



2026 unConference Summary

The federal statistical system, which produces essential public data, has been struggling with budget constraints for several years. However, data system risks have increased dramatically in the past year and a half. Urgent and emergent threats include cuts to staffing and contracts, data removals, revisions to data collections, data terminations, threats to data privacy protections, and delays and missed deadlines in the publication of key information.

The Association of Public Data Users (APDU) *unConference* brought together researchers, policy advocates, government officials, and data practitioners to address emerging challenges and opportunities across the federal statistical ecosystem.

Ahead of the event, attendees suggested and voted on breakout discussion topics, which are listed below:

- Public Data Are Public, Accessible, and Fit-for-Purpose
- Privacy and Confidentiality Are Protected
- Ethics & Transparency (every step of the data lifecycle supports ethical data, and public data are transparent)
- Looking Ahead (modernization, AI, and ensuring sustainability)
- Setting a Data Integrity Agenda: How do you prepare when you don't know what's next?
- Anything Goes / What do you want to chat about today?

Although the breakout discussions varied widely across topics, there were several recurring themes. Those are described immediately below. This document also includes a more thorough summary of each of the breakout discussions. Breakout summaries are not verbatim nor necessarily in the order in which topics were discussed. APDU Board members and volunteers began with detailed meeting notes, then edited for clarity and flow.

Across all breakout sessions, participants emphasized that public data is an essential civic asset—vital for evidence-based policymaking, resource allocation, and community advocacy. However, discussions revealed an ecosystem facing unprecedented structural strains, regulatory shifts, workforce attrition, and technological disruptions. Key themes include:

Threats to Data Quality, Accessibility, and Integrity

Participants across all breakouts voiced deep concern regarding administrative orders, policy shifts, and operational reductions affecting core public data products. Participants noted major threats to data quality, utility, and inclusivity. Attendees highlighted the risk of data suppression, loss of granularity for rural and tribal areas, undercounts of young children and immigrant communities, and potential rollbacks of revised race and ethnicity classification standards (Statistical Policy Directive 15). Several discussions zeroed in on concerns related to the Census Bureau, including:



- The new Department of Commerce order (DAO 216-26) restricting data privacy protection methods for the Census Bureau and Bureau of Economic Analysis (BEA) products
- Proposed OMB rules regarding decennial census residence criteria and demographic questions under EO 12866 review. Participants expressed fear that residence criteria could be weaponized to exclude noncitizens and undocumented immigrants, while demographic updates under Statistical Policy Directive 15 (SPD-15) risk formal rescission or indefinite delay due to administrative extensions.
- Additionally, orders restricting federal survey languages exclusively to English (such as Department of Commerce DAO 2146) further compromise data quality and representation.

Norms vs. Statutory Guardrails

A recurring theme across sessions was that past protections for public data relied too heavily on agency norms rather than law or regulations. Recent actions have demonstrated that informal norms can be swiftly discarded, particularly when long-tenured agency staff and leaders have departed.

Participants emphasized the need for explicit statutory guardrails, including:

- Strict public notification requirements before terminating data collections
- Legally binding privacy protections
- Enforceable penalties for external actors who misuse confidential data collected under a pledge of trust

In addition, participants noted that the overturning of Chevron deference (under which courts deferred to federal agency interpretation of ambiguous statutes) has resulted in a structural shift that moves power away from technical statistical experts toward judicial and legislative arenas. In response, data advocates must shift from relying on agency discretion to lobbying for explicit statutory guardrails in federal legislation.

However, participants warned against over-prescriptive mandates that lock obsolete technologies or methods into law. Instead they recommended statutory protections focused on anti-termination rules, mandatory public notice periods, and full funding mandates.

Communications Barriers

Participants highlighted a profound breakdown in communication channels between federal statistical staff and external data users. Formal advisory committees have been disbanded, travel and participation restrictions on federal scientists have intensified, and widespread Non-Disclosure Agreements (NDAs) alongside "suitability" terminations have created a pervasive chilling effect. External researchers increasingly hesitate to contact federal staff for technical clarifications out of fear of exposing public servants to administrative retaliation. This structural isolation hampers scientific oversight, transparency, and collaborative problem-solving.



