

Developments in the Statistical Use of Administrative Data in the UK

Summary

This paper provides an update on the statistical use of administrative data in the UK. The paper outlines the current use of administrative data and future vision. It goes on to describe the statistical independence legislation being debated currently in the UK Houses of Parliament and considers the likely outcomes in respect of the potential for access to, and use of, administrative data.

Since the position with regards to the legislation is changing rapidly, this paper provides a brief outline only. The latest position will be presented at the conference.

1. Background

Traditionally, social statistics in the UK have been based on findings from the decennial census of population and housing and social surveys. However, falling response rates to both the census and surveys have coincided with increasing demands for information at smaller geographic areas. Resources are not available to conduct more frequent censuses or larger surveys. Therefore alternative approaches to providing statistical outputs are required.

2. Current position

The next decennial Census is planned for 2011. In addition, the social surveys conducted by the Office for National Statistics are being redesigned to form an Integrated Household Survey to allow more robust and consistent outputs. However, these initiatives go only part way to addressing the demand for more detailed and frequent small area information.

In 1999 the Neighbourhood Statistics programme was established to address the requirement for small area data identified in the Social Exclusion Unit's 1998 report on deprived neighbourhoods. The service aimed to provide the small area data necessary to underpin government plans for the regeneration of inner cities: the National Strategy for Neighbourhood Renewal. The Neighbourhood Statistics Service (NeSS) website was designed to provide on-line 2001 Census results in combination with information based on administrative data. The administrative data provided information not included on the Census and the potential for data to be updated more frequently.

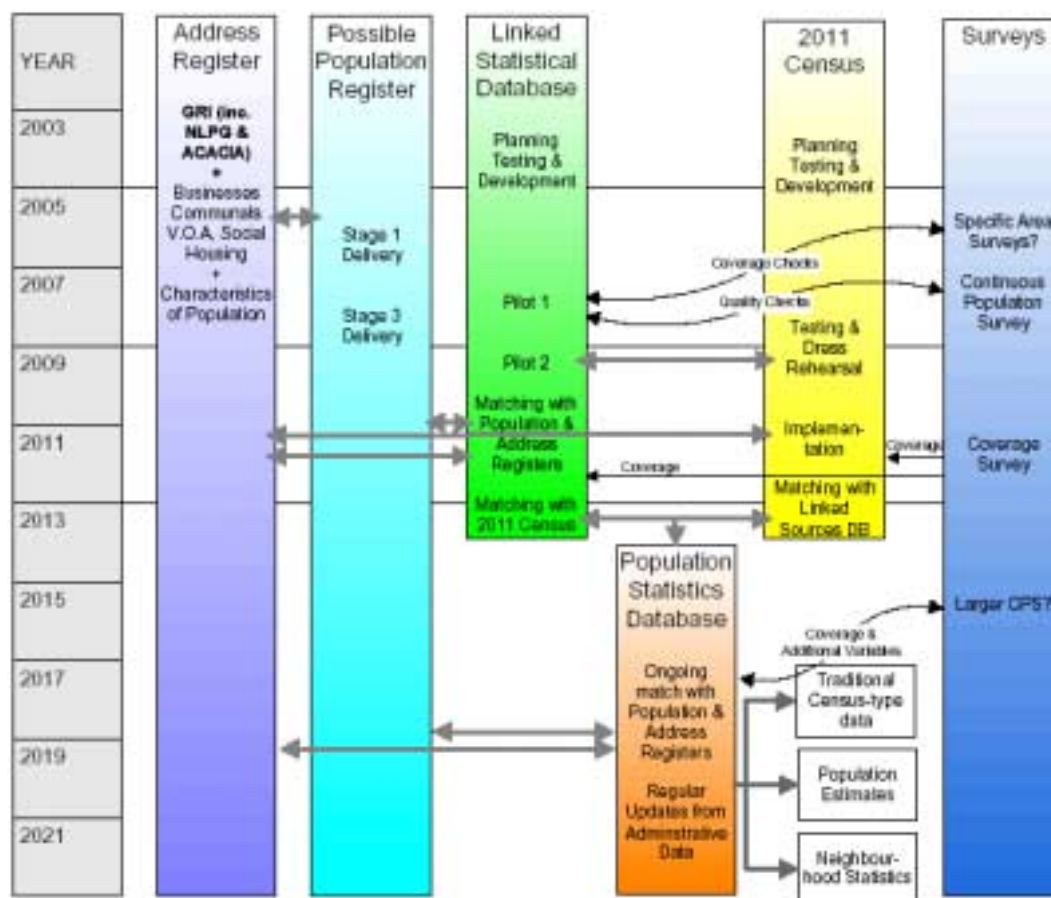
NeSS now holds over 300 datasets covering a broad range of deprivation-related topics including crime, health, housing and work deprivation. Most of these datasets are updated on an annual basis. However, these data are largely along single topic lines and are provided to ONS as aggregated, non-disclosive datasets. NeSS has

shown the value of bringing administrative data together in one place and the next logical step is to link individual level information from different data sources. However, legal issues surrounding the sharing of disclosive information between government departments have proved a barrier to this.

3. Future vision

In 2003 ONS set out their vision for the future of population statistics in England and Wales: the Integrated Population Statistics System¹ (IPSS). The IPSS is illustrated below.

