

Frequently Asked Questions

1. HOW LONG DOES IT TAKE TO DEVELOP A PROPOSAL AND START AN FSRDC-BASED PROJECT?

There is no simple answer to this question as the answer may vary considerably depending on many factors. The best way to explore the issue is through conversations with the Central Plains Executive Director and the FSRDC Administrator.

The following notes provide some indication of what the key issues are. FSRDC projects require formal proposals. Proposals undergo formal review. Researchers on approved projects must undergo special training to obtain Special Sworn Status to use the FSRDC lab. Data sets for projects must be prepared by Census (or others) and then placed on the FSRDC network to be accessed by researchers. Each of these steps involves time and should be taken into account when considering and planning FSRDC projects.

CPFSRDC project proposals must be routed through CPFSRDC and then reviewed by Census (and/or other relevant agencies). Proposal requirements vary depending on many factors. The FSRDC Administrator can give guidance on requirements and how best to proceed. First time FSRDC researchers and researchers planning complex projects should expect at least 30-60 days (1-2 months) for proposal development time. In practice, it often takes longer. Researchers with previous FSRDC experience and straightforward projects may move forward more quickly.

Once a proposal is submitted, expect that the review process will take at least 90-120 days (3-4 months). Projects that draw on data governed by stricter requirements will take longer. Projects are not always approved and may require multiple submissions to gain approval. (This risk can be greatly reduced by working closely with the FSRDC Administrator when developing the proposal.)

Once a project is approved, the researchers on the project become eligible to apply for special sworn status (SSS) which is necessary to gain access to the secure lab. Expect the application, approval review, and security training to take 90 days (3 months) or so. It can take longer for non-US citizens. Approval is not guaranteed but is likely for most applicants. The FSRDC Administrator can address questions about the factors that can cause approval to be delayed or denied.

Once special sworn status is obtained, the relevant project data sets are moved to the FSRDC server. The time involved can vary. It is less for when the data sets the project will use have been used by other recent projects. It is more when the needed data sets are new or have not been used by recent projects.

Adding everything up and the “low” estimate is 7-9 months. That is just a “rule-of-thumb” figure. With good luck the process can be a little quicker; but it is more likely to run longer. For obvious reasons, things will normally go quicker for experienced FSRDC researchers.

2. HOW DO I LEARN WHAT RESTRICTED-ACCESS DATA SETS ARE AVAILABLE AND WHAT THE CHARACTERISTICS OF THESE DATA SETS ARE?

The website for the Center for Economic Studies (CES) at [US Census Bureau](#) provides the most up to date posted information about available data sets. The [CPFSRDC website](#) provides related resources and some broad information on popular datasets that may help you get started.

Information about available data is often hard to obtain. The FSRDC Administrator is an important resource for answering these questions. Researchers should contact the FSRDC Administrator to verify information they have located on their own and to pose questions that researchers cannot answer on their own.

3. CAN GRADUATE STUDENTS WORK ON PROJECTS IN THE FSRDC?

Graduate students can work on FSRDC projects in two capacities. First, graduate students can work on FSRDC projects as research assistants working with senior investigators. In addition, doctoral students can work on dissertation and other advanced projects where they are then principle investigator.

Graduate students wishing to undertake FSRDC projects must have the endorsement and support of a faculty-level research (usually the student’s committee chair).

Graduate students undertaking FSRDC projects to meet degree requirements (e.g., dissertation projects) must review the timeline for their project with the FSRDC Executive Director to gain approval. The purpose of this review is to assure that the anticipated timeline is realistic and also to assure that all concerned are fully informed about the nature of FSRDC research projects and how it can impact student progress toward degree completion.

4. WHAT ARE THE DIFFERENCES BETWEEN PUBLIC AND RESTRICTED ACCESS DATA SETS?

Restricted-access data sets involve data that are covered by federal regulations relating to confidentiality. Such data sets can sometimes be used in the FSRDC research environment, but only if all federal regulations are met in both letter and spirit.

Protecting confidentiality is the highest priority of the FSRDC network. All other concerns are secondary. Researchers should gain an understanding of the implications this carries for FSRDC-based research projects.

5. HOW DO I SUBMIT A PROPOSAL?

Proposals are submitted through the FSRDC Administrator.

