Expanding Equitable Access to Restricted-Use Data through Federal Statistical Research Data Centers

The project presented here is one part of a multi-phased initiative aimed at assessing future capabilities of a National Secure Data Service (NSDS) by strategically examining user demand/needs of the Federal Statistical Research Data Center (FSRDC) network and by establishing a targeted pilot program to make funding supports available among underserved communities and institutions. Phase 1, described below, focuses on studying prospective FSRDC data user needs to inform current operations as well as a future NSDS.

This pilot lays the groundwork for additional phase(s) that: a) explore novel funding models based on the needs assessment developed in this phase and b) develop a pilot funding support program that seeks to leverage those novel models to expand access to the FSRDCs to a more diverse user base by addressing known cost barriers that are also highly relevant to a future NSDS.

PHASE 1

Key Objective

The objective of this project is to conduct an environmental scan of user demand/need and strategies for expanding access to the restricted-use data made available through Federal Statistical Research Data Centers (FSRDCs) beyond its traditional base of users at high research activity (R1) universities.

This proposal involves using the FSRDC system as a testbed for assessing potential needs of a future National Secure Data Service (NSDS) to reach a broader user-base, including researchers at other types of academic institutions and non-governmental organizations, and government decision-makers beyond the Federal level. The results of this project will inform planning for both the FSRDCs and a potential future NSDS by providing critical evidence on unmet needs, service gaps, and resource demands/needs required to expand access to restricted-use data to a wider community for evidence-based decision-making, as recommended by the Advisory Committee on Data for Evidence Building (ACDEB).

Key Evidence Building Considerations

The Federal statistical system (FSS) has made progress in recent years to provide better tools and better data to drive innovation and answer fundamental questions about the economy, labor, health, and general well-being of Americans. However, these improved tools and data must be broadly accessible to a diverse range of users to fully realize the potential for new insights and novel discoveries. Ultimately, the evidence user-base should reflect the diversity of the communities represented by the American public to ensure evidence-builders and decision-makers are asking the full breadth of valuable questions of the data and designing appropriate products to answer those questions.

The FSRDC program is a nationwide network of 33 Research Data Centers (RDCs) providing users on approved projects secure access to highly restricted Federal survey, census, and administrative data for statistical purposes. The Census Bureau operates the FSRDCs in collaboration with the Office of Management and Budget (OMB), Federal statistical agencies, and research institutions.

These research institutions (e.g., universities, Federal reserve banks) provide the physical space to host FSRDCs in their facilities, designate an Executive Director to manage the FSRDC's budget and liaise with the Census Bureau, and reimburse the Census Bureau for the ongoing cost of employing an on-site RDC administrator, whose role includes supportive or "concierge" activities. This connection allows the host institution and their consortium members (nearby dues-paying research institutions) to benefit from the services offered by that local administrator. Such assistance includes discovering data and exploring its utility and availability, refining research questions and developing and submitting project proposals, navigating administrative processes and meeting access requirements, and ultimately overseeing disclosure review of research output. Recently the FSRDC program has also been piloting virtual access and how that may be expanded as well.

Current FSRDC users are predominately faculty members and graduate students from R1 universities geographically proximate to, or directly hosting, an FSRDC. As a result, many researchers across the country go largely unserved by the FSRDC program including researchers from Minority Serving Institutions (MSIs), Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HCBUs), and other academic institutions. This also includes many researchers outside academia, such as those in State and local government, non-profit institutions, businesses, independent researchers, and others.

To ensure that data from the FSRDC network can be used for evidence-based decision-making in every sector of society, the pool of data users must stretch beyond Federal agencies and traditional R1 academic researchers. For example, State, territorial, local, and tribal governments increasingly desire to make data-driven decisions. Their roles within the evidence ecosystem vary widely (both as data providers and evidence users), and they often lack the funding support, technical capacity, and/or expertise to access, analyze, link, and apply data effectively. In academic settings, expanding access to the FSRDCs to users outside of R1 institutions would improve equity for research, teaching, and other scholarly activities currently only readily available to the most well-resourced universities.

While evidence from the FSRDC experience and the ACDEB final report highlight barriers that potential non-traditional users face in accessing data held by the FSRDC system (e.g., awareness of the program, required training, and time and funding constraints), little is known about the underlying demand for such access including methods for identifying potential users and their institutions. This proposal will address this gap.

Project Highlights
The awardee of this project would perform an in-depth environmental scan and deliver a report, including a plan for future outreach activities, that addresses the following questions that will inform both the FSRDCs and a potential future NSDS:

Potential users and benefits

- What characterizes the potential user-base (e.g., researchers from MSIs, HCBUs, and other academic institutions as well as those in State and local government, non-profit institutions, businesses, independent researchers, and others) not currently being served by the FSRDC program? How does that differ from the established user-base?

- What is the interest in and demand for accessing restricted-use data for evidence-building purposes outside of the traditional R1 user-base? Which institutions and researchers would be most interested in accessing FSRDC data?

- What are the most promising uses of FSRDC data for interested researchers?

- What datasets are of greatest interest?

- Why are interested users not accessing the FSRDC system?

Resources and funding

- What are the resource requirements, access modalities (e.g., brick-and-mortar; virtual access), and funding models for expanding access to restricted-use data beyond the existing FSRDC user-base? How should these be evaluated?

- What strategies and activities exist to identify institutions and their researchers who might utilize FSRDC funding supports?

Outreach, services, and insights for a potential future NSDS

- What are the best outreach strategies for promoting the FSRDC program to new user-bases? What targeted training could encourage and better enable potential users to engage with the FSRDCs?

- What prioritized services could FSRDCs provide to potential user-bases to promote access to and use of the program?

- How could this project inform the functions and services of a future NSDS?