

Australian Bureau of Statistics Policy on Retention of Collection Forms and Administrative Material

Introduction

To assist statistical processing activities, the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) has a need to retain and store completed collection instruments and administrative material used for statistical purposes. However, any long-term storage of identifiable records not only adds to ABS storage costs but also to the security burden of safeguarding the confidentiality of the records. Achieving a balance between these conflicting requirements is the objective underlying this ABS policy.

2 Collection instruments cover all technologies that are used to obtain data, eg paper forms, Computer Assisted Telephone Interview (CATI) records, Computer Assisted Interview (CAI) records, electronic administrative data, data streams, scanned images and faxes.

Purpose

3 This statement contains the ABS policy about collection instrument retention and disposal, together with the retention schedule and relevant guidelines. The main reasons behind the disposal of collection instruments are to uphold, and maintain respondent confidence in, the ABS guarantee of confidentiality, and to reduce costs associated with storage and security.

Legislation

4 ABS has a range of legislative responsibilities for the data it collects under the *Census and Statistics Act 1905* (CSA) including: to publish what is collected; to do so in a manner that will not enable identification; and to ensure that access to identifiable data is only provided for the purposes of the Act. Further information on how the ABS keeps survey participant information confidential, including through secure disposal of forms, is provided in the following web link:

<http://www.abs.gov.au/websitedbs/D3310114.nsf/89a5f3d8684682b6ca256de4002c809b/1be71b5a0eb4e902ca25711a007b923a!OpenDocument>

Honouring this guarantee of secrecy is central in gaining and maintaining cooperation from respondents in the provision of their information. These legislative requirements and public relations objectives are supported by the adoption of appropriate data retention practices throughout the ABS.

5 Section 24 of the *Archives Act 1983* provides that Commonwealth records are not to be disposed of without the consent of the Australian Archives, unless the action of disposal is positively required by law, or takes place in accordance with a normal administrative practice of which the Archive does not disapprove. An ABS specific Records Disposal Authority (RDA) No 991 has been issued by the Australian Archives and is in accord with this Act. It has been prepared as an integral part of the record keeping program of the ABS. The RDA takes into consideration the requirements for creation, capture, maintenance and disposal of ABS records. This policy is consistent with the requirements of the 'Data Collecting' section of that RDA. Specifically, the RDA requires that filled in collection forms, whether paper or electronic copies, and whether collected via census, sample, administrative by-product or another collection, (including control registers), are to

be destroyed when no longer required. The RDA also specifies retention requirements relating to the 2001 Census and subsequent Censuses. Collection areas must ensure their Data Retention activities are carried out in a manner consistent with the RDA.

6 The *Privacy Act 1988* requires that Federal Government Departments and Agencies comply with certain Information Privacy Principles. In that regard, Branch Heads should ensure that their practices adhere to the relevant entry in the annual Personal Information Digest required under the Privacy Act.

Policy

7 This policy defines collection instruments to include the following types of forms and records (the scope of 'collection instruments' does not include the unidentified unit data records - these are the subject of the policy relating to Processed Statistical Data):

- a. completed paper documents, prescribed and certified under subsection 10(1) of the CSA
- b. household survey interview instruments and documents containing information about an individual respondent or group of respondents, whether completed by the respondent(s) or for the respondent(s) by an ABS officer or some other authorised person
- c. records, in paper or electronic form, collected or supplied by other organisations for statistical purposes, including those related to updating of population frameworks eg the ABS Business Register, or to support statistical frameworks
- d. images of any completed forms and documents created through scanning technology eg Optical Character Recognition
- e. electronic records obtained through technologies such as CATI, CAI, Internet Data Capture
- f. electronic records obtained directly from administrative sources and stored in input warehouses.

8 It is ABS policy that collection instruments are not retained beyond their useful life and that completed collection instruments and the resulting electronic records be retained as set out in the following schedule or until any prosecution action is completed. Retention periods specified in this document are intended to ensure that the collection instruments are retained for sufficient time to be used in editing and processing to ensure that the final data released is of good quality. For some collections, this may require the collection instruments to be retained for several cycles of the collection, as amendments may be made to previous data based on more recent information or subsequent investigation. In other cases, there will be no need for the collection instruments to be retained once the data for the cycle is finalised.

9 It is ABS policy that retention of collection instruments for periods longer than in the schedule must be approved by the appropriate Program Head.

10 It is ABS policy that Branch Heads keep information on the retention of collection instruments in the Data Retention Statement in the Collection Management System.

11 It is ABS policy that collection instruments may not be transcribed on to other media, such as CD-ROM, as a means of extending retention periods. The exception to this is the 2001 Census and subsequent Censuses.

12 It is ABS policy that paper-based collection instruments must be held in storage facilities or locations which provide guaranteed security including secure control outside normal office hours. Paper-based collection instruments held in work areas must be secured outside normal office hours. Electronic collection instruments must be held in a controlled computing environment with access to records restricted to those with a need to access them.

Retention Schedule

13 The retention schedule is:

<u>Collection Frequency</u>	<u>Retention Action</u>
Monthly Population Survey	Retain collection instruments for 4 months
Monthly or shorter term collections (other than MPS)	Retain collection instruments for 4 previous collection cycles
Quarterly ABS direct collections	Retain collection instruments for 3 previous collection cycles (ie 9 months)
6-monthly ABS direct collections	Retain collection instruments for 3 previous collection cycles (ie 18 months)
Annual ABS direct collections	Retain collection instruments for previous collection cycle.
5-yearly Population Census	Collection instruments are to be destroyed once data processing has been completed unless specifically authorised by legislation, as is the case for the 2001 Census and subsequent Censuses.
Less frequent than Annual ABS direct collections	Assess on merits, with expectation that collection instruments will be destroyed after all processing and likely provider queries have been resolved eg destroy 2 years after results released.
Exploratory questionnaires	Retain until end of analysis to which they relate
Administrative Records eg Births, Marriages, International Trade, Motor Vehicle Use, Income Tax data	Ensure retention is in accordance with intentions declared in the annual Personal Information Digest prepared for the Privacy Commissioner under the <i>Privacy Act 1988</i>
Longitudinal data collection eg tax data, business data	Retained until all likely provider queries have been resolved

14 For paper-based collection instruments that are subsequently scanned to produce electronic images, the retention periods shown above relate to the scanned images. The paper forms will be typically retained for shorter periods -- for annual and less frequent collections up until six months after the conclusion of intensive follow-up, for monthly collections up until one month after the due date and for other sub-annual collections up until three months after the due date.

Procedures

15 Each project is to document retention periods for each set of collection instruments using a Data Retention Statement which is held in the Collection Management System (CMS). These statements are intended to clearly identify details about the collection instruments, including their frequency, the appropriate retention period, any authority for retention beyond the specified standard and their location.

16 When paper based collection instruments are due for disposal, Project managers should advise Facilities Management that disposal action is needed. Facilities Management will ensure that the collection instruments are disposed of in the most appropriate and secure manner. Disposal of electronic based collection instruments is the responsibility of the subject matter program manager.