Proposals ultimately are reviewed by Census (and/or NCHS and others as appropriate). But proposals should not be submitted directly to these agencies. Project use of the CPFSRDC secure lab requires that the proposal be endorsed by the CPFSRDC Executive Director and the FSRDC administrator. Census will return proposals that bypass CPFSRDC internal review and may potentially impose additional penalties.

The purpose of CPFSRDC internal review is to facilitate FSRDC research. Internal review is geared to increasing the chances for success on Census review. It primarily focuses on non-scientific “risk factors” such as project feasibility, realistic time lines, and proper arrangements for lab access. CPFSRDC endorsement thus signals to Census that the project proposed has been vetted on feasibility and lab access.

6. HOW LONG DOES THE REVIEW PROCESS TAKE AFTER A PROPOSAL HAS BEEN SUBMITTED?

This is addressed in more detail in a broader FAQ. Briefly, review time varies but will usually take at least 90-120 days (3-4 months). Relevant factors include the complexity of the project and which federal regulations apply the data being used in the project.

7. CAN INTERNATIONAL RESEARCHERS (I.E., NON US CITIZENS) USE THE FSRDC?

Non-US citizens can work on FSRDC-based research projects including as principle investigator. Researchers and graduate students must have appropriate institutional affiliations and proper arrangements to lab access.

Review to obtain special sworn status often takes longer for non-US citizens. But most researchers with uncomplicated backgrounds will gain approval.

8. DO I HAVE TO CONDUCT ANALYSIS IN THE SECURE LAB AT University of Nebraska-Lincoln?

Mostly yes with limited exceptions. Analysis of restricted-access data can only be conducted in the physical site of the secure computing lab. The CPFSDC's secure lab is in Lincoln, Nebraska (Whittier Building, 2200 Vine Street). There is no remote access; researchers must be on site to use the lab. They also must have Special Sworn Status to gain access to the secure lab.

There are two exceptions. One exception is that, with proper arrangements, researchers can conduct research in secure labs at other FSRDC sites in the national FSRDC network. Thus, for example, a researcher with a CPFSDC project could potentially conduct analysis at another FSRDC site. The second exception is that researchers can, with proper arrangements, conduct some forms of analysis from long distance by working with a CPFSDC research analyst who is on site.

9. HOW MUCH DOES IT COST TO CARRY OUT A RESEARCH PROJECT IN THE FSRDC?

All FSRDCs charge lab fees for projects to help cover the expenses of operating the facility. FSRDCs are all part of one national network and do not compete on lab fees. Specific fees vary by locality and project depending on a variety of factors (e.g. consortium memberships, complexity and scale of projects, etc.). Lab fees for the CPFSDC are similar to those at other FSRDCs.

Researchers affiliated with the CPFSDC consortium members are charged a fee of \$5,000 per project-year. Projects that exclusively use health data sets receive a 20 percent discount due to lower administrative cost for the RDC. CPFSDC consortium researchers are encouraged to use the RDC and will be given vouchers to cover access fees to the extent possible. Health data sets, in particular, involve separate CDC/NCHS fees that are paid to the CDC and are not covered by CPFSDC vouchers. UNL researchers may be able to obtain vouchers to cover these costs from the Social and Behavioral Sciences Research Consortium-SBSRC. Researchers not affiliated with the CPFSDC consortium are charged a fee of \$15,000 per project-year.

10. WHAT IS THE CPFSDC CONSORTIUM?

The CPFSDC Consortium is a group of institutions that have made long-term funding commitments to support the CPFSDC. Their participation makes the CPFSDC viable. In return, researchers at these institutions receive very favorable terms for using the services and facilities the CPFSDC offers. University of Nebraska-Lincoln is the lead institution in the consortium. The University of Nebraska Medical Center, University of South Dakota, Iowa State University and Iowa University are partners in the consortium.

By design, consortium membership is the preferred and most cost-effective way for research institutions to take advantage of the resources of the CPFSRDC. CPFSRDC welcomes inquiries about institutional membership. Please contact the [Executive Director](#) to learn about membership costs, the various ways institutions can cover these costs, and the benefits and responsibilities associated with membership.

11. WHAT IS A RESEARCH ANALYST?

The CPFSRDC can, under certain circumstances, assign a research analyst to assist researchers who are undertaking FSRDC projects. The purpose of doing so is to facilitate the preparation and review of data sets that will be used for primary analysis (e.g., by merging files, inspecting variables, sub-setting cases, etc.). This can then make it possible for researchers not from Lincoln to be more productive when they travel to Lincoln to perform analyses in the lab.