Traditional mechanisms for public input—such as Federal Register notices and Paperwork Reduction Act comments—fail to reach impacted communities effectively. Attendees highlighted the necessity of building sustained civic capacity through grassroots partnerships, community-led research frameworks (e.g., Black Researchers Collective), and rapid-response civil society mobilization to ensure public data reflects community realities.

Opportunities and Pitfalls of Artificial Intelligence

Artificial Intelligence (AI) emerged as a major focus across technical and policy discussions. While AI tools offer immense promise for automating data coding, generating plain-language metadata, and simplifying portal navigation, LLMs carry inherent risks of "hallucinations," algorithmic bias, and non-reproducible outputs. Participants stressed that AI must serve as a deterministic, human-reviewed assistant rather than a replacement for foundational statistical collections and critical analytical training.

Participants wrestled with the opportunities and risks presented by emerging technologies. Generative AI and Large Language Models (LLMs) present major risks when querying public data portals: LLMs frequently hallucinate data, misinterpret statistical metadata, or synthesize false conclusions, eroding public trust. Conversely, deterministic, constrained AI tools hold promise for automating the recoding of open-ended responses, improving discoverability for data, metadata, and APIs. Modernization efforts should seek continuous research and development funding, adopt Findable, Accessible, Interoperable, Reusable (FAIR) data principles, assign persistent Digital Object Identifiers, and establish standardized metadata catalogs (DCAT-US v3).

Navigating the Tension Between Statistical Privacy and Data Utility

While privacy protections are vital, participants noted that some decisions about data privacy methodology may threaten small-area estimation. Rural areas, tribal nations, school districts, and small demographic subgroups (such as by sexual orientation, gender identity, or detailed race/ethnicity) face severe data degradation or complete data loss. In addition, any aggregations made to preserve privacy should be decided in collaboration with the communities affected. For example, removing data on race/ethnicity or aggregating all multiracial people into a single aggregate category (rather than having detail about multiracial identities) raised concerns.

Participants stressed that privacy tools must balance confidentiality with fitness-for-purpose. Furthermore, current legal frameworks (like Title 13 and Title 26) protect individual privacy from internal statistical agency abuse, but lack equivalent statutory penalties for external bad actors, commercial contractors, or enforcement agencies (e.g., ICE) that might misuse public data.

State-Level Resilience Matters

In response to federal instability, attention is pivoting toward state-level infrastructure and community partnerships. States are exploring interstate data compacts (such as the CA 100



initiative), independent state chief statistician roles, and state-level enactments of modernized race/ethnicity data collection standards (SPD-15) to preserve longitudinal data collection. Simultaneously, grass-roots organizations (e.g., the Black Researchers Collective) are pioneering "decolonized" research models—equipping community-based organizations with civic research toolkits, focus group methodologies, and direct policy feedback mechanisms to ensure public data authenticates lived experiences.

To hedge against systemic failures or undercounts at the federal level—particularly surrounding the upcoming 2030 Decennial Census—participants discussed specific state-level mitigation strategies including:

- Forming interstate data compacts
- Establishing state chief statistician roles
- Enacting state-level health equity and SPD-15 matching laws
- Creating unified state data platforms to maintain continuous, high-quality data collection independently of federal volatility

Looking Forwards, Responsible Modernization, and a "Project 2029"

Rather than merely striving to restore past standards, conference participants advocated for proactive modernization through an initiative dubbed "Project 2029." The goal would be to develop a comprehensive list of concrete legal, organizational, and methodological proposals for federal data modernization; identify a full wish list of system improvements and rank them by priority; and identify "red lines" and mechanisms to keep Congress informed.

Key flagship surveys (such as the Current Population Survey and Consumer Expenditure Survey) require continuous research and development, parallel testing of legacy and updated methodologies, and stable funding. Attendees also discussed alternative governance models, such as restructuring federal statistical operations under an independent body similar to the Federal Reserve or enacting a comprehensive U.S. Statistics Act.

