

# HOW TO DEAL WITH PUBLICATION ERRORS

## Guideline



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**Federal Statistical Office of Germany**

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## Uniform error management through the introduction of the “Guideline on how to deal with publication errors” in the Federal Statistical Office



Dear ladies and gentlemen,  
Dear users of our data!

The mission of the Federal Statistical Office is to provide statistical information on the society and the state, on the economy and the environment, and on a multitude of other issues for politicians, authorities, businesses and all citizens. Such information has to be objective, independent and of high quality. To meet this requirement, and to ensure and enhance the achieved quality level also in the future, the Federal Statistical Office has committed itself to the European Statistics Code of Practice and has introduced a comprehensive quality management system. Our goal here is, in particular, to further enhance user satisfaction and maintain user confidence in our products. This is important to my staff and to myself especially where incorrect data are published despite all the quality assurance measures taken. Errors in published data cannot always and entirely be avoided although all staff members of this Office take great care in doing their job.

To maintain confidence in official statistics in such a case, it is important to us that we react reasonably and in a uniform and transparent way. In accordance with the European Statistics Code of Practice, we correct errors detected in published statistics at the earliest possible date and we publicise the fact. The whole procedure of dealing with publication errors in this Office is now described in a guideline and ensures uniform reaction to publication errors. This also means that you, as users, are always informed about errors in the same manner and to a comparable extent.

A major element of the procedure is the documentation of errors that have occurred and of their causes. This allows us to take measures preventing errors from occurring. For more information on how we deal with and treat publication errors please refer to the “Guideline on how to deal with publication errors” available for download. If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact the staff members of this Office.

Federal Statistical Office

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Andreas G. ...'. The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

# Guideline on how to deal with publication errors

## Preamble

The Federal Statistical Office is one of the main information providers in the Federal Republic of Germany. Federal statistics are developed, compiled and disseminated in a neutral, objective and scientifically independent way. To meet this requirement, the Federal Statistical Office has committed itself to the European Statistics Code of Practice and has established a quality management system according to the Excellence Model of the European Foundation for Quality Management (EFQM). The quality of the statistical products thus is of major importance among the strategic goals.

In this context, user orientation is very important. User satisfaction should be enhanced and the confidence they place in our products be maintained. This is important especially where incorrect data are published despite all the quality assurance measures taken. As laid down in the European Statistics Code of Practice, errors detected in published statistics are corrected at the earliest possible date and are publicised.

In the present guideline, which is applicable in the entire Federal Statistical Office, this requirement is put in more concrete terms and reasonable standards in dealing with publication errors are defined. Applying such standards allows – even when errors occur in publications – to maintain the confidence placed in official statistics. This requires dealing openly with, and learning from errors.

## Section 1 Purpose of the guideline

The present guideline defines the following items for any publication of statistical data and information of the Federal Statistical Office (Destatis):

- Reporting channel and decision-making in correcting errors occurring in statistical data and information published by Destatis
- Measures to correct the incorrect data and information and the publication of the corrected statistical data and information
- Special notes for users on errors and corrections in publications

This is without prejudice to the provisions of press law that may be applicable to publications.

## Section 2 Definitions

In the present guideline, **publication errors** are

- incorrect data caused by a handling error which were not detected before publication of the statistical data and information and otherwise would have been corrected,
- release dates not met although they were announced in the weekly preview (of press releases) or in the annual release calendar on the website,
- release dates not included in the weekly preview / in the annual release calendar and referring to statistics intended for such announcement, and
- publication of statistical data and information which should not have occurred due to data protection provisions.

By contrast, random sampling errors and non-sampling errors, which to some extent are inevitable and are inherent to statistics (statistical errors), are not included under publication errors. Also, unscheduled and continuous revisions are not governed by this guideline because in such cases new information is available which had not been available before the data were first published.

**Statistical data** are numerical data representing the size of the phenomenon studied.

**Statistical information** contains (statistical) symbols, comments, tables, charts, figures, definitions, methodological explanations and other texts explaining the content and meaning of the statistical data.

The **author** is the person responsible in terms of specialised statistics who has prepared a publication.

