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HOW CAN WE IMPROVE TRUST IN FEDERAL ECONOMIC STATISTICS?

Michael Horrigan

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AUTHOR NOTES AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Michael Horrigan is president of the Upjohn Institute.

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In this report, we consider the question of how we can improve the trust we have in the data produced by the federal statistical system. On its face, the question presumes that some measure of trust, be it large or small, has been lost. And indeed, on a number of dimensions, this can be demonstrated to be the case. For example, as reported by the Pew Research Center, overall "Public trust in government" has been declining overall since surveys on public trust began in the 1950s, peaking near 80% early in the 1960s and hovering at around 20% since 2008 (Pew 2025). Certainly, it is not too far a leap to assume that such low levels of public trust in government may translate into a lack of trust in the data produced by federal statistical agencies.

More recent and direct measures—ones based on AmeriSpeak[1] household survey panels conducted by the National Opinion Research Center (NORC) in June-August 2025—report on a number of aspects of trust in federal statistics. As summarized in the 2025 report by the American Statistical Association, "The Nation's Data at Risk: 2025 Report," the percentage of individuals agreeing or strongly agreeing that statistics provided by federal agencies are generally accurate decreased from 40% to 32% between June and September 2025 (Bowen et al. 2025).

One way to view trust in federal statistical data is to think of it as being a continuum, ranging at the bottom with groups of individuals who have no trust at all in data produced by the government to others at the top that express full faith in the quality of the data and in the integrity and independence of the system of federal agencies producing them. While it is important to understand the perspectives of these groups at both ends of the trust scale, perhaps it is more insightful to think about where we are on average on the continuum and how that position has been changing over time.

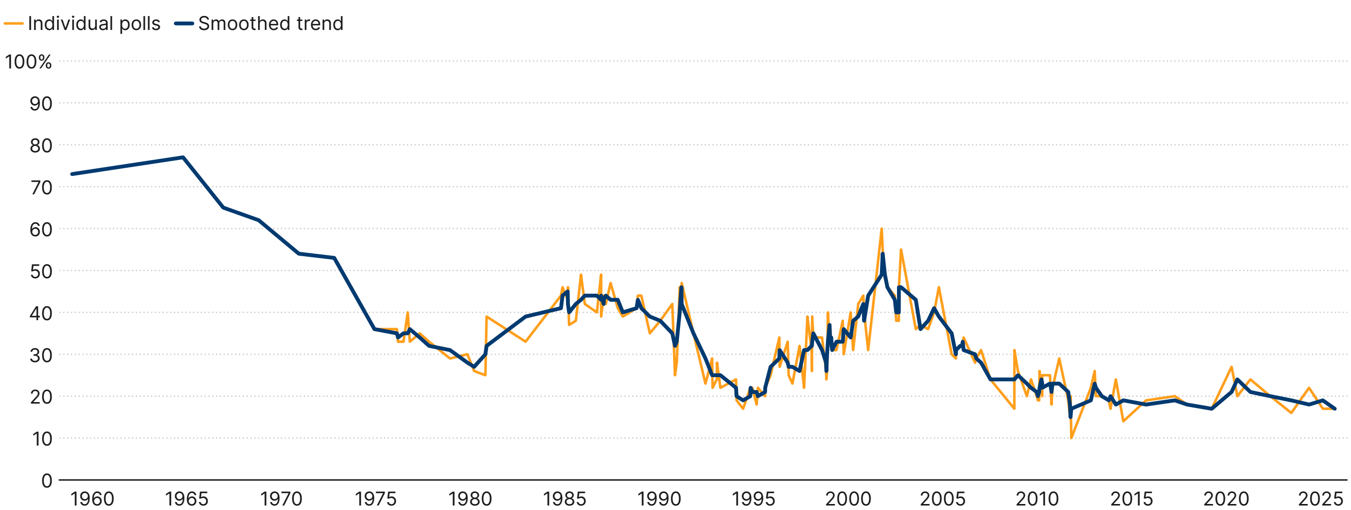
While there are no single, readily available metrics for accomplishing this, the Pew's "public trust in government" data and the 2025 NORC AmeriSpeak panel data suggest it is likely that on average we have been moving steadily toward less trust over time. There are some dimensions that are difficult to explicitly measure that certainly impact trust, such as the degree of political independence of the statistical agencies. There are other dimensions that are measurable and that impact trust through the critical lens of data quality such as collection and response rates, revisions to estimates, and the real value of budgetary resources available over time, among others.

To get a clearer understanding of the challenges faced by statistical agencies in achieving and maintaining trust in the quality of their published data, it is useful to first provide a brief description of the commonly accepted principles and practices of statistical agencies that are viewed as essential to achieving this goal.

