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# A Brief History of the Statistical Abstract

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Although many users of the *Statistical Abstract of the United States* automatically associate that publication with the U.S. Census Bureau, its history predates even the existence of the Census Bureau as a permanent government agency. The Bureau of Statistics in the Treasury Department issued the first edition in 1879 and continued to do so until 1902. Beginning in 1903 the *Abstract* was published by various bureaus within the Department of Commerce and its predecessor. In 1938 the Census Bureau took over responsibility for the *Abstract*. It remained there until 2011 when the 131st edition was released. At that time Census Bureau management decided to terminate the Statistical Compendia program in order to use funds from that program for programs it considered a higher priority.

The decision was a controversial one. The petitions and letters of protest from librarians and other data users did not succeed in reversing that decision but did demonstrate that the research community still regards the *Statistical Abstract* as an essential 21st century research tool.

The early editions of the *Statistical Abstract* strongly reflected the interest and responsibilities of the Treasury Department. The dominant subjects were thus imports and exports, public finance, shipping, and banking. The data on population occupied little more than one page. However, within 20 years, the population data expanded to 24 pages of coverage. It is also interesting that two pages of various data for “principal countries of the world” appeared for the first time in the 1902 *Abstract*. During subsequent decades various new topics started to appear as various government agencies published new data series.

For example, in the 1930s and 1940s the Bureau of Economic Analysis introduced a set of national economic accounts and annual estimates of gross national product. In the 1940s, the Current Population Survey began collecting a variety of labor force, income, and other social and demographic statistics. The introduction of various government programs such as Social Security in the 1930s and Medicare in the 1960s also led to the availability of more statistical data. As each of these new data series became available, they were included in the *Statistical Abstract*.

--Lars Johanson

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Census Bureau statistician, 1975 to 2009

As Federal statistical programs increased in number and scope, the coverage of the *Statistical Abstract* expanded along with them. In the 1950s, a typical volume contained 1,200 tables selected from roughly 140 sources and arranged in 34 sections. Since the 1990s a typical volume has contained 1,350-1,400 tables from more than 250 sources and arranged in 30 sections.

However, the value of the *Statistical Abstract* was not solely dependent on its statistical tables. The subject index, bibliography (Guide to Sources of Statistics), and the source citations below each table served as reference aids for those who needed more data. Among those who needed more were librarians, who were identified as the largest bloc of users in the very first user survey in 1943.

This focus on the needs of *Abstract* users was always the primary determinant in the selection of data and complemented an effort to portray in numbers the state of the nation. In the latter half of the 20th century it led to the introduction of more new subjects such as drug usage, day care arrangements, and various poverty measures. By the end of the century new means of data dissemination, compact disks and the Internet, provided further opportunities to release the *Statistical Abstract* in faster and more user-friendly ways.

Two examples will provide some insight into how the *Abstract* has been useful. Many users start looking for data by using popular ambiguous terms such as “binge drinking” or “dropouts.” In those instances an *Abstract* table will help sharpen a user’s thinking by providing a definition for such a term and leading the user to meaningful statistics. Also the *Abstract* has been useful just for idle browsing. For example, a user inquired about how much popcorn is eaten in movie theaters. Although no such data existed, the user was happy to start exploring about movie attendance, number of teenagers, and total popcorn production.

Such curiosity about the social and economic conditions of the United States has led many people the world over to the *Statistical Abstract* and will continue to guide the further development of this unique statistical resource.