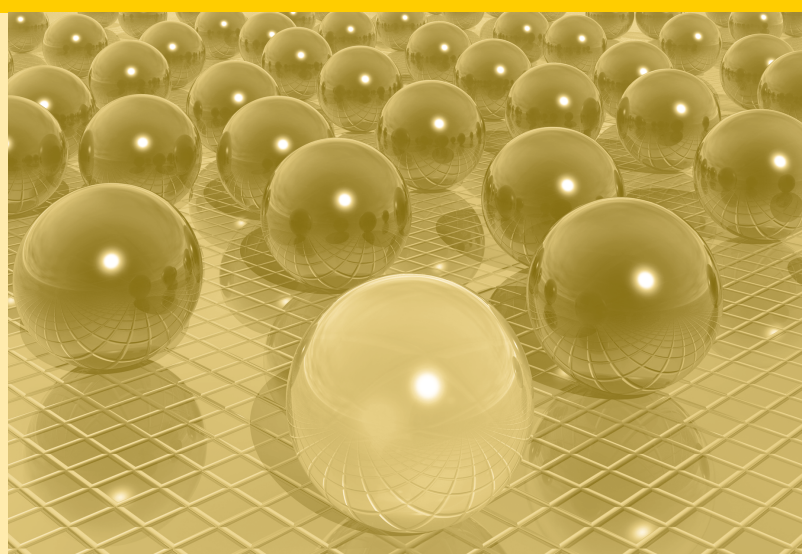


FDZ-Arbeitspapier Nr. 34



Harmonisation of statistical confidentiality
in the Federal Republic of Germany

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2011

Impressum

Herausgeber: Statistische Ämter des Bundes und der Länder
Herstellung: Information und Technik Nordrhein-Westfalen
Mauerstraße 51, 40476 Düsseldorf • Postfach 10 11 05, 40002 Düsseldorf
Telefon 0211 9449-01 • Telefax 0211 442006
Internet: <http://www.it.nrw.de>
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Erscheinungsfolge: unregelmäßig
Erschienen im März 2011

Diese Publikation wird kostenlos als **PDF-Datei** zum Download unter www.forschungsdatenzentrum.de angeboten.

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Harmonisation of statistical confidentiality in the Federal Republic of Germany

Maurice Brandt¹, Anja Crößmann² and Christopher Gürke³

Abstract:

The Federal Statistical Office and the Statistical Offices of the Federal States (Länder) in Germany provide a wide range of statistical information, information services and access to microdata for scientific research. To guarantee a consistent standard of official data in respect of statistical confidentiality, harmonisation in different aspects is necessary. In this paper, the German way of harmonising statistical confidentiality between the Federal Statistical Office and the Statistical Offices of the Federal States is presented. Besides general legal regulations, the focus is on the harmonisation of access to German microdata. Therefore guidelines for anonymisation of microdata files as well as for data laboratories, confidentiality of output, output checking and tabular confidentiality will exemplarily be discussed.

1. Federal statistical system in Germany

Similar to the European Statistical System (ESS), due to federalism, Germany has several national public data producers. According to the federal structure of the state and the administration in the Federal Republic of Germany, country-wide surveys of official statistics, or “federal statistical surveys”, as they are called, are organised in cooperation between the Federal Statistical Office (FSO) and the Statistical Offices of the 16 Federal States (Länder).

For this reason the majority of official statistics in Germany are collected in a decentralised manner, in each federal state (Land). This requires common guidelines in which statistical methods are defined and harmonised to guarantee a consistent standard of data collection, processing, publication and

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dissemination to third parties. A division of labour between the Federal Statistical Office and the Statistical Offices of the Federal States is necessary.

The responsibilities for the various statistical operations are laid down in the German Law on Statistics for Federal Purposes (FSL)⁴. Duties of the Federal Statistical Office (FSL, Art. 3) primarily are the preparation and further development of the federal statistics programme. In close collaboration, the statistical departments of the FSO and the Statistical Offices of the Federal States define methodological and technical requirements of official surveys. Supervised by the Federal Statistical Office, data collection and data processing of decentralised statistics are predominantly carried out by the Statistical Offices of the Federal States. Thus the Statistical Offices of the Federal States produce the legally required statistics locally, which will then be combined by the Federal Statistical Office.

The main function of the Federal Statistical Office in this collaboration is the mutual coordination of federal statistical surveys. These have to be without overlaps, comply with the defined standard methods and meet the time schedule. The Federal Statistical Office is in part or entirely entrusted with the statistical processing of the data (FSL, Art. 8). After collecting it from the Federal States, the Federal Statistical Office compiles the regional data to produce one common federal statistics which can be published and presented on a federal level for general purposes. Furthermore – in the frame of European Community statistics – the Federal Statistical Office transmits the common German micro-data to Eurostat.

