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- Out of the Weeds: Effective Cataloging Tools and Strategies for a Post-CRDP World
- Benefits of Federal Statistical Research Data Centers

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Editor's Corner: A Light in the Darkness

Elizabeth Sanders

I have sat down to write this editorial countless times over the past few months. Every time I think I'm ready, something else pops up in the news that causes me to renavigate my thoughts and emotions. These are troubling times for not just all librarians and libraries, not just for those in our communities that rely on us and our work, but also the grander government information landscape. To try and cover all that has happened in the few months since President Trump began his second term would be a paper in itself. I ask for your understanding as I briefly address just two of these areas

First, presidential actions targeting minorities with far-reaching, negative consequences have become the norm. Any effort to support minorities has been labeled "DEI" and dismantled in a variety of settings.[1] Trans, nonbinary, intersex, and people whose identity falls outside of the strict gender and sex binary have been targeted, demonized, and denied their existence, despite all historical, contemporary, and biological evidence.[2] Fundamental, Constitutional rights, such as birthright citizenship and voting, are being attacked.[3] Legal challenges have been made in response, with judges issuing injunctions, some of which have been ignored, and numerous lawsuits filed.[4] However, the immediate damage has been done, and will continue, unless these actions are reversed.

Second, presidential actions and the newly formed Department of Government Efficiency (DOGE) have slashed federal funding to critical resources.[5] These budget cuts include firing swaths of federal employees, freezing grant funding, and ending or greatly reducing research and data efforts.[6] As a result, we are losing critical institutional knowledge and infrastructure, skilled labor and the promise of a future federal workforce, and long-standing, critical data resources. As with the other presidential actions, these have led to legal challenges, including injunctions and lawsuits—and as with the other presidential actions, the damage has real time, potentially irreversible effects.[7]

However, I want to leave you all not with these heavy thoughts, but with a message of hope. Andie Craley's From the Chair column in this edition highlights several efforts both within and beyond the library community to preserve access to crucial data resources, inform others of the ongoing situation with the federal government, and advocate for the library community as well as open and free access and preservation of government information.

Many of us already support these efforts; I ask all of us to remember that anything we do, however small, joins with the efforts of others. Together, we are lights in the darkness, with the potential to ignite more even as we offer comfort to those looking for us. We must not let these times extinguish our light. Existence is resistance.

The views expressed in this editorial are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Government Documents Round Table (GODORT), the American Library Association (ALA), Lamar University, or any other entity.

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From the Chair

Andie Craley

As I stepped out from my library in the evening last week, I heard a familiar sound that starts back up each March as Spring gingerly arrives. Most people in my area associate Spring's return with the appearance of robins and other spring birds—but the clincher for me is when I hear the frogs singing in the marsh. Once I hear that, I'm pretty assured that no significant snowfall will appear and Spring is on its way, despite what Punxsutawney Phil the groundhog may have predicted.

With Spring often comes feelings of hope, renewal, life, joy, and new opportunities. Within GODORT, we would still love to have volunteers fill some open vacancies in our committees for the remaining 2024–2025 season and for the upcoming 2025–2026 year. You can see all the work our GODORT committees do at ALA GODORT Committees, Task Forces, and Interest Groups.[1] Please contact me with any questions and volunteer interest: acraley@harford.edu

GODORT also provides financial support for librarians and projects. Our newest endeavor is the GODORT Preservation Grant, which will provide up to $5,000 for projects that preserve government information produced at any level of government to sustain current and future access. Web archiving or digital preservation activities serve as just one example of such projects. The GODORT Emerging Leaders is another opportunity, with this program designed to enable new librarians to participate in problem-solving working groups and network with peers, a fast track professional leadership. GODORT usually sponsors a candidate each year who submits their application to ALA and is chosen for the incoming class. Finally, the Rozkuszka Endowment Scholarship provides $3,000 in financial assistance to individuals who are currently working with government information and are trying to complete a master's degree in library science. More information on all these opportunities can be found on the GODORT website,[2] and you can donate to any of them via the Donate To GODORT website.[3]

Another opportunity in GODORT is the collaboration with other ALA divisions and round tables, and government information librarians nationwide, to educate, advocate, and preserve open access to government information in all levels of government.

GODORT and the Politics, Policy and International Relations Section (PPIRS) of the ALA ACRL Division collaborate to offer the Kenya Flash Lecture Series.[4] The GODORT web series "Help! I'm an Accidental Government Information Librarian" hosts various webinars that feature government information resources and agencies.[5] This series, along with the Education and Program Committee, hosts webinars for events such as Sunshine Week, which celebrates the importance of public records and open government.[6] GODORT also reaches out to the great network of government information professionals during the GODORT Friday Chats, held during the first Friday of each month.[7] Each Chat starts with a scheduled topic of information, but elicits great collaboration through the sharing of resources, thoughtful discussion, and continued support for the work of government information libraries.

