
Got Data?

The Census Bureau's State Data Center Network Reaches out to Local Communities

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Guest Columnist

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Let me be sure I understand you: You want to start a tearoom and bakery business, and you'd like to know the number of women living in Kansas City whose households have incomes of more than \$60,000? . . . Okay! Yes, I can help you with that.”

So begins another reference interaction in which a librarian is asked to provide quite specific data for a business plan. Where should libraries without specialized staff turn for help? Why, the State Data Center network, of course. One of the most successful programs of the U.S. Census Bureau, it is probably the least expensive and also the least well known.

HISTORY

In 1978, the U.S. Census Bureau inaugurated a program to test a new kind of partnership. Using existing state resources, the State Data Center (SDC) program designated in every state a unit to closely communicate with the bureau about its many surveys and products. In turn, the bureau would benefit from local knowledge and disseminate its information to local areas.

North Carolina was fortunate to be one of the four states selected to test the arrangement. Francine Stephenson, head of NC-SDC, reflects on the early days:

Back then, staff stood at keypunch machines punching Hollerith cards to customize reports for clients across the state, and the reports were on ledger-sized, newsprint-quality, green bar paper. We consulted microfiche for voluminous printed reports as well as for census maps. Most technical staff agreed that scrolling back and forth, up and down for a particular block or tract in a darkened room was sure to induce a headache. Personal computers and e-mail were unknown, so requests came over the telephone and through walk-ins.

North Carolina and the Census Bureau invested heavily in training to build good data representatives. In some sense, we became experts to the experts because of our encounters with the big picture and our firsthand knowledge of data user needs. But the information didn't end at the state level; we trained local affiliates, and the knowledge spread across the state.

In 2006, most census-related publications arrive on DVD or are available in the bureau's online database, American FactFinder. Communication among all levels of the program—federal, state, and local—is still critical to its suc-

cess but is now facilitated electronically in addition to other means. Data users have likewise become more sophisticated. Questions received by the network are less often about how to find a particular figure and more often about how to interpret data that users have already located.

STRUCTURE OF THE PROGRAM

While each state has a lead agency serving as the primary contact with the Census Bureau, a wider network is necessary to ensure distribution of information to the local level. SDCs often have coordinating agencies that provide special services or knowledge, such as geographic information system (GIS) services, but most have also formed coalitions of affiliates that have regional or even more localized contacts and knowledge. As figure 1 shows, there are two main types of affiliates in North Carolina: Lead Regional Organizations (LROs), which are the Councils of Government (COGs) across the state, and public library affiliates. These affiliates are in close contact with the lead agency and can field questions about and from their local areas.

THE PROGRAM'S EFFECTIVENESS—AN EXAMPLE

One example of the critical role of affiliates is demonstrated by the Count Question Resolution (CQR) process following the 2000 Census. This process was the official means by which governmental entities could dispute the census bureau's count of their population. State, local, or tribal officials could submit documentation to challenge the bureau's tally. Census counts directly affect not only representation in Congress but also funding from most federal programs. As a generalization, the more population a place can claim, the

more federal money it is eligible to receive. Consequently, local governments want the largest possible count.

Each challenging entity must prove that some portion of its population was missed in the original count. Once the bureau reviews this documentation, it may correct the count or reject the challenge. In North Carolina, because SDC affiliates were proactive in promoting the program to local officials, more than one hundred geographic entities in the state received corrections to their counts, far more than any other state (See caveat in sidebar 2.).

LOCAL BENEFITS OF SDC

Unknown to many, the figures in the Census Bureau's online database, American FactFinder, do not reflect the count corrections from the CQR process—such revisions were deemed too expensive. Moreover, the corrections themselves were limited to four variables: total population, population in group quarters, total housing units, and vacant housing units. (Group quarters include, among others, military barracks, prisons, dormitories, and nursing homes.) How would a data user know where to find the corrected counts or how to use those data? There are many examples of such complex questions. SDC affiliates can help librarians find the answers.

SDCs educate their affiliate networks so that the individual agencies can spread such knowledge within their local communities. Some SDCs even provide workshop leaders who travel around their states upon request. Some provide specialized services for business planning. Quite a few provide specialized, state-specific resources on their Web pages. For North Carolina, see <http://census.state.nc.us>, a page with links to a variety of North Carolina census resources including the CQR corrections and maps, as well as the NC Census Lookup database, which provides access to the most frequently used North Carolina census data.

A few SDCs provide spectacular online resources for the whole country. For example, Indiana's Stats Indiana (www.stats.indiana.edu) provides States IN Profile and USA Counties IN Profile (www.stats.indiana.edu/usprofiles_topic_page.html). (The capitalization of IN is a play on Indiana's postal abbreviation.) Missouri's SDC (<http://mcdc2.missouri.edu/applications>) offers a variety of online tools for nationwide use. For the benefit of all census data users, SDCs across the country collaborated in 1990 and 2000 to formulate brief profiles from the decennial census data. The Missouri SDC Web site provides access to many of these under the heading Profile Products. Of course, all SDCs consult the bureau about questions and issues that arise in their states.

