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Come to Your Census: Making Some Sense of It All

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Census tools and resources have changed dramatically since the 1970s and my first exposure to those “government documents” feared by all novice librarians. As the “new” guy on staff I always got stuck with having to answer the questions requiring use of the new SuDocs classification scheme. I began to actually like the documents. In fact I very quickly became the go-to guy when hard-to-find statistics or information was needed. Guess what? The federal government looks into almost everything we do and counts it. Indeed I discovered a treasure trove of tables and articles and information available absolutely free and from a reliable source (so the feds claim).

In the dark ages of information science (BC—before computers) you had paper products, and you had co-workers, and a small personal network of colleagues to assist you. At times you felt alone when attempting to answer those census and demographic questions asked by the inquiring public. In the early 1970s, technology consisted of an electric fan and, if you were lucky, an IBM Selectric typewriter. (They were the typewriters with the changeable metal ball containing all kinds of different fonts). This was neat stuff, as I believe we still had quill sharpeners on staff. During the rise of the Information Age and growth of personal computers in the 1980s, several of my colleagues had to take a typing class before they could even begin accessing the 12 databases available (300 baud via modem) on the Dialog System. The most useful class in all of high school for me turned out to be the non-college prep class called beginning typing.

That was then, this is now. What a wonderful world of information technology we now live in. Yes, you still need the basic detective skills taught in library school, and a broad general college coursework background (liberal arts with some science thrown in), serendipity abilities (the pages sometimes just fall open to the right spot), computer and database training, and personal

networking skills to be a successful librarian or information researcher. Our minds do not work like computers so we are able to deal with, interpret, and answer the types of questions our users ask. The real secret of success is knowing which rocks to turn over and the people to contact. This is what makes our profession so valuable and irreplaceable, when the only other option is pay-up-front and as-you-go commercial information brokers, and “smart” expensive computer databases. Our great system of libraries allows those without financial resources to have at least some equal access to the world of information.

Using census and demographic products can be intimidating and a bit scary. Here are some of the rocks to turn over and examine.

In the Beginning: Paper Census and Demographic Products

Yes, at some point you will need to deal with paper in answering census data questions, especially those of a historical nature. Remember the farther back you go in time, the less data are available. At one point a census taken every 10 years satisfied most statistical needs. In fact paper is the only place you will find state and lower geography tables for the early years. The first truly electronic data did not appear until after the 1990 census (1980 used main-frame tapes.) So, any information prior to the 1980 census that has not been scanned or converted to electronic format is still in paper. The majority of the paper census products will be found at Oregon’s Superintendent of Documents (SuDoc) Depository libraries. Start at the big institutions: Multnomah County Library, Portland State University (regional depository), Oregon State Library, Oregon State University, University of Oregon, and Western, Southern, and Eastern Oregon Universities. Many private college libraries are good sources but may be limited in historical coverage.



The Census Bureau likes to place their publications in various series. Use your “Andriot” (Batten, 2000). This will help you locate where in SuDoc classification many of these items are scattered throughout the many years of publication. The SuDoc numbers will be a good starting point to begin the digging. Current census publications now are all electronic and most are on the Web full-text in .pdf format. Don’t overlook the old Monthly Catalogs to zero in on individual reports. After 1970, use the annual publication published by CIS—the ASI (American Statistics Index), with its wonderful index by subject, category, topic, etc. If you need quick data at the state and national levels, go to the Statistical Abstract of the United States (1995–current online at <http://www.census.gov/statab/www/>). The paper product goes back to 1938 and tables are not repeated in the newer editions, so keep your old editions; also don’t forget about the special edition: *The Historical Statistics of the United States*. Both are published by the Census Bureau. Commercial paper products are useful if you can afford to purchase them and don’t mind estimates based on formulas and surveys. My favorite is the *Rand McNally Commercial Atlas*. Keep your old ones. This large, oversized product produces annual population estimates for small places that even the Census Bureau ignores. I have used products produced by CACI (<http://www.infods.com/>) and Geolytics (<http://www.geolytics.com/>). There are other good census/demographics vendors out there.