Along with all these collaboration opportunities comes the necessity to advocate for consistency and preservation of government information produced by established agencies and institutions. At recent GODORT Friday Chats and webinars, there has been a demonstrated need to preserve free access to government information during times of executive level transition, prompting collaborative efforts and efforts to raise awareness of this ongoing situation.

Numerous efforts have been shared through GODORT and the GovDoc-L listserv of tracking changes or locating resources that seem to have disappeared. These efforts include The Data Rescue Project,[8] the GODORT 2025 Presidential Transition LibGuide,[9] the End of 2024 Term Web Crawl and Archive,[10] the Preservation of Electronic Government Information (PEGI),[11] and the Weekly Roundup and Trump Trackers guides from UC San Diego.[12]

In this season of renewal, there is hope that all this collaborative work will help us advocate for the strength of libraries to provide consistency and awareness in a time of uncertainty and drastic change. We must continue these good works and advocate for their needs and funding support, both within the communities we serve and to our government bodies. Several advocacy resources can help you build relationships with these stakeholders, including the Advocacy tab at the GODORT Voting and Elections Toolkit,[13] advocacy in your Library State Associations with Government Sections,[14] and ALA's Show Up for Our Libraries campaign.[15] Let's all use these tools together to celebrate the opportunities we have in hope of renewal in open and accessible information.

Andie Craley (acraley@harford.edu), Technical Services & Government Information Librarian, Harford Community College.

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Get to Know ...

Beth Dowling

Gwen Sinclair

How many of us can say that we knew our chosen career at age sixteen? Beth Downing decided to become a librarian as a sophomore in high school. Originally, she aspired to be a children's librarian, but she ended up as an "accidental government documents librarian." Beth first moved into a gov docs position at the University of Wyoming when a staff member left and Beth took over. A few years later, she was hired as the government documents librarian at Idaho State University (ISU) when her family relocated to Pocatello in 2003.

Oboler Library at ISU has been a federal depository library since 1908 and its FDLP collection contains more than 500,000 volumes. Beth is responsible for cataloging, reference, instruction, and collection development for government documents. Much of her work involves cataloging and checking record loads. In her words, she has "a talent for finding problems" and she enjoys the puzzle of figuring out what is going on with cataloging records. She is now trying to figure out how to get records into her database in a MARCIVE-less world. She is not worried, though, because, "GPO has really smart people and they provide a lot of great training, especially if you're an accidental gov docs librarian."

Outside of work, Beth is an avid reader and she especially enjoys Louise Penny's Chief Inspector Armand Gamache novels and Karin Slaughter's Will Trent series. If you've ever seen Beth knitting at a conference you will agree with her husband's assessment that she is a "knitaholic." Her love of knitting's orderly construction could be related to her desire to "make things look pretty in the catalog so that people can find stuff for themselves."

Beth strongly believes that having access to printed documents is essential to understanding how government information is structured and to see its context. She fondly remembers attending a training on the *Federal Register* at an Interagency Seminar in which attendees used the printed volumes of the *Code of Federal Regulations* and *Federal Register* to learn how they are related. She noted that the online census data and other dynamically generated databases are more difficult to navigate. "If we can't figure it out, how is the general public supposed to figure it out?" she asked. Moreover, the potential discovery of related items is lost when browsing is eliminated. She is doubtful that everyone will be better served by the digital transition. "Without the tangible [documents], even the best government information librarians are not going to see what is going on," because it is not feasible to review all of the new electronic records. "The rush to digital is short-sighted. It's great to have them available for the people who want to access them digitally," she said, but it is "really concerning to me, especially all of the things that were not online at all that we were getting, like the maps from Interior and the Forest Service, and those don't exist anymore."

Beth admits that she "gets sucked down the rabbit hole reading stuff." Her favorite print resources include the reports of the Hayden and Powell expeditions that explored and mapped the American West. As she related, "In one of the surveys is a description of [Shoshone Falls] and how, for a couple of days before they found the river, they could hear the cascade over the falls, and as they got closer they could see the mist. Shoshone Falls is referred to as the Niagara of the West. It's incredible, especially in the spring with the runoff, it's absolutely spectacular. To have that description of them suddenly coming upon the Snake River Canyon and Shoshone Falls and Twin Falls is just fascinating."

Curiosity about what is in the collection and interest in how government documents fit together are some of the qualities of good government information librarians, according to Beth. Paying attention to what is going on in the news is also important. Beth advises new government information librarians to "Ask lots of questions, take advantage of any learning opportunities that you have like training webinars, go to the depository library conferences, and learn about GPO's resources." Although she will miss physically reviewing new tangible documents, Beth's curiosity and engagement with government information will serve her well in the brave new world of the digital FDLP.

