

The Background and History of the Committee

In December 1959, the executive committee of the American Economic Association devoted a part of its annual meeting to the consideration of the preservation and use of data for economic research. The AEA Executive Committee recognized that research in the social sciences in general, and in the discipline of economics in particular, to an increasing extent requires large systematic collections of microdata for the formulation and testing of hypotheses, and that collections of microdata are research tools for the social scientist much in the same way that books and manuscripts are for the humanities and laboratories are for the scientist.

Although the AEA Executive Committee agreed that the problem of developing and preserving important bodies of microdata was extremely important, they concluded that it was not feasible for the American Economic Association to undertake an effort in this area, since the organizational structure of the association makes it difficult for subcommittees to carry out substantive work of this nature. The executive committee therefore recommended that the Social Science Research Council set up a Committee on the Preservation and Use of Economic Data to study this problem and undertake any program of action which it might deem desirable.

CREATION OF THE SSRC COMMITTEE

Accordingly, in December 1960 the Social Science Research Council arranged an exploratory discussion of the problem of data preservation and use, drawing on social scientists from universities and the Federal Government. This discussion revealed that although there was a large area of common interest among the various social sciences, there were also wide differences in approach and areas of concern when any specific aspect of data preservation and use was being considered. It became obvious that the problem was too broad and diverse to be solved by any simple general solution, and that a more concerted and focused attack on specific parts of the problem would have to be undertaken.

For this reason, a small committee was then appointed to explore the problems arising in the field of economic data alone. This committee consisted of individuals who were acquainted with the statistical work being done within the Federal Government, and who were also doing research using large bodies of empirical data. At the outset the newly constituted Committee on the Preservation and Use of Economic Data recognized that in order to maximize the effectiveness of its effort it should concentrate its attention on those areas which would yield the most valuable research materials per unit of cost. By definition this immediately excluded information which was widely scattered throughout the Government or stored in bundles in warehouses, and it suggested that attention should be focused on those bodies of information which were currently available in machine readable form. The Committee was concerned with the archival problem, as well as the problem of making existing data currently available to research workers, and for this reason it proposed to examine the disposal policy of the various Federal agencies as well as to try to develop methods whereby machine readable data could be made directly available to scholars engaged in economic research.

COMMITTEE ACTIVITIES, 1962-1964

During the 3 years from 1962 through 1964, the Committee undertook to study, on an agency-by-agency basis, the problem of providing access to specific bodies of information. Meetings were held with a considerable number of independent agencies in the Departments of Commerce, Labor, Treasury, Agriculture, Interior, and Health, Education, and Welfare. In addition, the Committee kept in close contact with the Bureau of the Budget and the National Archives. In some cases, arrangements were made to create and make available specific bodies of information, and substantial progress was made in developing awareness of the general problem of preservation and use of data by the Federal agencies. Representatives of the National Science Foundation attended many of these meetings.

Despite the progress which was achieved in specific areas, however, the Committee, at the end of 3 years' operation, concluded that some more general solution was required. Such a solution would require that the Federal Government develop (1) a systematic policy insuring the preservation of important data, and (2) mechanisms whereby data could be made available for research pur-