

developed a system of economic accounts. However, we are increasingly finding the same kind of frustrations that motivated the formation of that program cropping up all across the board. Policy formulation and review in such areas as poverty, health, education, area development, and science policy—in addition to the traditional areas of fiscal and monetary policy—have been severely handicapped by the inability to engage the service of relevant and timely information.

*Why is the present system incapable of serving adequately this kind of need?*

Because the present system is dominated by the intermediate aggregates that were designed to serve a publication program. Since detailed data cannot be published—because of expense, prohibition of disclosure and, as a practical matter, we would be inundated if it were—the Government statistical programs have developed over the years little boxes with names corresponding to different industrial, demographic, and social characteristics of the individual respondents.

Thus, the data pertaining to the respondent households, individuals, and establishments are sorted out into these boxes—some labeled “male” or “female,” and some “apparel” or “textile manufacturing”—and the resultant sums constitute the published statistical record.

There are two problems here. (1) The names on these boxes suffer from the fact that, whatever their origin, they do not provide descriptions of the attributes of the populations they contain that are adequate for many uses appropriate to research or public policy. (2) In the face of published aggregates there is no means for reaching back to the original observations in order to assemble them into different boxes with different names that might be more appropriate for policy or research use.

Now, particularly since the advent of the computer, there is no insurmountable technical limitation upon our ability to rearrange these collection boxes to generate information more appropriate to the requirements of each of the major objectives of policy and research. We should, in principle, be able to “reshuffle the deck” and “deal a new hand” as the situation requires. But to do this requires a Federal statistical program that sees its mission as more than a production and publication task. It requires one that sees its mission as a custodian of the file and a supplier of information services to a broad spectrum of important users. We are still living in identical statistical “rowhouses,” so to speak, when we have the technology and means to adopt the architecture to the “size and interests of the family.”

This means that the Government statistical programs need to develop a new capability for retaining in machine records the recorded attributes of respondents so that they can be retrieved and made subject to retabulation and computation to meet important needs that traditional publication tables cannot serve. Although some agencies have developed a limited capability in this area, by and large it is extremely difficult, if not impossible, to fulfill this kind of requirement.

There are two reasons, both interrelated, why the present system cannot perform in this way—in spite of the almost universal application of computers to the process of statistical collection, tabulation, and publication. First, the simple act of retrieval of respondent attributes in the interest of generating different aggregates or filling dif-