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Out of the Weeds: Effective Cataloging Tools and Strategies for a Post-CRDP World

Brianna King, Susie O'Connor, Pam King

In August 2024, the Government Publishing Office (GPO) announced the discontinuation of its Cataloging Record Distribution Program (CRDP), a critical service for federal depository libraries. Since its launch in 2009, the CRDP has cataloged government documents and provided essential cataloging metadata to support Federal Depository Library Program (FDLP) libraries. However, due to the transition to digital collections and the increasing use of electronic resources and metadata formats like MARC, XML, and linked data, traditional print-based cataloging methods are becoming less aligned with modern library practices. As a result, GPO has decided to end the program.

In addition to GPO's decision, MARCIVE, a long-time provider of cataloging services, announced it would cease operations. This adds to the challenges faced by libraries that have relied on MARCIVE for cataloging government documents, underlining the broader changes occurring in the cataloging field. As noted in GPO's August communication, "LSCM has recently reviewed the CRDP and recognized that there have been many changes in the discovery and metadata/cataloging ecosystem since the CRDP was implemented."[1] This announcement highlights the growing diversity of metadata sources and the modernization of library workflows in the digital era. As a result, GPO is encouraging libraries to explore other cataloging alternatives and digital content management systems.

These changes will significantly impact libraries that have relied on the CRDP for cataloging government documents. Without both CRDP and MARCIVE, libraries will need to seek new sources for cataloging records or adjust their workflows to ensure continued access to government publications. While GPO reassures libraries that their FDLP status will remain unaffected, it emphasizes the importance of transitioning to other cataloging solutions or content management systems before the program concludes.[2] Given these shifts in federal document management, libraries must adapt to new cataloging methods and tools. This paper will explore effective cataloging tools and strategies to help libraries transition away from the CRDP and MARCIVE, ensuring continued access to government publications and the efficient management of digital collections.

History of MARCIVE and the CRDP

Founded in 1981, MARCIVE quickly established itself as a leading provider of cataloging services for libraries across the United States. Initially, the company focused on cost-effective MARC bibliographic cataloging, but as technology advanced, MARCIVE expanded to offer more modern solutions tailored to the evolving needs of libraries.

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, MARCIVE identified a significant gap in the cataloging of government documents. Many libraries, particularly academic institutions, needed help managing large collections of U.S. government publications. To address this, MARCIVE launched a multi-year initiative in partnership with major libraries like Texas A&M University, Rice University, and Louisiana State University to enhance the bibliographic data generated by GPO, marking the beginning of its specialized services for government documents.[3]

By the mid-1990s, MARCIVE had become a key partner in government document cataloging. Working alongside the GPO, the company helped develop the CRDP, which provided depository libraries with standardized bibliographic records for U.S. government publications. The CRDP streamlined cataloging processes, ensuring consistent access to government records across the FDLP network.

The CRDP became an essential tool for libraries, particularly smaller institutions or those without dedicated cataloging staff. This collaboration allowed libraries to maintain accurate, up-to-date records of U.S. government publications. As the format of government publications shifted from print to digital,

MARCIVE adapted to include these new resources in the cataloging process.

The closure of MARCIVE poses significant challenges for libraries that depend on its services. With the end of the CRDP, many FDLP libraries will need to find new vendors or adopt alternative tools to ensure the continued cataloging and accessibility of government publications. Libraries are increasingly turning to digital resources and automated cataloging tools, and the traditional model of centralized cataloging services is being replaced by more flexible and diverse resources. Libraries will need to adapt to these new systems, which may require an adjustment period, but the transition offers an opportunity to explore innovative approaches to government document management.

New Strategies and Tools: Background

At the Fall 2024 FDL Conference, GPO, the Depository Library Council (DLC), and federal depository libraries discussed their concerns about the end of the CRDP and explored possible alternatives. At this conference, we presented "Adapting to Changes in Government Information Management: Strategies and Tools to Keep You Out of the Weeds," which focused on practical, low-cost strategies for libraries to receive metadata and MARC records, as well as guidance on developing efficient workflows for managing government information.[4]

Mastering Excel-Based Queries: Efficient Cataloging with Customized Search Tools

A key consideration for cataloging workflows and record selection is whether a library aims to collect government information broadly or focuses on specific areas of emphasis. Some libraries may take a hybrid approach, collecting broadly while also seeking comprehensive coverage in particular subject areas. For those adopting a more targeted collection strategy, advanced search techniques can help efficiently identify relevant cataloging records from lists and databases. This approach offers greater precision and allows libraries to allocate staff and resources more effectively toward developing specialized collections.

With the discontinuation of MARCIVE and CRDP services after December 2024, libraries must explore alternative methods for ensuring government information remains accessible to their patrons. This transition involves a two-fold process: first, selecting the most relevant and impactful government information based on the needs of their users; and second, determining the best ways to disseminate and make this information readily available.

