

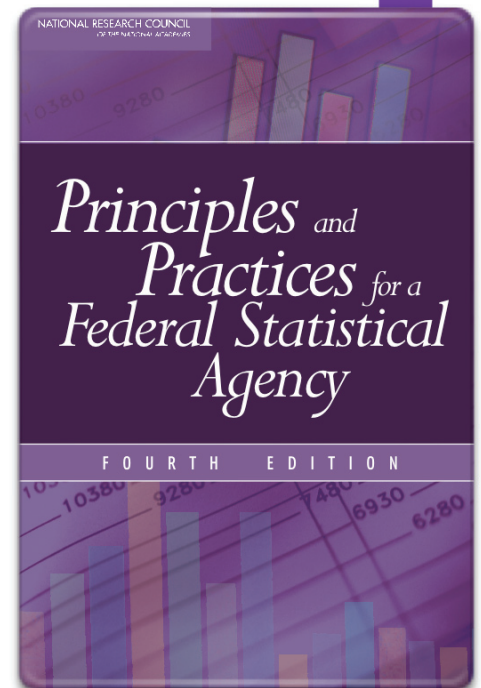
Principles and Practices for a Federal Statistical Agency Fourth Edition • 2009

Four Principles for an Effective Statistical Agency

1. **A federal statistical agency must be in a position to provide objective information that is relevant to issues of public policy.** Objective information is information that is as accurate and comprehensible as possible and is not intended to promote a particular policy position or group interest.
2. **A federal statistical agency must have credibility with those who use its data and information.** Few data users are in a position to verify the completeness and accuracy of statistical information; they must rely on an agency's reputation as a credible source of accurate and useful statistics.
3. **A federal statistical agency must have the trust of those whose information it obtains.** Data providers, such as respondents to surveys and custodians of administrative records, must be able to rely on the word of a statistical agency that the information they provide about themselves or others will be used only for statistical purposes. An agency earns the trust of its data providers by appropriately protecting the confidentiality of responses and by respecting their privacy.
4. **A federal statistical agency must have a strong position of independence within the government.** To be credible and unhindered in its mission, a statistical agency must be distinct from those parts of a department that carry out law enforcement and policy-making activities. It must be able to execute its mission without being subject to pressures to advance a political agenda. It must be impartial and avoid even the appearance that its collection, analysis, and reporting processes might be manipulated for political purposes or that individually identifiable data might be turned over for administrative, regulatory, or law enforcement purposes.

Eleven Practices for an Effective Statistical Agency

- I. A Clearly Defined and Well-Accepted Mission
2. Continual Development of More Useful Data
3. Openness About Sources and Limitations of the Data
4. Wide Dissemination of Data
5. Cooperation with Data Users
6. Fair Treatment of Data Providers
7. Commitment to Quality and Professional Standards of Practice
8. An Active Research Program
9. Professional Advancement of Staff
10. A Strong Internal and External Evaluation Program
- II. Coordination and Cooperation with Other Statistical Agencies



Definition of a Statistical Agency

A federal statistical agency is a unit of the federal government whose principal function is the compilation and analysis of data and the dissemination of information for statistical purposes. Statistical purposes include description, evaluation, analysis, inference, and research; they do not include administration, regulation, or enforcement.

Why We Need Statistical Agencies

Statistics that are publicly available from government agencies—estimates of business activity and productivity, consumer and producer prices, labor force and employment, high school and college completion, birth and death rates, prices of fuels, health and disability status, healthcare expenditures, health insurance coverage, transportation patterns, crime victimization, investment in research and development, air and water quality, crop forecasts, poverty, inequality, and welfare dependency, assets and wealth—are essential for a nation to advance the economic wellbeing and quality of life of its people and to operate a democratic system of government. Federal statistical agencies are established to be a credible source of relevant, accurate, and timely statistics in one or more subject areas that are available to policy makers in all levels and branches of government and for use by the broader public, including individuals, families, corporations, academic institutions, and other organizations.



In addition to definitions and commentary on the principles and practices, the fourth edition includes appendixes on the organization of the federal statistical system and laws and regulations that cover its operations. Also included is a reproduction of the *Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics* of the Statistical Commission of the United Nations.



About the Committee on National Statistics

The Committee on National Statistics (CNSTAT) is a standing committee of the National Academy of Sciences. It was established in 1972 to improve the statistical methods and information on which public policy decisions are based. The Committee carries out studies, workshops, and other activities to foster better measure and fuller understanding of the economy, the environment, public health, crime, education, immigration, poverty, welfare, and other public policy issues. It also evaluates ongoing statistical programs and tracks the statistical policy and coordinating activities of the federal government, serving a unique role at the intersection of statistics and public policy.

The Committee is chaired by William Eddy, Professor of Statistics at Carnegie Mellon University, and includes 13 distinguished members with expertise in survey research, statistics, computer science, biostatistics, economics, sociology, demography, and the operation of statistical agencies. They are assisted by a small professional staff. The Committee's work is supported by a consortium of federal agencies through a National Science Foundation grant.

NATIONAL RESEARCH COUNCIL OF THE NATIONAL ACADEMIES

COMMITTEE ON NATIONAL STATISTICS

500 Fifth Street NW, Washington, DC 20001

(202) 334-3096 • FAX (202) 334-3751

<http://www.nationalacademies.org/cnstat>