




# Recommendations


## Recommendations

USAFACTS believes the public deserves to be able to quickly find and use government data. While working for over eight years to store and visualize government data, and while putting together this report, USAFACTS has encountered many of the same challenges as Congress in accessing federal, state, and local data. USAFACTS created this report after speaking with congressional staff from both parties and both chambers to identify their needs and challenges in using government data for policymaking.

Moving the country toward a more productive, efficient, and effective data ecosystem requires long- and short-term changes. Congress and the federal government have taken significant steps towards creating an environment where government data can easily be used for policymaking — and where everyone has access to public information.

Some of the most significant improvements over the last decade include:

- The 2014 Digital Accountability and Transparency Act (DATA Act) and the creation of USASpending.gov;
- Creating the Evidence-based Policy Commission in 2016;
- The 2018 Foundations for Evidence-based Policymaking Act;
- The 2020 Federal Data Strategy and action plan issued by the White House Office of Management and Budget (OMB);
- The 2022 Financial Data Transparency Act.

However, implementation and agency guidance are lagging or incomplete. Good data systems require balancing the needs of the public and policymakers for information against important considerations like privacy and states' abilities to define their own data needs. This section summarizes these challenges and provides recommendations for improving government data.

## Federal data challenges

**Data management is decentralized among federal, state, and local governments.** There are over 90,000 governments in the United States resulting in a decentralized data infrastructure ill-suited to support real-time, accurate decision-making. Decentralized data frequently leads to cities, counties, school districts, police departments, states, and federal agencies publishing data in different formats and using different technical systems. This patchwork approach makes data sharing across governments difficult and expensive.

An example is data collection during the COVID-19 pandemic — the lack of a centralized reporting system made it difficult for the federal government to initially collect and report data. Private actors like USAFACTS stepped in to fill the gaps. The urgent need for real-time data for decision-making laid bare deficiencies in the US government's data infrastructure.

**Government data is at times out of date or delayed.** Government needs data to be published on a reasonable timeline to make informed decisions. High priority datasets may need more frequent publication and agencies should be empowered to experiment with methods for faster data collection and publication.

**Data on key issues is not collected or not made available to decision-makers.** In some cases, the data needed to inform legislation doesn't exist, preventing Congress from making informed decisions on key issues. Data is often not sufficiently disaggregated to allow insight into specific issues. For example, data not disaggregated by income, race, and other demographics makes it difficult to understand the lived experiences of the population. Data about Native Americans and territories is frequently excluded. And there is limited longitudinal data that tracks individuals through government systems making it difficult to understand the effectiveness or impact of, for example, our education system, criminal justice system, and immigration system.


**Federal agencies are slow to create new data collections that are necessary for understanding emerging issues.** As new technologies and issues confront Americans, government is often slow to collect and publish relevant data. Artificial intelligence, cryptocurrency, and the gig-work economy are all examples of new issues that are difficult to assess due to limited data. Federal agencies should identify emerging data needs and quickly develop pilot data collections, balancing the need for information with privacy and accuracy. The Census Bureau’s ability to stand up a new bi-weekly data collection, the Household Pulse Survey, during the pandemic is a good model for rapid data collection around an issue of national interest.

**It is difficult to track funding from appropriating legislation through state and local governments to recipients.** Understanding the impacts of legislation starts with knowing how much money is spent and where it goes. While the DATA Act and the creation of USASpending.gov are significant milestones, two significant gaps remain. First, it is difficult to track spending from appropriation to agency outlay, making it challenging for policymakers to know how much money in aggregate has been allocated and consequently spent as a result of specific legislation. Second, without partnership from state and local governments, it is hard to see how funds transferred to state and local governments are ultimately distributed.

**Government data is not presented in usable formats.** Federal statistical agencies offer rich information but do not consistently provide tools for nontechnical users (such as data visualizations or dashboards) to allow for quick presentation of data insights. Frequently, government data is presented within a PDF, making it difficult to aggregate and use. In many instances, only partial history is available, hindering access to the full dataset for analysis.

## Recommendations for improving data

### Legislation

- Fund and modernize agencies that support Congress including the Congressional Research Service, Congressional Budget Office, and Government Accountability Office so that they are more effective in providing useful, non-partisan data for policymaking.
- Support H.Con.Res.116 and the creation of a second Commission on Evidence-based Policymaking to continue the work outlined by the House Subcommittee on Modernization.
- Ensure any legislation that leads to data collection includes funding and provisions to enable federal, state, and local governments to use and share that data.

