

Action guide

Addressing misuse and misinterpretation of official statistics

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Addressing misuse and misinterpretation of official statistics: action guide

What this guidance helps you do

As an analyst producing official statistics, you can help make misuse and misinterpretation less likely, easier to spot and easier to respond to. This guide explains practical steps you can take to help ensure your statistics are clear, trusted and useful, including how to:

- produce statistics responsibly
- design outputs around user value
- anticipate and respond to misuse
- record learning while applying the [Standards for Official Statistics](#) in the [Code of Practice for Statistics 3.0](#) (the Code)

Several practices in the Code call for producers to challenge and anticipate misuse and misunderstanding of statistics, including practices 1.4 (Standard 1: Show integrity), 7.3 (7: Be open about quality) and 9.5 (9: Be clear). The wider aspects of Trustworthiness, Quality and Value are also central; robust methods, clear communication, openness about limitations and active user engagement all reduce the risk that statistics will be misused or misunderstood.

What we mean by misuse and misinterpretation

In this guide, misuse means using, presenting or repeating statistics in a way that could mislead people, whether or not this is intentional. This could include omitting important context, making unsupported claims, comparing figures that are not comparable, or selectively using data. Misinterpretation means understanding statistics in a way that does not reflect what the data can reliably show, often because definitions, context, uncertainty or limitations are missed or unclear. Misinterpretation may be accidental, but it can still affect understanding, trust or decisions.

Who this guide is for

Use this guide if you produce, develop, quality assure, publish or communicate official statistics and need practical prompts for reducing the risk of misuse and misinterpretation. It is written for analysts, but many actions will need to be agreed with statistics leads, communications colleagues, policy or operational teams, user researchers, senior leaders or external specialists.

How to use this guide

Use the ten actions proportionately. Not every release will need intensive monitoring or a formal response plan, but every piece of statistical work should consider where misunderstanding may arise and what simple safeguards are needed.

Scale your effort according to sensitivity, risk, likely impact, public interest, the likelihood of misunderstanding, and the potential harm if the statistics are misused:

- For low-risk updates, simple checks, clear wording and routine feedback routes may be enough
- For sensitive, novel, high-profile or contested statistics, a more extensive approach may be needed, potentially including deeper user engagement, communications testing, monitoring, escalation planning and post-release review

This guide explores the Code as well as wider guidance about trust, transparency, misuse, misinformation and information integrity. The useful resources section provides further reading, and the summary table gives examples of how analysts can put the actions into practice.

Quick start: use this guide in three steps

1. **Reduce the risk before publication** by being open about methods, quality, uncertainty, users and likely misunderstandings
2. **Decide the level of response** by considering sensitivity, reach, potential harm and whether misunderstanding is likely to recur or spread
3. **Review and improve** by recording what happened, what changed and what should be done differently next time

How to approach addressing misuse and misinterpretation

Our recommended approach can be used throughout the production process to make misuse and misinformation less likely, easier to spot and easier to respond to. The actions below bring together relevant Code requirements and wider good practice that can help producers reduce the likelihood of misuse and misinterpretation, identify issues early and respond proportionately when they occur.

Overview of the ten actions

1. Put trustworthiness into practice by being open
2. Be transparent and clear in communicating
3. Build quality openly and rigorously
4. Embed governance, leadership and accountability
5. Design statistics around users and public value
6. Communicate to counter misuse and build resilience
7. Make statistics easier to find, understand and reuse
8. Take a proactive, preventative approach
9. Actively identify and manage misuse and misinformation risk
10. Engage openly with challenge and scrutiny

Summary of actions and examples

Build trustworthy foundations

What analysts should do: Show users how you made the statistics, what judgements you made, where the limits are, and how decisions, changes and improvements are recorded.

Example in practice: When you revise a dataset, explain what changed, why it changed, whether the message has changed, and where users can find the evidence behind key judgements.

Related actions: 1, 2, 3 and 4.

Support use

What analysts should do: Design outputs around user questions and public value, work with communications colleagues on clear messages, and help trusted intermediaries find, check and reuse the statistics accurately.

Example in practice: When developing an output for a broad audience, engage users early, test the main messages and visuals with communications colleagues, and provide a short explainer so intermediaries can reuse the statistics accurately.

Related actions: 5, 6 and 7.

