

A Century of Washington Statistics

A History of the Washington Statistical Society, 1926 - 2026

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Abstract

The Washington Statistical Society is a regional professional association of national significance. Its history reflects the evolving state of “Washington statistics,” encompassing the quality of official statistics, the principled use of data as evidence for public policy, and statistical literacy as a component of civic life. Existing histories document the Society’s development through much of the twentieth century. The Society’s centennial offers an opportunity to examine its history from a longer perspective and reassess how the Society and, by extension, Washington statistics have changed. This paper examines records and publications, membership and workforce data, and the authors’ collective recollections. The central finding is that while the particular challenges facing Washington statisticians have changed, the Society has endured where comparable efforts have failed because its core activities—seminars and workshops, mentoring, public service, professional recognition, and fellowship—have sustained a diverse professional community of shared values across agencies, sectors, professional identities, and generations.

Keywords

American Statistical Association; federal statistics; national statistics; official statistics; professional societies; statistics history; Washington Statistical Society

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1. Introduction

The Washington Statistical Society was founded a century ago, on January 19, 1926, and serves as the professional home for statisticians in the Washington, DC, metropolitan area. From the beginning, its mission has been to foster statistical thinking and promote unity among those concerned with statistical matters in the region. Because the capital of the United States lies within the Washington metropolitan area, the Society's activities have been organized around what we call "Washington statistics," which includes the quality of official statistics, the principled use of data as evidence for public policy, and statistical literacy as a component of civic life. In conducting these activities, the Society has not only sustained a local professional community but also played a national role at important moments, shaping policies and debates felt by Americans throughout the country. Its activities trace a century of profound change in the practice of Washington statistics and in the role of scientific evidence in society more broadly.

The story of the Washington Statistical Society's survival is also the story of the persistence of statistical principles in public policy, neither of which were inevitable. The Society was born amid political conflict and public controversy over science. The Progressive Era had largely ended; the First Red Scare had tested the limits of speech and political dissent; and the Scopes "Monkey" Trial, held only months before the Society was established, had dramatized the national conflict over the supremacy of scientific evidence. A century later, the Society again operates amid rapid technological change, political polarization, and distrust of expertise. Statistical thinking, in the authors' view, has never been more necessary or more contested. But today the professional community that the Society seeks to unify has changed. Statistical work is

no longer confined to those who call themselves statisticians, and professional exchange is no longer organized primarily by geography (Auerbach 2025).

The centennial offers an opportunity to view these and other trends from a longer perspective and to reassess how both the Society and Washington statistics, by extension, have changed. This paper draws on Society records, published histories, membership and workforce data, and the authors' collective recollections—as well as the recollections of others from events organized to celebrate the centennial (Liu 2026a, 2026b). It begins with a high-level overview of the last century, analyzing changes in the Society's size relative to the American Statistical Association membership and the Washington-area statistical workforce. It then provides a decade-by-decade account of the Society since 1980 in an effort to better understand recent trends. The central finding is that while the particular challenges facing Washington statisticians have changed, the Society has endured where comparable efforts have failed because its core activities—seminars and workshops, mentoring, public service, professional recognition, and fellowship—have sustained a diverse professional community of shared values across agencies, sectors, professional identities, and generations. We end with a discussion of the future of Washington statistics and a few concluding remarks.

2. A Brief History

The Washington Statistical Society emerged from a longer American tradition in which statistical societies were not merely professional interest groups but civic institutions dedicated to collecting, evaluating, and disseminating knowledge for public use. Despite this noble goal, many nineteenth-century statistical societies failed to endure. The New York Statistical Society,

for example, was incorporated in 1836 to collect, arrange, and diffuse statistical knowledge. But it never functioned, and only the American Statistical Association, formed three years later in Massachusetts, survives among the nation's statistical societies of that era (FitzPatrick 1957).

The American Statistical Association did not hold a meeting outside of Boston until 1908. The Washington Statistical Society's regional precursor was the Census Analytical Association, founded in 1888 and later renamed the National Statistical Association. The National Statistical Association sought to verify official statistical data and integrate analyses across national, state, and municipal boundaries. Its advocates argued that Washington was the natural home for this effort because it housed the federal government's central offices, records, libraries, and archives (FitzPatrick 1957).

