

Census Bureau Research Data Center Research Proposal Guidelines

People wishing to conduct research at a Census Bureau Research Data Center (RDC) must submit a research proposal using the Census Bureau's Center for Economic Studies (CES) website (www.ces.census.gov). The following guidelines describe the research proposal submission and review process. This is the only procedure that can be employed to submit a research proposal.

The Proposal Process

Preliminary Proposal Development

Researchers who wish to develop a proposal to conduct research at a Census Bureau RDC should first contact the RDC administrator at the primary center where the research will be carried out. The researcher should discuss the proposed project with the administrator to determine whether the research fits with the Census Bureau's mandate, is feasible, and is likely to provide benefits to Census Bureau programs under Title 13 of the U.S. Code (this is required by law).

The first step in the proposal process is for the researcher to register as a user with CES by opening an account through the CES website. Once an account has been created, the user receives a system-generated email message containing an initial password. The user can change this password at the first login session. All researchers must have a user account in order to submit preliminary and final proposals to CES.

Working closely with the RDC administrator, researchers develop a preliminary research proposal that includes a list of expected researchers on the project, the primary site where the research will be carried out, the purpose of the research, its funding source, requested datasets, desired software, a brief narrative description of the research project and proposed benefits to the Census Bureau.

Once a preliminary proposal has been submitted, the RDC administrator reviews it and advises the researcher of any suggestions for improvement or refinement. The administrator must approve the preliminary proposal before the researcher can submit a final proposal to CES.

Both CES and the RDCs entertain proposals from doctoral students who seek access to confidential data for dissertation research. Proposals that list dissertation research as the motivation must include the student's primary advisor as a co-principal investigator. CES recommends that the advisor also apply for Special Sworn Status (see below) if he or she expects to view any intermediate output.

Final Proposal Submission

Researchers should consult with the RDC administrator about the content and form of a final research proposal before submitting the proposal through the CES on-line management system. The final proposal consists of three separate documents in Adobe Acrobat Portable Document

Format (PDF): (1) Abstract of the proposal; (2) Project description (full proposal); and (3) Statement of benefits to the Census Bureau in the form of a Predominant Purpose Statement (PPS). Failure on the part of researchers to consult fully with the RDC administrator before submission of proposal files can result in a decision by CES to decline to review the proposal.

The three document files should conform to the following requirements:

- Proposal Abstract. This document should be no longer than one single-spaced page or two double-spaced pages and it should capture the essence of the project proposal. The proposal should be aimed at a competent social scientist who is not necessarily a specialist in the field or on the topic within the field. The data sets, and years of data, that will be used must be stated. Within the abstract, one or two sentences should succinctly state what the project would do and the data it will use. The abstract must also address the proposed benefits to the Census Bureau. The abstract must include, at the top of the first page, a project title and the names of all researchers.
- Project Description (full proposal). This document should describe in as much detail as possible:
 - The nature of the research question(s),
 - Description of the methodology (including models to be estimated, how model variables will be measured and hypotheses to be tested),
 - Census Bureau and non-Census Bureau data sets to be used,
 - Expected outcomes,
 - A detailed description of the nature and amount of output to be submitted for disclosure avoidance review and ultimate release and,
 - Should contain a list of references cited.
 - The proposal should:
 - Be limited to no more than fifteen (15) single-spaced pages or thirty (30) double-spaced pages (inclusive of references).
 - Contain a title and the names of all researchers at the top of the first page.
 - Include appropriate headings and subheadings throughout the document to assist reviewers in following the proposal narrative.
 - Use a font size of at least 11 point and should have at least one-half inch margins all around. Twelve point font and one-inch margins are preferred.
 - Number all pages.
 - Contain a separate section identifying all data sets, Census Bureau and other, the project will use. Public-use Census Bureau data that will be used in the project must be included in this section. Years of data needed must also be stated. If the project would make links among data sets, the links must be indicated, and the method for making the links must be specified.
 - Contain a separate section stating the proposed duration of the project in absolute amounts of time (e.g. 14 months) and a desired starting date. This section should also state the intensity of RDC lab use (e.g. 15 hours per week).
 - Not include a separate title page, which will be counted against the page limit.

- Not include any appendices unless approved in advance by the RDC administrator. Unapproved additional pages will count against the page limit, and may be sufficient cause for CES to decline to review the proposal.
- Benefits Statement. This document should be in the form of a Predominant Purpose Statement. It has no length limitation, although brevity and concise presentation are encouraged. The statement should address clearly how the project would provide one or more of the Title 13 benefits listed below.