Anticipate misuse and respond effectively

What analysts should do: Think ahead about likely misunderstanding or misuse, assess potential harm with communications colleagues, and agree when to monitor, pre-empt, correct, escalate, review or involve external expertise.

Example in practice: When planning work on a sensitive or contested topic, identify likely misconceptions, agree the context users will need, set monitoring and escalation routes, and review what happened after release.

Related actions: 8, 9 and 10.

Actions for analysts

The ten actions set out the main activities analysts can take. The sections that follow help you decide when to apply those activities, what proportionate responses can look like, and how to review whether your approach is working.

Building trustworthy foundations

Start by showing users that your statistics are produced with clear stewardship, openness about evidence and methods, and visible commitment to quality.

1. Put trustworthiness into practice by being open

Support trustworthiness by showing your workings, explaining your judgements and being open when things change.

- Be open about methods, decisions, limitations and quality issues
- Demonstrate independence and integrity in all outputs and communications

- Explain why decisions are made, not just what the outputs are
- Create a visible audit trail of changes, revisions and judgements

Ask: Would a user be able to see what we did, why we did it and what the limitations mean for interpretation?

2. Be transparent and clear in communicating

Use transparency to help users understand the evidence, context and limits before questions or misunderstandings arise.

- Release data, context and explanations proactively, not reactively
- Make statistics clear, accessible and easy to interpret
- Provide context so headline figures are not interpreted in isolation
- Apply [intelligent transparency](#) expectations across all communications – provide access to key information, make it clear, guided by analytical leaders

Ask: Have we provided the context users need before a misleading interpretation can take hold?

3. Build quality openly and rigorously

Support confidence by making quality assurance, uncertainty and improvement visible throughout the statistical lifecycle.

- Use robust methods, quality assurance and peer review
- Be explicit about uncertainty, bias and limitations
- Maintain consistent standards across the statistical lifecycle, from data through analysis to release
- Commit to continuous improvement and clear prioritisation

Ask: Have we made uncertainty, quality and limitations visible enough for users to make sound judgements?

4. Embed governance, leadership and accountability

Make accountability visible by documenting how your statistics meet the Code's standards of Trustworthiness, Quality and Value. Show how you give an account, are held to account and make good when improvements are needed.

- Maintain a statement of compliance that explains how the statistics meet the Code's standards and required practices for Trustworthiness, Quality and Value
- Give an account by keeping evidence of methods, quality assurance, user engagement, release practices, revisions, risks, judgements and improvement actions
- Be held to account by making it easy for users, communications colleagues, intermediaries, external experts, and the public more broadly, to ask questions, challenge interpretation and raise concerns
- Make good by correcting issues, improving methods or communication, and recording what changed as a result of feedback, challenge or misuse
- Agree who can decide whether to monitor, clarify, correct publicly, escalate or seek external advice when misuse or misinterpretation happens

Ask: Could we show, if challenged, who made the key decisions, what evidence they used and what changed as a result?

Support use

Ensure you address user questions and support the wider information environment your products are applied in. Communications can support you to understand and communicate toward user needs.

5. Design statistics around users and public value

Check that your outputs are useful, understandable and relevant to the decisions users need to make.

- Continuously engage direct, indirect and potential users, including under-represented groups, where appropriate
- Use “you said, we did” updates to show how engagement has influenced statistics
- Ensure outputs are relevant to real-world decisions and lived experience
- Explain clearly how the statistics are useful
- Use evidence about how the statistics are used after release to check whether they remain relevant, useful and clear for users’ decisions

Ask: Have we engaged the people who use, may use or are affected by these statistics, including intermediaries who may explain them to others?

6. Communicate to counter misuse and build resilience

Help users understand the evidence and reduce the risk of misuse by working with communications colleagues on clear messages, tested explanations and informed judgement.

- Use plain language and clear narratives, not technical jargon
- Explain how statistics relate to real-life experience to reduce disconnect between evidence and public perception
- Provide visuals, examples, and tailored outputs for different audiences
- Work with communications teams to test messages, visuals and audience reach routes before release
- Prepare clear lines, explainers or supporting material where these would help users interpret the statistics accurately

Ask: Have we tested whether the main message, visuals and caveats are clear to the audiences most likely to use or repeat them?