Illustration of the proposed integrated population statistics system



A key risk identified at the time the IPSS was published was the dependence on population and address registers. Neither of these is currently in existence and there are considerable challenges to be addressed before high-quality, frequently updated registers are in place. Therefore the IPSS is still as aspirational as it was in 2003. However, in some areas, recent developments will make development of an IPSS more feasible. The requirement to reform legislation governing the sharing of data across government for statistical purposes is being addressed. The Statistics and Registration Services Bill² is being debated in parliament as part of the legislative process of making ONS independent of central government.

¹ http://www.statistics.gov.uk/downloads/theme_population/ipss.pdf

² http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/pabills/200607/statistics_and_registration_service.htm

4. Statistical Independence Legislation

In November 2005 the Chancellor of the Exchequer announced that he intended to make ONS independent of Government, making the publication of official statistics the responsibility of an independent body at arm's length from Government and fully independent of it.

Assuming the legislation as drafted becomes law, it will result in:

1. the creation of an independent Governing Board for the Office for National Statistics, with delegated responsibility for meeting an overall objective for the statistical system's integrity;
2. the appointment of external members to the Board, drawn from leading experts in statistics and including men and women from academia and business; and
3. a new accountability to Parliament through regular reporting by the Board to explain and to be questioned by Parliament on their performance.

Following the Queen's Speech on 15th November 2006, the Statistics and Registration Service Bill was introduced into the House of Commons on 21st November and published on 22nd November 2006.

The key stages of the legislation process are as follows:

1. Bill introduced to the Commons (21/11/06)
2. Common's stages:
 - a. Second reading (08/01/07)
 - b. Committee stage (16/01/07 – 25/01/07)
 - c. Report (13/03/07)
 - d. Third reading (13/03/07)
3. Bill moves to the House of Lords (14/03/07)
4. Lord's stages:
 - a. Second reading (26/03/07)
 - b. Committee stage
 - c. Report
 - d. Third reading
5. Royal assent: the Bill becomes an Act of Parliament

The independent Governing Board is expected to be in place in April 2008.

Independence will have a number of significant consequences for ONS. One of the most important is the possibility of increased data sharing for statistical purposes.

5. Data sharing clauses

The Statistics and Registration Services Bill contains data sharing clauses, although until the bill has progressed through parliament it is not possible to say with certainty which of its' provisions will come into force.

Key aspects of the proposed data sharing clauses are:

1. Existing gateways for sharing data preserved.

2. Order-making powers will allow two-way sharing of data between Statistics Board and public authorities/devolved administrations for statistical purposes, subject to the following safeguards:
 - a. Only possible where otherwise prohibited by law of public authority/devolved administration has no power to share the data.
 - b. Subject to bilateral ministerial agreement and affirmative parliamentary scrutiny in each case.
 - c. Only for specific statistical purposes and subject to public interest test.
 - d. Criminal penalties for unlawful disclosure

In other words, the legislation is likely to enable us to share data bilaterally where both parties are willing to co-operate. It will not give the Statistics Board the authority to compel others to provide access to their data.

Access to each individual source will require a specific piece of secondary legislation and will therefore need to be supported by a strong justification and clear specification of how the data will be used. As a result, access to data is likely to be gradual. Potential data sources for ONS have been identified and prioritised in order to ensure that the first datasets tackled are those likely to deliver the greatest benefits whilst avoiding (for the time being) those likely to be controversial.

Population and migration statistics and business/economic statistics have been identified as the key priorities.

5.1 Population and Migration Statistics

Migration now exceeds natural change as the main component of population change in the UK. High quality births and deaths data are available via our registration services. However, better information is needed urgently to improve estimates of migrants and support the derivation of reliable population estimates and projections. A number of key sources have been identified which could contribute to this work, for example the School Census and the Work and Pensions Longitudinal Study. Access to data from specific sources will improve our understanding of changes affecting specific sub-sections of the population. However, the major benefits will come from data linkage.

5.2 Business and Economic Statistics

Access to a range of administrative data, primarily from HM Revenue and Customs and the Department for Work and Pensions, will:

1. improve national and regional economic statistics;
2. reduce the burden on data suppliers; and
3. generate significant cost savings.

ONS is working with other Government departments to ensure that we have a clear understanding of the scope and content of the data held on their administrative systems. We are also reviewing the analytical and technical capacity necessary to make appropriate use of the data as soon as the legal barriers to data sharing have been overcome.

6. Administrative Data Strategic Development Project

The administrative data strategic development project has been established in response to the above legislative developments. The project will run until April 2008 when the new Statistics Board is expected to be in place.

The project has two objectives:

1. to develop a clear strategic plan on how to make more and better use of administrative data;
2. to explore data sources as far as possible so as to prepare for secondary legislation and include proposals on the top priorities in the strategic plan.

The project will research the potential of both existing and new administrative data sources from primarily (although not exclusively) public sector sources. The project will recommend the best ways of delivering the expected benefits and inform decisions.

The project has three work packages:

1. the coordination of data needs;
2. data sharing policy, including legal aspects and communication; and
3. research and methodology.

The major benefits of any data sharing clauses will come about through record level linkage of data from two or more different sources. Therefore the third of these work packages aims to develop guidelines and options for the necessary infrastructure for secure data handling and record linkage.

7. Conclusion.

There is now the political will necessary to make the legislative and culture changes required to support the sharing and linking of data for statistical purposes. Although the legislative process is moving quickly, realising the benefits will take time. We are at the beginning of a long road!

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