The National Statistical Association survived only eight years, despite having distinguished honorary members such as the presidents Benjamin Harrison and Grover Cleveland. The Washington Statistical Society inherited the civic conception of statistics, but rather than relying on a narrow mission or celebrity, it developed a broader organizational umbrella that proved successful in weathering the profound changes in Washington statistics that were to come.

The Society traces its roots to American Statistical Association meetings in Washington that began just as the National Statistical Association ended in 1896. Early topics focused largely on government statistics. The Society was formally organized on January 19, 1926, as "a branch of the American Statistical Association," but it did not become a chapter until 1935 (Allen 1988). The Washington Statistical Society and the American Statistical Association have remained distinct to this day in that not every Society member is an Association member.

The Washington Statistical Society's first major expansion coincided with Washington's rise as the center of federal statistics. Duncan and Sheldon (1978) place the start of "the revolution in United States government statistics" in 1926, the year the Society was founded. Yet Morris H. Hansen recalls two subsequent developments that were critical (Olkin 1987; see also National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine 1996). The first was the mathematical formulation of sampling and survey design that followed Neyman (1934). The second was the need for surveys following the rapid expansion of government that occurred during the New Deal and World War II.

Sampling was controversial in many federal settings. W. Allen Wallis describes objections to federal surveys from both outside government and within the Census Bureau. He also recalls an exuberant Washington statistical community in which W. Edwards Deming and the Department of Agriculture Graduate School helped bring together statisticians engaged with developments associated with Neyman, Fisher, Shewhart, among others (Wallis 1994). Wallis judged 1935–1945 to have been perhaps the most exciting decade in 20th century American statistics.

The Washington Statistical Society both shaped and was shaped by this environment. When statisticians came to Washington for wartime work in 1942, the Society claimed 1,000 members, roughly one-third of ASA membership (Allen 1988). According to Duncan and Shelton (1978, page 49, lines 194-195), the Society "inaugurated a 'new type' of meeting, dealing with the application of statistical principles to actual problems of estimation," and these meetings were extremely popular. The Society went on to attract and influence figures whose work influenced statistical practice worldwide, including Joseph Adna Hill, Ewan Clague, Morris H. Hansen, Jerome Cornfield, Margaret Martin, W. Edwards Deming, and Joseph Waksberg—seven of the nine influential statisticians profiled by Cohen (2014) served as presidents of the Society.

After World War II, the Society expanded its role and established many of the traditions still practiced today. By contrast, focused efforts, such as the famous Statistical Research Group at Columbia University (run by Wallis, 1942–1945) were disbanded after serving their specific purpose (Wallis 1980). Like time capsules, Society traditions capture the era of Washington Statistics in which they were started, documenting changes in statistical practice and values. The annual dinner and newsletter, which continue to this day, were established in the 1940s, and through the 1950s the Board of Directors functioned largely as a program committee. As the Washington statistical community grew, that centralized model became insufficient. The 1960s brought the Methodology Section, subject-matter program committees, graduate student awards, an employment column, and constitutional changes that created greater leadership continuity through the President-Elect and Past-President roles.

The Society also faced a recurring challenge: how to serve members with diverse professional interests and career stages. For example, a 1969 survey identified a generational divide, with older members favoring more social meetings and younger members drawn to technical sessions. The Society responded by seeking to balance the two (Allen 1988), and technical sessions have remained central to the Society’s identity. For examples of the continued importance of such sessions, see U.S. Office of Federal Statistical Policy and Standards (1978, page 357) and U.S. Office of Management and Budget (2017, page 63).

The Washington Statistical Society’s semicentennial coincided with the Society’s peak in membership (Table 1). The Society grew from roughly 1,000 members in 1942 to about 1,500 in 1967, peaking around 1979 when it had 1,773 members. In 1988, it still had about 1,500 members, organized 35-40 technical sessions annually, and drew members from government, academia, private and nonprofit organizations, and the retired or self-employed population

(Allen 1988). The Society’s scale reflected an institutional form well matched to its environment. Washington statisticians worked near one another, needed continuing education, and benefited from a local mechanism for professional exchange. But that environment slowly changed after the 1980 presidential election.