2. Harmonisation of statistical confidentiality

Principle five of the European Statistics Code of Practice⁵ describes that “the privacy of data providers (households, enterprises, administrations and other respondents), the confidentiality of the information they provide and its use only for statistical purposes must be absolutely guaranteed”. Generally, data confidentiality is one of the most important duties of official data producers. Therefore the statistical offices of the national states have to take organisational and procedural precautions to counteract the risk of the right to privacy being violated. The main aims of statistical confidentiality are:

- The protection of every respondent against disclosure of his personal circumstances and material situation
- Preservation of mutual trust between the respondent and the statistical offices
- Creation of willingness to respond and guarantee of response reliability

⁴ Federal Statistics Law – FSL of 22 January 1987

⁵ European Statistics Code of Practice for the national and Community statistical authorities, 2005.

These requirements of statistical confidentiality need standardisation and harmonisation to be implemented between the statistical offices. The following describes some selected aspects of harmonising statistical confidentiality between the Federal Statistical Office and the Statistical Offices of the Federal States in Germany.

2.1 Legal aspects of harmonisation

To assure the confidentiality requirements, Germany has defined a set of legal standards which have to be fulfilled by both sides, the statistical offices of the Federation and the Federal States. These standards are fixed in the Law on Statistics for Federal Purposes. Therein harmonisation of statistical confidentiality is regulated in various fields. From collecting to publishing, every step of producing official data takes place in compliance with standardised confidentiality. For example before publishing regional or national results, summary tables are checked for confidentiality by the statistical offices to protect the release of sensible data.

First of all, official employees which are entrusted with the operation of official statistics are specially sworn in for public service (FSL, Art. 16, Para. 1).

In principle, after data collection, the plausibility of conclusiveness and completeness of a survey and its auxiliary characteristics, like personal number or address, will be checked. The auxiliary characteristics will be deleted from the survey by the Statistical Offices of the Federal States or, in case of periodical surveys, stored separately (FSL, Art. 12). The transmission of individual microdata between the statistical offices of the Federation and the Federal States takes place through strictly controlled encrypted data lines.

Individual data are strictly confidential, unless otherwise stipulated by a special legal provision (FSL, Art. 16, Para. 1), such as individual data for the transmission or publication of which the respondents have given their written approval, individual data from generally accessible sources, individual data which have been summarised with individual data of other respondents as well as individual data which cannot be allocated to the respondents or persons concerned. The latter case gives the opportunity to create absolutely anonymised microdata files of common statistics, so called Public Use Files (PUF). These can be used for national or foreign research by any interested person or, in the form of CAMPUS Files especially created for academic teaching, at institutions of higher education for statistical methods training.

Under the precondition that disclosure of microdata is possible only with an excessive amount of time, expenses and manpower, the statistical offices of the Federation and the Federal States can transmit microdata to institutions of higher education or other institutions entrusted with tasks of independent

scientific research (FSL, Art. 16, Para. 6). For this purpose the statistical offices create de facto anonymised microdata files in the form of standardised Scientific Use Files (SUF) for off-site use which are then delivered to users from the scientific community. These Scientific Use Files are similar to the so called “Microdata Under Contract” (MUC). Prior to transmission, the recipients of SUF must be committed to confidentiality (FSL, Art. 16, Para. 7). The data can be used only for a predefined scientific project and as soon as the project has been completed, the data have to be deleted. At agencies to which SUF are transmitted, it must be warranted by means of organisational and technical measures that only especially authorised persons are recipients using the individual data (FSL, Art. 16, Para. 8). The statistical offices have to keep records on contents, recipient agency, forwarding date and purpose of transmission and preserve them for a minimum of five years (FSL, Art. 16, Para. 9).

To protect personal information of respondents it is prohibited to return individual data to the administrative authorities. Furthermore it is not allowed to match individual data from federal statistics or to combine such data with other information for establishing a reference to persons, enterprises, establishments or local units for other than the legal statistical purposes of that Law or of a legal provision ordering a federal statistics (FSL, Art. 21).

It is important to ensure the data security during the production procedure in the statistical offices. Probably the most difficult part is to preserve the confidentiality of official statistics where the data are accessed by scientific researchers. On the one hand this needs safe (anonymised) data or a safe environment to get data access and on the other hand the results have to be kept safe until they are checked for confidentiality so that they can be released to the public.

