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THE CURRENT

“The US government data purge is a loss for policymaking and research”

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DEWS: You're listening to *The Current*, part of the Brookings Podcast Network, found online with our other public policy shows at Brookings dot edu slash Podcasts. We're publishing new episodes of *Democracy in Question* podcast now, and other shows are returning soon. I'm Fred Dews.

Since the start of the second Trump administration in January, thousands of federal workers have been fired or furloughed, entire agencies have been shut down, and foreign relations have been turned over from the previous administration to align with the new administration's priorities. A major development that perhaps has gotten less attention in the mainstream media and general awareness is the removal of taxpayer-funded data and statistics from a swathe of government websites, including data on crime, sexual orientation, gender, education, climate, and global development.

Here to talk about what she calls "an ongoing data purge" is Caren Grown, a senior fellow in the Center for Sustainable Development at Brookings. She's an economist who previously served as global director for gender at the World Bank Group and senior gender advisor at USAID, an agency that has been shut down by the Trump administration.

Caren, welcome to *The Current*.

GROWN: Thank you so much for having me.

DEWS: You recently published a piece on the Brookings website, quote, "An ode to the Demographic and Health Survey Program," the DHS. What is that program, Caren, and why have you written an ode to it?

[1:23]

GROWN: That program is very close to my heart as both a researcher and as someone who served in policy positions, as you mentioned. Launched in 1984 and expanded over time, the DHS has collected nationally representative and open source data on a whole range of topics, including childhood and maternal mortality, child health, nutrition, malaria, tuberculosis, HIV/AIDS, anemia, education, and of course, a whole swath of other topics.

In 1990, questions on spousal violence were added, which was really pioneering because we didn't have a lot of information on spousal or intimate partner violence. And that was followed by a full experimental module on women's lives and experiences in 1994. And then there was other modules that were added to collect information on men's health and men's attitudes and men's behaviors. So we really got a picture, a full picture of men's and women's relationships for a lot of demographic and economic and public health issues that we hadn't had before.

The data, for me, opened up a whole new field of research on issues of women's empowerment and decision-making, employment and health status, their fertility choices, as well men's attitudes about all of those topics. And I participated in some of the very early expert group meetings to discuss how to collect data on women's empowerment and agency. I'm still engaged in efforts outside of the DHS to refine that early work that we did.

And I've also used this data over the course of my career to understand the determinants of women's empowerment, their ability to make decisions over their own fertility, to access health care on their own, or to even own property, like having land or a house.

And I wrote an ode to this data because of its importance, not just to research for demographers and economists and public health workers, but also because of its importance for policymaking, especially in low- and middle-income countries. Because this data source, which is comparable across countries—we have the data for more than 90 plus countries, which is pretty amazing. And countless PhD students—I've had so many write to me, countless researchers have relied on this data over the years. And I think it's particularly important for decision-makers like health ministries who use this data in a myriad of ways.

DEWS: Well, the term ode suggests to me both praise and elegy, something that's been lost.

[4:04]

GROWN: It has been lost, and this is the saddest part. Well, first of all, I should make clear that everything that has been collected to date at least is preserved in some form or another. So we do have archives. Whether or not they'll be accessible to the range of people who have used this—and we're talking about countries like Guinea, to Latvia, and countries in Central Asia, to the U.S.—it's now gone. And I think researchers and policymakers are really trying to find ways to make sure that people still have access to that data, including code, including guidance notes,

including methodologies, how we can continue to have an open access archive for that.

But most importantly, I wrote an ode because it stopped data collection in 25 countries that were in the field. And it means no more data collection like what existed will go forward.

[5:04]

So it's great to have had information on the past. But this information, just to give you one example, which is used by health ministries, will no longer be available going forward. And I can give you an example of how the DHS were used in decision-making in different countries. So data from the 2019–2021 India National Family Health Survey on menstrual health influenced the formulation of India's national menstrual hygiene policy. Data from the 2019–20 survey in Gambia on women's employment were cited by that country's vice resident as part of their commitment to close the gender parity gap in employment.

And another thing for decision-making: DHS surveys are a primary data source for health ministries in countries. For instance, in Sub-Saharan Africa, South Asia, Central Europe, who rely on DHS data to target their health and vaccination programs. As an example, data from the 2017–2018 Pakistan DHS on childhood mortality informed a whole new support program for pregnant women in one of the lowest income contexts. Data from the 2016 Uganda DHS on gender-based violence inspired students from Makerere University in Kampala to create a mobile app to connect survivors of domestic violence to service points.

