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Digitising the Australian Historical Statistics Archive

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In 1988, as part of Australia's bicentennial project, the Bureau of Statistics library collected every statistical publication ever produced in Australia and copied them to microfiche. This was an enormous project involving millions of pages, and the microfiche provided an excellent medium for preserving the material. On the other hand, they are a very difficult resource to use, and the archive, which is held in about a dozen libraries around the country, is rarely accessed. With the cooperation of ABS, the Australian Social Science Data Archive is embarking on a program to convert these fiche to digital images and to make them available in indexed and machine readable form on the Web. We are beginning with the colonial, state and Commonwealth censuses. There are many technical and resource problems. Initial plans to use optical character recognition have been abandoned in favour of re-keying the data. Indexing and searching for variables across publications presents particular problems. Metadata standards for tabular material are yet to be agreed upon. Solving these problems will contribute to the state of the art in data dissemination as well as making Australia's entire printed official statistical archive accessible to all.