2.2 Access to German microdata

For the access to German microdata there are regulations and guidelines which are implemented to ensure the confidentiality of the data. There are various ways to keep the access to microdata for the scientific community as comfortable as possible under strict observation of data security.

Access to microdata of official statistics in Germany is possible via Scientific Use Files (SUF), Public Use Files (PUF), via data laboratory⁶ and remote execution through the Research Data Centres (RDC) of the statistical offices. Due to the federalism, the Federal Statistical Office and the Statistical Offices of the Federal States have set up two RDCs, the RDC of the Federal Statistical Office and the RDC head office of the Statistical Offices of the Federal States, which is organised in fourteen field offices. Besides there are more RDCs which are publicly funded and mentioned here for the sake of completeness: e. g. the Research Data Centre of the Federal Employment Agency at the Institute for

⁶ A data laboratory is a secured room in a statistical office especially designed for researchers granted with right of access to microdata. Such a room is equipped with special features preventing the transmission of any kind of information to the outside world.

Employment Research (FDZ-BA) and the Research Data Centre of the German Pension Insurance (FDZ-RV).⁷ These RDCs provide special microdata located in the field of employment and pensions and are governed by other laws than the statistical offices of the Federation and the Federal States⁸.

Access to German microdata is coordinated between the Federal Statistical Office and the Statistical Offices of the Federal States for every request.

The researcher can fill out a common request form to provide information on:

- the institution submitting the request/the individual data users
- the microdata requested
- the form of data access
- the research project

This request form can be sent to one of the both Research Data Centres of the German Federation or the Federal States. The form will be circulated and coordinated between all offices. In future a shared user management database will be implemented where the employees of each RDC have always an overview of which researcher is using which data for what reason.

After the involved statistical departments have agreed to the request form the researchers are able to access the microdata in the way they have chosen in the request form, namely by SUF, data laboratory or remote execution.

The researchers can use the microdata for example in any desired data laboratory of the Federal States or the Federal Statistical Office. This is possible because the Federal States and the Federation have agreed on guidelines for data laboratories which regulate the security requirements and organisational issues. The rules for the data laboratories are described in Chapter 2.4.

2.3 Guideline for anonymisation of microdata files

Due to the federal organisation, German microdata are divided into centralised and decentralised statistics⁹. However, as a result of the harmonisation of the RDCs, researchers have the opportunity to analyse both types of de facto anonymised microdata at the Federal Statistical Office in Wiesbaden, Bonn or Berlin or at one of the fourteen Statistical Offices of the Federal States.

⁷ A complete list of all RDCs and Data Service Centres can be found on the Homepage of the German Data Forum.

⁸ For further information see Bender et. al. 2009

⁹ Means that most of the German statistical surveys are collected, processed and stored by the Statistical Offices of the Federal States and just a few of them are decentralised managed by the Federal Statistical Office.

De facto anonymity is achieved not only by anonymisation of the data but also in combination with controlled data access. This is why these data may contain much more detailed information than the Scientific Use Files submitted in the form of data files.

Microdata are called de facto anonymised if deanonymisation cannot be ruled out completely but the data can be allocated to the respective statistical unit only with an excessive amount of time, expenses and manpower (Art. 16 Para. 6 Federal Statistics Law). Pursuant to that law, de facto anonymised data may be made available only to scientific institutions and only for the purpose of scientific projects.

De facto anonymisation mainly aims at reducing the possibilities of allocating the values of a variable to the respective statistical units by careful information reduction and information modification while preserving the informational value in statistical terms. The cost and benefit of deanonymisation have to be analysed for each individual survey. Therefore the RDC has to anonymise microdata specifically for every research project. Referring to this, the location/federal state office responsible in terms of subject-matter develops an anonymisation concept in close collaboration with the researcher. The concept is specified in such a way that researchers can conduct their full analyses while the used microdata meet confidentiality. Upon completion the anonymisation concept will be approved by the RDCs of the Federal Statistical Office and the Statistical Offices of the Federal States. The review focuses on the compliance with the definition of de facto anonymisation and local specific disclosure risks.

Afterwards the anonymised microdata will be provided at the data laboratory, where the researcher applies for access to a special account.

The daily business in dealing with research applications is the coordination of the data request and the anonymisation concepts for Scientific Use Files for off-site and on-site usage. To accelerate and simplify the process of coordination, guidelines for the management of requirements for de facto anonymous individual data for off-site usage and for on-site usage in a data laboratory are developed.