So it's not just for academics, it's really important for decision-making by governments, by other users like students that I just mentioned at Makerere and others. That is being lost for those countries that don't have the financial well-worth all the resources through their national statistical institutes to continue to keep it going.

DEWS: In your piece, in your ode to the DHS, one phrase struck me, and I'll quote, it's both "a national and an international public good." And the public good part is what really struck me specifically. What do you mean by that?

[7:07]

GROWN: I think reliable statistics collected, financed by governments, but open, accessible, transparent, are a public good. Effective policymaking relies on accurate and timely data, as I said, that are open and accessible not just to government agencies, but to international organizations like UNICEF, for instance, or parts of the UN system, to academics, like I mentioned, to journalists, to civil society organizations. Reliable and timely statistics are a tool of accountability. They're a tool for monitoring the progress of programs to achieve specific objectives, for instance, to respond to HIV/AIDS and ensure that the people who need treatment most are getting treatment. And we can see declines over time in the incidence of that particular disease.

So the DHS is an international public good for all of those audiences. It's important because that data, some of that data, underlie efforts to monitor the Sustainable Development Goals, which all countries approved through consensus in 2015. Including the United States at that time.

DHS data are used to calculate at least 33 of the indicators that support various parts of the SDG framework. One indicator, which is called indicator 5.61, which measures the proportion of women between the ages of 15 and 49 who make their own informed decisions regarding their sexual relationships, contraceptive use, and reproductive health care, is a composite scale of DHS survey data. Going forward, how are we going to monitor whether countries are on track just on that indicator?

Other data sources, like the Multi-Indicator Cluster Survey, which was launched by UNICEF, which focuses on health and well-being of children, also had relied on DHS for some of its complementary data. So internationally, there are big repercussions.

DEWS: Caren, you've explained how the loss of data harms programming, decision-making, and so on, but this is about more than data loss itself. You mentioned methodologies. It's about that, and it's about expertise developed over years to collect and use the data. Can you elaborate on that point?

[9:28]

GROWN: Absolutely, it's about all of that. It's about the loss of qualified technical staff who can't just be brought back and reconstituted. It's about the loss of some of the computer programming and coding information. It's about the whole capacity building for training and expertise. It's about the work within countries in terms of the whole statistical architecture. And that's really important.

It's about so much more than that. It's about the ability of the public to be able to access and use that data in accessible formats. It's about the ability of journalists to be able to use that. It's about, I mentioned for instance, how data are used. Data visualization, huge tool, mapping. It's not just the actual having of the data set and whether you download the numbers. But there's a whole ecosystem of data and statistics that's affected by this.

DEWS: Where else in the U.S. government, beyond the international development space, have you seen what you've called an ongoing data purge?

[10:30]

GROWN: So much. I hear about this every day. Let me give you three examples from the U.S. Staff at the Health and Human Services Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality are being told that DOGE plans to reduce in force 85 percent of the staff, decimating the agency and long-standing research and data collection, such as the Medical Expenditure Panel Survey. Which for all of the people, like you and me, who need information, it's a huge issue in the U.S. in terms of our expenditures on healthcare.

A second example, since the 1860s, the National Center for Education Statistics collected and analyzed data on education across the country, which has been used

by policymakers to measure things like academic success, teacher productivity, crime, and safety in schools. Gone.

A third example. This is an important example because it's a real-time huge issue, the Famine Early Warning Systems Network, what's called FuseNet, which monitors drought and crop production and food prices and other indicators in order to forecast food insecurity in more than 30 countries, is now down. That is so super important because we don't know in real time anymore how many people, for instance, in the Horn of Africa or in West Africa might be experiencing food insecurity and famine. And we may not know until it's way too late to set up the kind of assistance for humanitarian distribution of food supplies, of other things that go into that.

So there are many other early warning systems that have been taken down. This is across the board as well in public health. This is across the board in other ways.

