



COPAFS

Council of Professional Associations on Federal Statistics

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ADVANCING EXCELLENCE IN FEDERAL STATISTICS

April 13, 2018 COPAFS MEETING SUMMARY **Summary Courtesy of Ken Hodges and PAA**

APRIL 13, 2018 COPAFS MEETING

COPAFS Chair Linda Jacobsen started the meeting (rescheduled from March 2), and COPAFS Executive Director John Thompson introduced new COPAFS staff member Corinna Turbes, who will be assisting with projects and initiatives. Although not on the agenda, there was much interest in the decision to add a citizenship question to the 2020 census. Thompson explained that COPAFS is neutral on the issue, but that as a former Census Bureau Director, he has communicated the significant risks involved. He added that the topic might come up when Acting Director Ron Jarmin testifies before the House oversight committee on May 8.

Update on the Federal Statistical System

Nancy Potok. Chief Statistician of the United States. Office of Management and Budget

Potok noted that excitement over increased FY2018 funding for the Census Bureau has been tempered by realization that it is less a windfall than a down payment on 2019. In other words, if (or when) continuing resolutions for FY2019 hold agencies at 2018 spending levels, the Census Bureau will be better positioned to cover the ramped up expenses for the year preceding the 2020 census. BLS and other agencies are held steady, which is better than a cut, but can be a problem in the long run.

In May, the administration is expected to report on discussions with agencies prompted by an executive order that they determine how to reorganize to better accomplish their missions. Potok suggested that stakeholders stay tuned, as reorganization orders could impact statistical agencies as much as budgets.

Because we so often focus on challenges, Potok wanted to highlight some positives. For example, BEA has released data product tools to capture the effect of fast changing technologies on the economy, and better measure the digital economy. BEA is also developing GDP statistics by county, and hopes to have something ready by the end of the year. The Interagency Council on Statistical Policy (ICSP) has a working group on employee development, and is sponsoring a “Big Data Day” event where early and mid-career employees of the statistical agencies can describe big data work, and promote technical innovation. The event will be May 11 at the National Academy of Sciences. BLS has released new data on employment and wages, contingent workers, and CPI for new geographic areas, and has several new blogs that are worth checking out.

Potok commented on the success and quality of the recent FCSM conference, and described an OMB request for information on data sharing projects that has received submissions from academic, nonprofit and for-profit organizations. The submissions describe work addressing challenges associated with the use of varied types and sources of data, and OMB will follow up with FCSM on how to proceed. Potok also described the president's appointment of Margaret Weichert as Deputy Director of Management at OMB. Weichert comes from the financial services industry, with an emphasis on data, and will promote the President's Management Agenda, and in particular push OMB to develop a data strategy – something Potok said the federal statistical system currently lacks. OMB will want input from federal and nonfederal stakeholders as they pursue this objective.

A recent Interagency Council on Statistical Policy meeting included a strategic planning session where FCSM work on data quality was discussed. Of particular interest were the identification of quality for combined datasets, improving relations between federal, state, and local governments, and building workforce competencies needed for the future. Other topics included ways to improve survey response rates, the branding of official federal statistics, and how to protect confidentiality while publishing data with the granularity users have come to expect.

As we moved to discussion, Thompson asked about talk that the administration might move to rescind some 2018 appropriations. Potok could not discuss specifics, but confirmed that rescission is under discussion at OMB.

Asked about the addition of a citizenship question on the census, Potok explained that under the Paperwork Reduction Act, requests go to OMB's Office of Information and Regulatory Affairs (OIRA) for review, where they might or might not be cleared. OMB's charge is to ensure the data will have quality and serve the need for which they are collected, and it is up to the agency to demonstrate the proposed data will meet these standards. OMB completed this review for the 2018 end-to-end test (which does not ask citizenship), and will also conduct a review for the 2020 census. That review has not started. The proposal goes first from Commerce to Congress, and then to OMB. As part of this process, there will be a public comment period on the proposed questionnaire, and comments will be included in the package sent for OMB review.

Kim Brace of Election Data Services asked if citizenship data would be included on the PL 94-171 redistricting file. He noted that the file already crosstabulates population by age by race by ethnicity at block level, and that adding citizenship as another layer might force the suppression of some redistricting data. Potok said that is a good question, and Thompson wondered if the Census Bureau might address it at its May 20 management review. Asked to compare the decision against changing the race/ethnicity questions (citing the need for more research) with the decision to add a citizenship question (in the absence of testing), Potok explained that the decision on race/ethnicity was to not change an existing OMB standard, while the matter of the citizenship question has not yet come to OMB.