The **Head of Section** dealing with the relevant statistics is responsible for the publication of the statistical data and information and, consequently, for dealing with publication errors caused by the specialised unit. When the Head of Section is absent, his/her deputy takes over this function.

The **Head of Division** dealing with the relevant statistics is responsible for strategic questions of publication and, consequently for strategic questions in the context of dealing with publication errors. When the Head of Division is absent, his/her deputy takes over this function.

The **publication unit** supports the specialised units in compiling various forms of dissemination (see section 3). The Heads of Section who, in the publication unit, are in charge of the different forms of dissemination are responsible for a standard application of this guideline in the entire Federal Statistical Office. In addition, they are responsible for errors caused in the publication unit.

### **Section 3 Forms of dissemination**

The different forms of disseminating statistical data and information allow and require different ways of reaction. In this guideline, the following dissemination forms are distinguished:

**Print publications:** print publications address, first, the general public (*Kennzahlen auf einen Blick, Im Blickpunkt, Pocketbook* and *Datenreport*) and, second, expert users (*Statistisches Jahrbuch, Wirtschaft und Statistik, Fachserien, Statistik und Wissenschaft*).

**Electronic publications:** all print publications are also offered as electronic publications. In addition, there are all *Fachserien*, which are no longer printed, volumes of tables and specialised reports. This means that electronic publications, too, can be subdivided by user group (general public and expert users).

**Website:** all web pages published through [www.destatis.de](http://www.destatis.de). The STATmagazin is part of the website.

**Press releases:** press releases are published on the homepage of our website and archived on the press pages. In addition, there is a popular e-mail and fax subscription service. Press releases are of outstanding importance in terms of dissemination because the statistical data, information and analyses are redistributed by the press and perceived, in part intensively, by the general public. Press releases are announced in the weekly preview and in the annual release calendar and are generally published on release day at 8 a.m.

**Databases:** for purposes of individual research, the Federal Statistical Office offers – generally for expert users – various databases such as GENESIS-Online as the main dissemination platform for all specialised statistics of the Federal Statistical Office, the agreed earnings database and the database of all information obligations (WebSKM).

#### **Section 4 Error classification**

To ensure reasonable reaction to publication errors according to the definition given in section 2, errors are subdivided into the following error types:

**Formal errors** are incorrect data

- which do not change the published data and information (“flaw”). This includes, for example, errors of grammar, expression or spelling.

**Minor errors of content** are incorrect data in tables, texts or charts

- whose magnitude is so small that the information content remains unchanged (irrespective of the level of aggregation) or
- which occur at a lower level and whose magnitude is so large that the information content is changed and which are not in the public focus or
- whose magnitude is so large that the information content is changed, but it becomes obvious from the context what the correct information is.

**Serious errors of content** are incorrect data in tables, texts or charts which

- occur at a high level of aggregation and whose magnitude is so large that the information content is changed, or
- occur at a lower level and whose magnitude is so large that the information content is changed and which are in the public focus or
- have significant economic consequences or
- occur in the release calendar or
- represent a violation of data protection.

If the error is so serious that it can cause considerable damage to the image of official statistics and the Federal Statistical Office, it is a **particularly serious error of content**. In some cases, this may include, for example, data protection violations.

#### **Section 5 Error detection**

As soon as an error has been detected in the statistical data and information, the Head of Section dealing with the relevant statistics is informed. If the Head of Section cannot be contacted, his/her deputy is informed. It is irrelevant whether the error was detected in the relevant unit, in one of the statistical offices or by users.

#### **Section 6 Classifying the error**

The Head of Section dealing with the relevant statistics determines, together with the author, whether the error is an error of content or a formal error.

If it is an error of content, the author, the Head of Section and the Head of Division of the responsible unit determine whether it is a minor or serious error of content. The decision as to how the error should be classified is submitted, together with the corrected data, to the Head of Section responsible for the publication in question or to the editor of *Wirtschaft und Statistik*. If, with a view to a standard procedure applicable in the entire Federal Statistical Office, the publication unit should reach a different conclusion, the publication unit contacts the specialised unit to arrive at a joint decision. The purpose of involving the publication unit is, first, to correct the error as quickly as possible in cooperation with the specialised division and, second, to ensure that a comparable procedure is applied across the specialised units.