FIGURE 1

Public trust in government

Percentage who say they trust the government in Washington to do what is right just about always/most of the time



Source: Pew Research Center

A framework for preserving and enhancing trust in federal statistics

What are the generally accepted standards by which federal agencies seek to reach their goal of having a high degree of public trust in their data? The intent of this section is not to provide the definitive framework but rather to draw from existing documentation the standards that are commonly agreed upon for this purpose. To answer this question, we rely and expand upon the standards put forward in “Principles and Practices for a Federal Statistical Agency” from the Committee on National Statistics (CNSTAT) and the Statistical Policy Directives of the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) (NASEM 2025)[2]:

Trust in federal economic statistical system requires trust along several significant dimensions:

- Trust that the agencies producing the data are free from political influence
- That data collection, development of statistical estimates, analysis of the data, and dissemination of data follow the highest standards of methodological and statistical practice
- That statistical agencies are committed to quality and professional standards of practice, maintain an active research program to improve the quality of published data, and are forthright and timely in identifying and communicating any problems in the data such as bias or other sources of mismeasurement
- That statistical agencies are transparent in their communications on all of these dimensions

What are the characteristics of federal economic statistical data that form the basis for determining the level of trust in the data?

There are a number of oft-cited characteristics of federal economic statistical data relevant to determining the level of trust. These characteristics, often described as determining data’s fitness for use, include:

- Relevance
- Comparability and coherence
- Timeliness
- Accuracy
- Reliability
- Accessibility
- Confidentiality

It is useful to carefully define each of these dimensions briefly and to explore more detailed characteristics that fall under each. Across all of these dimensions, there are often relevant and interesting differences between what a user demands for trust and what may be “objectively” viewed as an absolute requirement to judge the quality of data. Our discussion follows attempts to recognize these differences.

Relevance: A key element of relevance may be the degree to which the level of detail in the data, also known as completeness, corresponds to the needs of the data user. Are the data highly suppressed at the level of detail under examination? Do the data provide the level of detail desired by the user?

Comparability and coherence: Do the measured concepts exhibit reasonable behavior over time and across other dimensions such as geography, demographic, and socio-economic characteristics? To what extent are the measured statistics consistent with other data concepts that have interconnectedness with the measures in question? For example, are trends in output, hours, and value added, among others, consistent with trends in labor and total factor productivity?

Timeliness: Are the data produced and published when promised? Are the data produced in a timely enough way to be useful to the data user?

Accuracy: To what extent are the data unbiased measures that accurately reflect the concept being measured? Do the data have acceptably low standard errors? If bias is known and present, do the estimates have acceptably low mean squared errors?

Accuracy is a statistical concept that may be relevant to some data users and less so to others. Some data users may care a lot about the standard error of estimates while others, even relatively sophisticated users, may not use standard errors as a relevant criterion for judging their trust in the data.

Reliability: Use of sound methodology and transparency of methods.

Accessibility: The characteristic of accessibility is often associated with websites being easy to navigate and the ease of download data, especially for individuals who need special accommodations. A website that is difficult to navigate and data and analysis that are viewed as hard if not impossible to understand can serve to undermine trust in the output the statistical agency.

The other characteristic of accessibility which we will explore in more depth in this paper is whether or not the data and analysis are easily understood by the layperson.

Confidentiality: All statistical agencies provide pledges of confidentiality to their respondents and also provide advance notice to the public of the exact day and time that their data products and press releases will be made available. Breaches of any kind, be it revealing the identity of a respondent or early releases of data, even if viewed as accidental and unintentional, will serve to undermine trust.

Challenges faced by statistical agencies in achieving and maintaining the public's trust

With this framework defining the critical principles and practices with which statistical agencies can earn the public's trust, we turn now to specific challenges that the agencies face in accomplishing this goal.

IDENTIFYING USERS AND THEIR VARYING DEGREES OF TRUST

How each of these characteristics is operationalized in practice will depend critically on who is the data user, what are their objectives in using the data, and how the data are being used to meet those objectives. The nature of what trust represents can differ markedly by audience. A sophisticated data user will have different standards for what generates trust or a lack of trust in federal economic statistics than someone from the general public. Defining this scope is akin to defining who are the relevant users of federal economic statistics such as:

- The general public
- Policymakers
- Businesses
- Academics
- Journalists
- Nonprofits
- Economic development organizations

Consider, for example, economic development organizations that seek to attract employers to invest in their local areas. The ability to develop an overall statistical profile of the community that can be used as basis for decisionmaking is likely more important than requiring each data set be "perfect" in some absolute sense. This is especially apparent from the purchase by economic development firms of private-sector data on local economic trends for which official statistics are lacking, despite the fact that the methods used to develop these private sector estimates are proprietary and generally not at all transparent.

Across all of these user groups, each of these characteristics in our framework can have both subjective/normative and objective/statistical dimensions. The weight that is attached to these dimensions can vary significantly across users, as can the objectives for the use of data and how they are used. While it is difficult to assess the differences that exist across constituencies in their degree of trust in federal statistics and their willingness to use the data produced by the system, another critical aspect that trust impacts is the willingness of individuals and businesses who, in addition to possibly being data users, are asked to provide the data being collected by statistical agencies. In the sections that follow, we address this dimension of trust in more detail.