Discussion of Initiatives to Support Statistical Agencies

Steve Pierson. American Statistical Association

John Thompson. COPAFS

Steve Jost. Team Subject Matter

Steve Pierson described a joint effort of COPAFS, PAA and ASA – with funding from the Annie E. Casey Foundation – to support federal statistical agencies. The initiative is in response to concern about the status of federal statistical agencies in the new administration. The presentation sought to increase awareness of the initiative, and seek feedback from COPAFS.

Steve Jost displayed the initiative’s “messaging pyramid,” progressing from the tagline at the top, to the elevator story, followed by key messages, and finally proof points at the base of the pyramid.

The initiative supports investment in all federal statistical agencies, but is focused on BLS, NCES, NCHS and the Census Bureau – four agencies that most help measure the wellbeing of children (a key concern for the Casey Foundation). The assumption is that coordinated messaging will be more effective than a collection of individual efforts, and the goal is to provide a bank of ready-to-use messages that keep advocates on message with salient points in public and private conversations about statistical agency appropriations.

Messaging stresses the theme of “Investing in America’s Data Infrastructure.” Just as roads and rails were the backbone of America’s competitiveness in the industrial age, accurate data is seen as the vital infrastructure for today’s economy. The view is that data fuels the national economy and empowers decision making, and with federal investment flatlined at irresponsibly low levels, we must marshal support for greater funding for key agencies.

Jost described some of the group’s deliberations over the infrastructure theme, and questions concerning whether *data* infrastructure, *statistical* infrastructure, or *information* infrastructure would be the most effective term in messaging. Concern was expressed that the term “statistical” might be perceived as more “nerdy” and thus less effective with the intended audience of congressional appropriators.

The “elevator story” is as follows. *American businesses, non-profits, educational system, community leaders and even moms and dads depend on government statistics to make the best decisions about where, and at what levels to make investments. Yet federal spending in four essential agencies core to America’s Data Infrastructure have flatlined for over a decade, impeding every region of the country and every sector of our society from getting the impartial and accurate data they need. Now is the time to reinvest in these agencies which are so vital to our communities, our businesses, and our collective future, and achieve more favorable and equitable outcomes.*

Jost then presented a series of key messages and proof points related to economic competitiveness, health and wellbeing, and the measurement of progress. Thompson stressed that while the initiative is focused on four statistical agencies, these messages can be useful in advocating for the others.

The short version of the “overarching message” is *To fuel our collective prosperity, we must make greater investment in America’s Data Infrastructure*. The tagline *Investing in America’s Data Infrastructure* and elevator speech received positive feedback, but concern was expressed about the length of the other materials, and how advocates could make use of them. Acknowledging the length of some of the messages, Jost suggested that they be viewed as material from which advocates can draw for presentations, blogs, and social media posts.

Transparent Quality Reporting in the Integration of Multiple Data Sources **John Eltinge. US Census Bureau and Chair, Federal Committee on Statistical Methodology**

Eltinge described work FCSM’s Working Group on Data Quality is doing with the Committee on National Statistics, and participants in related workshops and meetings. The work has focused on the challenges agencies face with traditional surveys given declining response rates, growing costs, and increasing user expectations for timely and granular data. At the same time, the increasing availability of non-survey data sources provides an opportunity to increase quality and expand the suite of information products by integrating multiple data sources.

A working group goal is transparent reporting in the priority areas of quality (accuracy, timeliness, relevance, and accessibility of data), risk (production failures and disclosure), and costs (financial, scarce skills and respondent burden). They emphasize the distinction between current transparent reporting which is focused on “what we do/do not know” (for example AAPOR standards for computing response rates) and the eventual goal of specific operational standards (for example, response rate must be at least X percent).

Work to date includes meetings with CNSTAT and other stakeholders which have identified well-developed quality frameworks, and three levels of transparent reporting – for technical specialists, power users of specific data series, and media/general public. Eltinge noted that narratives tend to be best for media and the public. Three public workshops have been held with the Washington Statistical Society – one on input data quality, one on processing quality and one on output data quality.

