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National Accounts and Economic Statistics - International Trade Statistics

**CONFIDENTIALITY BY COMMODITY AND PARTNER COUNTRY AS REPORTED IN
COMTRADE**

NOTE BY UNSD

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NOTE BY UNSD

1. Regarding the treatment of confidentiality the United Nations publication on *International Merchandise Trade Statistics: Concepts and Definitions, Revision 2 (1998)* recommends the following.

157. *Confidentiality.* In many countries, the publication of statistics at the item level of HS or SITC by partner country would reveal information pertaining to individual firms and would thus be contrary to national laws concerning confidentiality. In such cases, some form of suppression of data is required, but the method chosen is of considerable importance for international comparisons. **It is recommended** that in suppressing data due to confidentiality, any information deemed confidential (suppressed) be reported in full detail at the next higher level of commodity aggregation that adequately protects confidentiality. For instance, a confidential commodity (six-digit HS) with complete or partial country breakdown that is suppressed should be reported in full detail at the lowest level of aggregation of HS that adequately protects confidentiality. Suppression of data should not be carried higher than necessary in the commodity aggregation hierarchy.

2. This note gives an overview for the period of 1992 to 2001 of the magnitude of confidentiality reported by OECD member countries in the United Nations Comtrade database. Confidentiality in this context means the suppression of commodity or trading partner information. Tables will be presented separately for commodity and trading partner suppression, where the commodity suppression is split into full and partial suppression.

3. Tables 1 and 2 show full commodity suppression as percentage¹ of total trade for OECD member states which had for at least one of the 10 years a percentage above 1%. As a benchmark the World average percentage is given. This percentage is based on all the available reporters in the Comtrade database for the respective years (the Harmonized System was used as the commodity classification). The absence of 14 of the 30 OECD member states in Table 1 means that for those² the percentage of commodity confidentiality was less than 1%. By contrast, Germany, Ireland and USA show a percentage of full commodity suppression which is consistently higher than the World average. Hungary, Italy and Sweden show an increasing tendency in this percentage, whereas a decrease can be reported for Belgium and Luxembourg, Canada, Denmark and Mexico.

¹ The percentage of commodity suppression is calculated as the value of HS commodity 99 compared to the value of total imports or exports.

² Australia, Austria, France, Greece, Iceland, Korea Republic, Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, Portugal, Slovakia, Spain, Switzerland and Turkey

Table 1: Percentage of complete commodity suppression for Imports

Reporter	1992	1993	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001
World	2.23	2.42	2.04	2.22	2.47	2.43	2.51	2.53	2.79	2.54
Belgium-Lux				5.09	3.62	1.19	0.24			
Canada	2.83	2.61	2.56	2.58	3.21	2.68	2.17	2.07	1.95	2.16
Czech Rep		0.63	0.45	1.10	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
Denmark	4.09	7.27	7.33	6.84	8.27	3.46	3.04	2.73	2.61	3.44
Finland	0.00	0.00	0.00	1.64	1.64	1.67	1.62	2.06	2.29	2.22
Germany	3.50	6.65	5.12	7.12	6.72	8.23	6.57	7.50	11.97	10.28
Hungary	0.05	0.34	4.04	0.00	1.03	1.49	1.32	1.19	4.27	3.95
Ireland	2.79	8.83	8.80	9.13	8.29	6.75	6.80	6.09	5.70	5.56
Italy			2.53	2.56	2.73	2.74	2.50	2.45	3.84	4.35
Japan	1.32	1.23	1.28	1.16	1.27	1.24	1.51	1.47	1.46	1.66
Mexico	11.31	11.50	10.22	6.84	2.46	3.46	3.13	2.86	2.32	0.46
Poland			0.00	0.40	0.00	0.00	1.05	1.91	0.00	1.80
Sweden	0.88	0.78	0.63	1.43	1.87	1.69	6.06	5.92	5.21	4.49
UK		0.72	0.54	0.67	0.70	0.72	1.03	1.17	0.68	0.38
USA	3.12	3.01	3.06	3.05	3.22	3.26	3.75	4.16	3.89	4.16

On the export side 10³ of the 30 OECD member states have percentages which are consistently lower than 1%. Canada, Denmark, Germany, Norway and USA consistently suppress more commodity information than the World average. Overall the average World percentage for commodity suppression is slightly higher for exports than for imports, but for all the OECD member states together the percentages for imports and exports are not remarkably different. For imports 205 out of 277 country by year data cells (covering all OECD member states for the years 1992 to 2001) have percentages which are below the World average percentages and for exports that number is 187 out 277. These numbers indicate that the use of commodity confidentiality among OECD countries is in general below the average use of it at the global level.