7. Make statistics easier to find, understand and reuse

Strengthen information integrity by making statistics easier to find, understand, verify and reuse accurately. This could include:

- short explainers
- clear data tables and metadata
- technical briefings
- questions and answer sessions

- concise briefing packs

This will:

- support statistical and media literacy through clear communication of statistics
- enable fact-checkers and intermediaries to reuse data accurately
- build collaboration across analysis, communications, academia, media and civil society
- equip users and intermediaries with clear context and caveats

Ask: Have we made it easy for trusted intermediaries and wider audiences to find, verify and reuse the statistics accurately?

Anticipate misuse and respond effectively

Enhance your good design with active risk management. Work with communications colleagues to spot likely misuse early and respond before misunderstanding becomes embedded.

8. Take a proactive, preventative approach

Think ahead about how the statistics could be misunderstood or misused and build safeguards into your plan.

- Use clear definitions so users know what is included, what is excluded and how the statistics differ from similar measures, linking to those measures where possible
- Add context, caveats and uncertainty so headline figures are not read in isolation
- Test headline messages, visuals and explanations with communications colleagues before release
- Horizon scan for events, public debates or misconceptions that could increase the risk of misuse or misinterpretation
- Agree in advance what response options may be needed if misuse happens, from monitoring and direct clarification through to public correction or escalation

Ask: What is the most likely way these statistics could be misunderstood, and what can we do now to reduce that risk?

9. Actively identify and manage misuse and misinformation risk

Using the Government Communication Service's [RESIST toolkit](#) can help you to manage risks when statistics may be misunderstood, misused or misrepresented. Apply each step in a way that supports the trustworthiness, quality and value of the statistics:

- **Recognise:** Check whether claims about the statistics are accurate, missing context, or using figures in a way that could mislead users
- **Early warning:** Use agreed monitoring routes to track media coverage, social media, stakeholder feedback and user queries where the topic is sensitive or likely to spread

- **Situational insight:** Summarise what users are saying, identify common misunderstandings, highlight where evidence is being distorted, and explain the likely audience impact clearly
- **Impact analysis:** Assess whether the issue is wrong or incomplete, how widely it is spreading, who may be affected, and whether it could affect understanding, trust or decisions
- **Strategic communications:** Choose a proportionate response with communications colleagues, from adding context or clarifying directly through to public correction or escalation where needed
- **Tracking effectiveness:** Review whether corrections were picked up, misunderstandings reduced, users changed how they described the statistics, or further clarification is needed

Ask: Do we know how we will assess, respond to and review misuse or misinterpretation, and who is responsible for each step?

Distinguish whether misuse is within government or external, as the response route may differ: internal engagement and escalation may be needed for government use, while external misuse may need public clarification or engagement with intermediaries.

10. Engage openly with challenge and scrutiny

Support trustworthiness by responding constructively to challenge, explaining the evidence clearly, and using scrutiny to improve future outputs.

- Welcome questions, critique and alternative interpretations as opportunities to clarify and improve
- Respond with evidence, context and proportionate explanation, not defensiveness
- Distinguish whether the issue is about data quality, methods, communication, interpretation or use
- Involve communications colleagues or external experts where they can help explain the evidence clearly and credibly
- Record significant challenge and what you did in response so learning feeds into future outputs

Ask: Have we treated challenge as evidence for improvement, not just as something to answer?

When to monitor, pre-empt, correct or review

The ten actions above describe what to do. These prompts help you decide when to apply them and how far to go, depending on the sensitivity, reach and potential harm of the situation:

- **Monitor** proportionately to the situation. For high-profile, sensitive, novel or contested statistics, plan monitoring before publication with communications colleagues. For lower-risk issues, keep a lighter watch on whether misunderstanding recurs, spreads or becomes more significant

- **Pre-empt**, or ‘pre-bunk’, with communications colleagues and, where useful, external experts when known misconceptions, definitional risks, seasonal effects or headline-grabbing figures could distort understanding
- **Correct or escalate** with communications advice when misuse is material, repeated, high profile, used in official or public debate, or likely to affect understanding, trust or decisions. This could include clarifying directly, publishing a correction or clarification, escalating internally, or working with trusted intermediaries or subject experts to explain the evidence
- **Review** with analysts, communications colleagues and relevant intermediaries after significant releases or interventions to understand whether users received, understood and acted on the intended message, and whether future statistics or communications need to change