If the error was caused in the publication unit, the Head of Section responsible for the relevant form of dissemination and the Head of Section and the Head of Division dealing with the relevant statistics jointly classify the error.

The statistical offices of the Länder are immediately informed about the issue if Länder data are affected or if the error occurred already in the data supplied by the statistical offices of the Länder.

If there is good reason to assume that the error is a particularly serious error that could cause damage to the image of the Federal Statistical Office, the Head of Department, the President/Vice-President and the Head of the Press Office are additionally involved in taking a decision.

## **Section 7** **Treating formal errors**

Where formal errors occur, users are not specifically informed about the error correction. The following principles continue to apply to the correction of errors in the individual forms of dissemination:

(1) *Print publications:*

- The error will be corrected in the subsequent publication of statistical data or information referring to the same set of statistics.

(2) *Electronic publications:*

- The error will be corrected in the subsequent publication/next revision of statistical data or information referring to the same set of statistics.

(3) *Website:*

- The error will be corrected in the next revision of the page, but it does not require immediate revision of the page.

(4) *Press releases:*

- The error will be corrected as soon as possible and only in the online version.

(5) *Databases:*

- The error will be corrected as soon as possible.

Further internal information about the formal error is not required. Documentation within the relevant unit is recommended. There is no centralised documentation of the error.

## **Section 8**

### **Treating minor errors of content**

Where incorrect data have been classified as minor errors of content, the following provisions apply regarding the information of users and error treatment. An exception is minor errors of content which have been detected in a form of dissemination whose relevance has strongly decreased due to the time lag from the reference period. They are corrected in accordance with the provisions in section 7 and analysed in accordance with section 12. In addition, precautionary measures are initiated to prevent the error from occurring again.

#### *(1) Print publications:*

- If the publication is reprinted, the detected error is corrected and a note referring to the correction is included in the imprint.
- If the publication is not reprinted and if the publication addresses expert users, an erratum is added, provided that the error is detected before delivery (of the publication), the publication date is not put at risk and there is a reasonable cost-benefit ratio.

#### *(2) Electronic publications:*

- The incorrect statistical data or information are corrected as quickly as possible and the incorrect product is replaced.
- If an electronic publication is concerned which is also offered as a print publication and addresses expert users, the correction is made in the file and, at the relevant place, the date of correction and the difference to the print product are indicated.
- If an electronic publication is concerned which is not offered as a print publication, a note referring to the corrected data or information and to the date of correction is included on the cover sheet or in the imprint of the corrected file.

#### *(3) Website:*

- The incorrect statistical data or information are directly corrected.

#### *(4) Press releases:*

- A note referring to the correction as “correction of (date)” is included below the press release title.
- The corrected statistical data or information are put in “bold”. The correction note below the title also indicates that this kind of presentation refers to the corrected value.
- The corrected version of the press release is disseminated through the same channels as the incorrect version.
- The Press Office informs the President about the error correction.

#### *(5) Databases:*

- The incorrect statistical data or information are directly corrected.
- In the list of news on the start page, the correction is indicated.

The causes of error are analysed in accordance with section 12 and precautionary measures are initiated to prevent the error from occurring again. The Head of Department is informed by the Head of Division when minor errors of content occur frequently.

## **Section 9**

### **Treating serious errors of content**

Where incorrect data have been classified as serious errors of content, the following provisions apply regarding the information of users and error treatment. An exception is serious errors of content were been detected in a form of dissemination whose relevance has strongly decreased due to the time lag from the reference period. They are corrected in accordance with the provisions in section 8. Errors representing a violation of data protection are treated differently. Section 10 has to be applied when correcting them.



A principle applying to all forms of dissemination is that the error should be corrected as quickly as possible and, if possible, simultaneously in all relevant forms of dissemination and that users are immediately informed about the error. Other principles applying to the individual forms of dissemination are the following:

(1) *Print publications:*

- If the publication is reprinted, the detected error is corrected and a note referring to the correction is included in the imprint.
- If a publication for expert users is reprinted, the causes of error can be explained – if required – in the corrected version at the relevant place.
- If the publication is not reprinted, an erratum – possibly explaining the causes of error – is added to copies not distributed yet.
- Important users known to us are informed about the error.