Eltinge said the working group seeks insights from groups such as COPAFS, and is particularly interested in user concerns about data quality, concrete examples of quality problems, efforts to mitigate problems with specific data sources, and examples of how best to communicate with non-specialists, power users, and the media and general public. Discussion touched on the importance of metadata (for those interested), and the problem of quality measures focused narrowly on sampling error while failing to address non-sampling error.

Update on the Census Bureau's New Dissemination Platform
Rob Chestnut. Center for Enterprise Dissemination Services and Consumer Innovation (CEDSCI), US Census Bureau

Chestnut traced the Census Bureau's online history to the start of census.gov in 1994, Data Ferrett in 1995, the first American FactFinder in 1999, AFF2 in 2011, and the API in 2012. Despite its impressive advances, the current system is a convoluted set of tools with so many ways to access census data, many users are challenged determine and find the tools they need.

CEDSCI is an effort to make access easier and less frustrating with a system of enterprise dissemination. Enterprise dissemination involves centralized and standardized metadata, data and software, a customer-oriented platform for easy access to Census Bureau data, and a single, efficient search for all data and content. The Census API is at the center of the new dissemination platform, which is designed to provide single search access to all data content and tools, promoting greater use of census data, and enabling users to build new apps.

While some users come to the Census website frequently and access large volumes of data, most visit only occasionally for a single number, and are not aware that the Census Bureau has many different types of data from many different sources. The challenge is making access easier for the vast number of occasional users while retaining the functionality and flexibility appreciated by more frequent and knowledgeable users.

The Census Bureau has sought feedback from a wide range of users throughout the development of the new platform. An alpha release in 2016 was followed by several beta releases. From June 2018, the Census Bureau website will begin a transition to the new platform as the primary dissemination system. In June 2019, functionality expands as programs are added and the current American FactFinder is retired. In the future, the new platform will be leveraged to support and streamline other dissemination tools.

June 2018 goals are to support basic dissemination functionality, support the 2018 end-to-end census test, and serve as the primary dissemination system for ACS products. Current tools will be maintained for now, but with the release of the 2013-2017 5-year ACS data, the intent is to start pushing users to the new platform.

Chestnut concluded with a quick demo of the new system – illustrating how a single, simple search (like a Google search) directs one to the most relevant census data and tools. For example, a search on “population Maryland” promptly and prominently displays **6,016,447**, but one has to read the fine print to know this number as Maryland's population total from the 2016 1-year ACS data. If one wanted the 2017 population estimate, one might enter “population Maryland 2017 estimate” (as I did in a post-meeting trial), but the system (still in development) again offers up the 2016 ACS number. Many questions of the “what if” variety could not be explored at the meeting due to a halting online connection, but the beta site is available to all, and the Census Bureau invites users to try it out at www.data.census.gov.

Highlights of 2018 Federal Committee on Statistical Methodology Research and Policy Conference

Andy Zuckerberg. National Center for Education Statistics

David Kashihara. Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality

John Thompson introduced our presenters as among those responsible for the success of the FCSM conference. Zuckerberg noted that they had over 200 submissions for this year's combined research and policy conference. There were 49 sessions and four panel discussions on topics including web scraping, nonresponse bias, poverty measures, response burden and combining data. The conference attracted 882 attendees – 700 government and 182 non-government – and post conference survey results were highly favorable.

Notable sessions included one on “Federal Statistics, Multiple Data Sources, and Privacy Protection: Next Steps” based on a CNSTAT report, and addressing the challenges of using blended data. Kashihara described sessions on non-probability sampling and estimation, noting the high level of current interest in this area, with sessions addressing topics such as “fit-for-purpose” surveys, estimation from non-probability samples, and hybrid estimates based on combinations of probability and non-probability samples. Thompson then reported on next steps in advancing the recommendations of the Commission on Evidence-Based Policymaking. The legislation is said to be moving through the House and “not dead” in the Senate.

Looking to the future, the intent is to move the conference back to the November/December timeframe. Attendees seem to like the Washington Convention Center as the venue, but other options are being considered. With many attendees declining the paper program, the conference might switch to an online or app-based program that attendees can print for themselves if they choose.

COPAFS Business Meeting

John Thompson described the Board's progress in revising and updating the COPAFS bylaws, noting that there would be one more iteration to reflect changes based on legal review. Proposed revisions relate to things like the business meeting, distinctions between members and affiliate members, and the new category of individual supporters. After a brief discussion of possible topics for the June meeting, the April meeting was adjourned.