

Sunshine Week column 2026

Removal of federal data affects us in our hometowns

By Miranda S. Spivack

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Federal data on rising hunger, on long term trends in maternal and infant mortality, information about preparing for disasters - gone.

Freedom of Information Act offices eviscerated across the federal government.

The Department of Government Efficiency led by Elon Musk insisted it was not required to open up its records to the public, even when courts found otherwise

Getting information of many types from the federal government – which has never been easy – is now a nearly impossible task.

And even if the government does answer a request for its public records, how reliable will the information be? The disappearance from government websites of decades of data on health, diseases, education, criminal justice, civil rights are among the many datasets that the Trump administration has dumped. The experiences of two key government agencies are emblematic of this information chasm. Experts who track certain data found that more than 3,000 pages of information were removed from the [Census Bureau](#) website, and similar losses occurred at the [Centers for Disease Control](#).

Since taking office in January 2025, President Trump has taken several steps – via executive order, and by making public statements - to demand that federal agencies ditch their data. So even if FOIA offices were somehow miraculously reinvigorated, they will have less and less information to give out. And that is information that your tax dollars already paid for, and by all rights, belongs to you.

The bottom line is that public is being kept in the dark and decision making is hobbled. Yet the outcry over disappearing data has been limited mostly to academics, scientists, finance people and others who regularly mine government data and documents to inform their work.

One of the biggest challenges that open government advocates perpetually face is how to build support for the idea that open government is government for all - not just for the experts or the academicians.

But there are many ways to enlist broad support for open and accurate information from the government. For starters, show how government secrecy and disappearing data have a direct effect on your neighbors and their communities.

Take for instance the move in April 2025 by the CDC to [stop collecting long term data on maternal and infant mortality](#). Might this not be information that people beyond the medical profession, those making decisions in state and local government about how to allocate public health dollars, and pregnant women and their partners might want to know?

Or what about a decision to end a [Justice Department database](#) that tracks law enforcement misconduct? Wouldn't it be helpful for residents of communities to have this

information, along with state and local governments and federal agencies who might be hiring and need to know the backgrounds of applicants?

Data collection on food insecurity - that is to say hunger – [has also been limited by the federal Department of Agriculture](#). The agency said in announcing the end of the program that it had other sources for the information. Groups that track the data say the USDA’s move has made it [difficult to understand the breadth of hunger](#) in the United States and push for policies to end it.

Data about the state of public schools in the United States is also among the missing.

Federal infrastructure data is disappearing. That sounds wonky, but here’s why it matters: “It’s made it harder to track conditions at prisons, decide how to increase security in cities during large events and plan natural disaster responses, according to researchers, and state and local government employees...” said a [report](#) from NOTUS.

The American Statistical Association predicted extensive damage to democracy due to disappearing data [in a report](#) issued in December. “Federal statistics are a core democratic institution, supporting free and fair elections, fair and impartial courts, informed civil discourse, and other vital functions that are not easily replicated by the private sector.”

The disappearance of government information can also put more power in the hands of private entities and businesses, themselves often exempt from public records laws.

“Removing government databases can also transfer power from public to private entities, strengthen monopolies, hobble innovation, and promote autocracy,” according to a recent New England Journal of Medicine [article](#).

As Sunshine Week – an annual celebration of government transparency - arrives in mid-March, open government advocates must do more to explain the importance of the nation’s information infrastructure. Anyone interested in preserving First Amendment rights to assemble, petition the government, speak freely, practice religion, and protect a free press needs to explain to their neighbors why they should care about disappearing data. Start at the local level, where your community’s health department is being affected as are your public schools – and keep pushing at the state capital and in Washington, D.C. For what you do close to home can ripple across the country, and make a big difference in what kind of nation we will become – and whether information from governments, including state and local governments that rely on federal information, can be trusted to be truthful.

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