

***PROFESSIONAL AUTONOMY FOR
STATISTICAL AGENCIES—***

FINDINGS FROM AN ASSESSMENT

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What Is It (Professional Autonomy)?

- *What protects the autonomy of the federal statistical agencies? An assessment of the procedures in place to protect the independence and objectivity of official U.S. statistics (Citro, Potok, et al., forthcoming, *Journal of Statistics and Public Policy*)*
- Defines “**professional autonomy**” as—

An agency’s ability to act independently from political or other undue external influence with regard to its operations, such as data collection and analysis, staffing, and publications.
- Language borrowed in part from CNSTAT’s *Principles and Practices for a Federal Statistical Agency* (2021, 7th Edition)

What Is It Not?

- Statistical agencies of course operate within framework of congressional and executive oversight
- Professional autonomy does not mean that agencies wall themselves off from/hold themselves above direction/criticism
- Agencies must keep in close touch with the information needs of the nation and various user constituencies
- Agencies must seek outside expert advice to keep up to date with latest methods and to contribute to same

6 Elements of Professional Autonomy

	Statistical Policy Directive No. 1/ Evidence Act Protections for All Agencies	Additional Statutory Protections for Specific Agencies			
		BTS	EIA	BJS	Census
(1) Data Collection & Analysis	YES	STRONG	STRONG		
(2) Systems	YES	INTER-MEDIATE			
(3) Publication	YES	STRONG	STRONG		
(4) Staffing	YES (HIRING); NO (STAFFING LEVELS)	WEAK (HIRING)	STRONG		WEAK
(5) Budget	NO	WEAK			
(6) Contracting	NO	WEAK		STRONG	

Five agencies (BEA, ERS, NASS, ORES, SOI) lack even basic enabling legislation, and most agencies' legal authorization does not address autonomy.

Does Autonomy Really Matter?

- YES, statistical agencies need *credibility* with data users and stakeholders and *trust* of data responders— perception and reality of professional autonomy are critical to credibility and trust

An object lesson – CDC was in part politicized under the previous administration, and it is not trusted by half the population

- Stat agencies not in that dire straits—indeed, NYTimes documented resistance of Census Bureau career staff to attempted politicization of the 2020 census, and ERS/USDA built back up its staff after forced move to Kansas City—but the system would be naive to rest on its laurels

Is It (Can It Be) Threatened?

- YES, previous administration was egregious, but other administrations have tried to influence timing/content of statistical publications, retaliated against agencies/ staff, etc.
- Agencies have remarkably little legislative protection against undue external influence

Recommendations

- **LEGISLATION** (based on blue-ribbon panel) to authorize all principal statistical agencies and strengthen their professional autonomy
- **STRENGTHENED** role of **CHIEF STATISTICIAN** and **PERIODIC ASSESSMENTS** of health and performance of statistical agencies

Is Legislation Fool-Proof? What Else Can Help?

- Of course, norms/laws can be broken, but without authorization/protections in law, agencies don't have a leg to stand on
- “Informal” protection is also key—namely, user/stakeholder community that trusts an agency and will rise to its defense
 - ✓ Requires transparency, adherence to standards, good documentation at different levels
 - ✓ Requires strong two-way relationships with users

Building User Relationships

- Agencies (understandably) focus on data collection/production/release
- Often don't sufficiently prioritize/internalize user needs/documentation/et al.
 - ✓ Detail staff to users (e.g., states, businesses)
 - ✓ Get user input well ahead of proposed changes; respond to user feedback
 - ✓ Do crosswalks, parallel series
 - ✓ Elevate/empower user viewpoint in agency

Strengthened Laws/Stakeholder Relationships << Stronger Agencies

THANK YOU!

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***Principles and Practices for a Federal
Statistical Agency (7th edition)***

available from the

National Academies Press

<http://www.nap.edu>