

# What Do We Mean By “For Statistical Purposes Only?”<sup>1</sup>

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June 7, 2024

<sup>1</sup> Any opinions and conclusions expressed herein are those of the author(s) and do not reflect the views of the U.S. Census Bureau.

# What Do We Mean By “For Statistical Purposes Only?”

- Motivations for reviewing the phrase meaning
- Where did this wording come from and its use.
- How do other NSO’s use and define the phrase?




# Why Review The Use of “For Statistical Purposes Only”

## What is the legal authority for conducting this survey?

The U.S. Census Bureau conducts this survey under the authority of Title 13, United States Code (U.S.C.), Section 8. Section 9 of this law requires the Census Bureau to keep all information about you and your household strictly confidential. We may use this information only for statistical purposes.

## Apply for Access to Restricted-Use Census Bureau Microdata

...s at secure r...als from qualified researchers in social subject matter of the surveys and  
...posed projects must: ... All researcher access to restricted-use Research Data Centers (FSRDC).  
• Provide benefits to Census Research Using Confidential Data (see "Opening the Door to Data")  
• Have a statistical purpose  
Require non-public data  
...e feasible given the dat...  
...risk of un...

Share   

## Statistical purposes only.

## Confidentiality assurance

## Safeguards to Protect

We only publish statistics  
...identify individuals in the data we publish.  
...and statistical safeguards help us  
...mation.  
...nsure Review Board verifies that any data  
...identiality standards.  
...identiality stan...

# Why Review The Use of “For Statistical Purposes Only”

Landreth, Gerber, and DeMaio (2008) note:

*“Messaging about “confidentiality,” “statistical purposes,” and linkage to administrative records is often misunderstood, or seen as vague or open-ended.*

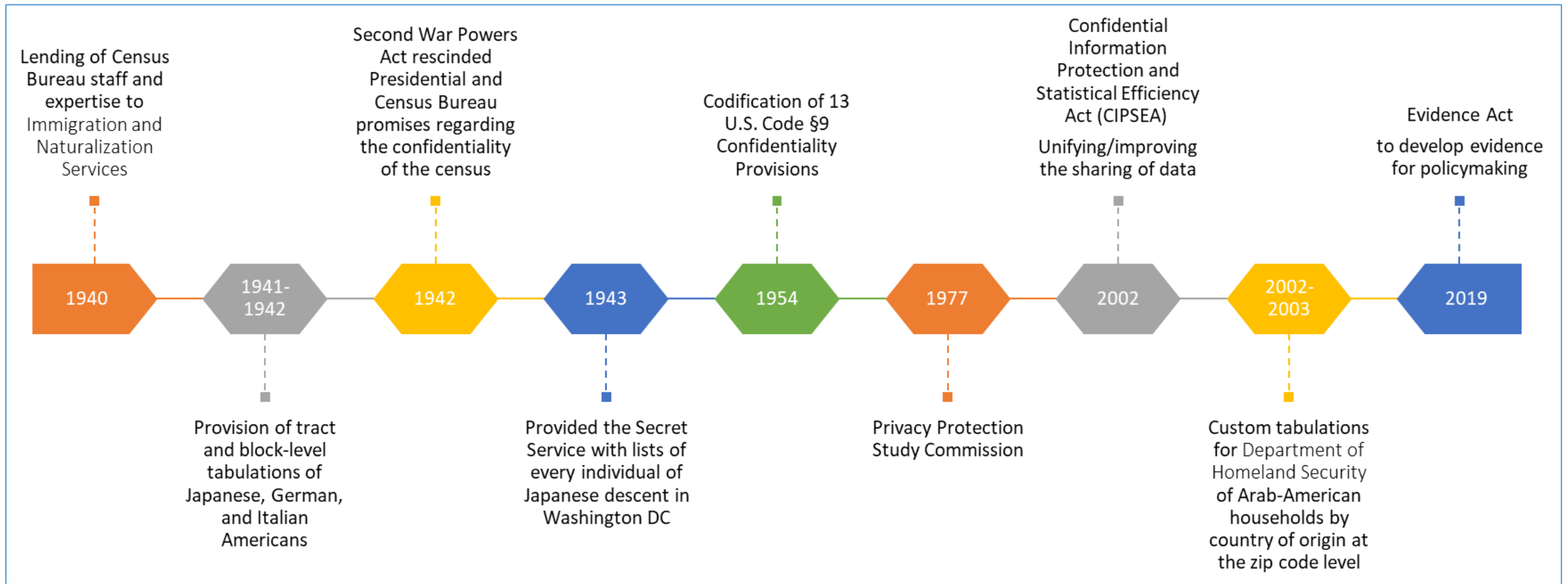
*Messaging about legal protections and penalties for unauthorized disclosure was variously interpreted as “legalese,” the “fine print,” or “over the top.”*

