

Paper delivered at the 10th Biennial Conference of the
Australian Population Association
POPULATION AND GLOBALISATION:
AUSTRALIA IN THE 21ST CENTURY
Melbourne 28th November to 1st December 2000
Melbourne Australia

Developments in administrative data in Australia

(Paper presented to Australian Population Association: 10th Biennial Conference, 29
November to 1 December 2000, Melbourne)

Ching Choi

Welfare Division

Australian Institute of Health and Welfare.

Introduction

As part of the United Nations Geneva 2000 Forum held in Geneva in June 2000, the Statistical Division of the Economic Commission for Europe organised a seminar to discuss progress in the development of statistics to measure social development.

The speakers and the background papers for this seminar have highlighted the urgent need for better data from administrative systems to supplement population censuses and household surveys in transition and developing countries as well as in more developed countries. Well developed, administrative data can provide detailed information highly relevant to policy. Administrative data can be relatively inexpensive to compile and up-dated.

Australia has a long and strong statistical tradition; a well-developed ABS program of household surveys and population censuses has existed for several decades. However, apart from vital statistics, the development of administrative data in the health and welfare fields has received increased attention only in the last ten years or so.

This paper describes the recent demands for and efforts in the development of administrative data in health, housing and community services in Australia and the structure and processes that have been established to enable and promote the development and use of nationally consistent data.

The demand for administrative data

There has been a clear demand for better quality data from administrative systems for some time. Since the 1975 Henderson poverty inquiry, there have been numerous parliamentary reports on the need for better administrative data to inform the evaluation of social programs. The 1976 report of the Parliamentary Task Force on Co-ordination in Welfare and Health, the 1979 report of the Senate Standing Committee on Social Welfare, the 1977-1992 WELSTAT project and the 1992 Senate report on employment of people with disabilities are examples of strong recommendations for better and nationally consistent administrative data in health and welfare. The requirements are for consistent time series data, State and Territory comparable data, as well as data that can be used across health and welfare programs. There is a further requirement, ie the statistics produced from administrative sources and from surveys and censuses should be comparable so that they can be used jointly.

The Commonwealth responses to these statistical demands included the strengthening of the ABS social statistics system, eg the expanded household survey program and the establishment of the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW). The AIHW specialises in health and welfare data, in particular the development and analysis of State and Territory administrative data. It works closely with the Commonwealth and the States and Territories in its work. The AIHW is thus a part of the national statistical system led by the ABS.

The development of administrative data is very much related to the need for accountability in the use of government funds. This is true of all government agencies in all countries. However, this is probably more so in Australia because the federal system of government has meant funds of the Commonwealth are transferred through various agreements to State and Territory governments and to non-government agencies for the delivery of social services. Accountability of funds in such a system is a real issue. In many social program areas (health, disability, supported accommodation, housing etc), formal agreements are signed between the

Commonwealth and the States governing the provision and usage of funds, with reporting requirements specified.

In addition to inter-government agreements between the Commonwealth and State/Territory governments, there are also agreements between government agencies and non-government organisation that delivers health and welfare services. Reporting requirements under these agreements include the use of statistical performance indicators of effectiveness and efficiency.

The national information agreements

The challenge has been to marshal the disparate administrative statistics into a cohesive picture of the performance of the support system in the country. To assist the development of data for reporting purposes (including the construction of performance indicators), the relevant policy agencies of the Commonwealth, the States and Territories and the two statistical agencies (the Australian Bureau of Statistics and the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare) have signed four national information agreements. These four agreements are:

- The National Health Information Agreement (1993)
- The National Community Services Information Agreement (1997)
- The National Housing Data Agreement (1999 - a subsidiary agreement of the Commonwealth State Housing Agreement)
- The Agreement on National Indigenous Housing Information (1999).

So far, data on the income support programs have not been included as priorities in the Information Agreements because these programs are totally under the Commonwealth and interstate comparison is not an issue. However, other issues of comparability are relevant and the terms of reference of the Agreements do not explicitly exclude income support issues.

The agreements provide a structure and consultative mechanism to ensure that statistics available nationally are relevant, accurate, reliable and timely. They provide a framework through which governments can work cooperatively, within a national perspective, to improve, maintain and share national health, community services and housing information. The Agreements also ensure that the collection, compilation, dissemination and interpretation of information are appropriate and efficiently carried out.