Making cataloging more accessible can be achieved through various methods, such as creating library guides (both online and physical) or linking to the Catalog of Government Publications (CGP). Adding government documents to the library's main catalog has also been a popular approach for increasing visibility and accessibility. However, there is no "one-size-fits-all" solution to cataloging government information, as each library has a unique mission, serves distinct users and communities, and operates within specific financial and staffing constraints.

Many libraries are selective depositories and only catalog some new GPO cataloging records.

A widely used method that allows libraries to create customized item selections is DSIMS.[5] The Depository Selection Information Management System (DSIMS), introduced in 2012, replaced the older Depository Distribution Information System (DDIS), which had been in use since 1982. In DSIMS, item selections are matched to SuDoc stems, creating a one-to-one ratio. Recently, the GPO introduced an initiative adding 900 new item numbers, providing libraries with greater flexibility to make selections based on geography and format. This change allows libraries to achieve greater precision in their item selections, which can be reviewed through GPO's Item Lister.[6]

Another approach to selecting cataloging is to create a list of keywords relevant to topics important to a library's region and users. Libraries can match these keywords against government document cataloging lists and tools such as New Electronic Titles (NET).[7] Additionally, they can utilize combined shipping lists via FDLP.gov.[8]Another option would be to create lists through MetaLib, which is available through the CGP.[9] For libraries focusing on specific collection areas or topics, keyword searches of cataloging lists and tools alongside DSIMS can help ensure that no relevant items are overlooked.

The discontinuation of MARCIVE services served as a catalyst for exploring new methods of performing advanced searches. Clearly, having tools capable of querying spreadsheets for multiple keywords or terms simultaneously would be highly beneficial. For example, if a library wanted to search cataloging lists using its DSIMS selections, a tool that could cross-reference these selections with cataloging lists would save those involved in collection development and cataloging time searching lists. Several options for searching lists were explored, including AI tools and extensions, Microsoft Power Automate, Power Query (an Excel extension), and Python scripts with PyCharm.

Among these tools, the most successful approach was using ChatGPT to generate Python code for searching cataloging lists based on library item selections and keywords.[10] While the code provided by ChatGPT required a few iterations to refine, it eventually developed into a functional Python script. One of the challenges was ensuring the program performed exact matches for item numbers from FDLP and GPO cataloging lists, as partial

matches would result in errors. For instance, during testing, the script mismatched "0050-E-17" when it was intended to match "0050-E." After revisions, the script successfully performed exact matches. Additional adjustments included modifying file paths to access Excel files correctly and converting file paths into raw strings (e.g., rpath) to handle backslashes properly.

The final Python script, capable of performing multiple simultaneous searches, was shared on the 2024 DLC conference pages.[11] A suggested next step would be to develop a shareable executable version of the program. This version would allow users to load an Excel file and input search criteria for a simple, plug-and-play experience. The executable would output a new Excel file populated with cataloging records that match the library's query.

The final step for libraries using the tool would involve generating a file of MARC records from the OCLC numbers included in the resulting list of cataloging selections. While this process was not part of the presentation, libraries could extract OCLC numbers from the Python script's output and create a file for uploading into their cataloging systems. Programs such as OCLC Connexion can assist with this by generating MARC records from a list of OCLC numbers. For guidance, consult OCLC Connexion's help page: How do I batch export records from a list of OCLC numbers using Connexion client?[12]

Cataloging Government Documents in Connexion and WorldShare in a Consortial Cataloging Environment

Another strategy for disseminating government information involves utilizing Connexion and WorldShare subscriptions. For libraries in a shared catalog with access to these tools, there are many workflow and collaboration opportunities to explore. In consortial environments, cooperation between selective and regional libraries is critical for effectively managing records within the shared cataloging environment. With CRDP and MARCIVE no longer viable options, libraries can explore a cataloging model where strengthening collaboration and integrating workflows take on increased importance.

Gathering a list of documents to add to the collection is a major first step in working with a shared catalog. In working closely with other FDLP libraries in the consortium, dividing the workload using each library's curated list of documents should eliminate duplication of work. Guidance for consortial shared catalogs can be developed by the FDLP regional and selective libraries. The guidance would cover loading, modifying, and any configurations that are needed in the ILS or OCLC for government documents. This strategy, along with the use of AI or other algorithms, is one of several approaches that can be instrumental in developing an efficient workflow that fits the needs of the library.

Each month, the GPO provides a list of new electronic government documents. This is an excellent resource for curating a list of items relevant to a library and its patrons. As an alternative, it is possible to access the Catalog of U.S. Government Publications (CGP) to create a customized list of documents.[13] Libraries can also retrieve lists from previous months if they do not subscribe to the emailed list. The CGP website offers excellent tutorials and tips to assist with this process.

OCLC can also aid in gathering documents based on a library's profile. The OCLC website provides detailed instructions for setting up a government documents collection.[14] This process is straightforward for those with a Cataloging and Metadata Subscription, and additional instructions are available for libraries without a subscription. There are multiple options for obtaining government documents, including OCLC, the CGP, and GitHub.[15] The best approach will depend on each library's workflows and specific needs.

