

Statistics Act Amendment

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Introduction

The Statistics (Amendment) Bill was passed in Parliament on 11 Jan 2010. The amended Statistics Act, which takes effect from 12 Feb 2010, comprises two key amendments:

- 1) To allow the Department of Statistics (DOS) and the Research and Statistics Units (RSUs) gazetted under the Statistics Act to provide researchers access to anonymised microdata¹
- 2) To clarify DOS' legislative powers to obtain information from public sector agencies.

The last major amendment made to the Statistics Act was in 1990.

Providing Anonymised Microdata Access

DOS and gazetted RSUs collect, analyze and disseminate a wide range of socio-economic and demographic statistics. Under the previous Statistics Act, such statistics can only be provided in aggregated form.

The provision of anonymised microdata access is in line with practices of other advanced National Statistical Offices (NSOs) in the US, the UK, Netherlands, Finland and Australia and enables researchers to undertake more sophisticated analyses.

Under the amended Statistics Act, DOS and the gazetted RSUs can provide anonymised microdata access to approved researchers. A calibrated approach will be adopted. For a start, only researchers from public sector agencies or their commissioned consultants will be allowed access. Access to a wider group such as research institutions will be considered at a later stage.

Various safeguards will be put in place to protect the confidentiality of individual data (Table 1).

Obtaining Information from Public Agencies

DOS was established to collect, compile, analyze and disseminate key official statistics. To minimise the burden on

1 "Anonymised" microdata refer to data where the particulars or information pertaining to any person is in a form that conceals or protects the identity of that person, whether by presenting such particulars or information in statistical form or otherwise, such that the identity of that person cannot be readily discovered or ascertained from the particulars or information. "Microdata" refer to data on a person, household or establishment at an individual level.

respondents, DOS has been using administrative data collected by other agencies, instead of requesting the same information anew directly from members of the public or private establishments.

The amendment makes it explicit that the Chief Statistician is allowed to obtain data from public agencies for statistical purposes. The data obtained will be protected under the provisions

of the Statistics Act. This amendment further strengthens DOS' role as Singapore's National Statistical Authority and enhances its ability to provide more timely and relevant statistics to the government and the public. As a safeguard, the Ministers responsible for the agencies that collect, or are in possession of the data will have the power to exempt sensitive information from being provided to the Chief Statistician.

TABLE 1 SAFEGUARDS TO PROTECT THE CONFIDENTIALITY OF INDIVIDUAL DATA

- The **microdata must be anonymised** by applying appropriate statistical techniques before access is provided. In instances where it may not be possible to completely mask the identity of the individual party, such as in the case of industries with only a small number of firms, access will not be provided.
- Users are required to come to an **on-site Data Lab** at DOS or the gazetted RSUs to access the anonymised microdata.
- All **output will be examined** prior to the researchers taking them out from the Data Lab. This is to ensure that only statistical tables and output without any anonymised microdata are taken out.
- A **two-layer administrative review mechanism** will be put in place to ensure data confidentiality. A Microdata Review Panel will look at the technical issues on anonymisation and assess each request for microdata. The Microdata Advisory Committee will advise on policy issues and processes relating to anonymised microdata access.
- The maximum **fine for breaches of confidentiality has been increased** from \$5,000 to \$10,000, besides the existing provision for imprisonment for a term of up to 12 months. This serves as an additional deterrence to the abuse or misuse of anonymised microdata.