The guidelines for anonymisation of microdata files contain the following steps:

1. Receipt of the request for microdata use in the Research Data Centre

The RDC is responsible for processing the research application and involving the concerned organisational units and maintains contact with the user.

2. Legal analysis of access according to Art. 16, Para. 6 FSL

Regarding applications of institutions which request official data for the first time the RDC involves the legal department.

In collaboration with lawyers of the Statistical Offices of the Federal States the legal department verifies whether this institution performs independent scientific research within the meaning of Art. 16, Para. 6 FSL. If the legal prerequisites are not fulfilled the RDC informs the data users and indicates alternative forms of access (remote execution on a full cost price basis, special evaluation or Public Use File)

3. Creation of the anonymisation concept

The RDC creates the anonymisation concept based on the specific anonymisation guideline for anonymous individual statistical data in consultation with the relevant statistical department. The concept includes performing anonymisation measures and relevant tests. If subsamples should be used for anonymity, the adjustment of weighting factors has to be coordinated with the department responsible for mathematical methods.

4. Participation of the RDC of the Statistical Offices of the Federal States

For decentralised statistics, the duty of the RDC of the Statistical Offices of the Federal States is the coordination of the anonymisation concept with all regional locations. As regards central statistics, the Statistical Offices of the Federal States are just notified.

5. Contract

The legal department will sign a contract with the data users. Part of the contract is the anonymisation concept. A copy of the completed contract is forwarded to the RDC.

6. Data delivery and invoicing

The RDC offers the de facto anonymised individual data for off-site use on a disk (CD-ROM, DVD) or for on-site use in a data laboratory. Invoices are issued by the RDC.

The improvement of harmonisation is shown exemplarily for personal and household statistics as well as for business statistics.

2.3.1 Personal and Household Statistics

For the microcensus, which is the official data source used most often in the field of personal and household statistics in Germany, the statistical offices decided to produce a standardised on-site file. This is due to the fact that the anonymisation concept for on-site use is developed in close cooperation with the researchers and can therefore turn out very time consuming and elaborate. In addition to that the coordination itself delays the microdata access for the researchers. Therefore the benefit of a

standardised on-site file is that the anonymisation concept needs to be coordinated only once and the microdata can be used after that by all researchers via a data laboratory or remote execution without any additional adaptation. The on-site file contains the full range of observations and all important characteristics for most research questions. All identifiers are removed and the detail of regional breakdown is limited. Users have to document and comment on the analysis program and the output. For the structure of analysis programs there are also uniform guidelines on how to write a code. This makes it easier for the employees to reproduce the results.

In terms of off-site use via SUF the anonymisation concept of the relevant statistics has to be coordinated between the statistical offices of the Federation and the Federal States. For a standardised SUF this needs to be done only once per statistics.

2.3.2 Business Statistics

There were two projects in the past in which the Statistical Offices of the Federal States and the Federal Statistical Office produced Scientific Use Files especially for business statistics. Within these projects the possible different views of the partners were reflected. The goal of these anonymisation projects was to set up a guideline on how to anonymise business statistics in an efficient way so that the confidentiality and the analysis potential of the data can be safeguarded. One first project was conducted for cross section business statistics and a follow-up project transferred the collected knowledge to longitudinal enterprise microdata. Each project aimed to consider the specialties of the Federal States and the Federation to create a common product.

After the anonymisation guideline has been agreed on in the Federal Statistical Office, it has to be sent to each single statistical office of the Federal States to give them opportunity for remarks, feedback and changes. One substantial advantage of involving the Federal States in the decision-making process is the knowledge of the agency responsible in terms of subject-matter. This means that almost each Federal State has the functional responsibility for a specific statistics. The regional offices have more detailed information on their region. They know their companies and it is easier for them than for the Federal Statistical Office to tell which company could be at risk even in a Scientific Use File. Furthermore, the Federal States are not only involved in the process of decision-making but they also have the function of double checking to improve the quality of statistical products from confidentiality aspects.

After this process a standardised file for scientific use can be released to the research community. The developed anonymisation guideline is then used for different years and waves of the same statistics. This considerably accelerates the creation of Scientific Use Files of other business statistics. The

knowledge shall be communicated within the Federal Statistical Office and also to the Statistical Offices of the Federal States.

2.4 Guidelines for Data Laboratories

The Federal Statistical Office and the Statistical Offices of the Federal States notice considerable demand by researchers for access to confidential data sets. Therefore the statistical offices established harmonised data laboratories, which are special PC workplaces in the RDCs, where domestic and foreign researchers can analyse de facto anonymised microdata.

The data laboratory itself consists of a secure hermetic working and data storage environment in which the confidentiality of the data for research can be ensured. It also avoids feeding the de facto anonymised micro data with further information.

