



INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION IN THE PROVISION OF ACCESS TO ANONYMIZED AND HARMONIZED CENSUS MICRODATA AND METADATA FOR RESEARCH PURPOSES (THE UNECE EXPERIENCE)

Nikolai Botev*

INTRODUCTION Population and housing censuses have long been one of the pillars of official statistical practice and have provided invaluable information for policy-making, planning and research purposes. Most of that information has traditionally been presented in aggregate form as part of the tabulation programmes of National Statistical Offices. With the rapid progress in computer technologies and the introduction of sophisticated multivariate statistical techniques, there is a growing pressure from the scholarly community to obtain access to individual level data, as they open important new research opportunities.

Although census data do not provide the substantive depth and detail that specialized sample surveys do, by virtue of emanating from long-standing exhaustive enumerations they offer coverage, geographic details, and chronological depth that make them particularly valuable for social science research. For example, according to statistics collected by the IPUMS project, census microdata have been the data source for nineteen of the fifty-one U.S. and Canadian articles that appeared in the 2000 and 2001 volumes of the journal *Demography*, i.e. even though the United States has abundant high-quality survey data and the most recent census samples were over a decade old at that time, U.S. census microdata were used three times as often as the next most popular data source (McCaa, Ruggles and Sobek 2002).

As pointed out during the seminar session on statistical confidentiality and access to microdata of the 2003 Conference of European Statisticians, "enabling research on microdata is a strong part of any official statistical system. In the USA and the UK, this is a long-standing distinguishing characteristic of the statistical system. In both countries, a high level of microdata access has enabled a well-

* Population Activities Unit, UN Economic commission for Europe CH-1211 Geneva 10, Switzerland.