After obtaining the records or a list of documents to add to the collection, the next step is determining how to upload them. For libraries with an OCLC subscription, records can be uploaded using either Connexion or WorldShare Record Management, with the choice depending on the library's specific workflow. Workflows may also vary depending on who is responsible for the task. While some prefer batch cataloging for efficiency, others may opt to catalog records individually.

When processing individual records, Connexion and WorldShare Record Management offer multiple search options. Searching by SuDoc number is the most efficient method, and if this has been part of existing workflows, it will remain unchanged. Once the platforms are properly configured, exporting records is a straightforward process. Given that many users have been working with these programs for years, this aspect of the cataloging workflow will not be altered.

Each record management system has strengths and weaknesses. WorldShare Record Management has a cleaner look but also some drawbacks. For example, when exporting from WorldShare some of the information in the MARC 001 and 008 fields is lost, including the date and location of publication. Catalogers will need to add this information back post-export, if they wish to use this method. When exporting from Connexion the MARC 001 and 008 fields information is not lost. However, some may find that editing in Connexion isn't as user-friendly as in WorldShare. Ultimately, a cataloger's selection of Connexion and WorldShare is going to be based on personal preferences. Both systems are effective for loading single and batch records. WorldShare is available for free to those with a current OCLC

Cataloging and Metadata Subscription. Information on creating a WorldShare account is available on OCLC's website.[16]

For those working in a consortial environment, it is a good practice to check for titles in the shared catalog before exporting records. Frequently, rather than exporting a record, simply making modifications to an existing record is necessary. Many consortia have the same philosophy for shared records: Do No Harm. This philosophy means being careful not to delete metadata or make modifications to records without prior consent of other libraries holding the record. For record clean-up projects, catalogers should first reach out and use established protocols to communicate plans and get approval. A common practice is to contact consortia member libraries if there is a problem with the records (such as improperly added local notes), and allow them to fix the issue, rather than fixing the note without the member library's consent.

A shared catalog simplifies access to records and offers an opportunity for greater collaboration among Federal Depository Libraries within a consortium, reducing redundant work. Partnering with a regional depository library can help distribute the workload more efficiently. While selective libraries with different profiles may have limited overlap, those within the same consortia will still share some common records. If a regional library is part of the shared catalog, even more overlap is likely, further streamlining efforts. With the discontinuation of the CRDP and MARCIVE services, regional libraries may need to rely more on their selective counterparts. Clear communication among libraries will be essential in adapting workflows and ensuring efficiency. Rather than viewing these changes as a setback, libraries can use this shift as an opportunity to strengthen collaboration, enhance cataloging efforts, and foster a robust and productive exchange of ideas within the shared system.

With the discontinuation of CRDP and MARCIVE and rapid change within the cataloging world the next few years are guaranteed to be exciting and challenging. As libraries navigate this, they will need to be flexible and ready to adapt to change and new workflows. A willingness to work collaboratively and share expertise will also be imperative. Fortunately, the FDLP has tools that provide guidance to libraries as they map out new workflows. Several of these resources will help libraries develop lists of items that match the libraries' collection areas.

FDLP Data Manager (FDM) Workflows

The FDLP Data Manager (FDM) offers an efficient solution for managing and uploading MARC records of federal government documents. In response to the GPO's announcement about the discontinuation of the CRDP, FDM emerged as a strong alternative, allowing libraries to seamlessly continue their work without disruption.

The MARC Records Module within FDM helps librarians retrieve government document records based on a variety of customizable criteria, including catalog record dates, SuDoc number, agency, and publication type. This functionality allows libraries to refine their search and organize records based on specific needs, ensuring that collections remain relevant and streamlined.

FDM's ability to filter and retrieve MARC records tailored to individual library profiles is a key feature that simplifies the cataloging process and supports efficient management of federal documents. Training resources are available in FDLP Academy to help libraries integrate FDM into their workflows.[17] An example of a new FDM workflow system and how to upload records to a library's ILS can be found in the full presentation.[18]

One of the critical advantages of FDM is its flexibility and the ability to retrieve records tailored to a library's specific needs. FDM allows libraries to filter records based on various cataloging fields, such as SuDoc number, publication type, and agency, which helps streamline collections and ensure they are relevant to the library's patrons. Another notable benefit is that FDM can retrieve records based on a library's section profile, allowing for even more targeted and efficient record management. Additionally, the system integrates seamlessly with SirsiDynix Symphony, an integrated library system (ILS) that has been shown to work with FDM, enabling smooth uploads of MARC records directly into the library's catalog.

