

How Will We Know When "Sequestration" Hurts Us?

by
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As readers of this blog know I've been researching [government transparency](#). Recently I've been examining how web accessible data are used to help [measure the performance](#) of government programs.



Given availability of data on government programs from sources as diverse as [Performance.gov](#), [Data.gov](#), [Sunlight Foundation](#), and the [State of the USA](#) project, where can we go for impartial reporting on the impacts sequestration will have on the US economy? For example, if I'm in charge of one of the Federal agency programs that is reporting in to Performance.gov's [performance improvement](#) section, shouldn't I want my data to reflect, as soon as possible, the impacts cutbacks on my program are having or will have on my ability to accomplish my program's goals?

Let's state from the outset that addressing such questions might have an undeniably political component. For example, if my primary goal is to reduce government spending without regard to the impacts such spending reductions have on individuals or the economy, I might just be satisfied knowing that government spending now and over a defined future time span has been and will be reduced.

Problem is, government cost data are such that there exist significant questions about the quality, reliability, and completeness of such data. (To read about the nature of such issues and what can be done about it, the reader is referred to diverse resources such as the trade association [Data Transparency Coalition](#) headed by Hudson Hollister and the cost data

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standardization efforts of the Cato Group's [Jim Harper](#).)

On the other hand, let's say you need to show how cutbacks in staffing and other program resources are impacting the effectiveness of government programs authorized by Congress. One place to check is Performance.gov which I have written about [here](#) as a model for how resources can be managed to share government program performance data.

Problem is, Performance.gov's performance improvement pages are targeting quarterly reporting for both agency program-specific and cross-agency goals. Will such quarterly reporting be frequent enough to provide direct evidence of sequestration's impacts? More importantly, are the impact oriented metrics being displayed in Performance.gov sensitive or detailed enough to detect the ripple effects on, say, local economies of reduced local spending by government staff and contractors? Regarding programs targeting health improvements among specific target populations, will sequestration actually reduce the ability to measure program impacts by, say, reducing spending on follow up home visits by healthcare workers who are responsible for assessing specific health conditions?

In some ways government programs are like giant nuclear powered aircraft carriers. Turning them around takes miles of open sea while every other ship in the battle group has to change course as well. It's a complex process requiring careful planning and coordination and can't be done with blinders on. If we reduce the resources devoted to measuring and reporting government program performance, aren't we, in effect, putting "blinders" on?

These are complex questions to answer. Generating good cost data and performance statistics both require care, planning, resources, management, and collaboration among all the parties involved. My concern is that sequestration and -- more seriously -- uninformed arguments about its impacts will not be able to move us forward if we lack good data.