

Remote Access

to data from official statistics agencies
and social security agencies

– English Summary –

The full report is available in German on <https://doi.org/10.17620/02671.42>



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Abstract

■ Microdata, i.e. data which include detailed information, on e.g. individuals or companies (making it confidential microdata) from official German statistics agencies as well as from social security agencies are important for empirical social and economic research. Currently, much of these microdata can only be accessed on-site from designated workplaces at the data producer's research data centre (RDC). Some RDCs allow remote execution of statistical program code on these microdata but visual examination from a remote workplace remains forbidden.

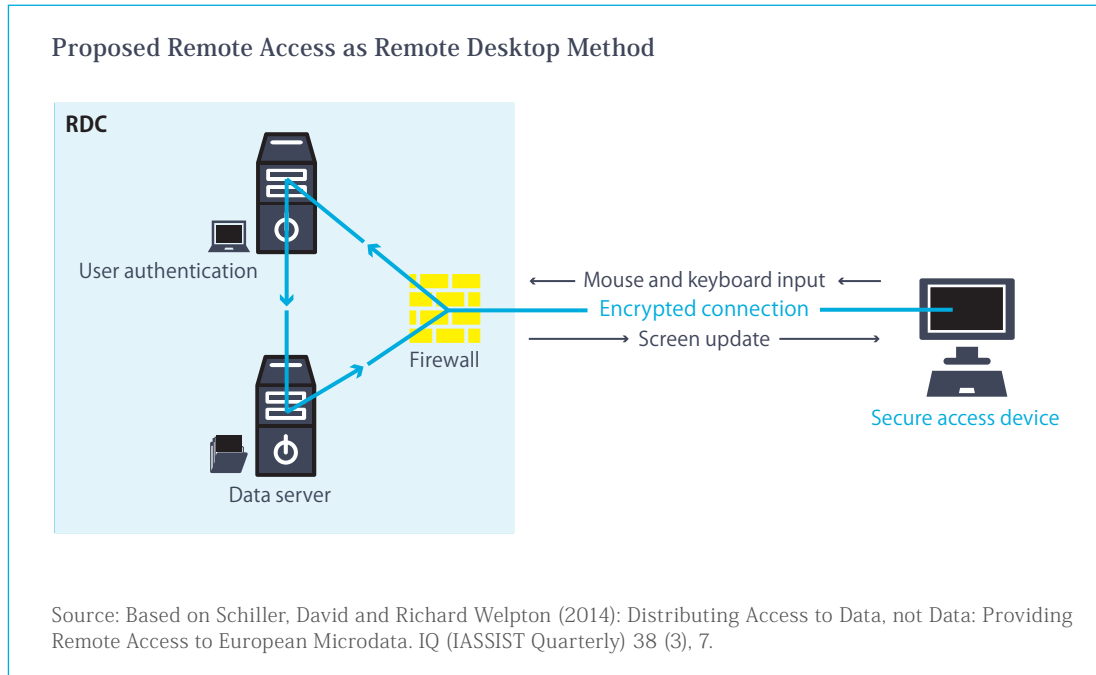
The current data access procedures are a significant improvement on the situation 16 years ago when RDCs were first established in Germany. However, they still require researchers to invest considerable time and resources into data access. It is therefore important to modernise the access to microdata in Germany to make it more efficient for both researchers and data producers. For some time now, the official statistics agencies in Scandinavian countries and in the Netherlands have established the legal and technical basis for researchers to access confidential microdata remotely by using remote desktop applications. These countries can serve as role models for modernisation efforts in Germany.

This paper introduces various access methods and makes recommendations: through pilot projects, Germany should establish a remote desktop procedure for accessing microdata from official statistics agencies and social security agencies. The official statistics agencies at the federal and Länder level, social security agencies, researchers, and data protection stakeholders should cooperate very closely within these pilot projects. The German Data Forum (RatSWD) recommends changing § 16(6) of the Federal Statistical Act to allow accessing formally anonymised data held at the official statistics agencies via remote desktop applications. Such pilot projects would bolster Germany's appeal as a research location. With the cooperation of research-funding institutions, the pilot projects could be implemented in a way that guarantees legal certainty and high data availability.