It is fair to say that SDCs and their affiliates perform wonders on shoestring budgets. Typically, SDCs have fewer than five staff members, yet service statistics are impressive. As reported

Figure 1: North Carolina State Data Center Network

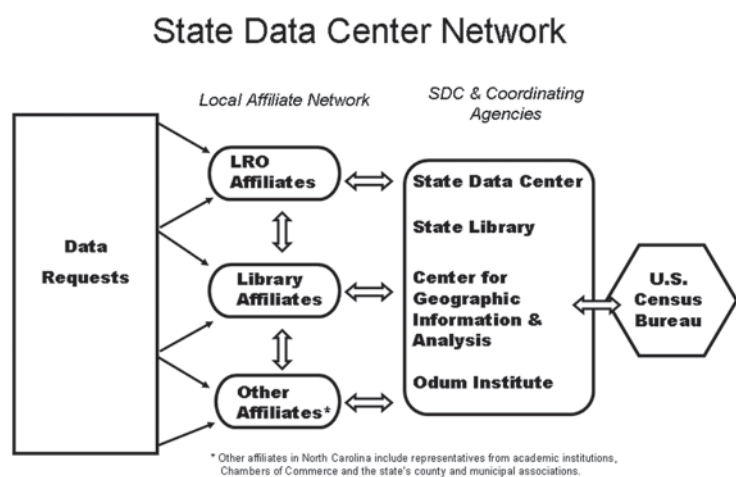


Figure created by NCSDS staff member Bob Coats. The author thanks the Center for permission to use this graphic.

Sidebar 1: CQR and Citizens Overseas

After the 2000 Census, the most attention-getting challenge came from Utah, on the grounds that if the bureau had counted the large number of Utah residents living abroad, the state would not have lost a congressional seat. Court challenges yielded no gain for Utah but did force the bureau to test ways to count U.S. citizens overseas. (The state that won the extra seat in the House was North Carolina.)

The bureau concluded that counting citizens overseas was an impractical endeavor. Because citizens overseas are not tracked by the U.S. government, they could only be invited to participate. Voluntary participation domestically has generally been shown to result in low response rates (participation in the decennial census is required by law). Moreover, the bureau has no funding to station staff overseas; consequently, such a count would result in a new administrative burden for American embassies.

Sidebar 2: The Risk in a Challenge

Local governments do gamble a bit in filing a challenge—only 65 percent of the CQR corrections in North Carolina increased the geography's counts, and 8.5 percent of the decisions resulted in no change. If the bureau finds that the original count was inaccurate but that there were actually *fewer* people than they thought, there is no appeal for the decision.

in the bureau's latest annual report (calendar year 2004), the national network of affiliates handled about 660,000 requests from local governments, businesses, academia, research organizations, public service and nonprofit organizations, the media, and others. Of these requests, 15 percent required in-depth data analysis, technical assistance, or consultation. SDC Web sites received 320 million hits. The network also prepared about 26,000 customized products. Such products

may include location analyses for business start-ups or a customized GIS map. Network trainers conducted about 1,300 workshops on bureau data. Yet for all of these achievements, the cost to states was only about \$14.7 million, including costs for personnel, equipment, travel, and supplies. And 60 percent of these requests were free to the customer.

The need for the SDC network is still easily demonstrable. American businesses and governments at all levels continue to need help finding and using detailed data for planning and growth. The Census Bureau is now conducting the new American Community Survey (ACS), which will take the place of the long form in the decennial census. The ACS produces *annual* data but uses a radically different survey method. The SDC network is the primary means by which local officials and librarians will learn how to navigate and use ACS data. As 2010 approaches, SDC affiliates support local governments' participation in preparatory programs for the decennial census, to ensure that the bureau has the most current information available about local communities before it begins mailing surveys and sending out enumerators. When Congress wrangles over the budget for the bureau, the network acts as its advocate, contacting key officials to explain the wide variety of critical local needs met by census data.

As society grows more and more complex, so do the data required for successful planning. The demands for census data and the expertise to use them effectively are only increasing. Together, the Census Bureau and the SDC network are meeting the challenges of the information age and putting data to work for the American people.

HOW TO CONTACT YOUR LOCAL AFFILIATES

Find your State Data Center from the Census Bureau's SDC Web site, www.census.gov/sdc/www. From there, link to the Web site of the lead agency in your state. Most SDC Web sites have prominent links to local affiliates; or you may contact your SDC directly to determine local affiliates and how to reach them. The SDC Clearinghouse Web site, www.sdcibdc.iupui.edu/, provides more information about current network issues, congressional activity affecting the Census Bureau, and internal workings of the network.