

The background of the top half of the page is a photograph of three women sitting at a table in what appears to be a meeting or conference. The image is heavily overlaid with a semi-transparent orange filter. The woman in the center is looking towards the right, while the woman on the left is gesturing with her hand. The woman on the right is looking forward.

Unlocking Administrative Data

MAXIMIZING THE IMPACT OF THE SOCIAL SECTOR

A Transform the Sector Report

Transform the Sector 2017 Series

Unlocking Administrative Data is part of a series of reports written by Powered by Data that aim to summarize some of the key topics covered at Transform the Sector 2017. Transform the Sector 2017 was a one-day conference about revolutionizing the Canadian social sector's use of data. Held on February 23rd 2017, the event was organized by Powered by Data in partnership with the Ontario Trillium Foundation and the Stanford Digital Civil Society Lab.

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About Powered by Data

With the goal of enabling the social sector to benefit from the rapidly changing way society handles information, Powered by Data works with leaders in nonprofits, governments, and foundations to help them better use, share, and learn from data. Powered by Data also works with key stakeholders to open up their data for social impact. Powered by Data operates on Tides Canada's shared platform, which supports on-the-ground efforts to create uncommon solutions for the common good.

For more, visit <http://poweredbydata.org>



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Overview

Most stakeholders in the social sector understand the importance of evidence-based decisions for policy and programming. However, available evidence can be incomplete, inconsistent, and distorted, which means that measuring social impact is a persistent challenge. Governments and organizations regularly collect information, known as administrative data. Government administrative data is often inaccessible to the social sector. Rather than duplicating data collection efforts — nonprofit organizations, funders and even different government departments could regularly access existing administrative datasets to measure the outcomes of interventions. This would unlock the potential of existing data and enable a more informed and strategic social sector.

This report provides an overview of the discussions at Transform the Sector 2017 on how the social sector can access and use administrative data. It also provides additional context and background on this topic.

What is Administrative Data?

All organizations, including all levels of government, create and store information while functioning. For government agencies, that includes information about the services they offer and the people they serve. Government departments, like health, justice, and education, often use this administrative data to inform policies.

Compared to many other data sets, government administrative data tends to be consistently collected and representative of populations in any given community. Information within administrative data could include: individual health records, including whether individuals accessed particular services; individual birth and death records; and individual records of employment, income, and education. This data, when linked together, is a rich source of information about the impact of various social programs and interventions.

The Current Context

In Canada, with certain rare exceptions, the social sector does not have access to individual-level administrative data. Academic researchers affiliated with universities in Canada have processes to get access to administrative data to answer research questions about social outcomes. This demonstrates that it is possible for the social sector to access administrative data under similar conditions.

Why We Should Unlock Administrative Data

Administrative data can complement other types of data like surveys to reveal patterns more clearly. Accessing administrative data also reduces the need for organizations to collect data themselves, which reduces both costs and the burden on communities from repeatedly giving the same information to different parties. But most importantly, administrative data can be used for program evaluation to help improve outcomes for clients, communities and organizations.

To evaluate their programs using administrative data, organizations can use these large administrative datasets to directly check which of their service recipients benefitted from their programs. The value of easily tracking program recipients is significant and removes the cost of potentially surveying or tracking down these program recipients years later. Moreover, this also allows organizations to easily compare these recipients to a control group, who did not receive the service. These comparisons can provide crucial insights about impact for all stakeholders in the social sector. For example, this means it's possible to see if a particular program, such as an afterschool initiative, impacts participants' graduation rates compared to a similar population that wasn't in the program; or, whether a seniors' exercise program reduced the number of health services they required in a given year.

BENEFITS TO SOCIAL SECTOR ORGANIZATIONS

When social sector organizations can access administrative data relevant to their program delivery, they can better understand how services are being used, and most importantly, their impact. Organizations with similar goals can also share data about their outcomes with one another, compare results, and learn from one another about what is and isn't successful. With these insights, organizations can evaluate and refine their policies and practices, enhance performance management, and advocate for improved social policy and programs – all on the basis of the best available evidence.