However, FDM does present some challenges. Unlike MARCIVE, FDM does not provide a monthly batch of new and changed records. Additionally, users may encounter issues when attempting to download too many records at once, as integrating FDM MARC records and uploading them into SirsiDynix can sometimes lead to problems with large downloads. While this is a consideration for SirsiDynix users, other integrated library systems (ILS) may have their own unique challenges with large downloads. The specifics of these challenges may vary depending on the system. While the new workflow may require libraries to take on a few additional steps, we feel that FDM remains an excellent resource for many libraries.

Conclusion

The sunsetting of the CRDP and the closure of MARCIVE are going to create some challenges for libraries going forward. The potential to collaborate with libraries is wide open and will hopefully create some wonderful new networks. Exploring new technologies will be interesting and can lead to some amazing ways of handling workflows. Instead of looking at this new

world of gathering government documents as a bad thing, we must look at all the wonderful possibilities that it can lead us to. Communication is going to be a significant building block, letting others know what we find and what someone else finds can lead to more sustainable and efficient cataloging workflows. As the saying goes, "Teamwork makes the dream work." By collaborating across all government documents libraries, we can ensure that everyone has access to the documents they need.

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Benefits of Federal Statistical Research Data Centers

Suzanne Reinman and Katrina Stierholz

The thirty-three Federal Statistical Research Data Centers (FSRDC) provide researchers access to unique datasets.[1] FSRDCs are operated by the U.S. Census Bureau in partnership with federal statistical agencies and leading research institutions in the U.S. (map of locations in Figure 1). Formerly called Census Research Data Centers, FSRDCs provide controlled access to restricted agency microdata in a secure environment to researchers, protecting respondent confidentiality. Following congressional action in 2018, the number of FSRDCs and the available data has grown significantly and is likely to continue to increase.[2] These data are extremely valuable to researchers and provide much more detail than data that is publicly available on federal agency websites or distributed to libraries in the Federal Depository Library Program. Federal datasets support research in economics, sociology, public health, geography, and related fields. Working with these sets provides unique research opportunities, beyond what is possible with the publicly distributed aggregated data.

Federal Statistical Research Data Centers Overview

FSRDCs are located nationwide; each of the thirty-three centers has an administrator as the primary contact. The About Us section on the FSRDC website gives an overview of the program including the Standard Application Process, Partner and Collaborating Agencies, Research Data Center Partner Institutions, and FSRDC projects. Partner institutions within each Center offer researchers an access point to FSRDC data and support. Costs are shared by partner institutions via a consortium.

In addition to the Census Bureau, federal partner and collaborating agencies provide data directly through the FSRDCs.[3] The addition of these agencies allows researchers to access even more data and potentially link datasets for deeper analysis. The Partner and Collaborating Agencies section lists the available data, fees, and proposal requirements for each agency. Partner agencies also participate in the governance and oversight of the program.

Congressional Commitment to Expanded Access

While Census Research Data Centers have existed for decades, Congress recently established goals to expand access to more datasets and more data centers. The Foundations for Evidence-Based Policymaking Act of 2018 (Evidence Act) set an ambitious goal of creating a standardized process for applying to use federal data—including highly confidential datasets—for evidence-building purposes.[4] Congress had several reasons for making it easier to find and apply for federal data assets:

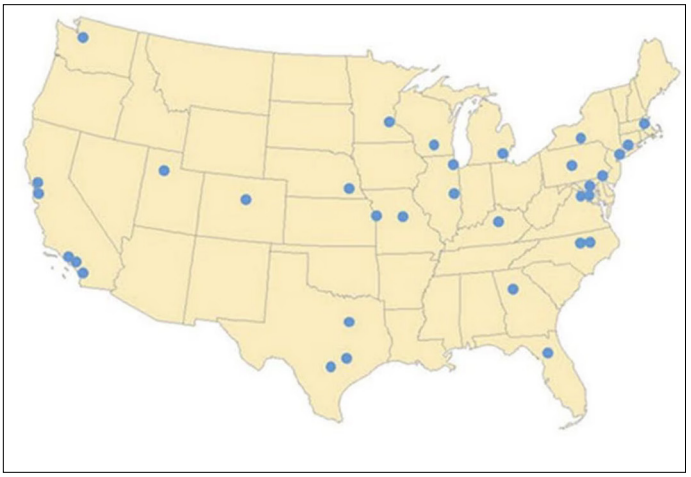

Figure 1: Map of Federal Statistical Research Data Centers[1]

- Expanded and safe access to and use of data, including administrative data, to build evidence for improving public policies and programs;
- Enhanced ability to build evidence by making data available to staff at all levels of government, including state and local officials;

- Timely access for business and academic communities to high-quality data to develop insights and analytic tools that benefit citizens, policymakers, and the private sector,

The Census FSRDC program is the "front door" to accessing these highly confidential data and an increasingly important part of research work. The procedure to access data is known as the Standard Application Process, providing a systematic policy for access to confidential data from U.S. statistical agencies. This is part of a long-term plan to improve access to federal data.[5]

Relationship to Aggregated Federal Government Data

The microdata available from the FSRDCs are the detailed data that underlie the aggregated data government information librarians are most familiar with (an individual's income v. aggregated personal income for a geographic region); as such, they are part of the continuum of data products offered from the Federal government. Because these data reveal individual or firm information, they are very highly controlled, and users must submit proposals that go through extensive vetting to access them. Access to the data itself is also highly controlled, typically in a single room without any external internet access. Government information librarians benefit from familiarity with these datasets as they may offer researchers an alternative to the aggregated data that is easily available.