³ Austria, Finland, France, Korea Republic, Mexico, Portugal, Slovakia, Switzerland, Turkey and UK

Table 2: Percentage of complete commodity suppression for Exports

Reporter	1992	1993	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001
World	2.59	2.87	2.36	2.59	2.62	2.59	2.33	2.39	2.46	2.69
Australia	0.41	0.37	2.79	1.81	2.05	1.9	3.99	3.48	1.63	1.94
Belgium-Lux	.	.	.	5.63	5.27	5.35	0.62	.	.	.
Canada	4.21	4.15	4.38	4.2	4.28	4.42	5.5	6.04	5.72	6.09
Czech Rep	.	1.72	1.78	1.55	0	0	0	0	0	0
Denmark	5.04	9.68	10.52	9.52	9.35	5.62	5.96	5.75	5.57	5.42
Germany	3.99	6.13	4.62	5.55	5.39	4.76	3.73	4.67	6.96	6.74
Greece	3.09	1.86	2.12	1.84	1.97	1.72	1.34	1.34	2.87	1.73
Hungary	0.14	0.18	7.71	0	3.89	2.69	1.77	1.36	1.6	2.56
Iceland	0.51	0.41	0.24	0.27	0.39	0.4	0.55	0.72	0.93	1.15
Ireland	3.16	7.07	6.01	6.87	0	5.5	4.91	4.26	4.25	3.99
Italy	.	.	0.91	0.85	1.21	1.33	1.17	1.22	1.23	1.63
Japan	1.53	1.64	1.85	2.05	2.41	2.65	3.02	3.17	3.51	3.99
Luxembourg	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	1.47	1.27	1.72
Netherlands	3.73	3.84	4.28	3.84	3.80	0.24	0.25	0.14	0.15	0.21
New Zealand	1.08	1.08	0.88	0.91	0.99	0.92	1.19	1.95	4.44	3.52
Norway	.	6.62	6.94	7.23	6.19	5.85	7.15	5.83	4.39	4.49
Poland	.	.	0	0.16	0	0	0.13	2.35	0	2.09
Spain	1.13	1.23	0.93	0.7	0.68	1.8	1.48	1.39	1.57	1.61
Sweden	0.22	0.2	0.19	7.65	7.19	6.77	6.35	6.21	5.64	5.71
USA	3.24	3.18	3.17	2.97	3.02	2.89	3.00	3.07	3.05	3.40

4. For an additional picture of commodity suppression Table 3 shows separately for imports and exports the percentage of total trade value where commodity detail is only shown at the 2-digit level of the HS classification while suppressed at the 4 and 6 digit level. Table 3 shows that only two OECD member states use this option of presenting import commodity (Turkey and UK) while six countries use it for presenting export commodity detail (Austria, Belgium, France, Germany, Turkey and UK) (The percentages of Table 3 should be added to the percentages in Tables 1 and 2 to get the full picture of suppressed commodity information).

Table 3: Percentage of partial commodity suppression for Imports and Exports

Reporter	1992	1993	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001
Imports										
World	0.01	0.04	0.02	0.03	0.01	0.07	0.08	0.02	0.07	0.41
Turkey	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.82	2.38	2.13	0.00	3.74	5.48
UK		0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.15	0.00	0.00	0.00	5.95
Exports										
World	0.16	0.15	0.3	0.41	0.27	0.41	0.48	0.38	0.31	0.67
Austria			0	7.47	7.16	6.79	6.34	5.08	4.91	4.73
Belgium1				0	0	0	4.29	3.74	3.28	2.93
France		.	2.59	2.67	0.4	2.43	2.33	2.08	2.02	1.92
Germany	0.83	0.9	1.03	1.05	0.92	0.89	0.82	0.6	0.36	0.44
Turkey	0	0	0	0	1.12	0.91	0.97	0	1.16	0.67
UK		0	0	0	0	0.71	0	0	0	6.51

1 for years prior to 1999 data refer to the customs union of Belgium-Luxembourg

The conclusion regarding the partial suppression is that very few OECD countries show commodity detail at the 2-digit level of the HS classification while suppressing it at the 4 and 6 digit level.

5. Trading partner breakdown can be suppressed at the detailed commodity level but shown at the total trade level. For this note there was not enough time to go through the complete Comtrade database to aggregate the suppression of partner breakdown at the detailed commodity level. Therefore, only the partner suppression at the total imports and exports level is reported here. Tables 4 and 5 show the case of suppression of partner information at the total trade level. Again OECD member states only appear in the tables if for at least one of the 10 years the percentage of suppression was greater than 1%.

Table 4: Percentage of Partner suppression for Imports

Reporter	1992	1993	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001
World	0.6	0.59	0.58	0.6	0.89	0.87	1.07	1.01	1.18	1.91
Australia	0.07	0.07	0.06	0.05	0.06	0.07	0.07	2.08	0.06	0.02
Austria	0	0	0	2.17	0	0	0	0	0	0
Belgium-Lux	0.08	0.18	0.92	1.02	0.76	0.69	0.03			
Canada	1.86	1.87	1.78	1.72	1.8	1.65	1.63	1.73	1.89	2.08
Czech Rep	.	0.06	0.29	0.48	0.6	1.52	1.57	1.69	1.04	1.05
Denmark	2.44	2.34	2.38	2.48	2.32	2.54	1.96	1.79	1.78	1.99
Finland	1.76	1.12	0.91	1.96	2.2	2.4	1.94	2.48	2.76	2.64
France	1.87	1.4	1.44	1.34	0.32	1.47	1.46	1.49	0.19	0.23
Germany	0	0	0	0.08	0.12	0.1	3.14	2.77	0.12	11.92
Hungary	0.79	0.75	0.92	0	0	1.5	1.33	0	0	0
Ireland	0.49	3.48	4.4	4.04	4.13	2.7	3.16	3.05	3.11	2.59
Italy	0.28	0.22	0.25	0.18	0.18	0.21	0.17	2.61	3.84	3.57
Netherlands	1.53	2.22	2.42	2.71	3.23	0.02	3.47	3.81	5.15	1.69
Poland	0	0	3.01	0	0	0	0	0	1.66	0.04
Slovakia	.	.	0.09	0.53	0.44	0.79	1.43	0.81	0.81	0.87
Turkey	0.13	0.28	1.41	0.88	0	1.09	0.03	0.04	0.05	0.03
UK	0.62	0.33	0.29	0.24	0.23	0.26	0.27	0.28	2.63	5.82