Table 1: Approximate Number of Members in the Washington Statistical Society (WSS) and American Statistical Association (ASA)

Year	WSS Membership	ASA Membership	WSS as % of ASA
2025	730	14,600	5%
2024	760	16,000	5%
2023	720	15,800	5%
1995	1,200	19,000	6%
1988	1,500	15,000	10%
1979	1,773	14,000	13%
1967	1,500	10,000	15%
1942	1,000	3,000	33%

Sources: Allen (1988), Mason and McKenzie (2015)

Society membership has fallen from its circa 1979 peak. To some extent, this decline reflects a Washington environment that is more ambivalent toward statistical evidence, particularly within the federal government. For a detailed discussion, see, in particular, Wallman (1983) in *The American Statistician* 37(3). Many efforts that grew alongside the Society to support Washington statistics did not survive this era. For example, the *Statistical Reporter*, a monthly federal statistics magazine, ended in 1982 after running for four decades (roughly as long as the Society’s own newsletter at the time). The magazine initially disseminated information to coordinate the federal statistical system but over time expanded to include general-interest contributions such as technical developments and opinion and discussion pieces. Throughout its run, it frequently referenced Society activities, particularly starting in 1966, when magazine issues began to be circulated among the public as well as government employees.

Yet by many measures, statistical activities in the region have increased since the late 1990s. For example, the Washington-area statistical workforce has not declined with Society membership. Comparing approximate Society membership in the mid-1990s with the 1998 occupational count in Table 2, membership equaled roughly one-third of the number of statisticians in the Washington area. By 2024, membership was roughly one-fifth of the number of local statisticians and only about six percent of the combined number of local statisticians and data scientists.

Table 2: Approximate Number of Statisticians in the Washington, DC-Maryland-Virginia (DMV) Metropolitan Statistical Area and Federal Government

Year	Washington (DMV) Area		Federal Government		
	Statisticians	Data Scientists	Mathematical Statisticians	Statisticians/ Stat Assistants	Data Scientists
2025	3,220	9,260	1,498	3,882	1,245
2024	3,490	8,530	1,660	4,440	1,130
2023	3,850	6,840	1,620	4,310	540
1998	3,410	0	1,240	4,410	0

Sources: BLS OEWS (<https://www.bls.gov/oes/>) Occupation Codes 15-2041, 15-2051, 25312 and OPM FedScope (<https://www.fedscope.opm.gov/>) Occupation Codes 1529, 1530, 1531, and 1560. OEWS data is for the DC-VA-MD-WV MSA/PMSA. FedScope data is as of September.

This raises two questions: How has the Society changed since 1980—and Washington statistics by extension? And what kind of organizational capacity is needed to sustain Washington statistics, thereby advancing the Society’s mission?

Part of the answer lies in the fact that these trends are not confined to the Washington Statistical Society or the Washington area. For example, over the past 20 years in the United States, the number of Ph.D. students in Statistics has doubled and the number of master’s students has nearly quadrupled (He 2026). Furthermore, the membership decline has not been limited to the

Washington Statistical Society. The American Statistical Association has also experienced declines in recent years (Table 1) as well as in the mid-90s, when growth earlier in that decade caused a strain in member services, a strain that was alleviated by improving organizational capacity (Mason and McKenzie 2015).

Nevertheless, we argue that the Washington Statistical Society is shaped by a unique set of forces that deserve a separate examination. This examination is important both because Washington statistics is important in its own right and because Washington statisticians make up a large percentage of statisticians (within the American Statistical Association, for example) such that changes in Washington statistics inevitably reverberate throughout the larger community.

For these reasons, we take a closer look at the past half century. The following sections review the Society's activities, decade by decade, drawing on Society records and oral accounts. We find that since the 1980s, the Society has repeatedly confronted changes in professional identity, public expectations, and communication and technology. Examining each decade in sequence shows how the Society's core activities have been adapted to new circumstances and makes a case for why these activities will remain central to the Society's future.

