



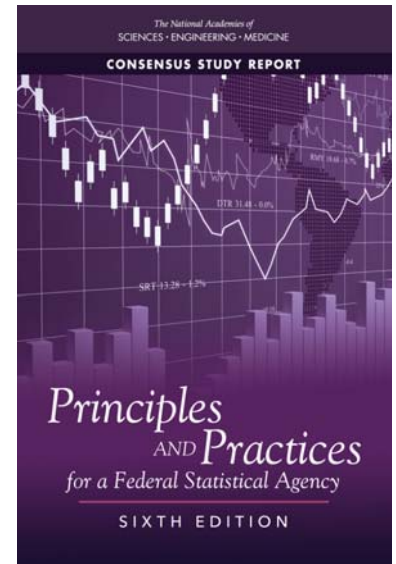
July 2017

Principles and Practices for a Federal Statistical Agency: Sixth Edition

Principles and Practices for a Federal Statistical Agency (P&P), from its first edition in 1992 to this sixth edition, is intended to support the invaluable role of widely available, trustworthy, relevant, accurate, and timely government statistics. Such statistics are essential not only for policy makers and program administrators at all government levels, but also for individuals, households, businesses, and other organizations to make informed decisions and for scientists to add to knowledge. Even more broadly, the effective operation of a democratic system of government depends on the unhindered flow of impartial, scientifically based statistical information to its citizens on a wide range of issues, including employment, growth in the economy, the cost of living, crime victimization, family structure, physical and mental health, educational attainment, energy use, and the environment.

In the United States, federal statistical agencies, such as the National Center for Health Statistics and the U.S. Census Bureau, are the entities whose principal function is to compile, analyze, and disseminate information for statistical uses, such as monitoring key economic and societal indicators, allocating legislative seats and government funds, deciding on the location of services, evaluating programs, and conducting scientific research. Statistical uses encompass only descriptions of populations: they exclude interest in or identification of any individual person, institution, or economic unit. To facilitate understanding, statistical agencies may analyze their data to describe trends, make comparisons, and evaluate data quality, but never to advocate policies or to take partisan positions. The work of these agencies is coordinated by the U.S. Office of Management and Budget.

In today's data-rich environment, in which no single source can provide all of the needed information with acceptable quality, costs, and timeliness, statistical agencies need to draw on multiple data sources, carefully assessing each source's quality and relevance for statistical use. Such sources include not only surveys or censuses of people and organizations, but also government administrative records, private-sector datasets, sensor data, geospatial data, and a wide variety of web-based data.



Statistical agency decisions—managerial, programmatic, and technical—are guided by four well-established and fundamental principles:

- **Principle 1: Relevance to Policy Issues**

A statistical agency must provide objective, accurate, and timely information that is relevant to issues of public policy and useful to a broad range of public- and private-sector users, as well as to the public. To establish priorities for its programs, a statistical agency must not only work closely with the executive branch and Congress, but also engage users from state and local governments, businesses, academia, and nongovernmental groups. Interaction with stakeholders is essential to enable a statistical agency to continually reassess the information needs of the users of its data.

- **Principle 2: Credibility among Data Users**

Because 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 source of quality work that is free from political and other undue external influence. An agency builds credibility by widely disseminating its data in accessible and easy-to-use ways on an equal basis to all users. Also essential to building credibility are for an agency to be open and transparent about its data sources and their limitations, demonstrate understanding of users' needs and priorities, fully document the processes used to produce and disseminate statistical products, and take proactive steps to preserve data for future use.

- **Principle 3: Trust among Data Providers**

Data providers, such as survey respondents or custodians of administrative records, must be able to trust that the information they provide to a statistical agency will be used only for the purposes that the agency has described. In particular, data providers must trust that

information collected from them for statistical purposes will not be used for any other purpose, such as law enforcement or regulation, that could affect a specific individual or organization. Data providers must also be able to trust that a statistical agency will honor its pledges to protect the confidentiality of their responses and safeguard individual records against unauthorized attempts to gain access. A statistical agency further earns the trust of data providers and respects their privacy and autonomy through minimizing the intrusiveness of questions and the time and effort needed to respond to information requests. It also does so through informing providers of the importance of the information, the expected time required to participate in the data collection, and whether the collection is mandatory or voluntary.

- **Principle 4: Independence from Political and Other Undue External Influence**

To be credible, trustworthy, and unhindered in its mission, a statistical agency must maintain a position of independence from undue external influences (even as it proactively seeks input on its program and priorities). It must avoid even the appearance that its collection, analysis, or dissemination processes might be manipulated for political or partisan purposes or that individually identifiable data collected under a pledge of confidentiality might be turned over for administrative, regulatory, or law enforcement uses. Protection from undue outside influences requires that a statistical agency have authority for professional decisions on its programs, including authority over the selection and promotion of staff; the processing, secure storage, and maintenance of its data; and the timing and content of data releases, accompanying press releases, and documentation. The credibility that comes from independence is essential for users to maintain confidence in the accuracy and objectivity of a statistical agency's data and for data providers to be willing to cooperate with agency requests.

Thirteen practices are critical for the effective, principled operation of a statistical agency:

1. a clearly defined and well-accepted mission,
2. necessary authority to protect independence,
3. use of multiple data sources for statistics that meet user needs,
4. openness about sources and limitations of the data provided,
5. wide dissemination of accessible and easy-to-use data,
6. cooperation with data users,
7. respect for the privacy and autonomy of data providers,
8. protection of the confidentiality of data providers' information,
9. commitment to quality and professional standards of practice,
10. an active research program,
11. professional advancement of staff,
12. a strong internal and external evaluation program, and
13. coordination and collaboration with other statistical agencies.

By adhering to the principles and following the practices, a federal statistical agency will be well positioned to provide the relevant, accurate, timely, credible, and trustworthy statistical information that policy makers and the public require.

ABOUT THE SIXTH EDITION

The sixth edition of *P&P*, like previous editions, is designed to assist officials in cabinet departments and independent agencies that house federal statistical agencies, as well as those agencies' leaders and staff, to understand the requirements for the agencies to serve the public good. The sixth edition retained the same 4 principles and 13 practices as the fifth edition, while renaming Practice 3 to emphasize the need for statistical agencies to use multiple sources of data (e.g., administrative records and private-sector datasets) to strengthen the utility and cost-effectiveness of their data in the face of such challenges as decreasing survey response rates and constrained budgets. The sixth edition also has a new section on the value of federal statistics.

The sixth edition has been reformatted for ease of access; the online version, available as a PDF, contains the full text of the report and appendixes on legislation and regulations that govern federal statistics and the organization of the federal statistical system, with links to sections of the report and references.

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For More Information . . . This Consensus Study Report Highlights was prepared by the Committee on National Statistics based on the Consensus Study Report *Principles and Practices for a Federal Statistical Agency: Sixth Edition* (2017). The study was sponsored by the National Science Foundation, which provides support for the work of the Committee on National Statistics from a consortium of federal agencies. Any opinions, findings, conclusions, or recommendations expressed in this publication do not necessarily reflect the views of any organization or agency that provided support for the project. Copies of the Consensus Study Report are available from the National Academies Press at (800) 624-6242; <http://www.nap.edu/24810>.

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