***Data and statistics are a critical component of this nation's infrastructure and key inputs into effective decision-making by policymakers, business leaders, and citizens. We must support and sufficiently fund the principal statistical agencies of the U.S. government.***
>
> MAURINE HAVER, PRESIDENT AND FOUNDER, HAVER ANALYTICS; CHAIR, STATISTICS COMMITTEE, NATIONAL ASSOCIATION FOR BUSINESS ECONOMICS

PARENT AGENCIES

6 Proactively protect and promote professional autonomy. Parent agencies should regularly examine their procedures and policies for protecting statistical agency autonomy, including making sure that current and incoming leadership are aware of them.

7 Provide shared services as expeditiously as possible. Agency HR offices, for example, should facilitate and speed the hiring process for statistical agency staff. When services such as IT are shared, parent agencies should take steps to ensure that the statistical agency can meet deadlines, protect confidentiality, and innovate.

8 Provide adequate budget and staffing. Parent agencies have multiple bureaus to support but should recognize that statistical agencies need sufficient resources for continuous improvement of long-standing data series and other initiatives, including IT modernization.

9 Interact with and support their statistical agencies. Parent agency leadership should regularly meet with statistical agency leadership to learn what their statistical agency does, what it needs to fulfill its responsibilities, and how its functions are unique within the parent agency.

PRINCIPAL STATISTICAL AGENCIES

10 Relate to parent agencies and Congress. Statistical agencies should proactively demonstrate agility and flexibility to meet parent agency and congressional needs for data for policymaking and evidence building, while maintaining integrity and objectivity in methods and operations.

11 Relate to stakeholders and data users. Statistical agencies should proactively and interactively reach out to stakeholders and data users, using not only one-way methods (e.g., webinars) but also two-way, interactive dialogue and feedback to help establish priorities and understand user needs. They should ensure that stakeholder outreach covers as much of the political and policy spectrum as possible.

12 Increase transparency and accessibility. Statistical agencies should provide comprehensive, accessible documentation of content, technical features, and methodological decisions for data programs. When data user needs conflict, or when data series require major changes, statistical agencies should proactively reach out to affected users and be as transparent as possible about the rationale for the ultimate decision.

> ***For compelling reasons of national and economic security, the federal government is making major investments so that key U.S. industries, such as semiconductors and electric vehicles, can compete in global markets. Successful investments will depend on the capacity of the federal statistical system to provide reliable economic intelligence in near real time, by sector.***
>
> ANDREW REAMER, RESEARCH PROFESSOR, GEORGE WASHINGTON INSTITUTE OF PUBLIC POLICY, GEORGE WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY

U.S. OFFICE OF MANAGEMENT AND BUDGET (OMB)

13 OMB leadership should finalize as soon as possible its regulation on the fundamental responsibilities of statistical agencies and parent agencies ("Trust Regulation") as required by the Evidence Act. This regulation is essential to bolster parent-agency support for all statistical agencies, which, in turn, is essential to enable the statistical agencies to do their job and have credibility with the public. The chief statistician's office should move expeditiously to craft and issue the regulations on data access and confidentiality required by the Evidence Act.

14 The chief statistician's office and the Interagency Council on Statistical Policy should develop a strategic plan and vision for the federal statistical system and take actions to implement it. The plan should include maximizing the visibility and effectiveness of the statistical agencies, individually and collectively (e.g., consider mechanisms for upgrading IT infrastructure and providing staff training opportunities in new methods for all of the principal statistical agencies, large and small).

15 OMB leadership should provide the chief statistician's office with sufficient resources to effectively carry out its statutory duties and other responsibilities. In particular, staff are needed so that the office can not only update statistical policy standards, issue guidance, and approve survey questionnaires but also provide substantive leadership to the federal statistical system, engage in strategic planning for the system, seek out and expedite the approval of statistical agency innovations in data collection and methodologies, engage internationally with other statistical agencies and bodies, and facilitate inter-agency collaboration to enable the system to meet current and future data needs for the public good.

We believe that the package of 15 recommendations we propose above would fill important gaps in existing legislation and regulations to bolster statistical agencies' professional autonomy, data sharing authority, and resources, which, in turn, are critical for the agencies' ability to continue to provide relevant, accurate, timely, detailed, and credible data for the public and policymakers. The statistical agencies are achieving much with the resources and authorities they have. Following through on our recommendations, which include the agencies' stepping up their interactions with data users and stakeholders, should position them to respond effectively to the increasing information demands and challenges of the future.