Research analysts would not directly conduct or assist with primary data analysis for a project. Assistance of this nature must be negotiated with the Executive Director and will usually involve special fees or arrangements.

12. CAN I USE THE FSRDC TO PERFORM “SPECIAL TABULATIONS” TO GENERATE DETAILED, CUSTOM DATA FOR PUBLIC DISTRIBUTION AND USE IN RESEARCH AND PLANNING?

Bluntly, the answer is probably “no”. More optimistically, the answer is “maybe”, but only with careful thought and planning to overcome difficult obstacles.

Researchers can generate detailed tabulations as part of the analyses conducted to answer the questions posed by the research project. In general, however, these tabulations cannot be made public and used outside of the secure lab. The reason for this is simple; federal regulations protecting confidentiality impose strict guidelines on the kinds of tabulations data that can be publicly released. Most special tabulations cannot be released under these guidelines.

The internal CPFSRDC proposal review and the Census proposal review both give close attention to the question of what data products from the project can be released for public distribution. The issue is important to project feasibility. Accordingly, researchers should consult with the FSRDC Administrator early in the proposal development process to gain a better understanding of this and other issues relating to “disclosure” of project results.

13. WHAT ARE CENSUS BENEFITS? WHY ARE THEY REQUIRED IN FSRDC PROJECTS? IS IT DIFFICULT TO SATISFY THIS REQUIREMENT?

Census benefits are benefits that a research project generates for the U.S. Census Bureau by contributing to improving the Census' activities and procedures. Many potential benefits are recognized; most involve generating useful information to the Census regarding their data products and the procedures used to generate the data products.

Census benefits are mandated by the federal regulations that specify the conditions under which researchers can work with restricted access census data. Projects must provide benefits to the census. This is important and non-negotiable; it is the legal basis for allowing researchers to work with restricted access data.

Most projects have good potential to provide census benefits. So the requirement usually will not be an obstacle to undertaking an FSRDC project. The key is for the researcher to understand the nature of what is required and to offer benefits that are appropriate under the guidelines.

The FSRDC Administrator is well-informed on the relevant issues and can help researchers identify the potential benefits a project can provide. We advise researchers to discuss the issue with the FSRDC Administrator before giving time and effort to thinking about census benefits.

A longer discussion of this subject can be found at the following link on [Census Benefits](#).

14. ARE CENSUS BENEFITS REQUIRED FOR ALL FSRDC PROJECTS?

Yes, but the nature of the requirement varies. All FSRDC projects must provide some kind of recognized benefit. But the kinds of benefits that are recognized depends on the type of restricted-access data used in the project.

Projects that use restricted-access data from NCHS can meet the benefits requirement by generating new knowledge that helps improve understanding of public health. Most NCHS projects easily meet this requirement.

Projects that use restricted-access census data must specifically contribute to improving census data products and the procedures that generate the data products. Most projects can meet this requirement. But what is required is more specific in nature. So researchers must give close attention to understanding what benefits will be recognized as appropriate.

Projects that use restricted-access data in the federal statistical that are not “standard” census data products, often are subject to additional benefit requirements. Projects can and regularly do meet these requirements. But researchers must give close attention to understanding what will be recognized as appropriate.

15. WHAT Is a Federal Statistical RESEARCH DATA CENTER (FSRDC)?

Federal Statistical Research Data Centers (FSRDCs) are U.S. Census Bureau facilities, staffed by a Census Bureau employee, which meet all physical and computer security requirements for access to restricted-use data. At FSRDCs, qualified researchers with approved projects receive restricted access to selected non-public statistical system data. Please visit the Census website for more on the [FSRDCs](#) and our [federal partners](#).

16. WHAT IS SPECIAL SWORN STATUS?

The Census Bureau gives Special Sworn Status to individuals to conduct work that specifically benefits a Census Bureau program. Title 13 of the U.S. Code permits these activities under Section 23 (c). Moreover, these individuals are sworn to protect the data as Census Bureau employees are sworn, and they are subject to the same legal obligations and penalties.

17. WHO DETERMINES WHETHER A RESEARCHER IS ELIGIBLE TO DO WORK AT AN FSRDC?

All proposals to carry out research at an FSRDC must be approved by the Census Bureau. If data are provided by other agencies (e.g., the Social Security Administration), the other agencies must approve of the project as well.