

Introduction

When U.S. Commissioner of Labor Carroll Wright issued his first annual report in March 1886, he established the policy of explaining his statistical methods to his readers and of seeking to avoid misinterpretation of the figures presented. During the more than 100 years which have followed that initial report, the definitions, methods, and limitations of the data published by the Bureau of Labor and its successor, the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS), have been explained many times. The reason for this is to make readers aware of the known limitations of the Bureau's data, to guide them in the appropriate use of the information, and to assure them that proper statistical standards and techniques have been observed.

This volume continues that tradition by providing current descriptions of the Bureau's statistical series. For example, since the last edition of this bulletin, significant changes have been made in the Bureau's compensation and labor force statistics programs. These are described in full. And, because of budgetary constraints, two programs have been discontinued: Negotiated Wage and Benefit Changes and Technological Change. The Bureau's role, organization, and approach to its data collection activities also are discussed briefly. In addition, the Bureau is undergoing a metamorphosis of data delivery, that is, the printed document is now only one of the principal means of data dissemination. Since the last edition of the *Handbook*, the Bureau has begun large scale dissemination of data by fax and over the Internet via the World Wide Web, in addition to its older electronic delivery systems of diskette and tape.

BLS role

Among Federal agencies collecting and issuing statistics, the Bureau of Labor Statistics is a general-purpose statistical collection agency in the broad field of labor economics. BLS statistics, however, are often quite specialized, yet they meet general economic and social data requirements. In this regard, the Bureau's data serve the needs of business, labor, Congress, the general public, and the administrative and executive agencies for information on economic and social trends. As the needs of users are likely to differ, no statistic is ideal for all. This makes it important that the characteristics of the measures and their limitations be well understood.

Organization

The statistical programs of the Bureau have been developed, for the most part, independently of each other, taking on characteristics suited to the requirements of the subject under observation. As a result, the Bureau is organized according to subject matter areas, an arrangement which has proved efficient and has been continued over the years. Expertise in technology, statistical analysis, and other staff activities across subject-matter lines provides better use of the Bureau's resources.

As the Bureau's collection activities increased, regional offices were established to

administer the field programs, to disseminate data to local users, and to furnish technical advice and assistance to State agencies and other cooperating organizations. An important aspect of the work of the regional staffs has been explaining the concepts and techniques which the Bureau uses in compiling the statistics.

The Bureau's work extends beyond the initial collection and processing of data. Its findings frequently influence, and sometimes are crucial to, the determining and shaping of public policy. Over the years, it has developed a staff of professionals—economists, statisticians, computer analysts, and administrative specialists, among others—each playing a significant role to ensure that the information issued by the Bureau is of the highest quality.

Consultation and advice

A statistical program too much detached from the users of its data may fail in its principal mission. To remain responsive to those who rely on BLS data, the Bureau continuously invites advice and ideas from users and experts in business, labor, professional and academic organizations, and from members of the public. Although several commissions and committees have reviewed specific Bureau programs over the years and made valuable contributions, the Commissioner of Labor Statistics retains final responsibility for all decisions on statistical policy.

The Commissioner established two standing research advisory committees in 1947. These groups are the Business Research Advisory Council and the Labor Research Advisory Council. These councils advise on technical problems and provide perspectives on Bureau programs in relation to needs of their members. The councils accomplish their work in general sessions and also through committees on specialized subject-matter fields. The councils formally express their opinion through resolutions or recommendations on appropriate matters, but such resolutions are merely advisory. Members of the councils and the subcommittees serve in their individual capacities, not as representatives of their organizations.

The members of the Business Research Advisory Council are designated by the Commissioner under authorization of the Secretary of Labor, after nomination by the council's membership committee. The committee consists of representatives from broad-based business organizations such as the U.S. Chamber of Commerce and the National Federation of Independent Business. The members of the Labor Research Advisory Council are designated by the Commissioner under authorization of the Secretary of Labor, from nominations by the Director of Research, AFL-CIO. All research directors of international unions represented in the AFL-CIO are invited to attend the general meetings of the council.

Voluntary reporting and confidentiality

Voluntary reporting and assuring the confidential nature of reported data are important characteristics of BLS programs. For more than a century, the Bureau has asked millions of firms and individuals to provide information closely related to their daily affairs and their personal lives. Although Bureau data collectors often return to the same firms or individuals for later information on the same subject or for new types of information, the Bureau's respondents have been remarkable in their generosity. This high degree of voluntary cooperation is due in part to the great care BLS employees take to protect the confidentiality of the information that respondents furnish by

combining the data reported by the different sources and issuing the findings in summary tables, analyses, and reports. Respondents are thereby assured that their reports will be used for statistical purposes only. All efforts to obtain legal access to individual respondents' reports have been successfully resisted.¹

Bureau Commissioners and their staffs have been convinced over the years that these policies contribute to the reliability of BLS statistics.

¹ For example, see *Husted v. Norwood*, 529 F. SUPP. 323 (S.S. Fla. 1981).