ENSURING POLITICAL INDEPENDENCE OF THE STATISTICAL AGENCIES

A critical element tied to trust is the degree to which the statistical system is independent of political influence. The belief that any statistical agency is unduly affected and influenced by the political party in power, whether real or imagined, will erode trust and can move us further down the continuum.

A recent example is the firing of then Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) Commissioner Erika McEntarfer after the announcement in July 2025 of relatively large negative revisions to the payroll job gains in May and June. It was the mere size of the revisions that led to charges that the Commissioner herself caused the data to be manipulated for political purposes. That is, McEntarfar, a Biden appointee, was claimed to be influenced politically to make the current administration look bad. Beyond these stark claims, other more nuanced assertions added to the appearance that something was seriously wrong with the data. For example, the administration claimed that the June revisions, in particular, were the largest since 1968, a claim that, if true, would certainly raise eyebrows and a general feeling of distrust in the data (Welker 2025). In fact, it was the twenty-third largest in absolute value since 1979, but if you only include 2003 forward, when probability based sampling was introduced, it was the sixth largest (Horrigan 2025).

While relatively large, the revisions were in fact entirely reasonable and explainable in terms of prior history, the perceived weakness in the labor market, collection rates for reporting periods in the payroll survey, and the role of concurrent seasonal adjustment. For someone far to the positive end of the trust continuum, perhaps steeped deeply in the nuances of data collection, estimation, and statistical/economic analysis, the technical detail behind these factors made perfect sense. And for someone at bottom of the trust continuum, the firing and claims made to justify it were entirely consistent with having a complete lack of trust in the statistical system.

The reality is that there have been various forms of political influence exercised over the statistical agencies throughout history, although it has certainly been taken to new heights in this administration. Before the announcement of press release dates became standard practice, for example, then-President Eisenhower announced favorable (unemployment figures) before the (November election) voting in 1954, 1956, and 1958. In 1971, then-President Nixon ordered the discontinuation of press briefings by the BLS after two months in which BLS' interpretation of the numbers differed from the administration (Goldberg and Moye 1985).

Perhaps the ultimate and most direct possible form of political interference, one that has not yet occurred, is the appointment of an acolyte either as the head of a statistical agency or in the form of political appointees assigned to work in the agencies, especially individuals who do not have the technical background necessary to lead a statistical agency.[3] It is very reasonable to assert that such appointments would move the trust needle even further toward the bottom of the continuum.

THE REAL VALUE OF BUDGETARY RESOURCES FOR STATISTICAL AGENCIES

A more tangible metric also related to trust in government statistics is the amount of resources available to statistical agencies to perform their core functions and, in addition, to conduct the research and development needed to introduce new innovative methods and products to improve economic measurement. If declining budgets, in real terms, is a sign of declining quality, then even among the stalwart defenders of the statistical system, trust will be eroded to some degree.

In its 2025 report on the health of the federal statistical system, the American Statistical Association reports that "Eight of the thirteen agencies have lost at least 16% of their purchasing power since FY09 while congressional mandates have increased. Most of the agencies have also lost 20-30% of their staff. These reductions, along with contract cuts, are resulting in product delays, suspensions, and cancellations as well as reductions in data scope and detail," (Bowen et al. 2025).

Declining real budgets do not translate into declining product quality immediately. Statistical agencies will prioritize activities around their resources to maintain the effectiveness of their operations, the scope of their product lines, and their research into innovations. Over time, however, persistent cuts will begin to erode operations. Significantly large cuts, in any given year or over time, will often result in cutting entire operations such as eliminating a survey entirely. It is a well-known fact of statistical operations that owing to the overhead requirements of surveys, cutting sample does little to achieve significant budgetary savings. At the same time, statistical agencies are loathe to discontinue surveys. In general, surveys exist because they inform important measurement dimensions contributing to our understanding of the economy and our society. Even in the face larger cuts, agencies may seek to adjust data collection and estimation approaches to maintain surveys, resulting in longer-term declines in the quality of those operations and the data produced.

THE IMPACT OF DECLINING COLLECTION AND RESPONSE RATES

Perhaps the single most noticeable metric that is a signal of declining trust in the data are falling data collection and response rates.[4] Remembering the Pew "public trust in government" metric, even if there were no resource constraints, declining trust has likely contributed to a growing recalcitrance to participate in surveys, translating into declining collection and response rates. In addition, declining real resources will mean that the extra efforts needed to maintain response rates, such as devoting more personnel to contacting reluctant eligible sample members, including the use of relatively expensive but effective personal visits, will be increasingly out of reach.[5]

Another aspect of declining response rates is their potential impact on bias in the estimates produced. Are the nonrespondents to surveys different from respondents, such that if known, the answers that nonrespondents would have given might significantly change the published estimates and our understanding of the economy? What is likely not well known is that the Office of Information and Regulatory Affairs (OIRA) of OMB mandates that the statistical agencies conduct studies of nonresponse bias for their major surveys and report their findings to OIRA (NASEM 2025).

