

Preface

The Origins of IMAG — The International Microdata Access Group

"Globalization," "international linkages," "cross-border migration," "global economies," are common phrases today, describing social phenomena which manifest themselves internationally, such as migration, population aging, social reform, consumption and cultural identification. Though these concepts may seem new, they describe long-term patterns, and as such, serve historians as well as sociologists, economists and policy analysts. The growth of internationally comparative studies include historical and demographic approaches. The integration of international historical and contemporary census microdata exemplifies a simultaneously historical and demographic approach to international study, and constitutes one of the most promising avenues for comparative research on national populations. In recognition of this fact, population scholars from North and South America and Europe have come together to form IMAG – the International Microdata Access Group.¹

IMAG was formed to foster the international collaboration of researchers who work with individual-level electronic data in order to facilitate transnational comparative research. The mission of IMAG is to co-ordinate and facilitate international standards for data providers and users, to preserve original population microdata and their supporting documentation, and to improve access to these data in accordance with national confidentiality standards. Where possible, IMAG seeks to integrate microdata across national boundaries by uniting multiple data files with a common set of comparably coded variables. The power of an

¹For more information on the International Microdata Access Group, see the website at <http://aix1.uottawa.ca/academic/arts/cdn/imag/>.

individual microdata set is increased exponentially when used in conjunction with previous and parallel microdata to address research questions over time and across national borders.

IMAG goals include:

1. Create an inventory of international population data, microdata and supporting documentation;
2. Document accessibility and administrative constraints for each country's data, including anonymized data;
3. Establish protocols for researcher access to integrated international data;
4. Analyze the comparability of international microdata; and
5. Explore techniques for integrating international microdata, for delivery of these data to researchers, and for ensuring established standards of confidentiality.

The membership of IMAG is drawn from historical microdata projects and institutions from Europe, Scandinavia, and South and North America.² Current member projects and institutions include:

- The Norwegian Historical Data Centre,
University of Tromsø;
- The Demographic Data Base, Umeå University;
- The Danish Data Archive;
- l'Institut National d'Études Démographiques (INED);
- United Nations Population Activities Unit for Europe;
- The Demographic Center for Latin America and the
Caribbean (CELADE);
- The Department of History and the Data Archive,
University of Essex;

² IMAG's aim is to include participants from every continent and welcomes inquiries from anyone interested in participating. Information on membership is available on the IMAG website.

- The Great Britain Historical Geography Project, University of Portsmouth;
- The Minnesota Population Center, University of Minnesota;
- The Center for Social and Economic Policy, University of California-Riverside;
- The Canadian Families Project;
- The Institute of Canadian Studies, University of Ottawa; and
- The Latin American Social Sciences Faculty Program in Demography, National University of Mexico.

IMAG was formed at the 1998 Social Sciences History Association (SSHA) conference by a group of regular SSHA participants who acknowledged that the possibilities for international collaboration by microdata producers and users could not be fully explored if meetings were held *only* in the hectic context of general conferences. In May 1999, the Institute of Canadian Studies at the University of Ottawa hosted the first IMAG workshop at which twenty-five international scholars gathered to discuss prospects for integrating historical census microdata.³

The Ottawa meeting proved to be a galvanizing event. While IMAG workshop participants continue to meet at conferences—such as the 1999 SSHA meetings in Fort Worth and the 2000 European Social Science History Association meetings in Amsterdam—members of IMAG are making substantive progress on several different international fronts. For example, members of IMAG have begun to work closely with the group that has constructed the Historical International Standard for Coding Occupations (HISCO). This international group is dedicated to developing a common, trans-national scheme for coding and classifying historical occupations. IMAG members from the United Kingdom, Canada and the United States are preparing 100% files of the 1880 and 1881 censuses made available by the

³ A full list of the participants in IMAG's 1999 workshop can be viewed at <http://www.uottawa.ca/academic/arts/cdn/imag/participants.htm>.

Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. In June 2000, the Historical Census Project at the Minnesota Population Center hosted a workshop so researchers from these three projects could discuss common technical problems associated with these data and begin planning to integrate and disseminate the completed datasets.

Much is at stake in the IMAG initiative. Dr. Jean-Pierre Wallot, visiting professor at the Institute of Canadian Studies and former National Archivist of Canada, captured these implications well in his timely and inspiring opening remarks at the first IMAG workshop. Speaking of the value of international historical comparative research and the need for historians to influence state institutions to preserve national records for future, he said:

Every researcher with experience knows that statistics can be mere artifacts and tell very little unless they are set in broader context, taking into account geographic, demographic, economic, social and cultural dimensions, themselves, particularly in new and growing societies, revealing their full meaning through their networks with the larger world of which they are a dynamic part.

This handbook is based on the papers presented at the first IMAG workshop held in Ottawa in May 1999. Additional essays were added as we learned of the availability of other datasets. The handbook is a product of IMAG's commitment to facilitate the dissemination of information about historical and contemporary microdata, to foster discussion of issues pertinent to the integration of these microdata, and to encourage their use in international comparative research.

Lisa Y. Dillon

*Chair, International Microdata Access Group
Researcher and Research Coordinator
Institute of Canadian Studies
University of Ottawa*