Participants also asked several process questions:

- How do we continue to refresh the statistics we produce?
- How do we keep getting new questions on surveys?
- Changing forms?

They identified that the process can be slow and the system should have some surveys that can handle quick turns while others remain slow and deliberative. Specifically, the American Community Survey (ACS) was identified as an example of a slowly-changing data collection, the Household Trends and Outlook Pulse Survey as an example of a survey that can evolve quickly, and the National Health Interview Survey as in between, with updates every year. Participants also noted that dual data collections can be a solution when break-in-series concerns arise.

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Overall Action Items and Next Steps

- Build a coalition of coalitions
 - Build a "coalition of coalitions" to harmonize policy efforts across state agencies, academic researchers, and issue-focused non-profits.
 - Establish peer connection networks to allow secure, informal information exchange among data practitioners.
 - Develop strategic pacing frameworks for advocacy organizations to maintain continuous engagement while managing the chaotic news cycle.
 - Form strategic coalitions with non-governmental entities that have lobbying and litigation capability (e.g., ACLU, business groups) to support protecting data privacy
 - Dedicate an APDU webpage to community engagement and include information with non-technical terms
 - Establish targeted engagement channels with state-level data stakeholders to maintain continuity
 - Organize informal and formal networking events (e.g., an APDU/MDI meet-and-greet) to sustain connections with federal statistical staff
- Increase transparency
 - Consider FOIA for information behind decision to reduce 2026 Census Test sites
 - Develop solidarity fund for those who share info on breaches of law or public trust
- Specify guidelines
 - Define APDU's operational role in federal agency accountability and establish baseline recommended staffing thresholds for key Census Bureau functions.
 - Formulate precise, prioritized legislative language ("lines in the sand") to guide Congressional staff during oversight hearings
 - Develop communications materials regarding 2030 Census contingencies, historical census precedents, and legal boundaries surrounding data use.
- Educate and communicate
 - Data privacy
 - Draft and publish consistent and standard definitions for privacy terms (including privacy, confidentiality, security, and ethics) for all audiences, including federal, state, and local policymakers
 - Develop clear, non-technical guidance explaining how data is protected (e.g., Title 13 vs. Title 26)
 - Develop plain-language materials explaining noise infusion; what is it, how does it affect data quality, and specific implications for rural and tribal populations
 - Ensure data collection surveys have notes in the beginning regarding how a person's data is being used and protected



- Encourage more education on privacy-enhancing technologies (PETs) and statistical data privacy within the healthcare industry in addition to HIPAA
- Data production and access
 - Continue and expand on “rapid response” efforts—identify upcoming policy windows where public input is most likely to have impact and connect impacted communities to decision makers
 - Advocate for greater public comment opportunities before major statistical policy changes are implemented
 - Explore creating a demographic data accountability dashboard, analogous to the Economic Policy Institute’s accountability dashboards
 - Develop short-form educational content (e.g., social media explainer videos) addressing AI best practices, algorithmic bias, and data privacy protections
- Data use and usability
 - Draft a comprehensive document/resource to help navigate how to best use data
 - Guiding questions on where to start
 - Who are the parties in place, where did the sources come from, did you talk to your general council?
 - Expand federal public APIs to improve access for researchers
 - Advocate for assigning Digital Object Identifiers to all federal public datasets.
 - Cross-promote efforts to adopt consistent DCAT-US v3 metadata standards across agencies
 - Advocate for a comprehensive federal data catalog covering both public and non-public data assets, in alignment with Title II of the Foundations for Evidence-Based Policymaking Act
- Share resources
 - Share resources from Black Researchers Collective (BRC) community listening sessions
 - Share Connecticut’s health equity and SPD-15 matching state legislation as a model framework for other jurisdictions
- Develop a "Project 2029" vision document for federal data (contingent upon funding)
 - Identify concrete legal, organizational, and methodological proposals for federal data modernization
 - Begin structured conversations now so plans are ready when opportunity arises
 - Identify a full wish list of system improvements and rank them by priority
 - Identify “red lines” and mechanisms to keep Congress informed



