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BLS Guidelines for Informing Users of Information Quality and Methodology

The Office of Management and Budget (OMB) has issued [government-wide information quality guidelines](#) in accordance with Section 515 of the Treasury and General Government Appropriations Act for Fiscal Year 2001. The purpose of these guidelines is to ensure and maximize the quality, utility, objectivity, and integrity of information disseminated by Federal agencies. The guidelines direct each Federal agency to issue its own Section 515 guidelines. As part of the Department of Labor, BLS follows [DOL's information quality guidelines](#), as well as the OMB guidelines. Moreover, as part of the Interagency Council on Statistical Policy, BLS supports the [Council's commitment to information quality](#). The following BLS Guidelines for Informing Users of Information Quality and Methodology supplement the DOL guidelines that apply to all Departmental agencies.

The Bureau of Labor Statistics is the principal fact-finding agency for the Federal Government in the broad field of labor economics and statistics. BLS is an independent national statistical agency within the Department of Labor that collects, processes, analyzes, and disseminates essential statistical data to the American public, Congress, other Federal agencies, State and local governments, business, and labor. BLS also serves as a statistical resource to the Department of Labor.

BLS data must satisfy a number of criteria, including relevance to current social and economic issues, timeliness in reflecting today's rapidly changing economic conditions, accuracy, consistently high statistical quality, and impartiality in both subject matter and presentation.

As a Federal statistical agency, BLS conducts work in an open environment. Major changes in program design, scope, or methods are discussed in advance with users and advisory committees and described in published materials. Fair information practices are used, such as maintaining the confidentiality of individual responses. Confidentiality of the information that respondents furnish is assured by protecting the microdata, combining the data reported, and issuing the findings in summary tables, analyses, and reports. BLS values cooperation with data users and consults with a broad spectrum of users of its data in order to make its products more useful. As part of the BLS customer pledge to the public, the Bureau promises to help users understand the uses and limitation of the data.

BLS applies statistical data quality principles provided in guidance from the Office of Management and Budget (OMB Statistical Policy Directives, for example), as well as the National Research Council's *Principles and Practices for a Federal Statistical Agency*. Moreover, all BLS information products are subjected to a multi-stage review before they are disseminated to the public.

A key component in insuring information quality is integrity, or the protection of data from corruption through unauthorized access. [BLS data integrity guidelines](#) spell out procedures to protect the confidentiality of BLS records, the process of data collection, and various security measures.

To inform users about information quality and methodology, BLS provides descriptions of the methods and procedures used to develop and produce its statistical products. These descriptions are prepared at various levels of complexity and comprehensiveness to address the wide range of user needs. Summary level technical notes are usually included with news releases. For most programs, a periodical of record contains more comprehensive technical material. In addition, *Major Programs of the Bureau of Labor Statistics* provides a summary description of data availability, coverage, sources of data, reference periods, major uses, and forms of publication. The *BLS Handbook of Methods* covers most major programs and is updated every few years.

A major purpose for providing users with information on methodology is to assist them in determining whether the data adequately meet their needs both in terms of closeness of concept and range of statistical error.

BLS makes the information it disseminates and the methods used to produce this information as transparent as possible, so they could, in principle, be reproduced by qualified individuals. In practice, however, most estimates included in BLS information products are not directly reproducible by the public because the underlying data used to

produce them contain confidential information about individual respondents. The transparency, therefore, has the related goal of providing enough information about methodology for the public to understand the information and to have confidence in its preparation.

The level of documentation on methodology may differ among statistical programs based on type of data (from households or establishments), frequency of collection (monthly, annually, one-time), expected uses of the information, budget, and how long the survey has been in existence. The type of survey, census, or data collection process also may affect the existence of generally-accepted evaluation methods, and data collection protocols may affect the consistency of documentation.

Most of the information on information quality and methodology are available in both print and electronic form to assist the broad range of users. Current descriptions of specific BLS surveys and programs are available at <http://www.bls.gov/bls/descriptions.htm>. This page provides links to the relevant sections of the *BLS Handbook of Methods*. For most programs, the *Handbook* provides a variety of information that, as appropriate, may include a background summary, a description of the concepts, the sources of data and collection methods, the sampling and estimation procedures, and the uses and limitations of the statistics. Additional related information may be available from a program's home page, and links to these home pages are included with the descriptions.

As part of its commitment to information quality, BLS encourages communication with its users. In addition to formal advisory councils from the business, labor, and academic communities, BLS fosters discussions with the public at large by making it easy to reach staff by a variety of formats, including phone, mail, and email. A customer service guide is published annually with the names, phone numbers, and email addresses of subject matter specialists who can answer technical questions about the information we issue. Every page on our website has a link to a subject matter contact, a technical contact, and a general feedback contact. Every print publication also contains contact information. For more information on how to contact BLS, see our [contact page](#).

Affected persons who believe that BLS has disseminated information that does not meet its guidelines, or those of the DOL or OMB and who wish to follow a formal complaint process, may send their complaint to the [point of contact](#) that BLS is designating.

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