Recommendations

■ Internationally, remote access to confidential microdata from official statistics agencies and social security agencies is no new territory. The experience of other countries and a small number of German RDCs can be used to guide implementation in Germany. Remote desktop access would benefit both researchers and data producers. It would also allow to more fully tap the analytical potential of microdata.

While a uniform approach would be preferable, the remote desktop procedures may need to vary according to specific legal requirements for different kinds of microdata. In some cases, a change in the law is necessary. The RDC at the Institute for Employment Research (IAB), in cooperation with other data agencies, could take on a pioneering role because a pilot project for remote desktop access to IAB data would likely not require any legal changes. Data provided through remote desktop applications should in substance have the same analytical potential as the data currently available in on-site workplaces. At the same time, trips to RDCs will no longer be the rule but the exception.



According to our understanding of the law, implementing remote desktop access to **formally anonymised microdata** from social security agencies and to **factually anonymised microdata** from official statistics is possible. I.e., while social security agencies presumably do not require any legal changes to make formally anonymised microdata available remotely, official statistics agencies see a need for legal regulation or clarification. Not only researchers, but also research funding institutions and the Federal Ministry of Education and Research should be interested in improving the research conditions for German researchers and in catching up with the European competition in terms of data accessibility.

Recommendation 1

Pilot projects for implementing remote desktop access

Research-funding institutions should commit to improving the research conditions in Germany and support pilot projects for a legally secure and user friendly implementation of remote access with flexible access times.

Recommendation 2

Creating a federal legal basis for remote desktop access to statistics

The Federal Ministry of the Interior should push for changing §16(6) of the Federal Statistical Act so as to facilitate remote desktop access to formally anonymised microdata.

The official rationale given with the law is important. Since the law does not specify standards for implementation and operationalisation, the accompanying rationale should define the meaning of terms such as secure data access and methods of protecting confidentiality. The security level of remote desktop solutions should be comparable to on-site access at a designated workplace – not in detail but in the overall assessment. At the same time, it merits consideration whether the current requirements for such workplaces are up-to-date. Without a remote desktop solution, working with microdata remains highly restrictive in Germany and stands in contrast to the legitimate needs of scientists and researchers. They share their findings with the scientific community and the public at large, and provide evidence-based policy advice.

The experience gained throughout the 16-year history of RDCs in Germany, as well as the experiences in other countries, where much more confidential microdata are available via remote desktop procedures for research purposes, show that scientists and researchers overall are responsible actors. Ultimately, as the contracting parties, scientific institutions bear the responsibility for preventing improper use of data. The reputational damage to an institution resulting from its researchers' misconduct can hardly be overestimated. Moreover, since research data access is the lifeline of these institutions, the use of sanctions is a highly effective means of preventing misconduct. In Scandinavian countries, for example, contracts contain clauses to block data access for entire institutions.

Since remote access to data held by social security agencies would presumably not require any legal changes, a pilot project for identifying possible scenarios can be launched soon. In order to create a remote desktop solution that is as generic as possible, official statistics agencies should also be involved in this pilot project, although their participation would currently be limited to de-facto anonymised microdata.

Recommendation 3

Timely implementation of remote access pilot projects

The official statistics agencies at the federal and Länder level, social security agencies, researchers, and data protection stakeholders should jointly set up pilot projects to develop remote desktop scenarios. These scenarios should be tested using existing and adequately anonymised data sources in accordance with the current legal situation and take previous international experience into account.

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■ Established in 2004, the **German Data Forum** (Rat für Sozial- und Wirtschaftsdaten, RatSWD) is an independent council. It advises the German federal government and the federal states (Länder) in matters concerning the research data infrastructure for the empirical social, behavioural, and economic sciences. The German Data Forum (RatSWD) has 16 members. Membership consists of eight elected representatives of the social, behavioural, and economic sciences and eight appointed representatives of Germany's most important data producers.

The German Data Forum (RatSWD) offers a forum for dialogue between researchers and data producers, who jointly issue recommendations and position papers. The council furthers the development of a research infrastructure that provides researchers with flexible and secure access to a broad range of data. The German Data Forum (RatSWD) has accredited 34 research data centres (as of April 2020) and fosters their interaction and collaboration.