

DISCUSSION

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STANDARDS

ASA efforts should place emphasis on standards for statistics in government--for statistical products, processes, and functions--rather than on standards for statisticians. Statistical work in government is not necessarily done by persons classified as statisticians. The statistical work that has the biggest impact, and where there is the greatest concern for appropriate use of data, is in administrative activity, program measurement, program reporting. These activities use most of the statistical and data resource. They are often not recognized as being statistical activities, and the people involved in carrying them out may not be statisticians. By focusing on standards for the product, and pointing out the problems that arise when data are summarized for decision-making purposes, the ASA could generate the recognition that there is a technical area requiring special skills.

ASA ACTIVITIES AND THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT

I am somewhat concerned about the view that has been presented of statistics in the federal government. It's true that the major statistical agencies in the federal government have very high standards, have many outstanding skilled statisticians, and can provide guidance and leadership. State and local governments, however, are service and regulatory agencies. Their major relationship with the federal government is with their counterpart programs, and not with the statistical agencies. Thus, the major impact that the federal government has on state and local statistics is through program reporting requirements, and through the persons responsible for the program reporting systems. Judging by some of these systems, and some of the requirements, I am not optimistic that standards in state and local government can be improved through the federal government interaction.

The OMB Statistical Policy Division has been working hard to improve statistical processes and the reporting of statistics within the federal government. If this internal improvement of statistics could impact on the program reporting requirements of state and local governments; if there could be evidence of good statistical principles and practices in this ongoing activity, the federal government might thereby provide in-service training to all levels of government.

With regard to cooperative systems: cooperative activity is essential, but the different cooperative systems should be examined more carefully, before looking to them as a mechanism for improving state and local statistics.

Recent discussions have lumped the cooperative

systems together. Actually, the earlier ones and the newer ones might be quite different. The early systems seem to have specific programmatic reporting objectives, and so were designed to collect and process data with some good sense of how the data were to be used. In at least one of the newer systems, the Cooperative Health Statistics System, we are trying to develop a "general purpose," multiple-user system. There are data collection prescriptions, and data processing standards, but no standards that relate to the statistical product itself--that is, to summarization, presentation, analysis. Thus, I don't see that program contributing to statistical quality and professional statistical standards, since there is nothing in the federal-state contractual relationship that even requires a statistician in the state cooperative project. There is, of course, an indirect spin-off, since in many states there is an effort to use the added resource to provide statistical services for state and local purposes.

To summarize: cooperative data systems can be a good mechanism for improving state and local statistics, but the statistical objectives have to be part of the system.

ASA ACTIVITIES AND STATE AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

I would urge ASA to refrain from recommending administrative arrangements for statistical work and stick to guidance by objectives. I have never heard the details of the states that are supposed to have central statistical coordination in state government. In fact, I believe there are relatively few distinct statistical programs or units in state and local government.

I am opposed to the idea of an agency in state government serving as a channel to the federal government for all cooperative efforts. This would seem to insert another layer of bureaucracy into the communication lines. Coordination within a state is desirable, but it is important to maintain direct federal-state technical communication along programmatic lines.

It also would not be appropriate for ASA to make a blanket recommendation for central statistical services. It's true that there can be some benefit from aggregating statistical resources to serve a number of programs. The problem is that this may remove the statistician just far enough from the program so that he or she is not integrally involved in the program's day-to-day priority needs. Statistical work in state and local government involves such things as required program reporting and proposal documentation--state and local government agencies don't generally do research, and there are very few who do surveys. I am not for or against centralization, but feel

that it cannot be recommended as an administrative arrangement without knowing about the particular setting, the agency structure, the size of the establishment, and the people involved. Therefore, ASA should not endorse centralization, except as one possible alternative.

I would favor a program which encourages the ASA members who are government statisticians within a state to begin meeting, exchanging experiences and trying to work collectively to improve statistical standards.

JOB DEFINITION IN STATE AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Job definition is a problem, not only because of the nature of the job definitions for statisticians, but also because statistical work is carried out by so many persons who are not classified as statisticians--even the design of major statistical activities may be carried out by non-statisticians. In developing job description guidelines, ASA might look at other job classifications that should include requirements for statistical training.

A further complication is the fact that statisticians who are advancing in their careers are expected to move into administrative roles.

It might be helpful to have an exchange of ideas on the issue of appropriate job descriptions, with the discussion to include experienced statisticians from state and local government, as well as administrators with some understanding of statistical activities. It must be realized, for example, that decisions in government are not made on the basis of statistical analysis; statistical information is but one of many forms of information that contribute to decisions. The highest priority in any agency is to meet program reporting requirements of one form or another, and description rather than inference is the predominant application of data.

FINAL COMMENTS

What is the **greatest** source of influence on statistics in state and local government? I mentioned before that the primary federal-state relationship is through reporting requirements. Going a step further, the source of most reporting requirements, at any level of government, is in legislation--either in the laws themselves, or in regulations. It is illuminating to examine the details of recent legislation, and note how many of them have quite detailed prescriptions for extensive statistical reporting. I can't imagine that anyone actually looks at all the material that pours in as a result.

It is also illuminating to note that some of the legislative requirements are things that experienced statisticians would know are impossible--or at least a methodology has yet to be developed. They require measurement of the unmeasurable; ask for demonstration of relationships that may not exist; and have resulted in a vast proliferation of number collection and manipulation, often undertaken by non-statisticians.

Perhaps ASA could examine this issue, and, as an independent professional organization, work with legislative staff towards more realistic expectations of what statisticians in state and local and federal government can produce.