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# Assessing the Health of the Federal Statistical Agencies

The Backbone of Our Nation's Data Infrastructure

Claire McKay Bowen, Ph.D.

Principal Research Associate and Statistics Methods Group Lead



[cbowen@urban.org](mailto:cbowen@urban.org)



[www.clairemckaybowen.com](http://www.clairemckaybowen.com)



[@ClaireMKBowen](https://twitter.com/ClaireMKBowen)



# State of the U.S. Data Infrastructure: 2023 - 2025

- Team
  - PIs: Jonathan Auerbach and Steve Pierson
  - May Aydin, Claire McKay Bowen, Connie Citro, Nancy Potok, and Zachary Seeskin
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# State of the U.S. Data Infrastructure: At Risk!



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## ASA, COPAFS, Partners Urge Bolstering of Federal Statistical Agencies

1 MARCH 2021 6,858 VIEWS NO COMMENT

Constance Citro, Emerson Elliott, John Gawalt, Felice Levine, Jeri Mulrow, Paul Schroeder, Katherine Wallman, and Steve Pierson

*Even as their importance has increased over the centuries, the agencies producing the data have been neglected, lost important autonomy and statutory protections, and been pushed deeper into the federal bureaucracy.*

# Examples of Recent Challenges and Threats

- 2020 Census meddling
- Economic Research Service staffing gutted
- Bureau of Justice Statistics publication delays
- National Center for Education Statistics (non-contract) staffing shortage
- Shrinking budgets (i.e., declining purchasing power)
- Growing costs (e.g., declining response rates)
- Needs for more granular or frequent data without added budget
- “Schedule F” – Would politicize statistical agency leadership

# Threats to Federal Statistics Not New

- 1972 – During the Nixon administration, press conferences held by the Bureau of Labor Statistics were canceled after the Bureau presented a conflicting interpretation of the unemployment rate.
- 1995 – The Speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives threatened to withhold funding from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics unless it reduced its estimate of the inflation rate.
- 2006 – In the George W. Bush administration, the director of the U.S. Bureau of Justice Statistics was removed after he declined to minimize data concerning racial profiling in traffic stops.

# Longstanding Examination of Federal Statistics by ASA and Other Organizations: A Reactive Approach

- 1937 – *ASA & Social Science Research Council Committee on Government Statistics and Information Services* – following Roosevelt centralization of coordination function
- 1973 – *ASA & Federal Statistics Users' Conference Committee on the Integrity of Federal Statistics* – following interference in the reporting of economic indicators
- 2021 – *ASA Task Force on 2020 Census Quality Indicators* – following attempted interference in the decennial census

# Rare Implementation of Key Recommendations

- Recommendations to increase visibility
  - Executive Office of Statistical Policy (see Bonnen TAS 1981)
  - Council of Statistical Advisers (see Fienberg TAS 1983)
- Recommendations for regular reporting
  - Review of methods/operations (see Rathbun, Wallis, et al. TAS 1972) – led to CNSTAT
  - Monitoring by professional associations (see Joint Ad Hoc Committee on Government Statistics, TAS 1976 Recommendation 6) – COPAFS organized in 1981

# State of the U.S. Data Infrastructure: Proactive Design

## Goals:

- Enhancing the Visibility of Federal Statistics and Statistical Agencies
- Offering Information to Inspire Stakeholder Action  
(e.g., securing funding for currently unfunded mandates)

By collectively establishing an effective framework for monitoring the federal statistical system, we can more effectively recognize and highlight potential threats and challenges to policymakers and the public, preempting any actual harm they might cause.