Researchers must submit all proposal related documents through the CES website. Experience shows that PDF files can take several minutes to upload successfully to the proposal management system. The person uploading the files should wait until he or she receives a message that the upload process has completed successfully before exiting the management system and closing her or his web browser.

Proposal Review Process

Research proposals submitted to CES are reviewed and judged against five major standards:

- **Benefit to Census Bureau programs.** Proposals must demonstrate that the research is likely to provide benefits to data programs the Census Bureau conducts under Title 13 U.S. Code. The Census Bureau developed the 13 criteria below for assessing this potential. Researchers must consult with an RDC administrator to determine whether the data they propose to use contains Federal Tax Information (FTI). All business data and some kinds of household data contain FTI. Projects using FTI must demonstrate that the project's *predominant purpose* is to benefit Census Bureau programs by meeting at least one of criteria 5 through 13 below, which are the same criteria as listed in the Criteria Document of September 15, 2000. Projects using data that have no FTI must show that the project will provide benefits under one or more of criteria 1 through 13.
 1. Evaluating concepts and practices underlying Census Bureau statistical data collection and dissemination practices, including consideration of continued relevance and appropriateness of past Census Bureau procedures to changing economic and social circumstances;
 2. Analyzing demographic and social or economic processes that affect Census Bureau programs, especially those that evaluate or hold promise of improving the quality of products issued by the Census Bureau;
 3. Developing means of increasing the utility of Census Bureau data for analyzing public programs, public policy, and/or demographic, economic, or social conditions; and
 4. Conducting or facilitating census and survey data collection, processing or dissemination, including through activities such as administrative support, information technology support, program oversight, or auditing under appropriate legal authority.

5. Understanding and/or improving the quality of data produced through a Title 13, Chapter 5 survey, census, or estimate;
 6. Leading to new or improved methodology to collect, measure, or tabulate a Title 13, Chapter 5 survey, census, or estimate;
 7. Enhancing the data collected in a Title 13, Chapter 5 survey or census. For example: improving imputations for non-response; developing links across time or entities for data gathered in censuses and surveys authorized by Title 13, Chapter 5;
 8. Identifying the limitations of, or improving, the underlying Business Register, Master Address File, and industrial and geographical classification schemes used to collect the data;
 9. Identifying shortcomings of current data, collection programs and/or documenting new data collection needs;
 10. Constructing, verifying, or improving the sampling frame for a census or survey authorized under Title 13, Chapter 5;
 11. Preparing estimates of population and characteristics of population as authorized under Title 13, Chapter 5;
 12. Developing a methodology for estimating non-response to a census or survey authorized under Title 13, Chapter 5;
 13. Developing statistical weights for a survey authorized under Title 13, Chapter 5.
- **Scientific merit.** This standard relates to the project's methodological soundness and likelihood of contributing to existing knowledge. In order to benefit the Census Bureau, researchers must demonstrate that their project will use appropriate existing or innovative methods competently to address important questions using Census Bureau data. Evidence of a funding award from an organization using a competitive peer review process (e.g., the National Science Foundation or the National Institutes of Health) is sufficient to demonstrate a proposal's scientific merit. The Center for Economic studies typically solicits reviews of scientific merit from experts both inside and outside the Census Bureau.
 - **Clear need for non-public data.** The proposal should demonstrate the need for and importance of non-public data. The proposal should explain why publicly available data sources are not sufficient to meet the proposal's objectives.
 - **Feasibility.** The proposal must show that the research can be conducted successfully with the methodology and requested data.
 - **Risk of disclosure.** Output from all research projects must undergo and pass disclosure review.
 - Tabular and graphical output presents a higher risk to disclosure of confidential information than do coefficients from statistical models.
 - The Census Bureau is required by law to protect the confidentiality of data collected under its authorizing legislation, Title 13, U.S. Code.
 - Some data files are collected under the sponsorship of other agencies. In providing restricted access to these data CES must adhere to all applicable laws and regulations.

- Researchers may be required to sign non-disclosure documents of survey sponsors or other agencies that provide data for their research projects.

Both Census Bureau and external experts on subject matter, datasets, and disclosure risk review all proposals. Relevant data sponsors and data custodians also review proposals that request certain datasets. In addition, all proposals undergo a review by the Census Bureau's Policy Office for compliance with the Census Bureau's policies. Proposals that are deemed to pose a potential risk to the confidentiality of respondent-supplied information, or that do not clearly fall within existing Census Bureau policy guidelines, may be referred to the Data Stewardship Executive Policy Committee for additional review.

