

# ADOPT THESE EXPERT RECOMMENDATIONS TO STRENGTHEN WORKFORCE DATA



**T**he Commission on Evidence-Based Policymaking, a bipartisan group of U.S. government-appointed experts, proposed actions in September 2017 that would strengthen workforce data consistent with WDQC's advocacy. These actions would change how the government uses the data it already collects, and would improve the quality of information policymakers have about federal investments.

This brief summarizes the Commission's recommendations relevant to workforce data, which would create a national data matching service, produce a single source of employment data, direct Congress to reconsider bans on data collection and use, and establish stronger capacity for program evaluation.<sup>1</sup>

## Create a federal data matching service

As its topline proposal, the Commission recommended the creation of a National Secure Data Service (NSDS) to match data from multiple sources temporarily and provide access to the resulting aggregate information for evidence-building purposes. The NSDS would not reveal information about individuals, and the information could not be used to determine individual benefits from government programs.

The NSDS would be a separate entity within the U.S. Department of Commerce, and would build on infrastructure and expertise already developed in Commerce, especially at the U.S. Census Bureau.

Federal or state government personnel, federal contractors, or external researchers could qualify to use the service. To maintain confidentiality, they would receive only de-identified information back from the service after the NSDS receives and matches the requisite data.<sup>2</sup>

The NSDS would not serve as a data warehouse. Instead, the NSDS would destroy the datasets after the service completes data processing for a project. Findings and reports that result from the data matches, however, would be publically available as long as they follow strict confidentiality laws.

The NSDS would continuously innovate to ensure the use of the latest cryptography and privacy-preserving technologies. As part of maintaining transparency, the NSDS would establish a publicly searchable inventory of approved projects.

## BACKGROUND ON THE COMMISSION ON EVIDENCE-BASED POLICYMAKING

Rep. Paul Ryan (R-WI) and Sen. Patty Murray (D-WA) led legislative efforts to establish the 15-member Commission, with governmental, legal, academic, and technical experience, to study federal data infrastructure and statistical protocols related to federal policymaking, and issue recommendations to strengthen evidence-based policymaking. The Commission presided over ten public hearings and meetings, reviewed over 300 Federal Register comments, and surveyed over 200 federal offices before producing their 130-page report in September 2017. WDQC testified before the Commission, and submitted a series of written recommendations in collaboration with colleague organizations. WDQC recommended that evidenced-based policymaking should be enhanced by: increasing use of matched administrative records, expanding access to employment and earnings data, and providing student level data on postsecondary students, among other actions, while further ensuring individual privacy.



*“The Commission on Evidence-Based Policymaking envisions a future in which rigorous evidence is created efficiently, as a routine part of government operations, and used to construct effective public policy.”<sup>3</sup>*

### **Provide a single source for employment data**

The Commission noted that data about employment and earnings are among the most important for enhancing evidence about federal government programs. In order to make employment data more accessible, the Commission recommended that federal leaders should make statutory and administrative changes to ensure that state-collected administrative data on quarterly earnings are available for evidence-based policymaking from a single federal source. The Commission did not recommend what the source should be, but suggested that options include expanding access to the National Directory of New Hires, wage records maintained by the Longitudinal Employer Household Dynamics program under the U.S. Census Bureau, or the creation of a U.S. Department of Labor (DOL) national Unemployment Insurance (UI) quarterly earnings data system.

### **Reconsider bans on data collection and use**

The government invests billions of dollars in postsecondary education, yet the Higher Education Opportunity Act of 2008 prohibits the federal government from developing a student-level data system. In addition, the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) of 2014 prevents the federal government from maintaining a database with personally identifiable information on those served by WIOA.

While not directly calling for the overturning of a specific prohibition, the Commission said in their report: “[B]ans on data collection and use create a serious impediment to evidence-based policymaking, and could make it difficult or impossible to hold government activity accountable.”<sup>4</sup> The Commission encouraged lawmakers “to develop reasonable criteria to help ensure that legislators have the tools and the opportunity to carefully weigh the implications of significant bans.”<sup>5</sup>

### **Increase capacity for data and evaluation**

The Commission recommended that each federal department should identify or establish a Chief Evaluation Officer who should coordinate evaluation and policy research in the department, and collaborate with other departments to ensure that the Federal Government uses data effectively while maintaining privacy and confidentiality. (The DOL is presently the only department with a Chief Evaluation Officer.) The Commission also saw a critical role for the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) in facilitating cross-government coordination, and called on OMB to coordinate the Federal Government’s evidence-building activities across departments.

The Commission recommended that states administering programs with substantial federal investment should provide the data necessary for evidence building “where appropriate.”<sup>6</sup> Such programs could include those related to WIOA, Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), and education and training associated with the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP E&T).

### **Looking forward**

Congress is expected to consider legislation to enact key Commission recommendations, through a series of bills beginning in Fall 2017. In many instances, the Commission proposed general guidelines while leaving others to work out details in the future. Before the Commission’s vision can become a reality, it will require administrative as well as legislative action.

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## **Notes**

- 1 See the Commission’s full recommendations in their report, *The Promise of Evidence-Based Policymaking*, September 2017, available online: <https://bipartisanpolicy.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/CEP-Final-Report.pdf>
- 2 “Recommendations of the Commission on Evidence-Based Policymaking,” Hearing of the Full House Committee on Oversight and Government Reform, September 26, 2017.
- 3 *The Promise of Evidence-Based Policymaking*, p. 1.
- 4 *Ibid.*, p. 43.
- 5 *Ibid.*, p. 44.
- 6 *Ibid.*, p. 2.