Breakout 1: Public Data Are Public, Accessible, and Fit-for-Purpose

Summary

This session examined Principle 1 (Public Data Are Public & Accessible) and Principle 5 (Public Data Are Fit-for-Purpose) of APDU's Guiding Principles for Public Data. Discussions centered on the impact of new Commerce Department disclosure avoidance orders on Census Bureau and Bureau of Economic Analysis (BEA) data. Participants expressed alarm over document removals from official websites and the potential suppression of small-area data vital for local poverty estimation, funding allocations, and local governance—especially in rural and tribal communities.

Attendees discussed pending rules regarding decennial census residence criteria and demographic questions. Concerns were raised that revised rules might exclude noncitizens, miscount young children or shared-custody dependents, and stall or reverse the implementation of the 2024 SPD-15 race and ethnicity standards. Participants emphasized the intrinsic value of public data as a foundation for evidence-based policy and community advocacy. Proposed solutions focused on adopting FAIR (Findable, Accessible, Interoperable, Reusable) data principles, expanding public APIs, standardizing metadata via DCAT-US v3, assigning Digital Object Identifiers to datasets, and consolidating fragmented state data portals into single clearinghouses.

Detailed Notes

Disclosure Avoidance Order Concerns:

- Attendees expressed severe concern regarding the removal of key methodological documents from the Census Bureau website, raising questions about the scope of public data redactions.
- Severe implications for local poverty data used in allocating federal/state funding to counties, school districts, and local services.
- Changes threaten data timing, small-area granularity, and longitudinal consistency, particularly when intersecting with race/ethnicity revisions.
- Lack of public process; concerns that technical terminology ("arcane" concepts) is being used to obscure reductions in public community data.
- Potential over-reaction by agency legal teams, leading to default limits on Public Use Microdata Samples and microdata releases.
- Impact on independent survey research that relies on census benchmarks for population control totals.

Decennial Census Residence Criteria and Demographic Rule Proposals



- Stakeholders strongly urged to request Executive Order 12866 review meetings with the Office of Information and Regulatory Affairs.
- Concerns that residence rules could reclassify noncitizens or immigration detainees as "nonresidents," excluding them from apportionment/counts.
- Fears of adding citizenship questions or reverting to outdated 1997 SPD-15 race standards.
- Risk of undercounting young children in complex living situations (e.g., shared custody, doubled-up households).
- Agencies utilizing OMB action plan extensions to delay implementing 2024 SPD-15 standards, exacerbated by RIFs among statistical staff.

Ongoing Initiatives & Solutions:

- Applying FAIR data principles to maximize derivative downstream utility.
- Studying the impact of race/ethnicity reclassifications on poverty rate calculations in Baltimore.
- State-level data consolidation into single clearinghouse platforms to streamline user discovery.
- Creation of open-source tools, including a Python package and no-code web application for exploring ACS nativity data trends.
- Publication of plain-language summaries on ACS employment data focusing on Arab and MENA entrepreneurship.

Systemic Improvements & Guardrails:

- Federal API expansion and mandatory Digital Object Identifier assignments for datasets.
- Staffing recognition: data publication requires dedicated communications, technical, and subject-matter expertise.
- Improved collection strategies for low-literacy populations.
- Guardrails preventing arbitrary takedowns of public datasets; outdated datasets should be flagged/archived rather than removed.



Breakout 2: Privacy and Confidentiality Are Protected

Summary

This session focused on Principle 2 (Privacy and Confidentiality Are Protected) of APDU's Guiding Principles for Public Data. Participants debated the technical, ethical, and practical friction between robust data privacy protections and data utility. A key theme was the growing public anxiety and mistrust regarding government data collection. Attendees noted that fear of data misuse—such as immigration enforcement using SNAP or census records—chills survey response rates, directly harming data quality.

