

Tips for Writing a Successful MRDC Proposal

Your proposal to access U.S. Census Bureau data in the Michigan Research Data Center will consist of three separate documents: an abstract, a project description, and a statement of the benefits to the U.S. Census Bureau, referred to as the Primary Purpose Statement (PPS).

In addition, you should look over the following documents:

1. Census RDC Research Proposal Guidelines
2. Detailed instructions for writing Census benefits
3. Sample proposal from a successful project

Document I: Abstract

The abstract must address both the scientific merit of your project, the requested data, and the benefits to the Census Bureau. The proposed benefits to the Census Bureau are not a *pro forma* requirement. It is the legal basis on which researchers are given access to the data. The abstract must include, at the top of the first page, a project title and the names of all primary researchers. The abstract should be no more than one single spaced page. The abstract should be followed by key words and [JEL classification codes](#).

Document II: Project Description (full proposal)

The project description should be fairly detailed, though no more than 15 single-spaced pages or 30 double-spaced pages, including references, at a minimum font size of at least 11 point with one-half inch margins all around. Twelve point font and one-inch margins are preferred. All pages must be numbered. The proposal must include each of the sections listed below, however, researchers are free to add additional sections as they see appropriate. The proposal title and the names of all primary researchers should appear at the top of the first page.

Keep in mind throughout your proposal that the goal is to convince the reader that your project has scientific value and that accessing non-public data, i.e. confidential data, is essential to your project. In addition, you must describe the benefits to the Census Bureau that will result from your project.

Finally, you should note that the Census Bureau is legally authorized to collect data for statistical purposes only. Thus it is against Census Bureau policy to provide access to confidential Census data for the purpose of policy or program evaluation. Make sure that you describe your research project in terms that do not involve policy applications. Do not use the terms “policy implications” or “program evaluation” in your proposal.

I. Introduction

In this section you should motivate interest in your project, make a clear statement about specifically what you will do, make a convincing argument for why you need to

access non-public data, and outline the benefits to the Census Bureau of your research. The first paragraph of this section should provide an overall description of your research project and the need for confidential data. The second paragraph must outline the benefits to the Census Bureau.

Include the following text at the beginning of this paragraph: “The predominant purpose of this study is to increase the utility of Title 13, Chapter 5 data of the Census Bureau by meeting the criteria listed below and as described.”

II. Methodology

This section describes in detail your empirical methodology and theoretical background, including the econometric specification and any regression equations you will estimate. A literature review is not necessary, but you should place your research in context. This section must describe the purpose for each requested dataset and its role in the analysis.

III. Data Sources

This section contains a detailed description of your data sources, including public-use data sources, proprietary data, and non-public data that you wish to access from the Census Bureau. You must make clear why you need non-public data to complete your project. Describe how separate data sources will be linked, if applicable. For example, are you thinking of linking variables by 4-digit SIC or NAICS codes or by county? At the plant or firm level?

At this point in the proposal process, you may be uncertain about what non-public use data you may need to access. This should be discussed with the RDC administrator. You should note that once a proposal has been submitted and approved, it is virtually impossible to gain access to non-public use data that has not been requested previously, so you should make sure to include all necessary data in the proposal that you submit to Census.

If you are describing geographic or other linkages that you plan to make regarding household or individual microdata, your proposal should specifically state that you do NOT intend to link individual people or households across datasets. If your research does require the linkage of individuals or households, you must speak to the MRDC administrator about this. MRDC researchers are not permitted to link individuals across datasets; any such linkage must be performed by a different part of the Census Bureau and will require additional review and potentially additional cost.

This section also contains a summary table outlining the exact data you are requesting. The table lists the dataset, years requested, to which dataset you plan to link the data, and how the data will be linked. If you are planning to bring in data, a second summary table will describe the datasets you plan to bring in, the years available, and how and to which Census dataset the data will be linked.

IV. *Project Output and Disclosure Risk*

Once you have conducted your research, you will wish to remove certain output from the MRDC for publication, seminars, and other needs. Any output from the RDC must be reviewed for potential disclosure risk through the Census Bureau's disclosure review process. In this section of your proposal you should describe the output you expect to ask to remove from the MRDC. Typically, researchers remove some descriptive statistics to characterize their sample as well as regression coefficients and standard errors. You should list the various descriptive statistics, regression coefficients/standard errors, and other items you envision submitting for *disclosure analysis*, referring back to your methodology section.

(Disclosure analysis is the act of ensuring that research output does not disclose confidential information about individual business establishments, business firms, households, or individuals.)

Be clear in describing the samples you will be using for your analysis. Are you using only certain industries or demographic groups? Your work will be cleared for release only if it passes certain sample-size restrictions. That is, your samples must be fairly large and cutting your samples narrowly may lead to disclosure problems.

We discourage the release of intermediate output (i.e., output that will not appear in the presentation of a paper). Researchers/graduate students should thus ensure that their co-authors/advisors are willing to obtain Special Sworn Status and view intermediate work inside a Census RDC. If this is the case, you should indicate this in this section. Census will also prohibit disclosure of large amounts of tabular output. Researchers who desire disclosure of tabular output should request a special tab from the Census Bureau *rather than* requesting access to micro data in the MRDC.

Include the following language in this section: "In addition, all output must pass disclosure review by the RDC Administrator. In order to facilitate this process, our results may be further aggregated or not reported in cases where disclosure concerns may arise."

V. *Project Duration*

This section should state the proposed duration of the project in absolute amounts of time (e.g. 36 months) and a desired starting date. This section should also state the intensity of RDC lab use (e.g. 15 hours per week). It should be noted that projects with duration less than 24 months are almost never approved. Researchers often discover that it takes longer than anticipated to both open and close a project. For most projects, duration of at least 36 months is recommended. Sixty months is the maximum length of a project. All projects are required to submit a yearly progress report/interim benefits statement.

VI. Conclusion

The last paragraph of the proposal must be: "Upon completion of the project, as a part of our findings, we will include a memo or report to CES describing how the research project met the Title 13, Chapter 5 requirement or contributed to the improvement of the Census Bureau programs in ways not anticipated at the outset of the research project. We will provide all the programs, outputs, and findings to the Census Bureau and submit a technical paper to the CES working paper series."

Document III: Predominant Purpose Statement (PPS)

Your project must provide benefits to the Census Bureau as outlined in the document, "Writing Benefits Statements for Projects Accessing Confidential Data," available in the MCRDC Proposal Tips Packet. Note that criteria 1 – 4 can only be used for non-Title 26 data. PPSs provide documentation of how specific projects involving access to confidential data are expected to benefit the Census Bureau. Detailed instructions for writing and formatting the PPS can be found in the same file, "Writing Benefit Statements for Projects Accessing Confidential Data." The PPS must be written in the third person.

While the PPS is a separate document, the benefits themselves should be evident in and consistent with the description of the research in the proposal. You must also briefly describe your benefits in the introduction and conclusion to convey the importance of the benefits to potential reviewers.

Additional Documents**Institutional Review Board approval**

The University of Michigan has a formal mechanism to assure the rights of human subjects in research. This mechanism is known as an Institutional Review Board, whose approval is required for any project involving human subjects. The Michigan Research Data Center requires projects that use data on households or individuals to gain IRB approval for their projects. The University of Michigan IRB website is www.irb.research.umich.edu. IRB approval documentation should be submitted directly to the MRDC, not to the U.S. Census Bureau. An example of a completed MRDC IRB application is provided in the file "IRB Sample Application for Research in the Michigan Census."