As is often the case in technical survey methods research, these detailed reports are not translated into formats for consumption by the general public. It may be argued that even if they were, the impact on overall trust in federal data would be minimally affected. However, as we suggest in the last section of this chapter, taking a holistic approach to defending and making transparent the vast scope and high-quality work of the agencies, such as the analysis of non-response bias in surveys, is an opportunity to help bolster and maintain trust in the integrity of the statistical agencies.

MAINTAINING TRUST THROUGH DATA REVISIONS

The data produced by the federal statistical system are most often subject to revision. In many cases, it takes time to collect data from sample members, and the desire to provide timely data results in original estimates being developed based on partial returns and then updated in subsequent periods when more data are received. In other cases, revisions arise from making "benchmark adjustments" in establishment surveys on a periodic basis, usually annually, reflecting the difference between a survey estimate of a total measure in a given month such as total payroll employment or total output and the full count from the universe of establishments (usually known several months or even years after the survey).

As noted above, the size of the revisions to the May and June 2025 Current Employment Statistics (CES) survey estimates announced with the July 2025 Employment Situation report was the basis for firing then-BLS Commissioner Erika McEntarfer. In that July release, BLS revised its original estimate of payroll employment change for May from an original 144,000 to just 19,000 and June's original estimate was revised from 147,000 to 14,000 (BLS 2025). There are a number of reasons for the revisions of data estimates, principally including the time it takes to collect data as compared to the requirements of more frequent publication of data estimates. The CES is a large survey of 121,000 employers covering around 631,000 worksites; it takes time to collect responses. CES allows firms three months to report their payroll data for any given month. About 60% of firms respond by the first closing, which was the basis for the original May and June estimates of 144,000 and 147,000 respectively. Generally, the collection rate is around 90-92% by the second closing and 95% by the third.[6] Revisions simply reflect the incorporation of these later reports, which improve accuracy.

Given this reality, one might be satisfied in arguing that revisions are a "normal" part of the production of economic statistics and that their existence should not call into question our trust in the data. However, a more nuanced view should be seeking to understand the reasons behind revisions, particularly large ones like those observed in the July 2025 release. Do they signal a turning point in the economy? Are the revisions getting larger over time? Are they widespread across industries or are they concentrated in just a few? As mentioned above, at the same time that the data are revised each month BLS also updates their estimates of seasonally adjusted employment levels, which also affected the published totals. To what extent are the revised estimates a function of late reports and/or changes from concurrent seasonal adjustment? As we argue in the last section of this report on ways to improve trust, it is critically important that the statistical agencies adopt a (more) pro-active approach to analyzing and communicating their understanding of the data, such as the revisions to the May and June employment totals, to establish a clear, unbiased, and technical interpretation of their published estimates, no matter the political, public, or private research interpretations of those same data. To leave the interpretation solely to those outside the statistical agencies invites the possibility of untrue versions of interpretation becoming the trusted coin of the realm.[7]

Indeed, there was a missed opportunity for BLS to provide a technical perspective on the revisions announced in July 2025. Up until January 2023, BLS had included a "Commissioner's Statement" as part of the monthly Employment Situation report (BLS 2023). While this statement was viewed by many as simply repetitive of the language in the press release, it was a forum for providing more detailed information on unusual movements in the data.

This is not to say that the BLS or the other federal statistical agencies have not been proactive in their analysis of significant changes in data, the relationship between those changes and the structure and direction of the economy, and the possible ways in which the methods of data collection and the construction of estimates are affecting the nature of reported data. Indeed, the agencies have a rich history of analysis of their own operations and data. At the same time, questions that surface, especially ones that point to a lack of understanding, transparency, and— more directly— faith in the statistics produced could be addressed head on in a neutral and technical manner. A great example is a paper the BLS wrote in 2008 dispelling, one at a time, the various untruths propagated by the Shadowstats website claiming bias and intentional methodological manipulation of Consumer Price Index (CPI) inflation data (Greenless and McClelland 2008).

Nor is it possible for the BLS or other agencies to respond to every claim of data manipulation or other forms of breaking the public trust; the resources to do this simply do not exist. However, a more proactive stance, selecting the higher visibility claims, could serve to rebut some of the more insidious mistruths. What is unfortunate is that the advisory committees, comprised of volunteer experts from academia, business, and nonprofits, that have served the statistical agencies with commitment and distinction, and ones that often give voice to the concerns they hear from data users about trust in the data, have been disbanded by this administration.

