



**Council of Professional Associations on Federal Statistics**  
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*ADVANCING EXCELLENCE IN FEDERAL STATISTICS*

**SEPTEMBER 15, 2017 COPAFS MEETING SUMMARY**  
**Summary Courtesy of Ken Hodges and PAA**

**Update From the Executive Director**

COPAFS Chair Linda Jacobsen thanked Kitty Smith Evans for her service as Executive Director, and introduced John Thompson, the organization's new Executive Director. Thompson briefly reviewed the statistical agency budgets, which are for the most part flat-lined, and noted that troubling amendments in appropriations have not moved forward. All of this is happening in an environment where current methods and resources are challenged even as the demand for data is increasing. He noted that COPAFS members have wide ranging expertise that can contribute to the cause of federal statistics – a broad objective reflected in the new COPAFS tag line “Advancing excellence in federal statistics.” Thompson looks forward to working with and meeting all COPAFS members.

**Commission on Evidence-Based Policymaking Report and Recommendations**

**Katharine Abraham. University of Maryland (Chair)**

**Ron Haskins. Brookings Institution (Co-Chair)**

Co-chair Ron Haskins remarked on the bipartisan origins of the Commission on Evidence-Based Policymaking (CEP) – co-sponsored by Republican Paul Ryan and Democrat Patty Murray, and passed unanimously in Congress. Well-funded and supported by a “first-rate” staff, the 15 commissioners were given about 15 months to develop recommendations on how to build data for purposes of governing and program evaluation. Activities included seven meetings, three public hearings, surveys of 209 federal offices, and meetings with over 40 other groups. The report was submitted September 7 in a ceremony Haskins found reminiscent of the old days of bipartisanship. Legislation is required to move some of the CEP recommendations forward, and bills are already in the works.

Haskins touched on the report's three major themes (improved access to data, stronger privacy protections, and greater capacity), which reflect the view that data access and confidentiality are not necessarily a tradeoff. The report proposes a way to achieve both. Haskins then turned to CEP Chair Katharine Abraham, who expanded on the major themes.

For improved access, the CEP recommends the establishment of a National Secure Data Service (NSDS), which would build on existing capacity to facilitate data linkages for approved projects on a temporary basis – with data destroyed when the project is completed. The NSDS would serve government and external researchers who would apply and qualify for secure access to confidential government data through a uniform process. The CEP also calls for the review and revision of laws authorizing federal data collection and use, eliminating unnecessary bans, and taking steps to make data collected by states available for evidence building.

For privacy protections, the report calls for comprehensive risk assessments on de-classified confidential data intended for public release, and the use of modern privacy-enhancing

technologies. The CEP also recommends that each federal department assign a senior official (ideally the head of a statistical agency) responsibility for stewarding its data, and that policies for maintaining integrity and objectivity in federal statistics (such as OMB Statistical Policy Directive 1) be put into law.

For evidence building capacity, the CEP recommends that each department have a Chief Evaluation Officer to coordinate evaluation and policy research, and that learning agendas be developed to make sure research is aligned with department priorities. Other recommendations call for improved coordination of government-wide evidence building under OMB leadership, better alignment of administrative processes with evidence-building activities, and ensuring sufficient resources for evidence-building, perhaps through set-asides for evaluation in program appropriations.

Abraham explained that the NSDS, which is the centerpiece of the CEP recommendations, would not replace existing arrangements for accessing confidential data. It would be a separate entity in the Commerce Department, guided by a steering committee with federal, state, academic and public representation. For transparency, it would maintain a searchable inventory of approved projects.

Looking ahead, Abraham noted that a congressional hearing on the CEP recommendations is to be held by the end of September, when the commission will sunset. From that point, the Bipartisan Policy Center will advance the recommendations and legislation, which is already under development.

## **Discussants**

**Charles Rothwell. Director, National Center for Health Statistics**

**Felice Levine. Executive Director, American Educational Research Association**

Rothwell expressed appreciation for the commission's work, and said he was especially impressed with the balance the report achieves in its recommendations for a secure data environment, while conveying that federal agencies need to work better together. As the head of a statistical agency, he said he could run from the recommendations since he is barely able to do his job already, but said instead he will run toward them, knowing that the guidance is needed. He sees the report as not just a call to bring data from varied agencies together, but also a call for agencies to get beyond their fiefdoms, and work together. The obstacles, he said, involve not just legislation, but also the culture in agencies that are sometimes overly protective of their data.

Levine agreed that the report is worth running toward, and praised it for reaffirming the ethos of policy guided by sound science and research. She also commended the commission for addressing the access versus privacy dilemma head on, and seeing how new technology provides a way forward. Noting the need for advocacy and follow up on the CEP recommendations, Levine observed that the size and diversity of the stakeholder base for federal statistics should be a strength – although she expects there may be challenges in coordinating federal objectives with state stakeholders. Levine praised the idea of the NSDS, but wondered how to prevent a logjam of approved projects. She also called for clarification on “temporary data linkages,” expressing concern that destroying data after project completion could impair transparency and the ability to replicate results. Abraham clarified that even though linked data would be destroyed, a record would be maintained of what was done in the NSDS, with code retained for those seeking to replicate.

## **Boosting Public Confidence and Trust in Federal Statistics**

### **Ron Wasserstein. Executive Director. American Statistical Association**

Wasserstein traced the origins of ASA's Communications Campaign to Support the Federal Statistical System to 2016 when events made it clear what the recently launched *This is Statistics* initiative should focus on next. With articles and even a presidential candidate harshly criticizing official federal statistics as politically motivated, a campaign is needed to educate decision makers and the public on the value and integrity of federal statistics. Wasserstein said ASA is well positioned to pursue this project with its PR partner, Stanton Communications. He then introduced the firm's CEO Peter Stanton and President Lori Russo, who presented on the initiative.