The 1980s

The 1980s marked the peak of the Washington Statistical Society's membership. Oral accounts from that era suggest that the Society's flexibility extended beyond programming to operations. The Society created or institutionalized several activities that became enduring markers of identity: the Shiskin Award was first presented in 1980; the December holiday party began in 1982; the Short Course Committee was formed in 1983; the logo and mugs were introduced in

1984; the President's Award was established in 1985; local science fair judging began in 1986; and the first Symposium on Quality Assurance in Government was held in 1988. These activities expanded the Society beyond technical seminars. The Society influenced continuing education, public service, professional recognition, and social connection, all of which helped sustain its large membership. It also contributed to the celebration of ASA's 150th year with a series of special seminars in 1989, including a seminar that featured the careers of Mary Grace Kovar at the National Center for Health Statistics, Margaret Martin in the chief statistician's office and as the first director of the Committee on National Statistics, and Katherine Wallman as the first director of the Council of Professional Associations on Federal Statistics and soon to be chief statistician of the United States, serving from 1992 to 2017.

Before electronic communication, the monthly newsletter was the primary means to inform members about seminars and Society activities. In the 1980s, few alternatives existed for reaching members. Producing the newsletter required preparing a master copy, printing, mailing, and distribution. The Society also relied on informal distribution networks. Society President Maria Gonzalez (1983) created a system of "building representatives," asking volunteers in federal and nonfederal buildings to circulate newsletters or seminar posters. When mail delivery failed before the first seminar of one program year, volunteers hand-delivered posters around Washington so members knew the seminars were taking place. The episode shows that Society functions depended on the ability to use informal infrastructure when formal systems were inadequate.

Recruitment and mentoring were similarly informal. The Society had no official mentoring program in the 1980s, but members brought one another into the Society through encouragement, invitations, and committee work. Gonzalez's mentoring of younger members is

a remembered example of this informal process. Board discussions also focused on how to attract students and younger statisticians, including making annual dinners and social events more accessible. The social dimension was not incidental. Social events enabled statisticians from different agencies, companies, and application areas to build relationships that facilitated professional exchange. The 1980s therefore show the Society thriving in a relatively low-technology environment: print newsletters, building representatives, in-person short courses, social events, science fairs, and informal mentoring.

The 1990s

The 1990s marked a shift toward public engagement and electronic communication. The Washington Statistical Society expanded quantitative literacy activities, began distributing calendars and newsletters electronically, first awarded science fair prizes, and inaugurated the Hansen Lecture in 1991 and the Roger Herriot Award in 1995.

Many Society activities reflected concerns over the accuracy of survey statistics. For example, the Society prepared a 1999 letter to the Washington Post on scientific issues surrounding the 2000 U.S. Census (Lin 2026). Another example is a remembered seminar on survey design that sparked a debate over whether it was appropriate to “condition” on aspects of the design. A skeptical participant asked about a hypothetical survey design in which a coin is flipped: if heads, the population is sampled, while if tails, a complete census is taken. An unconditional analysis would report half the error of an analysis that conditions on the fact that a survey was taken. But the unconditional analysis seems far less useful in practice.

The Morris H. Hansen Lecture, launched with support from Hansen's estate and Westat, quickly became a high-profile platform and underscored the central role of survey analysis in Washington statistics. The lecture series placed the Society at the center of methodological debates important to federal and survey statistics, including discussions of design-based, model-based, and prediction-based approaches to inference.

At the same time, electronic communication began to reshape both how the Society reached its members and how its history was preserved. The newsletter remained important, but after the mid-1990s, the record itself began to change as electronic summaries became easier to distribute and archive.

The 1990s also show how the Society transmitted professional norms. Another remembered seminar on how to give a fifteen-minute talk illustrates this informal educational role. The talk emphasized that a short conference presentation should not reproduce the whole paper, but should explain why it was worth reading and clearly communicate its central message.

At the same time, the Society began to confront the limits of its own success. Its center of gravity in survey statistics made sense in Washington but risked narrowing participation. Meetings near the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) were more accessible to many federal survey statisticians than to biostatisticians working near the National Institutes of Health (NIH) and the National Cancer Institute (NCI), among others. Efforts to connect the Society with biostatistics, including through a remembered Donald Berry seminar on mammography, meta-analysis, false positives, and public communication of uncertainty, show the Society trying to bridge disciplinary and geographic divides. The lesson of the 1990s is that flexibility required both new technology and a willingness to broaden the community the Society understood itself to serve.