Benefits to Researchers: Why FSRDCs Matter

The Restricted-Use Data page provides detail as to the Available Microdata in addition to information about the Standard Application Process.[6] A description of the data, list of sets in each section, and links are provided. The microdata is categorized into Administrative, Demographic, Economic, LEHD (Longitudinal Employer-Household Dynamics), and UMETRICS (Measuring the Impacts of Research on Innovation, Competitiveness, and Science) datasets. This data is from Census Bureau censuses and surveys of businesses and households, linked employer-employee data, and administrative records from federal and state agencies and other sources.

Nearly all datasets accessible through the FSRDC system have a publicly available version but researchers often find these lacking due to the absence of detailed geography, aggregation, or highly useful variables (i.e., Date of Birth, Date of Death, etc.) To review research uses of the data the FSRDC Projects page[7] provides details on active and completed projects managed by the Census Bureau (e.g., project title, abstract, FSRDC location, principal investigator, year project started, researchers, and datasets requested in project proposals). That web page also provides a list of the research outputs (papers, articles, dissertations, etc.) produced from 2000 to date by external research projects managed by the Census Bureau.

Empirical research in the social sciences leans heavily on the use of high-quality data. The data that is available from an FSRDC is known as "administrative data" and contains information down to the establishment or individual, giving researchers powerful insights, while still maintaining confidentiality. Confidentiality is maintained by the very limited way the FSRDC allows researchers to use the data. The results of the data analysis can be published, but never the underlying data.

Using this kind of data, a researcher can reliably ask questions about the effects of one's environment, education, life circumstances, or polices to assess their impact. In addition, rather than relying on survey responses, many of these data are collected in the course of the government's business, providing a large sample size and more detail. Access to this data is incredibly impactful: Economists have studied outcomes following the establishment of FSRDCs in an area and found that empiricists produce more publications (about 24% more), in more highly-cited journals, and with demonstrable effects on policy making.[8] The *Opportunity Atlas* is an example of research results from this kind of data, charting the outcomes of children using their census tract, identifying high-opportunity neighborhoods that are affordable to low-income families.[9]

The FSRDC's benefits to researchers are centered around the benefits of access to more granular data. These data offer more geographic detail, larger samples, variables with higher top codes (e.g., a much higher upper limit for income), more detailed coding within variables (e.g., exact date of birth, medical diagnosis codes), and linkages to other administrative data and external third-party data (e.g., business data from IRS, individual data from SSA).[10] It is this level of detail that allows researchers to "connect the dots" and identify causation as part of their analysis.

How to Get the Data: Standard Application Process

Information about applying for access to restricted-use microdata in the FSRDCs is available on the Standard Application Process website.[11] The standard application process (SAP) Portal is a web-based data catalog and common application that serves as a "front door" to apply for confidential data from any of the sixteen principal federal statistical agencies and units for evidence-building purposes for approved researchers. All of the information needed for drafting and submitting proposals can be found on the SAP web page.

The FSRDC website outlines the steps for drafting and submitting proposals. Researchers should first contact the administrator at their FSRDC about their research interests and goals. They can schedule a time to review how to go about drafting a successful proposal. The proposal review process can take several months; researchers should plan accordingly.

Included in the SAP web page is a link to the ResearchDataGov catalog.[12] ResearchDataGov is a web portal for discovering and requesting access to restricted microdata from federal statistical agencies. Currently, users can search over 1,500 restricted datasets from sixteen agencies through this portal.

To perform statistical research in an FSRDC using non-public microdata, researchers must be both associated with an approved project and obtain Special Sworn Status (SSS), received from the Census Bureau after a proposal is submitted and approved.

Remote Access to FSRDC Datasets

Once a researcher has been approved for a project and met with the FSRDC, it may be possible to continue the research remotely from a home office. Remote access requires that all data is eligible and that the researcher has met a series of requirements; these are listed in detail on the Census web page for Secure Remote Research Environment to Access Restricted-Use Data.[13]

Researchers will begin their projects locally in their institution's FSRDC and make at least two visits with the FSRDC administrator. After the initial visits, the researchers are eligible to apply for remote access in which they will be able to work the remainder of their project from their home offices.

For a project to be approved for virtual access, all datasets approved for the project must be remote access eligible and the researcher must meet all eligibility requirements.[13] The Census Bureau posts a spreadsheet of restricted-use datasets available for remote access.