Box ES-4

Specific Findings

Our findings are organized by categories that we assessed, which include professional autonomy, parent-agency support, resource sufficiency, challenges and opportunities for data quality, innovation, and user and stakeholder engagement.

PROFESSIONAL AUTONOMY

Finding 1: While federal statistical agencies continue to reliably produce trustworthy data, the agencies remain susceptible to the types of political meddling and improper influence that have occurred in the past due, in part, to weaknesses in their professional autonomy. (See Box 9 for a definition and discussion of professional autonomy.) Such interference undercuts the federal statistical agencies' ability to maintain trust with the public and policymakers in the public and private sectors and to fulfill their fundamental responsibility to produce trusted, quality data.

PARENT-AGENCY SUPPORT

Finding 2: Parent-agency support for their statistical agency (or agencies), including protecting the basic tenets under which statistical agencies must operate, is essential for the agencies' agility and visibility, but it varies widely from strong to weak. The proposed OMB "Trust Regulation" would strengthen parent-agency support across the board.

RESOURCE SUFFICIENCY (BUDGET AND STAFFING)

Finding 3: The majority of principal federal statistical agencies have lost more than 14% of purchasing power over the past 15 years despite increasing responsibilities. (For comparison, federal discretionary, nondefense spending, accounting for inflation, has increased 16% over the same period.) Several agencies also have severe constraints on staffing. These resource deficiencies undermine the ability of many agencies to produce relevant and timely data and to innovate effectively.

CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR DATA QUALITY

Finding 4: Surveys remain invaluable because some information (e.g., self-reported health or crime victimization) can only be obtained by asking people questions. Yet, declining response and rising costs to address the decline raise significant concerns for their future. As the Committee on National Statistics documents, opportunities exist to combine surveys with administrative records and other sources to improve quality, although there are challenges in properly blending data sources, accounting for the uncertainty in estimates from them, and using them for estimates when that was not their original intent. Statistical agencies will need adequate resources to evaluate and implement, as appropriate, blending approaches for the future and to continue research into ways to improve the cost-effectiveness of surveys.

Finding 5: Long-running data series on important social and economic topics, which generally meet high standards of timeliness, are susceptible to becoming outmoded in content, accuracy, and efficiency. Reasons include the costs to run overlapping data series to enable users to changeover from the old to the new, inertia and hesitation to change on the part of agency staff and the user community, and the lack of adequate (ideally, multiyear) funding for continuous testing and implementation of improvements.

Finding 6: Because of increased threats that traditional publicly available data products could be reverse engineered to identify individual respondents, statistical agencies are experimenting with newer confidentiality protection methods that inject noise into every data output. They are also considering making some data products available only through secure enclaves or through use of "synthesized" data products with subsequent validation. The challenge is how to balance confidentiality protection with the agencies' mission to provide accurate, usable data to users in all sectors—Congress, federal, state, and local governments, businesses, NGOs, academia, the media, and the general public. Solutions may require legislation to make confidentiality protection a shared responsibility of statistical agencies and data users.

INNOVATION

Finding 7: The principal federal statistical agencies have a rich history of meeting the nation's data needs through innovation—in concepts, collection, processing and estimation, dissemination, and evaluation (e.g., the first nondefense use of computers for the 1950 Census). Overall, they rose to the occasion when the Covid-19 pandemic called for new data delivered promptly. They continue to innovate but not at the level needed, and external and internal barriers, if not addressed, will leave them behind at a time when the demands for more timely, accurate, and granular data are growing every day.

USER AND STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT

Finding 8: Proactive data-user engagement, including involving users up front when major changes are needed to data programs, and knowledge of users and uses are important to enable the statistical agencies to assess the relevance, responsiveness to users, transparency, and accessibility of their data. Yet these areas do not appear to get the priority they need for the agencies to fulfill their role as data stewards for the public good. (Title II of the Evidence Act and the proposed Trust Regulation emphasize user engagement.) Resources for user engagement, documentation, and research and development to continually improve statistical agency data programs are often not explicitly included in agency funding requests. Resources for these activities and those needed to collect, process, and disseminate data can be in competition, and the competition is increased when overall funding is not sufficient to meet core needs.

Finding 9: Agencies are not uniformly adopting available tools to expand their ability to identify users in a more granular manner (a stipulation in the proposed Trust Regulation, 1321.5(b)). Using tools, such as AI searches for the use of agency datasets, would enable the agencies to better target outreach to a broader community of users and proactively engage with underserved communities of practice that may include researchers from smaller institutions and minority-serving institutions.