The Center for Economic Studies accepts proposals for review at any time during the year. Reviewed proposals receive one of two ratings:

- **Approved.** The proposal successfully addresses all of the review criteria mentioned above.
- **Not Approved.** The proposal fails to meet one or more review criteria, and may be resubmitted as a new preliminary proposal only after suitable revision and approval by the RDC administrator.

The Project Review Coordinator communicates the outcome of the review process to the contact researcher, which includes a review synopsis, an explanation for the decision, and copies of the expert reviews.

After receiving Census Bureau approval, any proposals seeking to use datasets that contain Federal Tax Information (FTI) must also be reviewed for approval by the Internal Revenue Service to ensure that the predominant purpose of the research is to contribute to Census Bureau programs under Title 13, Chapter 5 of the U.S. Code (See the IRS Criteria Document and above for a list and description of approved Title 13 benefits). Researchers must consult the relevant RDC administrator to determine whether their proposal would use data that contain FTI. The review process is both lengthy and rigorous requiring that researchers exhibit patience throughout. Failure on the part of researchers to consult fully with the RDC administrator on this point before submission of proposal files may result in a decision by CES to decline to review the proposal. Projects that seek Federal Tax Information (FTI) normally require an additional two to three months to gain final approval. No proposal will gain approval from both Census and the IRS if its predominant purpose is not to deliver Title 13 benefits.

Post Approval Process

Approval of research proposals by CES, and the IRS if FTI is requested, is merely the first step in a multi-step process before research can actually commence. In many instances, CES must obtain permissions to access certain data from the survey sponsors, data custodians, or the Census Bureau program areas that control such access. This process can range from a few weeks to many months depending upon the nature and status of data sharing agreements between the Census Bureau and sponsoring agencies, whether Federal or State.

Once a project has been approved, all researchers who expect to access confidential data must undergo a background investigation, including fingerprinting. After completion of the background check, the Census Bureau grants Special Sworn Status (SSS) to each researcher, which subjects him or her to incarceration of up to five years and/or fines of up to \$250,000 if he or she knowingly or inadvertently disclose confidential information on individuals, households, or businesses. All SSS individuals must take annual training in the use and protection of Title 13 data, and of Title 26 data if FTI are to be used in the project. RDC administrators deliver this training.

All researchers on the project must register with CES by opening a user account through the Center's website.

All approved research projects are governed by a written agreement between the researcher(s) and the Census Bureau. The agreement stipulates the start and end dates for the project, responsibilities of both parties with respect to procedures and practices, and if the research project is conducted at the CES RDC, fee payment. All researchers on the project must sign this agreement with the Census Bureau, or if added to the project after the agreement is signed, an addendum to the agreement. If the research project is conducted at an RDC partner institution, an agreement with the RDC partner institution may be required as well

CES encourages researchers to assess carefully the time period over which they request access and to make efficient use of their lab time, but also to anticipate that disclosure review may require modification to computer output before it can be released. Requests for time extensions beyond the agreement end date undergo careful evaluation and rarely gain approval. Access to confidential data and facilities associated with a given research project will end at midnight on the official end date of the research project. These dates must be consistent with the dates specified in the approved proposal.

Timing

Researchers should expect a minimum of three months to elapse between the final proposal submission and the actual commencement of research. This duration can vary greatly by individual proposal depending upon data permissions required, IRS review, background checks, software and datasets requested, and the number of proposals under consideration. Researchers can help speed up the process by the following:

- Adhere closely to all practices and procedures for proposal submission as given on the CES website.
- Work closely with their RDC administrator on proposal development and on any requested revisions or clarifications to proposals or predominant purpose statements.
- Provide CES with the terms of use for any datasets they wish to bring to the lab.
- Process their Special Sworn Status (SSS) paperwork quickly.

Post Project Certification

Within six months of the end date of a research project the researcher(s) will submit to CES a Post Project Certification document (PPC) that describes whether and how the Chapter 5, Title 13 benefits outlined in the project's approved Predominant Purpose Statement (PPS) were achieved.

Cost

There are substantial financial costs involved in supporting research at RDCs. To recover those costs, CES or the RDC partner institution may impose user fees. The RDC Administrator should be contacted for further information on the fee. There are also special arrangements available for organizations that wish to sponsor a number of research projects over an extended period of time. In certain circumstances, the standard fees may be adjusted. For example, there may be additional costs for special data processing needed to make new datasets available, or for linking datasets.