CD-ROM Stuff

Now you will need to buy a DVD/CD-ROM drive for your computer. Lots of detailed data not available on the Web will be coming out on DVD disk. We have received several already as part of the SuDoc depository system. One of my favorite programs is the Landview software (<http://landview.census.gov/>). This product is a Geographic Information System (GIS) featured software available directly from the Census Bureau.

The earlier version was freeware on CD-ROM. The DVD version is an upgrade with many enhancements. Both versions should be available at depository libraries. You and your patrons now can create some of your own GIS products at very low cost using data and map layers supplied free from the Census Bureau (<http://www.census.gov/geo/www/tiger/>) and other federal agencies. Yes, there is a learning curve!

Maps

A word about maps. Detailed historical maps at the census tract and lower geographic levels for 1970–1990 are available here at the State Library. They are oversize and not a lot of fun to use or copy. Printed census tract versions are also available via many Oregon depository libraries. Commercial vendors also will sell the historic maps to you. All of the 2000 Census maps are now available via the Web from the Census Bureau and Proximity One. They are free; you just need to download them. They come in two versions: .pdf and electronic. See the map resources I have listed at: (http://www3.osl.state.or.us/smartor/Census/Oregon/Census_Maps/). It is important to remember that ZIP code maps are not produced by the Census Bureau. They are a product of the U.S. Postal Service, which sells the mapping software to commercial vendors for sale to the general public. The vendor I have used in Oregon is WER at <http://www.wermaps.com/map.or.html>. Check the Web for additional vendors.

The Web

WOW! Most of it is out there. You just have to figure out where to look. The main U.S. Census Bureau Web site is always a good place to start: <http://www.census.gov/>. One important thing to remember is that this page is designed for the public. The Census Bureau is a massive organization with lots and lots of divisions and sub-units. Many of these units are not linked to the public page in a logical manner. The



internal site links are improving but a lot of information remains hidden on the site and you need to roam around to find all the locations. One step in the right direction for self-service to customers is the Bureau's American FactFinder site (<http://factfinder.census.gov/>). The design of the site can get in the way of finding the real treasures. Use the "street address" link to quickly search and find data at any geographic level. The "Census 2000 Supplementary Survey" link is very important as it provides socio-economic data for some counties and metropolitan areas until the detailed data is released. Explore the "data sets" option to find .ftp sources for unpublished and hard-to-locate data. If you are going to use the data sets you will need a background in using SAS software or someone to help you customize data elements. When visiting a Census Website always look at the pull-down menus and buttons scattered around the pages. I have created a Census Web page (<http://www3.osl.state.or.us/smartor/Census/>) with links to many of my favorite census Web sites. A companion is my Oregon Statistics Web page (see below).

Help Available?

Stuck? Don't know where to start or where to begin looking? Go to the Oregon State Data Center Web page hosted by Portland State University's Population Research Center. This link provides contacts and phone numbers for information and planning people scattered around the state of Oregon (<http://www.upa.pdx.edu/CPRC/csdcpgm.html>). Where do you go if no help is available here in Oregon? Try the Experts Contact list for U.S. Census Bureau employees at <http://www.census.gov/contacts/www/contacts.html>. I have had fantastic success over the years in talking directly with the people who actually assemble the census information and statistics. They even answer their own telephones. Call them only when you are truly stumped or on a tight time frame. Giving the individual telephone numbers out to the general public is

probably not a good idea. Before calling do some research on what surveys are actually available. See the list at <http://www.census.gov/main/www/surveys.html>.

Keeping Up-to-Date

What's going on out there? How do I keep up? There are several options. The Census Bureau maintains a product release schedule at <http://www.census.gov/population/www/censusdata/c2kproducts.html>. Don't be afraid! Use listservs. The State Data Center/Business Industry Data Center Program maintains a great e-mail service at <http://www.sdcbidc.iupui.edu/index.html>. This group covers every aspect of Census Bureau activity and products and usually has several messages each day.

A local listserv Cens-or (maintained by the author) is more focused on Oregon data information. The number of messages averages several each week. Typical messages will include sharing of important Oregon data resources; questions relating to Oregon census and demographic data; investigation, planning and announcements for workshops; and networking between remote users and providers of Oregon data.