SELF-INFLICTED WOUNDS

Yet another possible factor influencing trust in federal data are the self-inflicted wounds owing to unplanned and unfortunate early releases of data by statistical agencies suggesting the possibility of political influence, managerial lapses, or promoting favored status among data users. There have been a number of instances of "early" releases of data that resulted from IT system failures, unintentional release of information through automated email transmissions, and even accidental mentions of top-line data by administration officials.[8] It is not clear how injurious such instances have been, mainly owing to their infrequency and not having a clear and systematic nature that would allow for study.

THE USE OF ALTERNATIVE DATA IN THE CONSTRUCTION OF ESTIMATES

Thus far in this report we have referenced the construction of estimates in very general terms, with explicit references to data from surveys that underlie those estimates. A growing practice, born both of opportunity and budget necessity, is the use of alternative data sources to supplement survey data in the construction of published data. These sources of alternative data are varied, including:

- Data collected for program administration purposes such as Unemployment Insurance Program wage record data, gas station pricing data from the Energy Information Agency, physician reimbursement data for medical services from the Center for Medicaid and Medicare, and welfare program recipiency from Health and Human Services, among many others.
- Private sector data provided to the statistical agencies, often for a fee, including credit card transactions, price data for in-store sales, and data on acquisitions and mergers provided by Wall Street firms, among others
- Website data derived from web scraping firms such as job posting data and cable TV pricing
- Text data, often derived from the sources mentioned above, in which the statistical agencies use various sophisticated machine learning algorithmic techniques to translate text into coded data classifications such as converting texts of job titles into the Standard Occupational Classification (SOC) System codes or descriptions of firm production processes into North American Industry Classification System (NAICS) codes.

There are obvious incentives for the statistical agencies to pursue innovative research into the use of alternative data. In some cases, it allows collection of vast amounts of data that will replace some portion, sometimes significant, of the data needed for published estimates. This can produce both budget savings—especially important in light of declining real budgets—and the possibility of higher quality data estimates. Judgment on the latter requires extensive analysis of the nature of the alternative data. For example, the BLS reports took several years to ensure methodological consistency and data quality before incorporating private data on new car prices into the CPI index for that category.[9]

In general, the statistical agencies have done a very nice job of documenting their progress and use of alternative data sources. Much of that research is published on the websites of the individual agencies. In other cases, CNSTAT has published extensive studies related to the use of various types of alternative data.

It is not completely clear how the use of alternative data affects the level of trust in official statistics. On the one hand, replacing data in surveys with declining response rates with higher quality and more reliable alternative data may improve trust. On the other hand, the mixing of various data sources to produce published estimates may produce a black box type of opaque understanding, even among technical users, that results in a feeling of a lack of transparency. Again, as argued throughout this series, the statistical agencies have an opportunity to address this shortcoming through more accessible communication of methods. A telling example of this challenge is trying to get a simple answer to understanding how many elementary price indices in the CPI are based solely on administrative data.

CHALLENGES IN UNDERSTANDING AND TRUSTING STATISTICAL METHODS

Related to the continuum of trust described above is the wide scope of what the public understands and does not understand about the nature of the data that are published by the statistical agencies. The popular saying that you can "use statistics to prove anything" is suggestive of the idea that you can hide behind fancy statistical methods to assert and defend interpretations of data that are simply not true. It would not be surprising that individuals at the bottom of the trust continuum also have a similar dim view of the statistics produced by the federal government.

More subtly, the choice of which statistics to emphasize and to publish can lead to a lack of understanding of the complexity of the phenomenon under study, such as only providing an average value instead of a more informative view of the percentile distribution of the statistical data in question. Certainly, it is not a stretch to suggest that advocacy groups often highlight the data concept that is most supportive of their particular position. For statistical agencies, the responsibility is extremely clear. Trust in the statistical agencies' data implies that they are providing the most relevant data for the purposes of understanding the true nature of our economy and society.

The problem in this context is that with limited and declining real resources, statistical agencies are often in the position of having to prioritize which of the most informative statistics they can afford to produce. For example, the costs of data collection may limit the sample sizes that would allow the publication of more detailed disaggregations of the concept under study. In other cases, there may be a recognition that the concepts under study are being measured with error, but the resources needed to address these deficiencies do not exist. For example, the use of temporary help agencies, independent contractors, and gig workers in manufacturing is an important but poorly measured phenomenon. This is especially true for establishment surveys that only measure wage and salary employment or household surveys that, while including such classes of workers in broad terms, do not have the necessary industry detail.

Statistical agencies also have the responsibility to adopt the highest standards of methodological and statistical practice in the construction and interpretation of data estimates. Even the most sophisticated data users, potentially well versed in the technical detail of statistical techniques, have to trust that statistical agencies are following best practice when it comes to the use of imputation, seasonal adjustment, non-response reweighting of estimates, raking, ratio allocation, and modelling of local geographic detail, among other statistical techniques. Trust, in this context, requires clear communication by the statistical agencies on the methods they adopt and an openness to critical review of these methods in the hopes of improving the quality of the data produced.

