Creating the American Opportunity Study (AOS): A New Tool to Study Trends in Social Mobility

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Short Abstract (<=150 words)
The National Academy of Sciences, the Census Bureau, and Stanford University are creating an innovative tool to use existing data sources to facilitate research into educational, occupational, and economic mobility across and within generations. This paper describes the first phase of a multi-phase activity termed the American Opportunity Study (AOS), which will digitize names from the 1990 Decennial Census in order to facilitate linking these data to other decennial censuses, Census Bureau Survey data, and administrative records. The paper will present the findings of the initial work underway now. We will discuss the hurdles overcome, along with the success rate of this process. With this sample, we will also demonstrate the unprecedented research potential of the AOS.

Extended Abstract (2-4 pages)
There is a pressing national need to understand the effects on mobility of the massive changes the United States has experienced in recent decades in family structures, gender roles, racial-ethnic and national origins, immigration, educational attainments, occupational and industrial structure, economic inequality, and labor markets. All of these factors are relevant to changes in social, educational, and economic opportunity and mobility. Although a founding principle of the United States is a commitment to equal opportunity among its people, surprisingly the nation has not collected the mobility data needed to reliably monitor whether that commitment is being upheld. The last large-scale survey of social mobility in the United States was fielded in 1973. Since then, the country’s capacity to monitor trends in mobility has languished, making it difficult to evaluate growing concerns that mobility may be declining or to develop evidence-based policy on mobility.
The National Academy of Sciences, the U.S. Census Bureau, and Stanford University are creating an innovative tool to use existing data sources to facilitate research into educational, occupational, and economic mobility across and within generations. Ultimately, the tool will permit on-demand links and extracts of existing decennial censuses, administrative data (e.g., Social Security earnings reports), and other survey data (e.g., the American Community Survey) to generate reliable longitudinal measurements for the entire population and important subpopulations. Data from the 2000 and 2010 Decennial Census, along with the administrative data and survey data, can already be linked. But to study intergenerational mobility, older data are needed. As such, the first phase of this project is to digitize names from the 1990 Decennial Census in order to facilitate linking these data to these other data sources. Having the 1990 Decennial will allow to studying intergenerational mobility with those born in the 1970s and 1980s.

This paper describes the first phase of a multi-phase activity termed the American Opportunity Study (AOS). This phase will be a “proof of concept” and produce six preliminary products: (1) a statistical methodology to digitize household members’ names and addresses from 1990 census microfilm records accurately and at low cost and append them to the 1990 electronic records; (2) a statistical methodology to assign identifiers to the electronic 1990 records and link them to later census and ACS electronic records; (3) a statistical methodology to establish intergenerational “relationship pointers;” (4) negotiated arrangements to append further information to these linked records from tax data, earnings reports, other administrative sources, and surveys; (5) a statistical methodology to estimate errors associated with linking data from multiple sources; and (6) a tool, with appropriate documentation, to enable on-demand links of 1990 census data with more recent censuses and selected administrative and/or survey data.

Steps one through three will be completed on a sample of 1990 Decennial households this winter, and the paper will present the findings of this initial work. We will discuss the hurdles overcome in this process, along with the success rate of each step. With this sample, we will also demonstrate the potential of the AOS for research.

Future phases will build on this initial work to enhance the tool and the methods for error estimation, to capture the information from the entire 1990 census and earlier censuses that is necessary for linking, and to develop methods for imputing or filling in gaps in the information. The data provided by the AOS will enable researchers to illuminate contemporary levels, differentials, and trends in mobility, and also provide valid comparisons with past decades.

The broader dividends from the AOS will come in the form of substantial new research capacities, substantial efficiencies, and new opportunities to develop
policy on social mobility on the basis of facts rather than speculation. These include:

- Provides higher quality data for research on social and economic mobility.
- Provides a valuable source of longitudinal data for program evaluation.
- Exploits data that have already been collected for other purposes and adds value to those data by assembling the latent panel underlying them.
- Advances the Census Bureau’s technology for assigning identifiers, linking records, and matching parents and children.

Advances the methodology for combining administrative data along with data from federal censuses and surveys to provide a rich data platform for research.

Lastly, the benefits from the AOS will extend well beyond social mobility. It represents a new panel data source that can be used for many different types of research. AOS will be transformational for demographers and other applied social scientists by providing a large panel data set.

After it is developed and ready for researchers, AOS will be accessible through the Federal Statistical Research Data Centers (FSRDC), operated by the U.S. Census Bureau.