

Pathways to New Demographic Infrastructure

The Minnesota Population Center and the IPUMS as a Case Study

Diana L. Magnuson, Bethel University



Minnesota Population Center

UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA

Research

- The Minnesota Population Center (MPC) was used as a test case to examine how an institution may contribute to and be shaped by the trajectory of social science research.

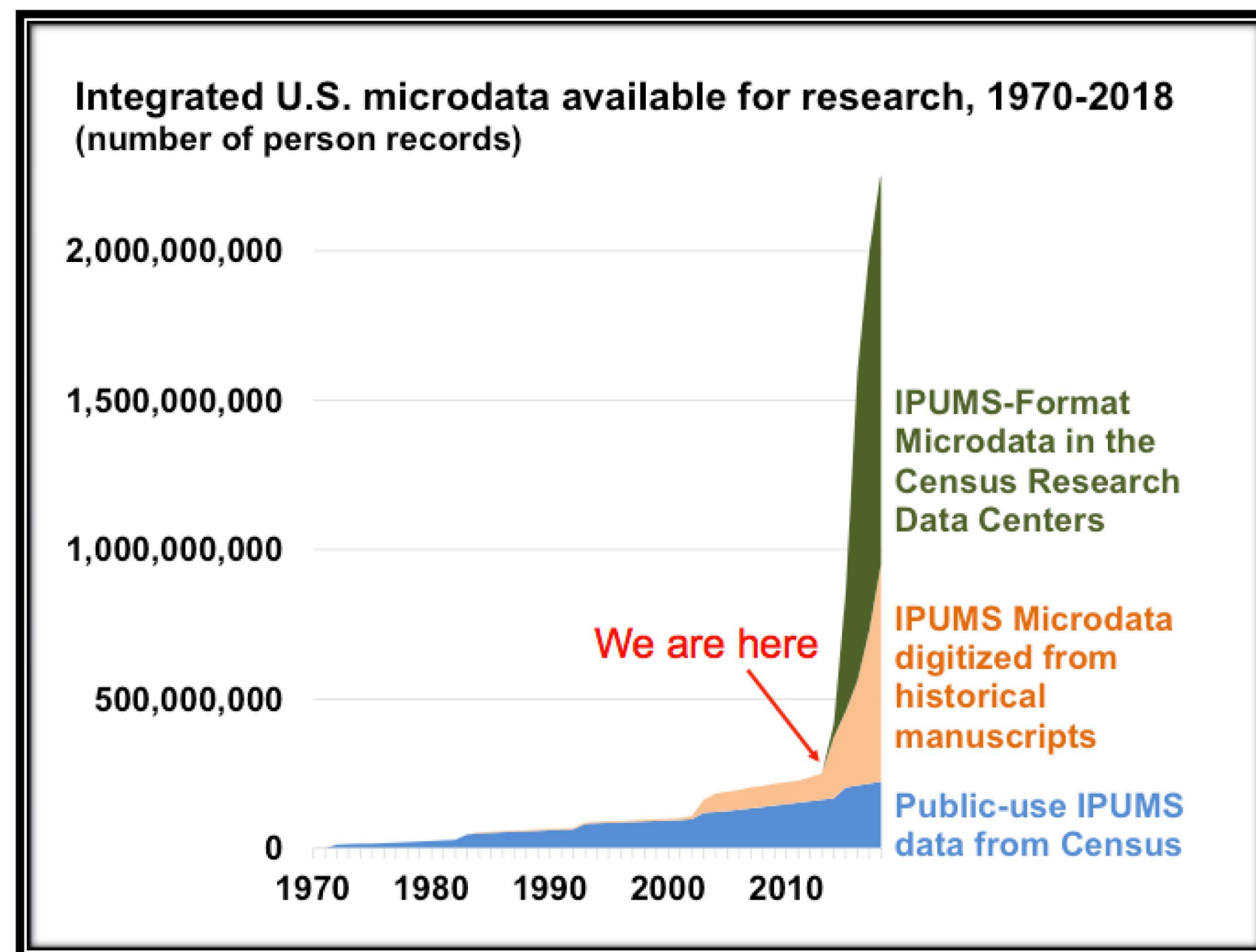


Figure 1. Used with Permission.

Evidence

- 26 oral history interviews with past and current individuals (i.e., data entry operators, IT staff, research associates, founding members, and administrative staff).
- MPC digital administrative and data integration project records.
- MPC manuscript materials.
- University of Minnesota Digital Conservancy, <https://conservancy.umn.edu/>.

Historical Context

- The growth and development of the MPC at the University of Minnesota is part of a larger story of the development of social science infrastructure in the United States. This larger history reflects a variety of social, political, and academic forces across three centuries.
- The modern (20th century) American university emphasized original research and the production of “new” knowledge applicable to current problems. Social science research requires data. A major undertaking of the academy was thus the collection, curation, manipulation and dissemination of data.
- The postwar computer revolution affected not only the type of research conducted, but also the relationship between social science disciplines and the federal government.
- Cross-disciplinary and international collaboration are increasingly important to social science infrastructure in the 21st century. The MPC is part of this broad movement to globalize the resources of the social sciences.

Creating Pathways to New Demographic Infrastructure



- Public use samples were released by the Census Bureau after the 1960 and 1970 censuses and quickly became essential tools of American social scientists. In the 1980s, the 1900, 1910, 1940 and 1950 public use samples were created by three different producers.
- The 1880 census project at the University of Minnesota represented the first step in MPC’s commitment to developing additional census public use samples. Between 1992 and 2002, federal funding supported the creation of the 1850, 1860, 1870, 1920 and 1930 public use samples.
- The most significant development establishing the University of Minnesota’s leadership was the creation of the Integrated Public Use Microdata Series (IPUMS). Funded by the University and the federal government, IPUMS facilitated analysis of long-term change. Key features were: consistent variable names, codes, and labels without loss of information; variable-specific online documentation; and dissemination of customized data files over the Internet.
- The IPUMS model proved transferable to other data. Since 1993, the IPUMS project has expanded to include U.S. surveys (e.g., Current Population Survey, American Community Survey, and National Health Interview Survey) and international census and survey data (IPUMS-International and IPUMS-DHS, respectively). Aggregate data were also harmonized and disseminated through the National Historical Geographic Information System and Terra Populus.
- Further IPUMS data for U.S. censuses are forthcoming (see Figure 1).

Preserving Institutional History



"Our founders built this company on a certain set of principles. But since they're all dead and nobody wrote anything down, looks like we're screwed."

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Conclusions

- The histories of the institutions that produce data for social science research deserve our attention.
- At the institutional level, active curation of digital and manuscript administrative assets is a vital component of our social science infrastructure.
- Collecting human institutional memory can take many forms, including: 1) oral history; 2) systematically collecting and archiving digital and manuscript administrative records; and 3) implementing snapshots of data development and construction.
- Institutions are forward-looking and focus on meeting their next deadlines. Preserving institutional history requires dedicated effort.