# Where Did This Wording Come From?

Prior to 1940 The language related to purpose and use statements often included the following:

- the discretion of the Director of the Census Bureau.
- an acknowledgement of not identifying data subjects.
- an acknowledgement that individual information will only be shared with persons working with the data for the statistical purposes for which the data was collected.
- information is not to be used to the detriment of the person or persons whom the information relates.

# Where Did Current Interpretation Come From?



# What Legal Definition Do We Use Today?

## US Federal Statistical System, Title 44 of US Code:

12) Statistical purpose.--The term “statistical purpose”--

**(A) means the description, estimation, or analysis of the characteristics of groups, without identifying the individuals or organizations that comprise such groups; and**

(B) includes the development, implementation, or maintenance of methods, technical or administrative procedures, or information resources that support the purposes described in subparagraph (A).

(8) Nonstatistical purpose.--The term “nonstatistical purpose”--

**(A) means the use of data in identifiable form for any purpose that is not a statistical purpose, including any administrative, regulatory, law enforcement, adjudicatory, or other purpose that affects the rights, privileges, or benefits of a particular identifiable respondent; and**

(B) includes the disclosure under section 552 of title 5 of data that are acquired for exclusively statistical purposes under a pledge of confidentiality.

# Product Development and Statistical Purpose

What is, is not, and may be for a statistical purpose can be interpreted from products that we have developed over time.

- What is:

*Population counts such as the Decennial Census provide a statistic useful for apportionment while preserving the anonymity of the respondents.*

*The American Community Survey was developed to help understand the changing shape of the nation and its communities.*

*Principal Economic Indicators are used to understand and improve the economy.*

*Sector Specific statistics are used to measure important aspects of society and support policy making research.*



# Product Development and Statistical Purpose

- What is not:

*In 1943, the U.S. Census Bureau provided names and addresses of individuals of Japanese ancestry to the War Department, not just aggregated data, as they had long claimed. While useful for the War Department this is now illegal and moved the tipping point for acceptable utility and the boundaries for what is a statistical purpose.*

- What may be:

*The Census Bureau's 2002-2003 special tabulations on Arab-Americans for the Department of Homeland Security provide one such ambiguous example. The tabulations only contained information that was already publicly available and did not violate the confidentiality of individual data subjects' records.*

# NSO Definitions

## **Eurostat definition:**

‘use for **statistical purposes**’ means the exclusive use for the development and production of statistical results and analyses” (EPCEU, 2009)

## **Statistics Canada definition:**

“Information collected by Statistics Canada is for **statistical purposes**, defined as description or analysis of characteristics of a population to which the individual belongs” (Stats Canada, 2017)

## **United Nations Statistics Division:**

“Statistical purpose: tasks aimed at developing, producing, and disseminating **official statistics**, including experimenting and testing.” (UNSD, 2019)

# NSO Definitions

## New Zealand definition:

**“Official statistics** may be produced on any matter relating to New Zealand including, without limitation, its economic, social, cultural, and environmental situation (Section 43). **Statistician must be satisfied research is in the public interest and account for the public benefit, contribution to the well-being of the Maori, and any risks of harm (Section 49).”**

## United Kingdom Office of National Statistics

“Processing is necessary for archiving in the public interest, scientific or historical research purposes or **statistical purposes** based on UK law.”

**“The ONS has the statutory objective to promote and safeguard the production of official statistics that serve the public good. This means that any personal data we collect, whether it is for our own use or on behalf of someone else, will only ever be used to produce statistics or undertake statistical research.** In order for us to produce statistics and enable research we may link the data that we collect with other data that we hold. (UKONS, 2023)

# NSO Similarities

- Analysis
- Official Statistics
- Public benefit, Public Interest, or Public good.
- Safeguards against risk of harm

# Next Steps and Thank You

We would like to work with National Statistical Organizations to develop an international definition of what statistical purpose means.

We welcome further discussion or additions to our table of definitions of “statistical purpose” and please send us your feedback.

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