### Implementation

- Ensure proper agency compliance with OMB guidance on implementation of the Federal Data Strategy and the responsibilities of agency Chief Data Officers (CDOs). One area of urgency is developing data standards and schemas for federal data collections in order to streamline aggregation and reduce costs.
- Push agencies to support state and local governments’ ability to share data with federal agencies. This could look like the General Services Administration (GSA) developing shared services for local jurisdictions to facilitate data collection or providing a list of vetted vendors. Agencies could also encourage states to focus on reducing procurement costs through cross-state contracts and taking advantage of open-source tools.
- Ensure federal agencies hire Evaluation Officers and Statistical Officers to reside within agencies as outlined by the Evidence Act to ensure that agency CDOs are supported.

### Oversight

- Ensure agency data publications meet standards defined by the Federal Data Strategy, including timeliness, relevance to policy conversations, and availability.
- Instruct the Government Accountability Office (GAO) to conduct an audit of data collections to identify and recommend areas of improvement.
- Monitor the implementation of new data programs to ensure efficiency, transparency, accountability, and ultimately good data for the American public.


## Opportunities for Congress

Congress needs a modern system of accessing data for legislating and oversight. Congressional staff do not always have time or resources to find, access, or analyze data for policymaking purposes. The practices and support systems within Congress need to evolve to make it easier to quickly find relevant, reliable government data.

**Congress should leverage data and modern technology to support informed and outcomes-based lawmaking.** Data can improve the efficiency and efficacy of legislation and support continuous monitoring and evaluation to inform policy. Lawmakers should strive to rely on nonpartisan government numbers in crafting legislation, and each major piece of legislation should involve an open discussion about relevant data and possible metrics-driven outcomes. Where data is unavailable, insufficient, or deficient, Congress should push agencies to improve.

### RECOMMENDATIONS

- Congressional support agencies should include technical assistance for graphics creation to support the use of visuals to communicate key data points during policy discussions.
- Continue to implement recommendations from the Select Committee on Modernization’s Final Report and evolve the work through the new proposed Commission on Evidence-based Policymaking.
- Members of Congress should create a “data” or “evidence” caucus in which members commit to using data in the legislative process, ensure data programs are established within legislation to evaluate outcomes, and encourage oversight of data policy implementation across federal agencies.
- Congressional support entities such as the Congressional Data Task Force (formerly Bulk Data Task Force) should explore prototyping data dashboards to be used in policymaking and oversight.

**The Congressional Research Service should evolve its products to include an emphasis on data provision to support policymaking.** Congress is supported by the Congressional Research Service (CRS), which historically produces long-form reports and analysis to guide congressional decision-making. CRS reports and data could be improved in many ways including by creating shorter, data-driven content summaries, increasing emphasis on data visualization, and producing interactive dashboards that update regularly. In addition, CRS could serve as a non-partisan partner to Congress in tracking stated outcomes of legislation and providing insight into the most pressing questions being asked by members of Congress.

### RECOMMENDATIONS

- Congress should work with new CRS leadership to explore ways to better serve congressional stakeholders, including considering providing frequently-updated data dashboards, longitudinal studies, and short-form content.
- CRS should expand and support the network of detailees available to congressional committees and consider ways to involve them in modernizing CRS products.

**Congressional staff should have avenues to learn data skills to support a modern Congress.** Congress relies on staff who know how to access government data from varying levels of government, analyze it for insights, and create data visualizations for use in the legislative process. Staff should have access to personal development funds and training opportunities to acquire these skills.

### RECOMMENDATIONS

- Congressional offices should invest in data skills for staff to support data use by the legislative body, as now allowed by the Congressional Handbook.
- The Congressional Staff Academy and other congressional support entities should host professional development trainings on using data in the policy-making process.

**Congressional offices should share anonymized casework data to assess constituent services across federal agencies.** As outlined in the recommendation from the Select Committee on Modernization, the House Digital Service should develop a pilot to standardize, collect, and share anonymized casework data from member offices that voluntarily share data. This information should be used to identify the most challenging areas within agencies and address problems.

### RECOMMENDATION

- Congress should provide adequate resources and funding to the House Digital Service to develop a pilot program for sharing anonymized casework data.