The discussion highlighted the limits of privacy-enhancing technologies (PETs) and traditional anonymization, noting that removing personally identifiable information is often insufficient in an era of advanced re-identification. Participants drawn from healthcare and education sectors highlighted confusion surrounding overlapping statutes like HIPAA and FERPA, as well as inconsistent state-level data-sharing laws. Crucially, attendees acknowledged that historical data protections often relied on unwritten institutional norms rather than clear, enforceable statutory penalties. Rebuilding public trust requires clear upfront communications on surveys, transparent opt-out mechanisms, rigorous enforcement against data misuse, and framing data protection around "data integrity" and public safety rather than passive privacy.

Detailed Notes

Privacy Technologies and Knowledge Gaps:

- High cost, technical complexity, and accessibility hurdles of PETs.
- Lack of interdisciplinary training across siloed technical, legal, and research fields.
- Inconsistent adoption of PETs in healthcare due to exclusive focus on basic HIPAA requirements.

Public Trust, Fear, and Survey Participation:

- Growing fear among regular citizens that survey responses will be weaponized politically or legally.
- Shift from voluntary engagement to survey non-response, which directly degrades sample validity.
- Realization that many assumed protections were informal agency norms rather than enforceable statutory laws.
- Need for transparent penalties against actors who violate data confidentiality pledges.

Navigating Complex Legal Frameworks:

- Overlap and confusion between Title 13 (Census protections), Title 26 (IRS tax data protections), HIPAA, and FERPA (e.g., Does FERPA or HIPAA protect student records when seeing the school nurse?).



- Patchwork of state and local privacy statutes creating conflicting legal interpretations among agency general counsels.
- Absence of a unified national privacy framework leading to risk aversion and data withholding.

Policymaker Engagement and Strategic Framing:

- Policymakers and staff often lack technical understanding of data privacy and AI regulations.
- "Waste, fraud, and abuse" messaging is frequently used to undermine public collections; advocates need alternative framing focused on efficiency, selective targeting, accountability, and "data integrity".
- Value of digestible briefs, peer-reviewed evidence, and litigation strategies developed in partnership with civil rights groups.



Breakout 3: Ethics & Transparency (Every Step of the Data Lifecycle Supports Ethical Data + Public Data Are Transparent)

Summary

Addressing Principle 3 (Ethical Data Lifecycle) and Principle 4 (Public Data Are Transparent) of APDU's Guiding Principles for Public Data, this session tackled structural threats to transparency within federal data agencies. Attendees analyzed the operational consequences of Commerce Department orders (e.g., DAO 20146) and proposed OMB decennial rule changes. Major concerns centered on data suppression, the potential loss of Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity (SOGI) data, and severe rural data degradation.

A primary focus was the systemic breakdown in communication between federal agency staff and external researchers. Participants reported that expanded Non-Disclosure Agreements (NDAs) and the threat of terminations for "suitability" have silenced federal experts, restricting whistleblowing and open scientific exchange. External researchers increasingly avoid contacting agency counterparts to protect insiders from professional retaliation. Proposed actions include filing strategic Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) requests, establishing whistleblower defense/solidarity funds, creating anonymous information exchanges, hosting informal networking spaces, and building automated tracking systems to alert users to undocumented dataset modifications.

Detailed Notes

Impact of Policy Orders on Data Integrity:

- Commerce Department Order (DAO 20146) restricting survey language access and disclosure protections.
- Threats to SOGI data collections and small-area rural statistics.
- Lack of scientific rationale or public evidence supporting proposed OMB residence and demographic rule changes.
- Inclusion of citizenship questions risking false reporting or widespread non-response due to fear of prosecution.

Silencing of Federal Workers & Transparency Loss:

- Widespread use of NDAs and suitability firings creates a climate of fear among federal career staff.
- Onerous approval processes for public speaking freeze scientific exchange and external accountability.
- Researchers forced to rely on investigative journalists or leaked reports to understand agency operations.
- Erosion of formal scientific advisory boards and working groups.