Stanton explained that they are starting by talking with the experts – stakeholders with long experience with government statistics – and already see numerous opportunities. They see widespread support for federal statistics among “natural allies” of the ASA initiative. For example, many journalists rely on federal statistics to do their work, and while they report high level attacks on the statistical system, they also are on the receiving end of attacks, and amenable to highlighting when attacks are false or misleading to the public.

The challenges are many. Skepticism of federal statistics traces to the broader erosion of trust in government, and agency officials are limited in what they can say in their defense. Self-appointed “experts” offer dubious interpretations to the public, and private firms generate data they promote as legitimate substitutes for government statistics – raising questions about the need for a publicly funded federal statistical system. Stanton also noted the perception that this campaign should be targeted at “everyone,” arguing instead for the greater impact of targeting specific audiences.

The campaign's mission is to distinguish federal statistics as absolutely essential to the functions of our democracy. Its objectives are to enhance awareness of the importance, integrity and trustworthiness of government statistics, provide a strong and non-partisan voice in support of federal statistics, and ensure that no attack on federal statistical agencies and their work goes unanswered. The campaign also seeks to promote statistical literacy through greater understanding of the statistical agencies and their work.

The strategy is to tell the positive story of federal statistics, influence the influencers, engage the user base, and inform and enhance agency communications. The idea is that society depends on statistics, and the case for that importance needs to focus on themes including integrity (the validity of agency operations), accuracy (data that are correct), credibility (trust that the data are apolitical), and criticality (importance of statistics to our economy, democracy, and society).

Stanton noted that the campaign will be a long-term effort, and one where progress is difficult to measure. But he asserted it can have a long-term impact similar to that of anti-smoking and healthy eating campaigns. Funding limits require a targeted outreach, but they are open to guidance from the wider stakeholder community, and solicited the thoughts of COPAFS attendees on the campaign. Attendees provided many suggestions, such as referencing OMB's *Principles and Practices for a Federal Statistical Agency* and the proposed codification of Statistical Policy Directive No. 1. It was also suggested that the US federal statistical system could be contrasted with systems in other countries that are prone to political influence.

The presentation wrapped up with a listing of key audiences including media, allies, Congress, the business community, and influencers. Among the ultimate objectives are to foster renewed support for federal statistical agencies, protect adequate funding for essential science, and develop the press and business leaders into defenders of federal statistics. The campaign also seeks to increase media reliance on legitimate data scientists for interpretation and analysis, and to foster agency and data user interaction to strengthen the base of support.

### **New Analysis of Federal Fund Allocation**

#### **Andrew Reamer. Research Professor. George Washington University**

Reamer described the “counting for dollars” project, which measures the role the decennial census plays in the geographic distribution of federal funds. The project identifies financial programs that distribute assistance based in whole or part on data derived from the decennial census. For each program, the project measures the distribution of funding to state and local areas, and determines the relation between census accuracy and the equitable geographic distribution of funds. The results suggest how dependent the accurate distribution of funds is on the accuracy of census counts.

Reamer explained that an earlier project, released in March 2010, could at most encourage response to the 2010 census, but with its earlier timeline, this project provides advance support for the 2020 census, and encourages participation in programs such as LUCA. In spring 2017, the project identified 22 census-derived datasets, and estimated the geographic distribution of funding from 16 large census-guided federal programs. From fall 2017 to winter 2018, the project will identify all census-guided federal programs, and annual funding for each program. And during spring-summer 2018, the project will prepare reports on additional programs of interest as data sources allow.

Among the 16 large census-guided programs are Medicaid, SNAP, Medicare Part B, Highways, School Lunch, Head Start, and WIC. Some programs use census-derived data to determine program eligibility. For example, an area might need population, income, or poverty exceeding specified levels to be eligible for funding. And some programs use census data in allocation formulas set by Congress or by the agency as authorized by Congress.

The datasets used for these purposes are usually “census-derived,” meaning they are derived from the decennial census rather than taken from the decennial census itself. They include Foundational sources such as geographic classifications (urban, rural, etc.), population estimates, household surveys such as the CPS and ACS, and price/expenditure surveys such as CPI and CEX. Reamer classified other datasets as Indicators, including BEA personal and per capita income, BLS local area unemployment, and census-based poverty thresholds. He also identified Program-Specific datasets, such as the HHS poverty guidelines for SNAP, WIC, Head Start and other programs, and HUD fair market rent data.

An initial finding is that the 50 states plus DC received \$589.7 billion from 16 large census-guided programs. Medicaid is the largest (\$312 billion) followed by SNAP (almost \$70 billion), Medicare Part B (\$64 billion), and Highway planning and construction (\$38 billion).

The datasets most relied on are:

Core-based Statistical Areas  
Urban/Rural Classification  
Population Estimates  
American Community Survey  
Current Population Survey  
Per Capita Income  
Poverty Guidelines

And of the 22 census-derived datasets identified by the project, 21 make use of the ACS.

For most programs, the amount of funding received by states is guided by the census count, so the more accurate the count, the more equitable its share of funds. But Reamer cautioned that the relationship between funding and the census count is complicated and not linear. For example, an undercount of low-income households and children would affect CPS and ACS sample selection and weights, leading to an underestimation of households in need, and thus reducing funds for programs such as S-CHIP, WIC and Head Start. Given such complications, it is difficult to specify a cost per person missed in the census count. However, it is clear that an inaccurate census count would result in a misallocation of funds. This project can help make that reality personal for members of Congress – showing them why adequate funding for the census and ACS are important to them and their constituents.

### **COPAFS Business Meeting**

We concluded the day with a brief discussion of upcoming events and topics for the December meeting.