

What first step is sufficiently large so as to promise a good prospect of further development? The Federal Statistical System has three basic functions; namely, (1) collection, (2) integration and storage in accessible form, and (3) analysis, tabulation, and publication. It is reorganizing the second that offers the most promise. This function is now the least well-performed of the three, and it is the one which is most easily separated out from the present organizational structure. However, it must be done on a substantial scale, and in such a way as to recognize the interaction of this function with the other two. Further, the new organization must not be confined to a merely archival function. If it is defined along the lines suggested below, it offers the best promise, in the judgment of the Committee, for starting the development of the Federal Statistical System toward a more integrated and efficient form.

Accordingly, the Committee proposes the creation of a National Data Center. This Center would be given the responsibility for: (1) assembling in a single facility all large-scale systematic bodies of demographic, economic, and social data generated by the present data-collection or administrative processes of the Federal Government, (2) integrating the data to the maximum feasible extent, and in such a way as to preserve as much as possible of the original information content of the whole body of records, and (3) providing ready access to the information, within the laws governing disclosure, to all users in the Government and, where appropriate, to qualified users outside the Government on suitably compensatory terms. The Center would be further charged with cooperation with state and local government agencies to assist in providing uniformity in their data bases, and to receive from them, integrate into the federally generated data stock, store, and make accessible, the further information these agencies generate. The funding and staffing of the Center should recognize both these functions.

In more detail, the functions of the Center would be:

(1) To establish and maintain an inventory of all available data in the relevant categories in the Federal System.

(2) To set and enforce uniform disclosure standards so that the legal requirement of confidentiality can be met with no unnecessary sacrifice of analytically useful information.

(3) Similarly, in cooperation with the state and local government units, to perform similar tasks for information generated at those levels of government.

(4) To assemble centrally the data from all these sources, integrate it to the maximum feasible extent, and preserve it in usable and accessible form. This will involve:

The maximum ability to exhibit the interrelations of various kinds of data.

The preservation of detail in basic records, and the avoidance of the loss of information in the storage, manipulation, and retrieval of information.

The ability to produce the full measure of inherent information which is computable from the basic records.

(5) In cooperation with users in and out of government and collection agencies, to set the standards for further collection efforts, so as to make maximum use of administrative information and provide maximum cross-linking of different bodies of data.

(6) To provide facilities—from working space to linked input-output consoles—for major users within government to facilitate their access to the data and improve their ability to work with it.

(7) To develop software and hardware, especially input and output devices.

(8) To define the regulations and compensation arrangements under which non-government users would have access to data in the Center. In general, subject to disclosure restrictions, standard tabulations and tapes could be made available at cost to private users for research and analytical purposes. However, the Center should not become a service bureau or data-processing agency selling special order analyses to private users in competition with firms and individuals in the information processing industry.

In full operation, the National Data Center would provide the following benefits:

(1) Reduce the collection effort and particularly the burden on respondents required to secure a given amount of information.

(2) Improve the protection of individual privacy by developing standards of disclosure, techniques of preserving confidentiality and supervision of enforcement of disclosure rules.