Statistics NZ guidance on confidentiality

Statistics NZ can advise on confidentiality issues that arise with the release of data, and on methods for ensuring confidentiality of aggregate social, business, and integrated data. Protecting confidential information ensures the ongoing supply of information and the continued goodwill of both clients and respondents.

The good news about confidentiality is that many people have already thought about it and devised relevant and simple processes and methods to protect confidential information. Using established good practice, it is possible to release useful data without breaching confidentiality.

It is important to assess the confidentiality risks involved with data release. This is because breaches of confidentiality may affect the ability to collect information in the future and reduce public trust in an agency. Public perceptions about the availability of information from one government agency may also impact on public trust in other government agencies.

Information about individuals, families, households, dwellings, iwi, businesses, or other legal entities such as schools, universities, or non-governmental organisations may be confidential. Confidentiality breaches may occur with release of individual-level or aggregate data, but the risk can be reduced through appropriate processes and methods.

Based on good practice, we recommend the following approach:

1. Determine whether data is
   a. in the public domain,
   b. discoverable, albeit with some hurdles (such as can be purchased), or
   c. confidential or private.

2. If data is not in the public domain, assess the:
   - legal constraints on release
   - effect of disclosure on the individual or entity
   - effect of disclosure on government agencies, including your own ability to collect the information in the future, or carry out other activities.

3. If these assessments suggest confidential information should be protected, determine which methods of disclosure control should be applied. Note the following:
   - In most instances, individual-level data either can, or cannot, be publicly released. Anonymisation, ie removing names and addresses, is not sufficient to protect individuals’ information: there remain risks of disclosure through spontaneous recognition, data matching, deliberate search, or other approaches.
   - Usually, the best approach is to release appropriately aggregated and confidentialised data.
   - A handful of useful and simple methods can be applied, such as random rounding, cell suppression, and collapsing categories. For an introduction to methods for protecting confidential information, see Confidentiality of information supplied to Statistics New Zealand.
Further guidance is found in the following resources:

- a short version of Statistics NZ’s approach to confidentiality:  
- a longer version of Statistics NZ’s approach to confidentiality:  
- introduction to confidentiality for the Census:  
- 2006 Census Confidentiality Rules:  
- introduction to the Statistics Act 1975:  
- the International Handbook on Statistical Disclosure Control (ESSnet SDC project, 2010):  
  [neon.vb.cbs.nl/casc/handbook.htm](http://neon.vb.cbs.nl/casc/handbook.htm)

The following Statistics NZ methodological standards can be shared on request:

- confidentiality in microdata
- confidentiality in social collections (draft)
- confidentiality in business collections.

For assistance or further information on confidentiality, please contact:
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