FSRDC Membership and Costs

Access to an FSRDC comes in two ways:

1. Research institutions and institutions such as Federal Reserve Banks can join the FSRDC nearest to them geographically as a consortium member. The cost is dependent on the number of institutions that are in the consortium, typically $20,000 and above annually, to cover the salary of a Census administrator, the construction and maintenance of the physical space, and other associated fees. This membership allows researchers within the institution to use the FSRDC without paying a separate fee. Membership costs may be shared among campus departments such as a Research office, related academic departments, and the library.

2. Researchers who do not have an institutional affiliation with a local FSRDC consortium will pay a fee to access the data at an FSRDC of their choice, typically thousands of dollars. In addition, some agencies may charge an additional small amount for accessing their data. While these fees may be a burden, the cost of managing this kind of data and its confidentiality is substantial and similar commercial data would likely cost even more. Grants can be used to pay for the access fees if a researcher does not have an affiliation with an FSRDC consortium member.

Summary

Federal Statistical Research Data Centers provide controlled access to restricted agency microdata. These datasets are extremely valuable to researchers and provide much more detail than data that is publicly available. Institutions and researchers interested in accessing data should contact the administrator at the Center that is closest geographically to their location.

The Census Bureau is bound by Title 13 of the U.S. Code to protect confidentiality. The FSRDC program makes it possible for researchers to partner with the Census for cutting edge research using the quality data that it collects about the nation's people and economy.

The Census Bureau has granted Special Sworn Status to researchers when the research goals align with the mission of the Census Bureau, benefit its programs and "Their expertise and vision allows the Census Bureau to improve [its] methods and to use [its] data in new and innovative ways that maximize [its] value to the American public."[14]

The views expressed in this paper are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Federal Reserve System, the Board of Governors, or the regional Federal Reserve Banks.

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Review

Foundations of Information Law. Paul T. Jaeger, Jonathan Lazar, Ursula Gorham, and Natalie Greene Taylor. Chicago: ALA: Neal-Schuman, 2023. 197 pgs. $58.49. 978-0-8389-4797-5.

Foundations of Information Law looks like a textbook but reads like historical nonfiction with some practical, professional slants. The authors' tone and stylistics choices make it more engaging than expected. Rooted in the real world of where law "is" (was, at the time of writing), its straightforward approach provides American librarians what they need to know when their world bumps into the law. The only caveat—it's changed. Published in 2023, *Foundations* was written off the tail end of Trump's first presidency. Unfairly pitted against the stark reality of today's political climate, some of the information is, as they say, "bad law." Cases like *Chevron* no longer hold the same weight as described, and the chaos of the current administration's upheaval of federal agencies leaves many questions unanswered. It remains a useful read, with contemporary audiences experiencing what has changed, and why, since its publication.

Jeager et. al. give an honest rundown of necessary knowledge for librarians, across issues and library type. Some legal problems are perennial between library types, like book bans and other censorship efforts. Other issues may occur more for libraries open to the public. One of the book's greatest strengths, then, is that it can be both an excellent primer and a reference book to use as needed, if these situations occur.

The book begins with legal research basics and an explanation of sources most frequently encountered before the authors include a brief history of law. This base helps set the stage by offering a refresher on federalism and the intentions of federal power, which helps with the remaining sections. The authors divide the law around primary problems librarians encounter, with chapters focusing on the big three: Intellectual Freedom, Intellectual Property, and Information Access. Depending on library type, some sections one may be more important to some readers than others. However, it's helpful for everyone to know the basic considerations at play for situations such as patrons attempting to photocopy whole books or sleeping all day in public reading areas. The book also addresses more practical areas of Law Enforcement, Professional Practice, and the Future, with the first two at least remaining constant. The main take away from law enforcement is always ask for a warrant; professional practice addresses the rarity of librarians getting sued for malpractice.

This book can be digested in just a few sittings, with the authors using an entertaining style that breaks legal jargon into compelling pieces while also consistently reminding readers of its relevance. Library professionals can read the book linearly to gain an overall understanding of their rights or in a more piecemeal fashion, referencing the needed topic in the moment. The prudent director, or even middle manager, would do well to read and re-read the book to gain some basic knowledge on issues commonly occurring in the field. This book is recommended for anyone working in libraries or archives—just make sure it's still "good law."—*Alexandra Acri Godfrey (agodfrey@os.pasen.gov), Librarian of the Senate of Pennsylvania, Senate of Pennsylvania.*

2024 GODORT Midwinter Meeting Summaries

Michael Alguire

International Documents Task Force (IDTF)

The IDTF did not hold a meeting at Midwinter. The Task Force's Coordinator is gathering vendor updates and will publish these aggregated updates as a single message on ALA Connect in the near future. The Task Force plans to meet again during GODORT's virtual Annual conference in June.