

DEFINITION OF A STATE STATISTICAL ENTITY

A state statistical entity is a unit of the state government whose principal function is the compilation and analysis of data and the dissemination of information for statistical purposes.

The theory and methods of the discipline of statistics and related fields and the practice of the profession of statistics are brought to bear on the compilation of data, on producing information from the data, and on disseminating that information.

- The *unit* is generally recognized as a distinct entity. It may be located within either a cabinet-level department or an independent agency, or it could itself be an independent agency.
- *Statistical purposes* include description, evaluation, analysis, inference, and research. For these purposes, a state statistical entity may collect data from individuals, establishments, or other organizations directly, or it may obtain data from administrative records, but it does not do so for administrative, regulatory, or law enforcement purposes. Statistical purposes relate to descriptions of groups and exclude any interest in or identification of an individual person or economic unit. The data are used solely to describe and analyze statistical patterns, trends, and relationships involving groups of persons or other units.

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PRINCIPLES FOR A STATE STATISTICAL ENTITY

Principle 1: Relevance to Policy Issues

A state statistical entity must be in a position to provide information relevant to issues of public policy.

A statistical entity must be knowledgeable about the issues and requirements of public policy and state programs and able to provide objective information that is relevant to policy and program needs. In establishing priorities for statistical programs for this purpose, a statistical entity must work closely with the users of such information in the executive branch, Congress, and interested nongovernmental groups.

Often, the provision of statistics concerning a particular subject area is itself a public policy, with the goal of serving a broad range of information needs of private- and public-sector users as well as the public. To establish priorities for such statistics, a statistical entity must maintain contact with a broad spectrum of users in the business sector, academia, state and local governments, and elsewhere.

Principle 2: Credibility Among Data Users

A state statistical entity must have credibility based on a relationship of mutual respect and trust with those who use its data and information.

It is essential that a statistical entity strive to maintain credibility for itself and its data. Few data users are in a position to verify the completeness and accuracy of statistical information; they must rely on an entity's reputation as a credible source of accurate and useful statistics.

To have credibility, an entity must be and must be perceived to be free of political interference and policy advocacy. Also important for credibility is that an entity follow such practices as wide dissemination of data, openness about the data provided, commitment to quality and professional practice, and fair treatment of data providers.

Principle 3: Trust Among Data Providers

A state statistical entity must have a relationship of mutual respect and trust with respondents who provide data and with all data subjects whose information it obtains.

Data providers must be able to rely on the word of a statistical entity when they are asked to provide information about themselves. An entity earns the trust of its data providers by ensuring appropriate confidentiality of responses. Maintaining confidentiality, in particular, precludes the use of individually identifiable information for any administrative, regulatory, or law enforcement purpose.

PRACTICES FOR A STATE STATISTICAL ENTITY

Practice 1: A Clearly Defined and Well-Accepted Mission

An entity's mission should include responsibility for all elements of its programs for providing statistical information – determining sources of data, measurement methods, efficient methods of data collection and processing, and appropriate methods of analysis – and ensuring the public availability not only of the data, but also of documentation of the methods used to obtain the data and their quality. The mission should include the responsibility for assessing information needs and priorities and ways to meet those needs, which could include the establishment of a data collection program or the modification or discontinuance of an existing program.

Practice 2: A Strong Position of Independence

A widely acknowledged position of independence is necessary for a statistical entity to have credibility and to carry out its function to provide an unhindered flow of useful, high-quality information for the public, decision makers, analysts, and program planners inside and outside government. Without the credibility that comes from a strong degree of independence, users may lose trust in the accuracy and objectivity of the entity's data, and data providers may become less willing to cooperate with entity requests.

In essence, a statistical entity must be distinct from those parts of the department carrying out law enforcement and policy-making activities. 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.

Other characteristics related to independence are that the statistical entity have:

- authority for professional decisions over the scope, content, and frequency of data compiled, analyzed, or published.
- recognition by policy officials outside the statistical entity of the entity's authority to release statistical information without prior clearance.
- adherence to predetermined schedules in the public release of important statistical indicators to prevent even the appearance of manipulation of release dates for political purposes.

Practice 3: Continual Development of More Useful Data

Statistical entities must continually look to improve their data systems to provide information that is accurate, timely, and relevant for changing public policy needs. An entity may achieve these goals by sharing technical information and ideas with other statistical entities.

Practice 4: Openness About Sources and Limitations of the Data Provided

A statistical entity should be open about its data and their strengths and limitations, taking as much care to understand and explain how its statistics may fall short of accuracy as it does to produce accurate data in the first place. Data releases from a statistical program should be accompanied by a full description of the purpose of the program, the methods and assumptions used for data collection, processing, and reporting, what is known (and not known) about the quality and relevance of the data, appropriate methods for analysis that take account of viability and other sources of error in the data, and the results of research on the methods and data.

Practice 5: Wide Dissemination of Data

A statistical entity should strive for the widest possible dissemination of the data it compiles. Data dissemination should be timely and public.

Practice 6: Cooperation with Data Users

A statistical entity should consult with a broad spectrum of users of its data in order to make its products more useful. It should:

- seek advice on data concepts, statistical methods, and data products from data users as well as from other professional and technical subject-matter and methodological experts.
- provide equal access to data to all users.

Practice 7: Fair Treatment of Data Providers

To maintain credibility and a relationship of respect and trust with data subjects and other data providers, a statistical entity must observe fair information practices. Such practices include:

- policies and procedures to inform data providers of the purposes of data collection and the anticipated uses of the information, whether their participation is mandatory or voluntary, and, if voluntary, using appropriate informed consent procedures to obtain their information.

Practice 8: Commitment to Quality and Professional Standards of Practice

A statistical entity should:

- use modern statistical theory and sound statistical practice in all technical work.
- develop strong staff expertise in the disciplines relevant to its mission, in the theory and practice of statistics, and in data collection, processing, analysis, and dissemination techniques.
- develop an understanding of the validity and accuracy of its data and convey the resulting measures of quality to users in ways that are comprehensible to nonexperts.

Practice 9: An Active Research Program

An effective statistical entity should have a research program that is integral to its activities.

The research program of a statistical entity should include research on the substantive issues for which the data were compiled. Such research should be conducted not only to provide useful objective analytical results, but also as a means to identify potential improvements to the content of the data, suggest improvements in the design and operation of the data collection, and provide fuller understanding of the limitations of the data.

Practice 10: Professional Advancement of Staff

A statistical entity's professional staff should be committed to the highest standards of quality work and professional practice. They should also be committed to the highest standards of professional ethics with regard to maintaining the entity's credibility as an objective, independent source of accurate and useful information obtained through fair information practices.

An entity's personnel policies should encourage staff to maintain and extend their technical capabilities through appropriate professional and developmental activities, such as attendance at professional meetings, participation in relevant training programs, and rotation of assignments.

Practice 11: Coordination and Cooperation with Other Statistical Entities

A statistical entity must seek opportunities to cooperate with other statistical entities to enhance the value of its own information and that of other entities in the state statistical system.

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