THE VALUE OF INDEPENDENT REVIEWS TO IMPROVING THE QUALITY OF FEDERAL ECONOMIC DATA

Organizations outside the statistical system such as the CNSTAT and advisory boards internal to and appointed by the statistical agencies have provided such critical review of the statistical practices of the agencies. In addition, access to confidential agency data to academic researchers has provided valuable additional opportunities for independent review and validation of the quality of the data produced by the agencies. And as noted above, the agencies themselves provide critical insight and review of their own practices by publishing their own analyses of their data.

Consider the role of CNSTAT. As an independent body part of the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine can commission studies of the work of the federal statistical agencies, often leading to important insights and recommendations for improving statistical practice. Statistical agencies can also ask and provide resources for an independent study commission of a particular issue for which they want advice. A typical request that has often been made is to set up a commission to make recommendations on the redesign of a survey program. The benefit of these studies is that the final reports are developed by experts who are wholly independent of the statistical agencies. The benefit to the agencies is often derived from the support that the recommendations often provide for budget initiatives subsequently introduced by the agencies.

A less formal but no less effective approach has been the interaction between the statistical agencies and the now-former advisory committees set up by the statistical agencies. For example, the Federal Economic Statistics Advisory Committee provided advice jointly to the Census Bureau, the Bureau of Economic Analysis, and the Bureau of Labor Statistics. In addition, each of these agencies had their own internal advisory boards. These boards performed important functions in monitoring the activities of the agencies, setting up studies of specific issues affecting the quality of statistical operations and data, and providing advice on how to prioritize agency programs and future direction.

It is naturally concerning that these advisory boards have been eliminated by the Trump administration. Coupled with cuts to research funding overall, the dismantling of these boards has created an environment in which there is far less support for work that supports improving the quality of economic statistics. While the budget of CNSTAT has yet to be reduced (as of this writing), they are operating in an environment in which work on ways to innovate and improve the work of the statistical agencies is of much lower priority than in the past. While the tangible effect on trust in the data produced by the agencies is hard to measure, it seems reasonable to assert that it will only serve to move us further to the left on the continuum.

Ways to improve trust in the data produced by the statistical system

Moving the needle on trust in the quality and relevance of data published by the statistical agencies is no easy task. While the framework for accomplishing this objective is not in dispute—adherence to the principles and practices of a high performing statistical system—it is overcoming many of the obstacles discussed in previous sections that are threats to improving trust.

In many cases, the challenges that statistical agencies face are not directly under their control. For example, what advice would you give to the heads of statistical agencies as to how to respond to charges of data manipulation that have no basis in fact or, more simply, declarations that the mere size in the movements in data are such that they call into question the quality and reliability of the work of the agencies? It seems obvious that responding to politically motivated statements directly would be in conflict with the goal of maintaining independence. However, it is certainly within the province of the statistical agencies to produce objective analysis pertaining to any trends or movement in the data. More broadly, it may be useful for the agencies to continue and expand their practice of studying and publishing results of their analysis of their statistical operations and trends in published data.

In other words, what the agencies can control is their own messaging about the quality of their operations and data. It may be challenging to develop accessible and easy to understand versions or summaries of technical work, but creating a much more pro-active approach to assessing the quality of the data they produce and highlighting those assessments front and center on their websites would help counter claims of bias or inaccuracy. As previously mentioned, the statistical agencies already do a significant amount of research on the quality of their operations and data. However, the results of those efforts are often highly technical reports that are not easily understood by the public and are posted in very hard to find areas of their websites. These analyses are often the product of individual statistical programs within the agencies, and while of very high quality, they do not represent a holistic and pro-active approach by agency executives to address public concerns about trust in the data.

Stakeholders including the academic, business, and nonprofit communities also need to continue to rebut claims that data produced by the statistical agencies are untrustworthy. More importantly, these stakeholders need to point out the value of the data produced by the agencies and clearly state the case for budget enhancements to improve operations, coverage, and data quality.

In the absence of restoring the now defunct advisory committees—which we highly recommend be done—one clear opportunity that exists is for stakeholders to take a significant leadership role in setting up new communication channels with the statistical agencies to restore the types of strategic and technical conversations that existed with these committees.

Probably the best model for doing this is the summer workshops hosted by the National Bureau of Economic Research (NBER), in particular the Conference on Research in Income and Wealth. This event brings together academic researchers and statistical agency staff to discuss measurement issues. Hosting a similar type of convening on a more frequent basis in Washington, D.C., with agenda setting co-managed by academic and statistical agency representatives would help to close this communication gap.

There are other avenues of regular communication with the statistical agencies that are very valuable and should continue. For example, the National Association for Business Economists (NABE) holds quarterly meetings with the heads of the statistical agencies, generally focused on budget and program updates. NABE will often also set up panel discussions with agency heads at their annual conferences, again focused on budget and program updates. Other groups such as the Council for Community and Economic Research (C2ER), hosts the agency heads for similar purposes at their annual meetings.

