Gaps in Data and Plans to Fill Them for Second-Year Assessment

This section further elaborates on topics included in the full report's section titled "Year Two Plans and Considerations."

ADDITIONAL STATISTICAL UNITS

During our first-year assessment, we focused on 13 principal federal statistical agencies. In the second year, we will examine the feasibility of assessing the other 16 departments and independent agencies represented on the Interagency Council of Statistical Policy (ICSP). These are departments and agencies that do not have a recognized statistical agency but do carry out statistical functions and have a Statistical Official as designated in the Foundations for Evidence-Based Policymaking Act of 2018 (Evidence Act). These are agencies such as the Environmental Protection Agency, the Department of Housing and Urban Development, the Department of Homeland Security, the Department of the Interior, the Department of Veterans Affairs, and others (see Supporting Materials: B for the full list of ICSP members).

Understanding how these departments and agencies collect and use statistics in ways that may be similar and different from the principal federal statistical agencies would help us define a healthy broader statistical infrastructure and relevant metrics for assessment. It could also be useful to consider other offices and programs that carry out statistical functions (there are about 100 such in the federal government) and to examine the role and capacity of the office of the chief statistician and its integration with the broader federal data ecosystem to a greater extent than in our year 1 report.

EVIDENCE ACT MANDATES

An important perspective for whether an agency's data fulfill the Evidence Act requirements—to produce relevant, timely, accurate, credible, and objective statistics—is that of the agency's current and potential data users, who could be probed through surveys, interviews, or focus groups. We discovered that with the exception of four agencies, the statistical agencies do not have much depth of information about who is using their data and how it is being used. Only ERS, NASS, NCSES, and NCES have used machine learning algorithms to discover how their data are being used in published research and evidence-building, and what topics are being researched. The other agencies have varying degrees of information on direct hits and downloads from their websites. None of the agencies has good information on users in such sectors as state and local governments, NGOs, the media, and the broader public.

We would like to reach out directly to users during year 2 to find out more about both who is using the data and for what purposes and what these users think of the data. If more agencies begin applying the machine learning algorithms to explore data usage appearing in publications, we would propose to use those data as well.

RESOURCES

During the first-year, we focused on top-line budget and staffing levels, as these are basic needs of the agencies. However, if the information is available, we would like to examine the diversity of the workforce, skill set gaps, retention, and activities and policies of the Office of Personnel Management in the context of the federal statistical system. Another area of importance for study is the level of professional development resources available and annual spending supporting research and innovation.

INTERNATIONAL

The practices and perspectives of the international official statistics community can be very informative as benchmarks for measuring how the U.S. infrastructure compares to the rest of the world. The U.S. plays an important role in setting international measurement standards for areas such as GDP, trade, employment, etc. Although most other countries have a centralized statistical office, studying policies, data sharing, privacy protection, investment in research and innovation, data linkages, and evidence building will be informative.