The researcher has no direct access to the internal production network of the statistical offices. This restriction prevents the possibility of researchers to access other sensitive information. It also allows RDC staff to supervise every step of analysis at all times.

A separate PC workplace with an internet connection is available for e-mail communication and World Wide Web searches.

From the administrative point of view, the data laboratories comply with defined standards. The following aspects are taken into account:

- The data laboratories are located in the premises of the Federal Statistical Office or in the premises of the Statistical Offices of the Federal States, respectively one in the premises of the German Institute for Economic Research in Berlin and one at the University of Technology in Dresden
- legal measures have to be taken when allowing access,
- only authorised users should be able to make use of this facility,
- the use of laptops, mass storage and picture recording devices (e.g. digital cameras, camera phones) is prohibited in the data laboratory,
- the RDC staff members are permitted at all times to examine the activities of the researchers including their working materials.

The computers for analyses are subject to restrictions in order to prevent disclosure of individual persons or entities and to meet confidentiality provisions. Therefore it is not possible to

- print documents,

- copy data to diskettes, USB sticks, CD-ROM's, DVDs or Zip drives,
- copy data to the local hard disk,
- connect recording devices to the serial, parallel and USB ports,
- connect a laptop to the network,
- use e-mail,
- make Internet connections,
- install hardware (the PC is locked) or remove hardware,
- nor boot the PC from floppy, CD-Rom, DVD-Rom or any other media.

Before releasing intermediate and final outputs the RDC staff have to check every output for confidentiality (see above).

2.5 Confidentiality of output

Due to the fact that researchers can access official statistics from RDCs in different Federal States and different locations of the Federal Statistical Office it is necessary to harmonise the rules of output checking. This is important to avoid the case of unequal treatment of the same analysis and the same output by different researchers from aspects of confidentiality because they access data from different points. For that reason there are statistics-overlapping confidentiality rules, for example the p%-rule whose parameters are harmonised between the Federation and the Federal States. Furthermore there is a common agreement between the statistical offices that the minimum frequency of an output table has to be at least three cases. There are also recommendations like double-checking the output in the RDC and also in the relevant statistical department.

Nevertheless, due to the differences between the official statistics the RDCs developed statistic specific guidelines for output checking for a bulk of official statistics.

For the standard publications of the statistical departments it is inevitable to coordinate the confidentiality of tables between the Federal Statistical Office and the statistical offices of the Federal States. To manage this complex intention of output control, the committee for organisation and implementation decided to harmonise the confidentiality regulations for turnover tax statistics. This means the standard tables of the Federal States and the Federation shall be coordinated in a central cooperation model on federal state level. Synchronising the primary and secondary cell suppression for tabular data is a complex problem. On the one hand the Federal States have to produce and publish their own tables and have to take care of confidentiality, on the other hand the Federal Statistical Office

has to produce and publish tables aggregated on a federal level. If some cells of some Federal States are already suppressed it is barely possible to publish results on a federal level because the values can be recalculated. If the Federal Statistical Office performs secondary cell suppression by suppressing the values of a certain federal state, the federal state again cannot publish its own tabular data. This can be solved by using automatic tabular data protection in T-Argus, with the Federal States and the Federation using the same uniform concept. The execution of secondary cell suppression on Federation and Federal State levels is mandatory for the respective publication of the Federal Statistical Office and the Statistical Offices of the Federal States.

It is planned to develop and transfer the concept also to other statistics like accommodation statistics.

3. Summary and Outlook

Considering the examples of harmonisation of statistical confidentiality between the Federal Statistical Office and the Statistical Offices of the Federal States presented above, progress has already been made and results have been obtained in this field. But there is also plenty of space for optimisation. In a decentralised statistical system it has to be taken into account that not only conducting a survey needs to be harmonised. Also the confidentiality rules for tabular data in the different statistical departments and the output checking rules in the RDCs of the various statistical offices in the Federal States and the locations of the RDCs of the Federal Statistical Office need to be harmonised to treat every research output equally and to keep track of various results produced by researchers. Because of the different laws by which publicly funded RDCs in Germany are governed aiming at a uniform approach is even more important.

Harmonisation in a decentralised system is inevitable to create comparable and high quality results. But this process needs a lot of resources to coordinate and standardise procedures. It is important to optimise the process especially on the interfaces between the related bodies. The decentralised statistical system in Germany can be a model for the European system because it represents a kind of microcosm for the European situation even if the legal framework is different. For both systems better methods and instruments for harmonisation are necessary.

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