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Monica King
University of Pennsylvania

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Reflecting on the 2018 Population Association of America Conference

April 29, 2018
By Monica King

This past week, the [Population Association of America](#) (PAA) held its annual conference in Denver. For those who are not familiar, PAA is the largest demography and population studies conference in the country. Its annual conference draws an interdisciplinary audience that includes several thousand researchers and professionals with backgrounds in economics, demography, sociology, public health, and many other areas of study. While demography has traditionally relied on nationally representative surveys and Censuses as primary data sources to answer important research questions, there has been a trend toward using administrative data in recent years.

This year's conference program certainly reflects these recent trends. Over the course of two and a half days, PAA hosted multiple sessions on the uses of administrative data as well as additional sessions on applications of social media data and data from the private sector.

As I attended these sessions, I noted three ways the conference highlighted the value of administrative data.

First, I was impressed by the breadth of research topics that were addressed with administrative data. From evaluating the effect of a \$15 minimum wage to understanding how gender composition of doctoral peers influence graduation rates, PAA showcased the power of administrative data in answering interesting and policy-relevant questions across a range of research domains that could not have been answered with survey data alone.

Second, the conference highlighted the administrative data landscape at the Federal level, presenting both current opportunities and future advances. The conference first underscored the opportunities for researchers to access and use federal survey and administrative data through the Federal Statistical Restricted Data Centers. Another session then brought together leaders who laid out the vision for a new national data entity that would facilitate federal data access for statistical purposes.

Finally, I was thrilled to see a few presentations on building the administrative data infrastructure beyond the federal level. Researchers from Washington state and Minnesota presented their plans to create comprehensive, linked databases that would enable researchers to learn more about the policy changes on its residents.

As I reflect on these presentations and the ensuing discussions in the room, it became clear that there are lingering questions on using administrative data. From the researcher perspective, it's easy to buy into the benefits of using administrative data, but accessing these data and working with the idiosyncrasies of these new data sources present significant challenges. From the practitioner

perspective, building infrastructure to make administrative data available to researchers means spending a lot of time addressing institutional, legal, and cultural barriers.

Our upcoming ADRF Network Research Conference will aim to provide a venue to answer these lingering questions by sharing lessons around how to improve access and use as well as developing best practices for researchers and practitioners in this field.

Thank you to the organizers of PAA 2018, and we look forward to seeing you at the [2018 ADRF Network Research Conference](#)!