(2) *Electronic publications:*

- The incorrect statistical data or information are corrected as quickly as possible and the incorrect product is replaced.
- If an electronic publication is concerned which is also offered as a print publication, the correction is made in the file and, at the relevant place, the date of correction and the difference to the print product are indicated.
- If an electronic publication is concerned which is not offered as a print publication, a note referring to the corrected data or information and to the date of correction is included on the cover sheet or in the imprint of the corrected file.
- In the corrected publication, the corrected value is specially marked (e.g. by “r”) or the corrected data are indicated in a footnote.
- Where required, the causes of error are explained in a footnote.
- In the product description (detailed text), the correction and the date of correction are indicated.

(3) *Website:*

- The correction is indicated in a footnote.
- Where required, the causes of error are explained in the same footnote.
- Where correction cannot directly be made and the specialised unit is sure that the statistical data or information are incorrect, the incorrect data or information are depublished and a corrected version is prepared.

(4) *Press releases:*

- Below the press release title, the correction is indicated as follows: “Correction of (date)”.
- The corrected statistical data or information are put in “bold”. The correction note below the title indicates that this kind of presentation refers to the corrected value.
- Where required, the causes of error are explained in before the changed press release text.
- Errors relating to the annual release calendar are indicated on the “preview” web page. If a publication is delayed, the new release date is announced.
- If a release date announced in the weekly preview cannot be met, this is communicated through all dissemination channels used for the preview. Where possible, the cause of the delay and the new release date are indicated; this is compulsory for IMF indicators.
- If a press release not announced in the weekly preview is added, this is communicated – before the release date, if possible – through all dissemination channels used for the preview.
- The corrected version of the press release is disseminated through the same channels as the incorrect version.
- The Press Office submits the corrected press release to the President/Vice-President for approval.

(5) *Databases:*

- Through the list of news on the start page, the correction is indicated, including the date of correction.
- Where required, the causes of error are explained there.
- Where correction cannot directly be made and the specialised unit is sure that the statistical data or information are incorrect, the incorrect tables are removed from the website and a corrected version is prepared.

In addition to correcting the error as quickly as possible, the causes of error are analysed in accordance with section 12 and precautionary measures are initiated to prevent the error from occurring again. The Head of Department has to be informed immediately about the error by the Head of Section or Head of Division.

### **Section 10**

#### **Treating an error representing a violation of data protection or statistical confidentiality**

Statistical data or information that should not have been published for reasons of data protection or statistical confidentiality, are a serious error of content. Due to the sensitivity of data protection violations, both the correction and the communication of such an error are decided on an individual basis. This is done in accordance with existing laws, especially the Federal Statistics Law (BStatG) and laws on individual sets of statistics, and further ordinances and administrative instructions.

Where data protection is violated, the causes of error are always analysed in accordance with section 12 and precautionary measures are initiated to prevent the error from occurring again. The Head of Department, the President/Vice-President and the Data Protection Commissioner are immediately informed about the error by the Head of Section or Head of Division dealing with the relevant statistics.

### **Section 11**

#### **Treating particularly serious errors of content**

Particularly serious errors of content that could have an impact on the image of the Federal Statistical Office are rare, isolated cases. Reasonable reaction to such errors requires taking decisions on an individual basis. The question of how to react in such a situation is generally controlled by the relevant Head of Department, the Press Office and the President/Vice-President (crisis management). The Heads of Section and Heads of Division concerned are involved. Where particularly serious errors of content occur, it may be necessary to set up a Federation-Länder crisis management team - generally involving the Land responsible for the set of statistics - or to involve the relevant federal ministry.

### **Section 12**

#### **Long-term error management**

All errors of content are not only corrected but also documented and analysed. Documentation and analysis are based on a form published in the intranet of the Federal Statistical Office. The error is documented by the organisational unit which is responsible for the error. The information on the individual errors, their causes and the measures taken to prevent the error from occurring again are stored at a central place. The collected information is summarised and published in the intranet of the Federal Statistical Office and is used to develop improved measures for error prevention.