

HOW DOES DATA ACCESS SHAPE SCIENCE?
EVIDENCE FROM THE IMPACT OF U.S. CENSUS'S
RESEARCH DATA CENTERS ON ECONOMICS RESEARCH

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Abstract

The increasingly empirical nature of economics research has spurred concerns that researchers might be pursuing narrower and less impactful projects purely motivated by convenient access to pre-existing data. To shed light on this topic, we study the impact of confidential administrative data from the U.S. Census Bureau on the rate and direction of research in economics. Exploiting the progressive geographic expansion of U.S. Census's Research Data Centers (RDCs), we estimate the impact of local data access on individual researchers' scientific output. We find that increased access to administrative microdata helps rather than hurts the production of knowledge, leading empirical researchers to publish a greater number of higher-impact papers that span new topics and domains. Our results point to the promise of administrative data to enable important scientific advances with potentially large policy impact.