

## **Digging Deeper: Uses of Administrative Records at the U.S. Census Bureau**

Lisa Blumerman, Policy Office, U.S. Census Bureau

Carrie Simon, Policy Office, U.S. Census Bureau

### **Long Abstract**

Administrative records are microdata records contained in files collected and maintained by administrative agencies and commercial entities for the purpose of administering programs and providing services. The Census Bureau's guiding statute, Title 13 U.S.C., Section 6, directs the agency to use administrative records information as extensively as possible in lieu of conducting direct inquiries of the public. Several National Academy of Science panels have encouraged the expansion of administrative records to support and enhance statistical programs. Furthermore, the Census Bureau's strategic plan emphasizes use of administrative records data to produce new information using existing data sources to meet emerging customer product needs, to minimize cost to taxpayers, and alleviate respondent burden.

The benefits of using administrative records are far reaching. By accessing administrative records in conjunction with already existing research projects, we are able to maximize research potentials without the extra burden of creating, conducting, and analyzing a new survey. Using administrative records data reduces data collection costs. Also, administrative records data also reduce respondent burden. Thus, the use of administrative records data is more cost-effective and less intrusive on the public.

Administrative records come from a variety of sources. For the most part, the Census Bureau uses, and seeks to use, administrative records developed by federal agencies, and, to a lesser degree, state and local government and commercial entities. The Census Bureau formally acquires administrative records from the source agency. In most cases, either a data agreement letter or a Memoranda of Understanding, which governs the use of the data by the Census Bureau, is required.

Examples of source agencies from which the Census Bureau receives data include, but are not limited to, the Internal Revenue Service (IRS), the Social Security Administration (SSA), the U.S. Postal Service (UPS), and the Center for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS). The administrative data are collected and maintained by the source agency for the purpose of administering programs and providing services. For example, IRS collects and maintains data on those individuals who file tax returns. CMS maintains records on those individuals who participate in Medicare and/or Medicaid programs. While these records are critical to the source agency's operations, they are also essential to programs that are currently being undertaken at the Census Bureau. These programs utilize select variables from administrative records data to supplement existing data collected through Census Bureau censuses and surveys. For example, the Intercensal Population Estimates Program uses address information from IRS administrative data to create county-to-county migration flows, which are used in the yearly production of population estimates. Ultimately, this administrative data functions to provide demographic and economic information about our nation's people and businesses.

Within the last decade, the Census Bureau's administrative record activities have increased with advancements in linkage methodologies and computer technology, and the greater availability of administrative data. Current administrative record activities are identified in the Demographic, Economic, Decennial, and Methodology and Standards Directorates.

Many of the projects undertaken by the various Directorates are well established and have been conducted over two or more decades. These include the development of the Business Register (formerly called the Standard Statistical Establishment List); the National Longitudinal Mortality Study; and the Intercensal Population Estimates Program. Other more recent projects include the Statistical Administrative Records System (StARS); the Longitudinal Employer-Household Dynamics Program (LEHD); the Master Address File (MAF); and many projects taking place in the Center for Economic Studies (CES). A number of these more recent projects are enabled by the Census Bureau's acquisition of important administrative record sources, including the Social Security Administration's 100 percent Numident File, state-level Unemployment Insurance and ES-202 files, and the U.S. Postal Service's Delivery Sequence File.

The current uses of administrative records by the Census Bureau include the extensive use of data about businesses from the IRS, and, to a lesser degree, on information from the Social Security Administration (SSA) and the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) in the Economic Census and survey programs. For the demographic programs, the use has remained predominately centered on individuals and households to produce population estimates and evaluate and enhance survey data. Additional benefits of using administrative records include the ability to: improve survey coverage; develop better questionnaires; evaluate, edit, and analyze census and survey data; conduct new policy-relevant cross-sectional and longitudinal analyses; and, create new lower-cost data products without incurring additional respondent burden.

While the benefits of using administrative records are clear, the Census Bureau recognizes that these activities must take place in a strategic and measured manner that complies with its legal authority, mission, and ethical standards with regard to individual privacy. Thus, Census Bureau authority, legal guidance, and ethical principles provide the necessary foundation for administrative records activities among the various program areas.

In order to better understand the role of administrative records at the Census Bureau, this paper provides an in-depth discussion of administrative record data, sources, and activities that are currently being undertaken. We identify what types of administrative record data are used at the Census Bureau, which program areas are using the data, and for what purposes the data are being used. Furthermore, we identify direct benefits the program areas gain by employing administrative records in existing research projects. Census Bureau authority and the legal protections for using administrative records are also specified. As we bring together these various details of administrative records use, we are able to construct an accurate representation of the far reaching nature of

administrative record use and the vital role they play helping the Census Bureau fulfill its mission.