To subscribe, send an e-mail to: majordomo@sparkie.osl.state.or.us. Do not add a subject. In the body of the message type "subscribe cens-or" and your e-mail address.

Demographics and More


Craig's top ten statistical Web sites for Oregon Data:

1. SmartORgov Best of the Web Statistics/Oregon. This site is maintained by an Information Specialist at the State Library. Information is arranged in sub-categories with annotations and hot links. http://www3.osl.state.or.us/smart-or/Oregon_Statistics/
2. Office of Economic Analysis. Detailed quarterly Oregon economic/demographic data and projections. This includes



- prison and youth related statistics, analysis of the Oregon Population Survey, and population estimates and projections at the county level. The quarterly economic data includes Consumer Price Index (CPI) and other relevant statistical data for Oregon. <http://www.oea.das.state.or.us/>
3. Oregon Progress Board. Source for Oregon Benchmark information and data as well as the biennial Oregon Population Survey tables; also some county level data and past Oregon Population Survey results. You need SAS experience to use the latest data. <http://www.econ.state.or.us/opb/index.htm>
 4. Oregon Employment Department, OLMIS: Oregon Labor Market Information System. Source for employment and other Oregon-specific economic data. Difficult to navigate but worth it once you find the data. Netscape may crash due to java scripts. This site has dozens of publications and statistics tables worth investigating. <http://www.olmis.org/olmisj/OlmisZine>
 5. Local area data for Oregon, University of Oregon. The University of Oregon documents staff in the Knight Library have organized this page. Annotated links are arranged by major topics with hot links out to the original source. <http://libweb.uoregon.edu/govdocs/localdat.html>
 6. Oregon Health Division. Source for health-related statistics, including such socio-related lists as Abortion Aata, Adolescent Suicide Attempt Surveillance Data, Adult Behavior rRsk Factor Surveillance System (BRFSS) AIDS Surveillance Weekly Report, Birth Data, Death Data, Oregon Health Status Indicators, Youth Behavior Risk Survey (YRBS), Vital Statistics Annual Reports, Vital Statistics County Data and much more. Don't overlook the most popular data list at the site: Oregon Baby Names—lists of the most popular names back to 1961. <http://www.ohd.hr.state.or.us/>
 7. Center for Population Research, Portland State University. The Population Research Center (PRC) is the “official” source for all State of Oregon population information. PRC is responsible for producing the July 1 annual population estimates for the state, its counties and cities. PRC also serves as the Lead Agency for the State Data Center program providing U.S. Census Bureau data to the citizens of Oregon. <http://www.upa.pdx.edu/CPRC/>
 8. Oregon Department of Human Services, Oregon Data Directory. This site was developed by a group of state and local “data enthusiasts.” The listings can lead you to sources for unpublished and unreleased data. Contact name and phone numbers are provided. http://dhsdirector.hr.state.or.us/data/data_resources.htm
 9. Shortcut to Oregon Statistics, Oregon State University. Oregon State University list of links relating to Oregon statistical resources on the Web. A good place to start when looking for Oregon data. <http://govinfo.kerr.orst.edu/oregon.html>
 10. Oregon Statistical Information, Oregon Economic and Community Development Department. OECD quick reference tables for Oregon including: Consumer Price Index, County Economic Indicators, Distressed Areas in Oregon, Oregon Economic Indicators, Oregon Facts and Symbols, Oregon Maps (these are maps you can use in your software for graphs and charts, etc.). <http://www.econ.state.or.us/stats.htm>



Also see the Department's Oregon Community Profiles (nice descriptions of local cities with a host of information on economy, climate, festivals, sites, recreation, etc.). <http://159.121.111.9/profile.htm> 

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Open URLs

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a citation from a science database, what additional resources make sense? Science-specific biographical sources, citation indexes, search engines, other reference resources? What different types of resources are important for a humanities citation?

Reference linking using OpenURLs has gone from the theoretical to the possible. But will it really be useful to library patrons? I think librarians can rightly assume that given a citation, users will want to get to the full text of the article. OpenURLs definitely will help with this issue. But will users also appreciate an abundance of other related links attached to a citation? This remains to be seen. 

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