

GAO
Accountability · Integrity · Reliability

Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-06-607](#), a report to congressional requesters

Why GAO Did This Study

In 2003, the Bureau of the Census (Bureau) changed the day and location of the release of its Income and Poverty Estimates. Some data users believed the change was an effort to suppress unfavorable news and questioned the Bureau's data dissemination practices. GAO was asked to assess whether (1) the Bureau adhered to its dissemination practices for the 2003 and later releases, and (2) the Bureau and 13 other federal statistical agencies follow data release practices recommended by the National Research Council (NRC). GAO reviewed the Bureau's dissemination process for the 2003 thru 2005 Income and Poverty Estimates.

What GAO Recommends

The Secretary of Commerce should direct the Bureau to fully document its dissemination practices for the Income and Poverty Estimates. GAO also recommends that OMB consider (1) how to address gaps identified between agencies' dissemination practices and NRC's guidance, and (2) how OMB's proposed guidance should address documentation, coverage, and other questions noted in this report. In its comments on a draft of this report, Commerce neither agreed nor disagreed with GAO's recommendation but reiterated GAO's finding that the Bureau is updating its practices for releasing the Income and Poverty Estimates. OMB did not have comments.

www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-06-607.

To view the full product, including the scope and methodology, click on the link above. For more information, contact Brenda S. Farrell at (202) 512-6806 or farrellb@gao.gov.

DATA QUALITY

Expanded Use of Key Dissemination Practices Would Further Safeguard the Integrity of Federal Statistical Data

What GAO Found

While not all of the Bureau's data dissemination practices are documented, GAO was able to determine through discussions with Bureau officials and review of available documentation, that the Bureau adhered to most of its long-standing data release practices. However, the Bureau did depart from the traditional day and location for the release of the Income and Poverty Estimates report in 2003 and subsequent years. According to the Bureau, the day of the 2003 release was changed because of a delay in producing a companion report, and the location was changed from Washington, D.C., to Suitland, Maryland, in part, because the Director of the Census Bureau stated that he wanted to raise awareness that the construction of its new headquarters had just started. Some of the Bureau's documented practices, such as guidance on who has authority to choose the release date and location, lacked specificity. Also, the Bureau's documented Income and Poverty practices are outdated as they are contained in a 21-year-old memo. The Bureau is updating it, to among other things, reflect current technology.

Bureau Press Conference for Release of Income and Poverty Estimates



Source: U.S. Census Bureau.

Most of the 14 statistical agencies in GAO's review generally adhered to NRC's guidance, important for (1) the wide dissemination of data, and (2) maintaining a strong position of independence. Still, there were some notable gaps. For example, 6 of the 14 agencies lacked dissemination policies (as recommended by NRC) that promote the regular and frequent release of major findings from an agency's statistical program. The Office of Management and Budget (OMB), in concert with other statistical agencies, is developing governmentwide guidance on the release and dissemination of statistical products that, according to OMB officials, parallels NRC's and other generally accepted release practices. OMB's guidance could foster more consistent adherence to practices that promote broader dissemination of statistical data and enhance its credibility, especially to the extent they address gaps GAO found between agencies' data dissemination practices and NRC's guidance.