The agreements are high level agreements, signed by agency heads, under which national information management groups are formed. These management groups are headed by an agency chief executive officer or a second (deputy secretary) level officer of a policy agency and have members from all signatories. The Australian Institute of Health and Welfare provides the secretariat to these information management groups.

The management groups develop information strategy plans, set priorities and secure funds from all signatories. The health and the housing information management groups also approve national minimum data sets to be developed and compiled by all agencies. Management groups establish various working groups to progress priority projects developed under the respective information strategies of the agreements.

The involvement of policy agencies in setting statistical priorities has meant that data collected are not only useful for general monitoring, but also essential for policy development and program assessment. The data are by-products derived from databases that are kept by

policy agencies for administrative use. It means that policy agencies have ownership of the data and have immediate use of them.

National information development infrastructure and products

Structure	Product
Ministers’ Conferences	Policy
Ministers’ Advisory Councils	Information Agreements
National Information Management Groups	Information work program and funding
National Data Committees	National Data Dictionaries; Knowledgebase
Other Committees	Minimum data sets

The following committees or project groups exist under the national information management groups:

Health:

- National Health Data Committee
- National Indigenous Health Information Plan Implementation Committee
- Other ad hoc project groups

Community Services:

- National Community Services Data Committee
- National Child Protection and Support Services Working group
- Aged Care Data Development Group
- Children’s Services Data Working Group
- Other ad hoc project groups

Housing

- National Housing Data Committee
- National Social Housing (client satisfaction) Survey Steering Group
- Finance Technical Working Group

Indigenous Housing

- National Minimum Data Set Sub-Committee

The data committees are established to compile and publish national data dictionaries, and they contain authoritative data definitions and classifications as well as guide to use. The Australian Institute of Health and Welfare chairs the national data committees.

The Data Dictionaries

There is in existence a National Health Data Dictionary (9th edition) and the National Community Services Data Dictionary (2nd edition). The first edition of the National Housing Data Dictionary also is being compiled. These national data dictionaries, using ISO standards for meta data presentation, are authoritative documents for all agencies to use. Minimum data sets established under the health and the housing agreements are obliged to use the national data dictionaries.

The data dictionaries contain more than just the definition and classification of data items; they also contain related information necessary to understand its meaning and ensure consistency in its application. The information provided in the dictionary template includes:

- Definition (what it is to know)
- Context (who wants to know and why)
- Data domain (the range of possible answers)
- Guide for use (which answers to choose),
- Collection method (when and how to collect the information)
- Related data (other data items of relevance)
- Comments (other relevant information to understand the data item).

Conclusion

The implementation of the national information agreements has progressed, and has so far resulted in a better understanding of the gaps and overlaps in data in the health, community services and housing fields. There is now much better coordination in data development and collection activities, reducing overlaps in efforts and redundancies. Incremental progress is being made in statistical work and the problem of ‘re-inventing of the wheel’ is lessened.

Policy development and program evaluation and monitoring requirements are now driving data development; and there is now a better alignment between these requirements and data output and therefore collection. This alignment of data usage and data collection is necessary if the collection of data by administrative agencies is not seen as an add-on to their work but rather as part and parcel of their duties.

Under the information agreements, national minimum data sets have been developed in many areas (eg hospitals, general medical practice, drugs and alcohol services, home and community services, disability services, supported accommodation, child protection, and housing assistance), and development is occurring in other areas such as respite care, aged care assessment, children’s services and juvenile justice. These nationally consistent data sets have allowed:

- Comparison between States and Territories,
- Some comparison between household survey results (measuring social conditions) and service data (measuring service provision and use) to assess met and unmet need, and
- Time series analysis of key social indicators.
- Benchmarking
- Comprehensive data on the health and social support system in Australia for the Australian population. The Australian Bureau of Statistics publishes a Social Trends publication and the Yearbook each year. In addition, two yearly national reports on Australia’s health and Australia’s welfare are mandated by Parliament, to be prepared by the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare.

More recently linkage key methodology and privacy considerations are being examined to enable linkage of data without identifying individuals for the development of longitudinal data from administrative sources and to link data between different services.

It is hoped that the efforts described above may result in a more integrated system of social statistics in Australia.