In addition, with the recent NBER announcement of the establishment of the Economic Measurement Research Institute (EMRI), there likely will be additional convenings with statistical agencies. The focus of these meetings will be on innovative ways of modernizing data collection using big data and administrative data and addressing gaps in our knowledge of the digital and gig economy, among other topics.

These existing efforts along with the possibility of expanding their current scope of communication with the agencies on technical topics would be helpful. However, they do little to address the challenges faced by the statistical agencies in terms of the declining real values of their budgets. The agencies are often handicapped by the fact that they often do not have an opportunity to talk to OMB or to Congressional committees during the budget formulation and hearing process about the value of their programs, including support for specific budget initiatives. There are non-governmental organizations such as the Friends of BLS, the American Statistical Association, the Council of Professional Associations on Federal Statistics (COPAFS), and NABE, among others, that provide educational information to Congressional staff on the value of statistics and the need to protect the budgets of the agencies. While these groups are well intentioned, they do not have the organizational structure needed to maintain the kinds of timely communication and relationship building that are often needed at critical junctures in the budget negotiation process.

One possible avenue for better Congressional engagement is to work with advocacy groups to lobby on behalf of these various non-governmental organizations groups. What is also missing is the lack of focused efforts and attention by Congressional budget committees to hear directly from the agencies about the value of their programs. This is especially important in circumstances, such as in the current administration, in which Cabinet agencies have expressed serious concerns about the quality of the data produced by the statistical agencies.[10]

A more focused opportunity for the statistical agencies to move the needle on trust is to greatly expand their excellent work on blending and even replacing survey data with alternative data sources. The opportunity to greatly reduce the reporting burden on firms by replacing filling out survey forms with automated data pulls from existing firm records (payroll, HR, sales, etc.) could go a long way to improving the relationship between private sector businesses and the statistical agencies. Both the Census Bureau and the Bureau of Labor Statistics have introduced such data reporting modernization in many of their programs, but there is much more that can be done. To create greater momentum in this effort, however, requires resources to research possible approaches, set up pilot demonstrations including developing IT applications, and managing the upfront costs of converting data collection programs from existing collection methods to more automated modern ones.

Consider three examples. In the BLS Occupational Employment and Wage Statistics (OEWS) Survey, firms are asked to report how many employees they have in individual occupations, where these numbers are further reported by firms into separate wage intervals. The occupational codes used by the federal government often will not match the job titles used by firms, so respondents will have to make conversion assignments in filling the forms. A firm with 10 employees will find this task much easier than an establishment with 1000 employees, for example. An alternative approach is to ask firms to report each employee's job title and wage. Armed with these data, it is possible to use machine learning to assign occupational codes to job titles that have the highest probability of a match. And of course, the hope is that firms can provide this information easily through an electronic search and retrieval of data from their payroll and HR systems. The challenge for an organization like BLS is that the OEWS is a very complex and large production operation: The sample size for the survey is approximately 400,000 establishments annually, with data collected by the different Labor Market Information Offices across the states (including the Virgin Islands and Puerto Rico).[11] Converting this data collection to an automated approach is a significant undertaking that must be carefully piloted and tested.

Another example, one that is both very exciting and innovative, is the work the Census Bureau is doing with Intel to develop large language model (LLM) applications to allow a respondent, in the case of the pilot, Amazon, to provide data from their firm records—in their particular format—and have the LLM convert the records into answers needed for the various surveys that Amazon is asked to report. Census reports that the average quarterly reporting burden for Amazon across their various surveys was reduced from hundreds of hours to 20 minutes.[12]

A final example comes from the U.S. Chamber of Commerce Foundation's wage record initiative called "Jobs and Employment Data Exchange (JEDx)." This public-private effort seeks to create consistent standards for the reporting of employment and earnings data across firms in the U.S. with the goal of lowering the costs and improving the quality of data collected and reported by firms to statistical agencies while also improving workforce analytics and understanding of labor market trends.

One of the roadblocks faced by the statistical agencies is the lack of an innovation fund to allow exploration of ambitious ideas for new products and data collection approaches, including ones that may ultimately fail. The budget process for agencies is very rigid and designed to continue support for existing programs or to fund new ones. Resources to fund pilots that allow the agencies to explore and validate ways to improve data collection and measure new and emerging economic concepts would greatly improve and speed up their introduction of new innovations.

There are a significant number of measurement challenges that could benefit from such a flexible innovation fund. How we capture the emergence of and impact of AI on our economy, improving our measures of the service providing sector (particularly productivity), and the changing nature of employment, including gig work, are just a few examples. The EMRI effort by the NBER may help to establish the potential benefits of investing in such research, but ultimately, it will require administration and Congressional action to support an innovation fund. The benefit is that modernization of data collection may help to improve the public's trust in the quality of data, especially among firms who appreciate the efforts to ease the reporting burden of data collection.

