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(COMMITTEE ON GOVERNMENT RELATIONS CHAIR, KENNETH TROSKE, HAS RECUSED HIMSELF FROM THIS COMMENT)
(COMMITTEE ON ECONOMIC STATISTICS MEMBER, PAT BAJARI, HAS RECUSED HIMSELF FROM THIS COMMENT)

Comments for the Advisory Committee on Data for Evidence Building In Response to FRN Document 85FR81179

February 9, 2021

Thank you for the opportunity to provide input. The American Economic Association (AEA) Committee on Economic Statistics and Committee on Government Relations offer comments on questions 3, 4, 6, and 9, and provide a link to their report to the Biden/Harris Administration on Necessary Improvement in the U.S. Statistical Infrastructure, which speaks broadly to the Advisory Committee on Data for Evidence Building's mission.

Question #3: Which frameworks, policies, practices, or methods show promise in overcoming challenges experienced by governments in their evidence building?

Answer: We contend that major improvements in the U.S. statistical infrastructure are necessary antecedents to progress on designing, producing, and assuring widespread access to high-quality federal data to inform policy making. Our report on Improving the U.S. Statistical Infrastructure (see: <https://www.aeaweb.org/content/file?id=13507>) commends actions to: prevent the politicization of federal statistics; strengthen considerably the role of the Chief Statistician of the United States; assure the Executive Branch supports the recommendations of the U.S. Commission on Evidence-Based Policymaking to help assure wide access to federal statistics and administrative data under high standards of privacy and confidentiality; use lessons learned from statistical collection during the COVID-19 pandemic to make standard statistical measurement protocols nimbler; facilitate the involvement of the private sector in federal statistics; develop fundamental processes and incentives that assure that federal statistical agencies, under sufficient privacy and confidentiality provisions, can access State administrative data for improved State and Federal statistics; resolve critical problems resulting from the decentralized nature of the Federal Statistical System; and increase the timeliness and granularity of economic statistics generated by statistical agencies and/or created in collaboration with private sources.

Question #4: The Commission on Evidence-Based Policymaking recommended the creation of a National Secure Data Service. Do you agree with this recommendation and, if so, what should be the essential features of a National Secure Data Service?

Answer: Many essential features of any National Secure Data Service are the same as those required in setting up any data repository. The AEA Data Editor extensively addressed these requirements in his response to “Request for Public Comment on Draft Desirable Characteristics of Repositories for Managing and Sharing Data Resulting from Federally Funded Research,” which have great applicability to considering requirements for a National Secure Data Service. We recommend his observations, which are available at: <https://www.aeaweb.org/content/file?id=11689>

Question 6: If created, how should a data service be structured to best facilitate research and development of secure data access and confidentiality technologies and methods and agency adoption of those technologies and techniques?

Answer: In creating a data service, care should be taken not to introduce a new silo among the counterproductive silos represented by many federal statistical and other agencies. Hopefully the Advisory Committee will consider a data service that is distributed among a number of sites and existing and new institutions.

Question 9: What are the key problems and use cases where collaborative work between federal, state, and local authorities’ data analysis can inform decisions?

Answer: An important use case is exemplified by the fact that the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) currently has no access to states’ Unemployment Insurance (UI) worker wage or claims records. With these records, BLS could produce new granular layoff statistics, reduce revisions in payroll jobs estimates, add new geographic, occupational and industry granularity to many of its programs (such as JOLTS and employment projections), reduce employer reporting burdens, and more. This could be accomplished as a component of UI system modernization currently being considered by Congress and the Department of Labor. Elements include securing BLS access to the records, standardizing how records are delivered, enhancing wage records (with hours, occupation title, and work location), charging BLS with producing new economic indicators from claims data, funding state LMI offices’ use of improved data, and allowing BLS to share curated wage records with state workforce agencies to inform operations, labor shed analyses and program evaluations.