Advocacy, Monitoring, and Legal Tools:

- Need for an automated index or tracking score to monitor dataset health and detect unannounced revisions or codebook changes.
- Leveraging rapid-response webinar series to educate stakeholders on submitting formal Federal Register comments.
- Utilizing FOIA requests to uncover internal agency rationales for budget cuts, field site reductions, and survey modifications.
- Creating secure, informal networking spaces ("coffee chats," off-site meetups) to maintain community trust.



Breakout 4: Looking Ahead (Modernization, AI, and Ensuring Sustainability)

Summary

This breakout addressed Principle 6 (Public Data Systems Are Sustainable) of APDU's Guiding Principles for Public Data through discussions on long-term modernization, policy frameworks, and Artificial Intelligence. Participants recognized that federal statistics cannot simply aim to restore legacy systems; they require comprehensive structural modernization ("Project 2029"). Flagship surveys (such as the CPS and Consumer Expenditure Survey) have gone decades without fundamental methodological updates, leaving them vulnerable to declining response rates. Attendees emphasized the need for continuous R&D funding and parallel testing during methodological transitions.

The group explored broader data governance, including evaluating independent oversight structures modeled after the Federal Reserve or establishing a unified Statistics Act. Discussion highlighted the gap in formal "data policy" education, advocating for interdisciplinary curricula across policy and data science programs. On AI, participants outlined key distinctions: while deterministic LLM interfaces and automated tools can improve metadata, plain-language search, and write-in coding, probabilistic AI models must never replace core data collections. LLMs carry high risks of hallucinations, algorithmic bias, and non-reproducible outputs, making rigorous human review and transparent source citations essential.

Detailed Notes

Project 2029 & Systemic Modernization:

- Focus on future-proofing data infrastructure rather than returning to outdated status quo systems.
- Flagship surveys require sustained R&D to run legacy and modernized models concurrently.
- Addressing the lack of a formal "data policy" academic discipline; establishing core curricula covering the Evidence Act, Privacy Act, and Systems of Records Notices (SORNs).
- Extending legal misuse penalties (currently \$250,000 and 5 years imprisonment under the Evidence Act for statistical staff) to third-party misusers, contractors, and non-statistical agencies.

Governance and Independence Models:

- Debating an independent federal statistical structure (similar to the Federal Reserve Board or a central Statistics Act).
- Risks of independence: potential capture by over-protective privacy advocates at the expense of data dissemination.



- Addressing declining public trust caused by non-statistical data sharing (e.g., SNAP records shared with DHS).

Authentic Community Engagement:

- Failure of Paperwork Reduction Act processes to engage impacted communities.
- Model framework: BRC's "Community Workshop Intensive," equipping local civic researchers with training and stipends to conduct focus groups and formulate policy recommendations.
- Identifying "policy windows" and responding to agency Requests for Information (RFIs).

AI Opportunities, Risks, and Ecosystem Protections:

- Probabilistic vs. Deterministic AI: LLMs cannot guarantee identical outputs and frequently generate incorrect answers regarding dataset contents.
- Legitimate AI applications: automated coding of survey write-ins, classification tasks, and generating plain-language metadata improvements.
- Risks of "skipped foundational learning": users relying on AI queries without understanding basic data structures.
- Promoting intermediary "ecosystems" (e.g., apps integrating raw federal data) while ensuring mandatory source attribution.



Breakout 5: Setting a Data Integrity Agenda: How do you prepare when you don't know what's next?

Summary

This breakout addressed strategic planning and data integrity during periods of high political volatility and regulatory shifting. Attendees discussed recent administrative mandates—such as Commerce Department Order DAO 2146 requiring survey administration strictly in English—and explored legislative and judicial remedies to ensure compliance with overarching statutory protections.

A significant portion of the session focused on contingency planning for potential quality failures in the 2030 Decennial Census. Participants discussed state-level resilience strategies to preserve data capacity. These include establishing state chief statisticians, forming interstate data compacts, passing state legislation aligning local standards with OMB SPD-15 race/ethnicity guidelines, and funding independent state-level census quality studies (modeling California's parallel RAND study from 2020). Attendees emphasized engaging labor unions, state data centers, and oversight bodies like the GAO to monitor federal agency performance, document data degradation, and establish clear "lines in the sand" for Congressional oversight.