The 2000s

The 2000s were a decade of significant technological transition. The Society added video conferencing to some seminars beginning in 2000, began posting seminar slides online in 2006, developed a handbook for officers and committee chairs in 2007, and became affiliated with the statistical honor society Mu Sigma Rho in 2008. These changes did not replace the Society's local role. Rather, they changed how local professional activity was organized, recorded, and extended beyond a single meeting room.

The transition from paper to electronic communication was gradual. An electronic version of the monthly newsletter had existed since 1995, but electronic delivery did not become the default until 2005. The delay was as much organizational as technological. The Society had to collect email addresses, persuade members who preferred paper, and manage mailing-list complications. Video conferencing involved similar tradeoffs. It made participation possible without traveling to seminar locations such as BLS, but early systems were unreliable. If fewer people attended in person and the technology failed, the seminar could be left with a very small audience. The 2000s therefore show that adopting new technology required new administrative capacity and new expectations about participation.

The decade also broadened the Society's role in professional recognition. The Society helped create the Wray Jackson Smith Scholarship Award to encourage promising young scholars to pursue careers in government statistics and helped establish the Gertrude Cox Award with RTI International to recognize early- to mid-career statisticians and to bring their work before the Washington statistical community. These awards extended one of the Society's core functions,

defining and recognizing valued contributions to the profession, which had previously focused on late-career statisticians.

Another important development was the preservation of Society records. For much of its history, the Society accumulated paper without an office or permanent storage room. Boxes of materials moved among the Census Bureau, members' offices, garages, and basements. When members reviewed the materials, they found fewer grand historical debates than expected, but many dinner programs, newsletters, and records of who had served in what roles. Chris Moriarity, the 2015-2016 WSS president and a long-term WSS webmaster, later converted newsletters into electronic documents, creating an online record extending back to November 1945 and providing essentially complete monthly newsletters from 1949 forward. WSS in the 2000s therefore did more than modernize communication. It also greatly strengthened the Society's institutional memory.

2010–2026

The latest period, from 2010 to 2026, also saw far-reaching technological change, now accompanied by unprecedented institutional disruption. The Society entered this period as a large and unusually active association among regional statistical organizations, but the professional world around the Society was changing quickly. Smartphones, cloud storage, big data, machine learning, social media, targeted advertising, and later generative artificial intelligence changed both the practice of statistics and the professional identities of those doing statistical work.

The Society modernized its infrastructure: communications responsibilities were formalized in the early 2010s; the Review-Preview Conference (held jointly with the DC-Baltimore Chapter of

the American Association for Public Opinion Research) provided a forum for members to share work presented at other meetings; elections and the website were modernized; Eventbrite and PayPal replaced check-based registration and payment systems; and the formal mentoring program was established in 2015 (Otto 2016).

These changes were not merely administrative. They reflected a broader question about professional identity. The Society had long served statisticians, but by the 2010s, the community engaged in statistical work increasingly included data scientists, machine-learning researchers, and other data professionals. The Society recognized that its membership and social events did not fully reflect the changing profession and that it needed to recruit across age, interests, backgrounds, and professional labels. The formal mentoring program (with 40 mentoring pairs in 2019), the Diversity Committee, established in 2018, and data-science programming were part of this broader effort.

Leadership development followed a similar path from informal to formal support. A leadership workshop on November 14, 2018 (Washington Statistical Society 2018), along with a subsequent series of leadership lunch talks (Washington Statistical Society 2022a), provided members with structured opportunities to build leadership skills. The workshop and lunch talks inspired informal peer groups and mentoring relationships that have continued beyond the official program. The mentoring program itself remains active today and now partners with the American Statistical Association's Government Statistics Section. On November 16, 2021, the Society also held a mentor workshop led by Jill Dever (Washington Statistical Society 2021). The Society extended this support to career transitions as well: a government job workshop on April 21, 2022 (Washington Statistical Society 2022b), and a visa workshop with the George

Washington University student chapter on April 14, 2023 (Washington Statistical Society 2023), addressed what many students identified as their most stressful concerns after graduation.