Table 4 shows⁴ first of all that the World average percentage of partner confidentiality was below 1% from 1992 to until 1997 after which it increased slightly to a little over 1%. The 1.91 percentage of 2001 is influenced by the very high percentages for Germany and UK which is thought to be due to the fact that their data are provisional. The final data of Germany and UK usually carry a low percentage of partner suppression at the total trade level. Table 4 shows further that only for Canada, Denmark and Finland the percentages⁵ of partner suppression are consistently higher than the World average.

Table 5: Percentage of partner suppression for Exports

Reporter	1992	1993	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001
World	1.3	1.33	2	1.86	1.98	1.24	2.11	1.63	2.63	3.42
Australia	1.83	1.68	1.76	1.24	1.46	1.26	1.23	17.95	1.12	1.13
Austria	0.00	0.00	0.00	4.06	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.03
Belgium-Lux	0.18	0.11	0.15	5.68	5.21	5.21	0.10			
Denmark	6.35	7.22	7.34	7.46	7.15	7.42	7.91	8.04	8.00	7.98
Finland	2.45	1.39	2.55	3.02	2.62	2.53	2.77	3.09	2.68	3.41
France	0.04	0.11	0.09	0.07	1.02	0.63	0.87	0.25	0.34	0.30
Germany	0.00	0.11	0.03	0.13	0.16	0.14	2.55	2.62	0.15	6.48
Greece	0.74	1.02	0.24	0.10	0.05	0.10	0.43	0.18	0.15	0.12
Hungary	0.10	0.59	0.93	2.29	2.21	2.69	1.77	0.00	0.00	0.00
Ireland	0.53	3.50	2.60	2.65	1.82	2.44	1.85	1.63	1.52	1.37
Italy	0.01	0.01	0.01	0.01	0.00	0.00	0.01	0.81	1.33	1.22
Luxembourg								1.48	1.29	1.93
Netherlands	7.44	8.73	9.12	8.55	9.39	0.02	10.12	6.46	7.10	1.90
Poland	0.00	0.00	2.41	0.00	0.00	0.03	0.00	0.00	2.13	0.11
Spain	0.15	0.33	0.02	0.06	1.20	0.02	0.02	0.61	0.86	1.07
Sweden	0.30	0.30	7.26	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
Switzerland	2.34	0.00	2.43	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
Turkey	0.57	0.95	2.19	2.03	0.08	1.50	0.12	0.13	0.28	0.20
UK	0.90	0.40	0.41	0.37	0.35	0.33	0.32	0.30	2.84	5.47

Table 5 shows partner confidentiality in exports for 19 of the 30 OECD member states⁶. Denmark and the Netherlands show a large percentage of partner suppression in their export statistics. Whereas the 2001 percentages of Germany and UK are again thought to be due to the provisional data, it is unclear what caused the 1994 percentage of Sweden, or the 1999 percentage of suppression for Australia. The World average of partner confidentiality in exports is about double the amount for imports. For imports 200 out of 297 country by year data cells (covering all OECD member states for the years 1992 to 2001) have percentages which are below the World average percentages and for exports that number is 235 out 277. The lower number for imports as compared to exports can be largely explained by the fact that the average World percentage for imports is very low. In all, these numbers indicate that the level of partner

⁴ Greece, Iceland, Japan, Korea Republic, Mexico, New Zealand, Norway, Portugal, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland and USA have partner confidentiality which is consistently below 1% of total imports.

⁵ The percentage of partner suppression is calculated as the combined value of partners "Special categories" and "Areas not elsewhere specified" compared to the value of total imports or exports.

⁶ Canada, Czech Republic, Iceland, Japan, Korea Republic, Mexico, New Zealand, Norway, Portugal, Slovakia and USA have partner confidentiality which is consistently below 1% of total exports.

confidentiality among OECD countries is low and that its use is in general below the average use at the global level.

6. The main conclusion of this overview is that the level of commodity and partner confidentiality for the OECD member states over the last 10 years is in general below the World average. Some country exceptions have been indicated. As regards the commodity confidentiality the following question can be formulated: Can the OECD member states reduce the level of confidentiality in their trade data and in particular make more use of the possibility to reveal data at the 2 digit level when data are suppressed at the 4 and 6 digit levels?