BENEFITS TO GOVERNMENTS AND FUNDERS

Administrative data is crucial for governments, funders, and investors to assess programming success, particularly with the rise of pay-for-success funding models, such as social impact bonds. With insights gained from evidence, funders can gain confidence they are not just paying for programs to be delivered, but for the achievement of desired outcomes.

The Challenges of Unlocking Administrative Data

There are three main challenges to unlocking administrative data:

Privacy

Administrative data often contains private citizens' information, which raises important legal and ethical concerns.

Technological Constraints

The databases and systems currently used to store administrative data have been largely designed for the siloed government department model. Sharing information across these systems is difficult because it was not built with this ability.

Policies and Practice

There are policies in place in different jurisdictions which prohibit the linkage and sharing of administrative data. Even in the absence of these restrictions, the practice of sharing data outside departmental silos is also limited in scope.

These challenges can all be overcome. It is possible to unlock data in ways that ensure anonymity. The best practices for data sharing and data standards can make record linkage possible. Policies and practices can be changed. Clear leadership on this issue is what is missing. Increasing awareness about the opportunities of administrative data is one way that this necessary leadership can be created.



SUCCESS STORIES

Existing domestic and international projects demonstrate that this work is already being done safely and effectively.

JUSTICE DATA LAB

In the UK, the Ministry of Justice operates the Justice Data Lab, which gives organizations working with offenders access to reoffending administrative data. This service was created to help organizations evaluate the impact of their work on reducing reoffending. Organizations submit information about the offenders they have worked with to the Ministry. The Ministry matches these service recipients in their administrative database and sends the organization information about re-offending rates and frequency of re-offending at an aggregate level. The Ministry also creates a statistically-matched control group and provides the reoffending rate of that group to show more robustly if the intervention has made a difference. The results are shared with the organization in a clear and easy to understand format that includes explanations of the key metrics used but also the limitations. This provides organizations with insight into the effectiveness of their programs.

POLICYWISE'S CHILD AND YOUTH DATA LABORATORY

In Alberta, PolicyWise for Children and Families is a nonprofit organization that has partnered with Alberta's provincial government to create the Child and Youth Data Laboratory (CYDL). The CYDL links and analyzes administrative data from various ministries that interact with children and youth. This could include administrative data from student enrollment data or data from income support cases. The great advantage of this type of data is that it is population-wide. When linking data between ministries the process CYDL uses preserves privacy. The results help shape policy and program development with the goal of improving outcomes for children and families.

Conclusion

This report covers some of the key concepts on unlocking administrative data. As all levels of government in Canada, academia, and the social sector gain a better understanding of the opportunities of unlocking administrative data — these stakeholders would benefit from convening, collaborating, and conducting further research on the benefits, risks, and best practices associated with administrative data, both internationally and domestically.

Ultimately, government and other stakeholders can work together to maximize the potential of administrative data and adopt systems that facilitate access to it in ways that protect privacy. In the meantime, please see the following resources section for additional reading and knowledge.

Additional Resources

J-PAL - Using Administrative Data For Randomized Evaluations:

<https://www.povertyactionlab.org/sites/default/files/documents/AdminDataGuide.pdf>

National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine - Innovations in Federal Statistics: Combining Data Sources While Protecting Privacy (2017):

<https://www.nap.edu/catalog/24652/innovations-in-federal-statistics-combining-data-sources-while-protecting-privacy>

Powered by Data - How a social innovation is unlocking government administrative data:

<http://poweredbydata.org/blog/2016/9/27/how-a-social-innovation-is-unlocking-government-administrative-data>

New Philanthropy Capital - Data Labs:

<http://www.thinknpc.org/our-work/projects/data-labs>

PolicyWise - CYDL:

<https://policywise.com/initiatives/cydl>