Administrative Records Can Play a Greater Role in National Statistics If...

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Interest in administrative records use is growing in national statistical organizations that do not currently use these resources. The increasing costs to collect data, combined with shrinking budgets, demand new innovative methods to generate the detailed geographic data needed to plan and monitor social programs. Despite the promise, many technical and policy issues exist and must be addressed for these data to fulfill our high expectations. This panel discussion is prompted by recent Census Bureau efforts to plan and develop an administrative records data base to serve the needs of the decennial census and intercensal estimates programs. The discussion incorporates views from non-government users and our statistical colleagues in Canada and is intended to open a dialogue on how to resolve the complex policy issues we will face.

Two years ago, several of us at the Census Bureau formed an ad hoc group to discuss the need for better planning and coordination of administrative records use. We determined that the current decentralized approach to using administrative records did not have a focused long term objective, resulted in significant duplication of effort, and would not meet the needs of many new program uses. As a result, we formed two teams--one to recommend an organizational framework and create a strategic vision for the future and one to coordinate the current activities across program and research areas. The Team for Administrative Records Planning recommended a central staff for procuring and processing data and for conducting research on how best to integrate administrative data into decennial census, population, and income estimates and current survey programs. Two months ago, an Administrative Records Research Staff was formed under Cynthia Clark, Associate Director for Statistical Design, Methodology, and Standards, to undertake this work over the next two years. The Administrative Records Coordination Group is tasked with providing the needed ongoing coordination and exchange of ideas.

I see the policy issues sprinkled across each of the operational areas involved in collecting, processing, and using administrative records. The resolution of these issues lies in five activities that comprise our relationships with our employees, data suppliers, statistical colleagues, data users, and the general public. These activities are organization, investigation, negotiation, adaptation, and promotion.

In terms of **organization**, we need to begin to think strategically. This means coordinating our activities in a way that the added efficiencies leave time for planning.

We should **investigate** "best" resources to meet "identified" needs. Investigation should include understanding data limitations so that we can explain them to stakeholders.

We have to **negotiate** for access to data by understanding and respecting our supplier's needs and limitations. The old attitude that "I need it and you have to provide it" will not work any longer. We need to offer a win-win deal in exchange for this vital resource.

We must be ready and willing to **adapt** to what we are dealt. We need to mix and match data from different sources. We need to incorporate statistical techniques to derive better measures. We need to work with supplier agencies to encourage changes we want and limit the effects of changes we do not want.

Finally, we will need to **promote** ourselves to users, data subjects, and legislators. As Tom Jabine stated in the previous session on administrative records, this means selling the quality of our results, our commitment to privacy, and our concern for efficiency to those who do not speak our language but have a say in what we do.

Our panelists are up to the task of discussing these issues, and we are all eager to hear from our audience on alternative approaches, priorities, and likely land mines.