Detailed Notes

Navigating Regulatory Orders and Guardrails:

- DOC DAO 2146 (English-only mandates) directly undermines multi-lingual survey accuracy.
- Legal hierarchy: administrative orders cannot override statutory or constitutional mandates, opening avenues for legislative oversight and legal challenges.
- Addressing the disconnect between specialized data users and non-technical policymakers.

State-Level Resilience and Interstate Compacts:

- Developing state-level standards to maintain data continuity if federal collections degrade.
- Examples: California's proposed interstate compacts (CA 100) and Connecticut's legislative adoption of SPD-15 standards for health equity.
- Obstacles to state-level infrastructure: high perceived costs of establishing state chief statistician offices, despite high long-term ROI.
- Concerns that state-level data collection could be subpoenaed or seized by federal authorities if statutory protections are absent.

2030 Census Failure Contingency Planning:



- Addressing declining public participation caused by mistrust and fear of government data sharing.
- Evaluating post-2030 remedies: Household and Group Quarters Count Resolution processes, challenging population estimates, or advocating for a mid-decade census.
- Investigating non-traditional oversight mechanisms, such as independent external census monitors.
- Engaging regional State Data Centers (SDCs) and the Federal-State Cooperative for Population Estimates (FSCPE).

Oversight, Standing, and Accountability:

- Documenting egregious instances of data disruption to demonstrate financial and operational harm.
- Legal standing to sue: identifying affected end-users, service providers, and labor unions that suffer direct injury when public data is suppressed or terminated.
- Maintaining continuous engagement with the Government Accountability Office (GAO) on Census Bureau operational reviews.



Breakout 6: Anything goes

Summary

This open discussion session explored structural legal shifts, survey operational mechanics, demographic representation, and workforce dynamics. Participants analyzed the broader impact of the Supreme Court's overturning of Chevron deference, noting that power has shifted from agency technical experts to the judiciary. This shift makes statutory precision far more critical when drafting data-related legislation, as vague language now invites judicial reinterpretation.

Attendees evaluated survey update cycles, contrasting slow, deliberative instruments like the American Community Survey (ACS) with rapid-turnout mechanisms like the Household Pulse Survey. The group expressed deep concern over proposals that simplify race/ethnicity categories into broad catch-alls, which risks erasing multiracial detail and distinct community identities. In contemplating a worst-case scenario where federal data systems fail, participants highlighted the inefficiency and legal complications of relying on fragmented state-level alternatives. Finally, the session touched on AI's impact on early-career workforce development, cautioning that relying on AI to replace entry-level tasks threatens the talent pipeline for future statistical leaders.

Detailed Notes

Legal Power Balance and *Chevron* Overturn:

- Erosion of agency technical expertise deference in legal challenges.
- Shift in authority from agency statisticians to court interpretations.
- Need for precise statutory language: overly prescriptive laws restrict agency agility, while overly broad mandates invite judicial overreach.

Survey Update Cycles and Demographic Granularity:

- Balancing slow, highly accurate benchmark surveys (ACS) with agile, fast-response tools (pulse surveys).
- Importance of dual-collection collection years to establish bridging factors when survey questions are modified.
- Preserving multiracial detail: strong opposition to collapsing categories into generic "multiracial" catch-alls without detailed sub-category reporting.
- Subjectivity in self-reported identity (e.g., indigenous populations from Latin America navigating Hispanic vs. Native American categorizations).

Worst-Case Scenarios & Data Substitutes:

- Assessing the feasibility of replacing degraded federal data with administrative microdata or private datasets.



- Recognizing that no private dataset possesses full population coverage, making self-reported public survey data irreplaceable.

Workforce Pipelines and AI Disruption:

- Parallels between the current AI surge and the late-1990s Dotcom bubble.
- Over-reliance on AI threatens entry-level analyst and intern roles, disrupting the developmental pipeline for career data professionals.
- Need to design entry-level positions focused on critical analytical thinking, data provenance, and AI quality control.