[12:22]

And last thing I want to mention on this, it's not just the data itself. It's also disbanding really important technical advisory committees that are important for understanding survey methodology, new questions, and so forth. So just two references here. The Bureau of Labor Statistics in the U.S. has been told that they have to disband their advisory committees, which advise on things like the Current Population Survey, which measures employment in the U.S. The American Statistical Association learned that five statistical science advisory committees in the Department of Commerce have been disbanded. And these are crucial resources for the Census Bureau, for the Bureau of Economic Analysis, and of course the Bureau of Labor Statistics.

So these are just a few examples, but I've also heard of other examples from NASA, other examples from the Environmental Protection Agency and, of course, the Center for Diseases Control.

DEWS: So what do you think is the end result of all of this? What is the implication for policymaking that data is not available, data is gone, data is no longer being collected?

[13:36]

GROWN: I think that it's a very pessimistic future for us if we don't have this kind of data. As I mentioned, policymakers rely on accurate and timely data for a whole range of social, economic, environmental, agricultural, social welfare, so many issues. If we don't have the ability to collect that information, we just can't have good planning. We just can't have good decision-making over various policy choices which always involve trade-offs. You need information to make judgments about which route, which way you're going to go in terms of policy. It matters for program implementation. If you have a vaccination program, you need to know where to target, in which districts or in which segments of the population. So, the loss of data has enormous implications.

I mourn the loss of this data, not just from a research perspective, but as a former policymaker who was actively involved in decisions on how to target resources, where needs were greatest, and really from both a personal, human point of view.

DEWS: I know we're in early days of this ongoing data purge, but do you think there are any moves afoot by researchers especially to develop alternative sources of data or to protect the data that's been lost somehow?

[15:03]

GROWN: There are huge efforts to, for sure, protect the data that has been lost. I have heard from many of my colleagues of researchers scrambling to download the data sets that they've been granted access to, not just for surveys like the DHS, but across the board and all kinds of other surveys—health surveys, for instance, surveys in the CDC. There are professional associations like the Population Association of America or the American Statistical Association, which has been very concerned about this. And there's a lot of efforts that are being made by organizations like End of Term and the American Statistical Association to provide trackers of where you can get access to all of that.

It's really the information going forward. It's the future. And recreating, reconstructing whole statistical architectures are really difficult. I mentioned that there are 25 surveys stalled in the field. It's not just a matter of saying, okay, in 10 more weeks, let's say somebody agrees to fund all of these surveys. It's not simply a matter of just trying to bring back all the enumerators. It's that whole architecture that was disrupted.

DEWS: Yeah, I was gonna ask, in the future, can the next U.S. presidential administration restore data, restore this data, restore data practices? It's like the first Trump administration withdrew the U.S. from the Paris Climate Accords, but the Biden administration returned us to that, but the new Trump administration will take us out of that. So there's these major policy shifts that happen from administration to administration. Is that even a possibility in the future U.S. presidential administration?

[16:37]

GROWN: I would certainly hope that a future administration would bring us back into important global institutions that are really important for global problems like pandemics and public health, so the World Health Organization, or climate change, so the Paris Agreement, as you just mentioned. But I think it's more difficult when we think about how we're going to create an entirely new apparatus for data collection, curation, dissemination, and use.

These surveys, let's say the Bureau of Labor Statistics Current Population Survey, or even the Demographic and Health Surveys, have been built over decades. There has been financing arrangements in place. There's been implementing arrangements with different institutions or individuals to actually collect the kind of data. There's been huge efforts at compiling it in ways that open access for all of the constituencies I mentioned. Recreating all of that is gonna be super difficult.

But I also think that we have lost, we will have lost several years of the interval in between something else can be created. Maybe there will be an opportunity to recreate some of it, but the dollars of investment that are needed to put together that whole ecosystem, that whole architecture is overwhelming.

And you do need public investment for that. You can't just have a philanthropy or a few philanthropies. You really need this approach, whether it's within a country, with international cooperation, like in the case of the DHS, or within a country cooperation across a whole bunch of other agencies to make this happen.

So we can recreate in the future. We can maybe do better in the future. But I feel like we've really lost decades of progress going forward.

DEWS: Well, Caren, we have to leave it there. I appreciate you sharing your time and expertise on this extremely important topic with us today. Thank you.

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GROWN: Thank you so much for having me.

DEWS: You can find more about Caren's work on our website, Bookings dot edu, and also, I recommend finding her on LinkedIn where a lot of this discussion is taking place.