

Reflections on the Occasion of the 100th Anniversary of the *Monthly Labor Review*

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It is an honor to comment on directions for the *Monthly Labor Review (MLR)* over its next 25 years. The *MLR* is the federal government's oldest continuous publication—first printed in 1915 and now “published” on-line by the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS), one of the nation's oldest statistical agencies, established in 1884. BLS embodies the standards articulated by the Committee on National Statistics (CNSTAT) in its quadrennial volume, *Principles and Practices for a Federal Statistical Agency* (National Research Council, 2013, 5th edition). “*P&P*” lays down four principles—that a statistical agency produce data that are relevant to policy issues, earn credibility with data users, earn the trust of data providers (e.g., households, businesses), and maintain independence from political and other undue external influence. “*P&P*” also offers 13 practices, such as continual development of more useful data, openness about data sources and limitations, wide dissemination of data, an active research program, and collaboration with other statistical agencies. The *MLR* exemplifies many of these practices and thereby helps BLS achieve the principles we believe are critical to the success of a federal statistical agency. Not only does the *MLR* serve as an accessible outlet for authoritative labor statistics, it also publishes original articles that cover substantive issues related to the state of the labor force and methodological developments, all the while maintaining objectivity and policy-neutrality. A quick review of recent tables of contents reveals that the *MLR* editors look far and wide in their search for relevant articles. This editorial policy exemplifies best practice for a statistical agency and helps explain the wide appeal of this publication.

In thinking about the future scope of the *MLR*, it makes sense to look back at the climate in which BLS was founded. Agitation for a BLS began as early as the 1860s and gathered steam with the formation of organized labor groups such as the Knights of Labor and the American Federation of Labor. Finally, in 1884, overwhelming majorities in both houses of Congress approved a bill to establish the Bureau of Labor [Statistics]. One representative declared: “A great deal of public attention in and out of Congress has been given to the American hog and the American steer. I submit, Mr. Chairman, that it is time to give more attention to the American man [and woman]” (Ewan Clague, *The First Hundred Years of the Bureau of Labor Statistics*, 1985, p. 3).

Issues for which statistics were sought from the Bureau included conditions, broadly defined, of the American worker in an era of rapid industrialization. Topics of early BLS study included hours and wages of men and women workers, child labor, effects of immigration in labor markets, labor force conditions for minorities, household living standards, prices and the

cost of living, and strikes, lockouts, and other aspects of industrial relations. As noted earlier, the BLS began publishing its studies and statistics in the *MLR* as early as 1915.

In the future, the editors of the *MLR* will need to keep in mind the original reason for the establishment of BLS—namely, to report on the conditions of American workers and American households, disaggregated by geographic area and population group. Analogous to concerns articulated 100 years ago are those today about the adequacy of wages, benefits, the growth of inequality, and work schedules that do or do not accommodate family or personal needs. The effects of immigration and the cost of living are also as much a focus of attention today as they were 100 years ago.

While topics of interest may resemble the past, the challenge for the *MLR* editors is to keep up to date with nuances of emerging issues—for example, implications for workers of the meteoric rise of sharing businesses, such as Uber and Airbnb. Regular perusal of social media may give the editors valuable signals about developments that require added or modified data—from BLS’s own programs or those of other agencies, the private sector, or academia, with which BLS might usefully partner. Similarly, the *MLR* editors need to keep abreast of societal changes with data quality implications, such as declining survey response rates and increasing availability of data streams from other sources, to be sure its pages alert readers. The *MLR* in these ways can continue not only to serve its primary function of informing the nation of labor conditions, but also help BLS continually identify areas of needed data improvement to fulfill its mission to report on the American worker and household.