Examples of proportionate responses

- **Low risk: record and keep a lighter watch.** A small number of users misunderstand a technical definition, but the issue has limited reach and is unlikely to affect decisions. Record the issue, consider whether future wording can be clearer, and keep a lighter watch on whether the misunderstanding recurs, spreads or becomes more significant
- **Moderate risk: clarify or add context.** A stakeholder, journalist or user group repeats a claim that is incomplete or missing important caveats. Clarify directly where appropriate, add context to the release or supporting material, and prepare lines to take with communications colleagues
- **Higher risk: correct publicly.** A misleading interpretation is being repeated publicly, is gaining traction, or could affect public understanding, trust or decisions. Work with communications colleagues to publish a clarification or correction, and signpost users to the correct interpretation
- **Escalation risk: seek advice.** Misuse is serious, repeated, high profile, involves official or public use within government, affects professional independence, or could undermine confidence in the statistics or wider statistical system. Escalate internally and consider seeking advice from OSR

Questions to reflect on

- Can we explain who the statistics are for, what decisions they support and where misunderstanding or misuse is most likely to arise?
- Have we used proportionate safeguards, such as clear definitions, caveats, uncertainty, user-focused explanation, communications testing or monitoring?
- Have we engaged users, intermediaries or affected publics where their insight could help identify likely misunderstandings before publication?
- Have we agreed who is responsible for monitoring, correction, escalation, external engagement and post-release review?
- Have we recorded what happened, what changed, what could not change and why?
- Can we show how feedback, challenge or evidence of misuse has informed future statistics, communication or governance?

How to know this approach is working

- You can explain clearly who the statistics are for, what decisions they support, and where interpretation risks are most likely to arise
- Your releases include proportionate context, caveats, uncertainty, user-focused explanation and accessible messages developed with communications colleagues before publication
- You keep evidence of key decisions, quality checks, user engagement and learning throughout the production process
- You know who owns monitoring, correction, escalation, external engagement and recording lessons learned after significant releases or incidents

Getting advice from OSR

If your review suggests that misuse or misinterpretation is significant, repeated, difficult to resolve, or could affect trust in the statistics, consider seeking advice from OSR.

- Producers can approach OSR for advice at any point, particularly where they identify notable misuse or misinterpretation of statistics. This is especially important where an issue may create material reputational risk to the statistics, the statistical team, statistical teams in other departments, or the integrity of the statistical system more widely
- Where concerns arise about professional independence or wrongful release, producers should follow the [GSS guidance](#) about reporting to the National Statistician and OSR. It is helpful to keep a clear record of the issue, the evidence considered, the response taken and any learning for future releases
- OSR may also consider the topics covered in this guide through compliance reviews, casework or wider regulatory engagement. Producers can use OSR's [regulatory approach guidance](#) to understand how OSR applies the Code of Practice for Statistics in practice

Useful resources

Use these resources for further reading and practical support with planning, production, response and review.

- [Code of Practice for Statistics 3.0](#): to check that your work supports the public good through Trustworthiness, Quality and Value
- [Standards for Official Statistics](#): for how the statistics meet the Code's required practices and explain that clearly to users
- [Standards for Public Use of Statistics, Data and Wider Analysis](#): for guiding communicators on intelligent transparency, using statistics, data and wider analysis with integrity, clarity and accuracy
- [Guidance on the Standards for Public Use of Statistics, Data and Wider Analysis](#): to know who is responsible for implementing these standards and practical advice



- [OSR guidance on ensuring public accountability](#): to give an account, respond to challenge, make improvements and show what changed
- [Government Communication Service, RESIST 3 Counter-disinformation toolkit](#): for when you need a practical structure for spotting, assessing, responding to and reviewing misuse and misinformation risks
- [OECD, Facts not Fakes: Tackling Disinformation, Strengthening Information Integrity](#): for when you need to understand the wider information environment, the role of trusted intermediaries, and how to support accurate reuse
- [OSR Blog, Professor Sir David Spiegelhalter – Don't Ask for Trust in Statistics. Earn It](#): for five vital components of trustworthy communication of evidence
- [OSR report on analytical leadership – Demonstrate transparency and integrity](#): for case studies showing some ways to be open about evidence