Concluding remarks

This report explored a variety of dimensions of trust in the data produced by the federal statistical system, some more easily measured than others. Many of these dimensions point to declining trust over time, such as concerns about the political independence of statistical agencies, the declining real value of their budgets that affect overall data quality, and data revisions, as a few examples.

At the same time, the statistical agencies, despite declining real budgets, are doing an incredible amount of high-quality work to preserve and enhance their measurement of the economy and provide data-driven guidance to inform policy. This work, which should serve to improve the public's trust in data, is too often unrecognized, cloaked in highly technical reports on the quality of data, with missed opportunities to pro-actively promote this work in accessible non-technical formats.

Even if the agencies did achieve greater transparency and effective marketing of their work, there is a significant need for a greater level of resources to improve the quality of existing programs and flexibility in the use of resources to continue and greatly expand efforts to modernize data collection, estimation, and reporting. It is this latter need that is not under the direct control of the agencies. They can promote the value of their programs and proposed research into innovations, but unless there is consistent and dedicated increased funding support for their work, they will be forced to continue choosing among valued programs in response to the reality of declining budgetary resources, continuing a cycle of erosion of trust in the data they produce.

Perhaps most critically, we need to look to the future of measurement. Efforts to improve transparency and enhance the budgets of agencies need to be viewed in the context of measuring our increasingly complex and digitized economy. The emergence of AI, increased use of automation in all industries, the changing nature of work and firm/workers relationships, global trading and supply relationships, and the changing demographic landscape, among others, require that statistical agencies be allowed to respond quickly, pilot innovative measurement experiments, and communicate broadly with the academic, business, and policy communities to understand changing measurement challenges. Additionally, many of these same complex changes provide enormous opportunities to modernize the way in which data are collected, including the use of machine learning, accessing digitized records, and applying large language models to statistical processes such as imputation and modelling.

There is enormous potential to improve the quality and our understanding of the data produced by the statistical system, and thereby the public's trust. However, significant changes need to be made, especially in terms of resources, to allow the agencies to accomplish these goals.

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Endnotes

1 See https://amerispeak.norc.org/about-amerispeak.html.

2 Statistical Policy Directives of the Office of Management and Budget: https://www.bls.gov/bls/statistical-policy-directives.htm

3 In the fall of 1971, after ordering the discontinuation of press briefings by BLS, then-BLS Commissioner Moore announced a reorganization of his executive team, abolishing the position of Chief of the Office of Manpower and Employment Statistics, who had previously been the person conducting the press briefings, as well as the Chief Statistician of the BLS. In their place, two new positions were created, Deputy Commissioner for Statistical Operations and Processing (filled by a BLS staff member) and Deputy Commissioner for Data Analysis (a new position filled by a staff member from the President's Commission on Federal Statistics). Lawrence O'Brien, chair of the Democratic National Committee, charged that the White House was stacking the BLS with "political appointees" (Goldberg and Moye 1985).

4 Collection rate is the percentage of all sample units who have a final determined data collection status, including refusals and sampled units that are not in fact eligible for the survey; a response rate is the percentage of eligible respondents who provide data for the survey.

5 For a discussion of trends in survey response rates, see Johnson (2026).

6 Collection rates found via Bureau of Labor Statistics. "Databases, Tables & Calculators by Subject." Databases, Tables & Calculations by Subject. https://www.bls.gov/data/.

7 However, even among those who understand the technical arguments underlying these revisions, it is likely that aspects of these revisions have impacted their trust in the data. For example, it seems reasonable to assert that trust in the revisions would improve if the collection rate in the first period were significantly higher than 60%. One suggestion that has been made in various quarters, including by this author (Horrigan 2025), is to extend data collection for each month to the end of the first full week of the next month. This will ensure that firms in the first closing can report after the end of the month—in cases where the Employment Situation is released early the next month, say the first of the month, data collection closes before the end of the reporting period. Also, at some point between the first and second closing, the collection rate increases significantly from around 60 to 90%. How quickly this rate rises, such as by the end of the full week of the next month, is knowable and can help guide a change in policy. Delaying the release until the middle of the next month is not without precedent: The CPI Price Program at BLS follows this practice, in particular to achieve full representation of the month for pricing.

8 See, for example: https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2024-05-16/us-bls-says-april-cpi-data-inadvertently-posted-30-min-early.

9 See https://www.bls.gov/cpi/factsheets/r-cpi-u-nv.htm.

10 See https://www.dol.gov/newsroom/releases/osec/osec20250909.

11 See https://www.bls.gov/opub/hom/oews/home.htm.

12 See https://www.intel.com/content/dam/www/central-libraries/us/en/documents/2025-05/intel-uscb-aws-case-study.pdf.

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