



**Economic and Social
Council**

Distr.
GENERAL

CES/AC.71/1999/16 (SUM)
19 November 1998

Original: ENGLISH

STATISTICAL COMMISSION and ECONOMIC COMMISSION FOR EUROPE

CONFERENCE OF EUROPEAN STATISTICIANS

Meeting on the Management of Statistical Information Technology
(Geneva, Switzerland, 15-17 February 1999)

Topic (i): The impact of Internet on the statistical production and dissemination process

THE INTERNET AS A TOOL FOR CARRYING OUT THE CENSUS BUREAU'S MISSION

Submitted by United States Bureau of the Census¹

SUMMARY

1. The US Census Bureau's mission is to "be the preeminent collector and provider of timely, relevant, and quality data about the people and economy of the United States". Internet plays an important role in the US Census Bureau's development strategies for carrying out its mission. The Internet has already become a central part of the Bureau's information dissemination practice. Using the Internet for data collection began a few years later but the Census Bureau is actively looking for the ways how to make the best use of Internet in this realm.

2. The **Census Bureau's Internet site** provides highlights of the latest censuses and surveys, detailed tables, and links to other data sources. The provided information is available free of charge to any interested data user. The Internet dissemination is complemented by other methods of electronic dissemination: CenStats, a subscription service providing Internet access to

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CD-ROM products and other specialized databases, and the Federal Electronic Research and Review Extraction Tool (FERRET) to assist data users in accessing the results of the Population Survey and the Survey of Income and Program Participation.

3. The next generation system of Internet services, the Data Access and Dissemination System (DADS), will provide more cost effective and wider dissemination, greater and more timely data access, and a simpler user interface that will include "point and click" commands and thematic maps. Its first public release, called the **American FactFinder**, will be in the first quarter of 1999. American FactFinder will be cross-cutting and comprehensive in scope, and will allow users to formulate queries against many different databases.

4. In **data collection**, the Internet provides an opportunity to enhance public cooperation by providing an additional response mode. The Electronic Data Collection for **Surveys of Businesses** enables to reduce the response burden, while also improving data quality, and Census Bureau processing efficiency. A wide variety of electronic reporting modes are used. These include Computer Assisted Telephone Interviewing, Fax, Electronic Data Interchange, and a new promising technology - Computerized Self-Administered Questionnaires (CSAQ). Census Bureau is also examining the possibilities to move to an Internet application of CSAQ. The conducted pilot project has given valuable ideas for further development concerning the use of commercial software for this purpose, importance of usability testing, and the required amount of the assistance and follow-up.

5. These findings have caused the Census Bureau to investigate several uses of the Internet as a response option for companies and other organizations. For these surveys and future economic and demographic surveys, a substantial security system to protect the confidentiality of the data collected via the Internet has been developed.

6. The Census Bureau is developing a means for the **Electronic Data Collection for Census 2000**. Currently, our plans include allowing any household receiving a short form (about five of every six housing units) to respond by accessing a specially designed site. On the other hand, some steps are needed to limit the ease of response, due to concerns about keeping information secure, and matching and "unduplicating" multiple responses from the same housing unit.