The COVID-19 pandemic then forced an institutional break. All activities moved online in 2020; virtual annual parties followed in 2021 and 2022; and in-person events did not resume until 2023 (Lin 2026). The Society also shifted from a monthly to a quarterly newsletter, gradually and partially resumed in-person meetings, developed a three-year strategic plan, updated its logo and history book, and celebrated its centennial. At the same time, the Society faced renewed pressure on its membership and growing concerns about attracting new members. Internal counts showed a decline from roughly 730 members in 2025, including associate members, to 630 in 2026, a drop linked to broader disruptions affecting federal statistics, universities, research funding, and private contractors tied to federal work.

3. Discussion

Examining each decade in sequence reveals a Society shaped by forces that are, in some ways, unique to the Washington area and, in others, common to professional organizations worldwide. The future of the Society depends on how these trends evolve. For example, virtual and hybrid programming can reduce the burdens of travel, lodging, meals, and time away from work, especially for federal and other statisticians who are understaffed or unable to attend in person. It can also help the Society bring together statistics, data science, and artificial intelligence, broadening the Society's base.

But is virtual programming following COVID-19 a departure from the Society's regional mission? We argue it should not be viewed as a sudden departure but rather a technological

solution that has gradually evolved to address an old Washington problem: convening a geographically and institutionally dispersed statistical community. For example, a biostatistician who worked at the Environmental Protection Agency in the 1980s recalled that virtual seminars would have made it much easier to attend events held at NIH, NCI, or other locations.

Remote work further exacerbates this problem. Statisticians may now work for Washington-based organizations or otherwise be engaged in Washington statistics while living elsewhere, suggesting that the Society may increasingly serve people whose professional lives are tied to Washington institutions, even if they do not live there.

The same logic applies to outreach. Listservs and websites remain useful, but younger statisticians and data scientists may be reached more effectively through platforms such as LinkedIn and other social media. However, maintaining these platforms requires volunteers with the interest and skill to keep them active and up to date. The challenge, then, is not simply to add technology. It is to adapt the Society's core activities—seminars and workshops, mentoring, public service, professional recognition, and fellowship—to a professional community that is more dispersed, more interdisciplinary, and less likely to identify solely as “statisticians.”

The social foundation remains essential. A memory from the early 2020s captures this continuity: a long-retired colleague attended a professional gathering simply “to see my friends.” For the Society, that sentiment is not separate from professional activity. Camaraderie, shared values, and informal learning are integral to the persistence of statistical communities. In recent years, the Society has adapted by implementing mentoring, diversity initiatives, digital registration, virtual programming, strategic planning, and renewed attention to data science and AI. Yet the Society's mission has remained unchanged for the past century.

4. Conclusion

The history of the Washington Statistical Society, and of Washington statistics by extension, is one of adaptation and survival. The Society endured not by preserving a specific viewpoint or statistical technique, but by providing the practical means for statisticians to convene and advance the “Washington statistics” of their times. A flexible template enabled the Society to establish sections, committees, and awards as needed to support its mission. As a result, the Society’s history uniquely captures a century of profound changes in the practice of Washington statistics and in the role of scientific evidence in society more broadly.

The Washington Statistical Society has been strongest when it has combined professional substance with social connection, because the principled use of evidence depends not only on methods, but also on communities capable of applying, explaining, and defending them.

Washington statistics remains nationally significant, but recent developments—when viewed in their historical context—reveal that the community engaged in statistical and data-analytic work is no longer unified by geography, employer, or professional title.

Statistics has been democratized or amateurized (e.g., see Dunning-Kruger effect), depending on one’s perspective, as data scientists, AI researchers, federal statisticians, and policy analysts all contribute to our modern statistical infrastructure. The challenge is that these individuals have proven difficult to unite into a single professional community. The question for the Society is therefore not simply whether or how to increase membership, but how to adapt its organizational capacity to sustain the people, practices, and values that make statistical evidence credible and useful. We believe our review of the first century provides grounds for optimism as the Society enters its second century. The Society has survived where many comparable efforts have faded

because each generation has found new ways to advance the same mission. Yet history also suggests that survival is far from inevitable.

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