Aim of the Centre for Economic Demography

The aims of the Centre for Economic Demography (hereafter referred to as CED) are to (a) improve our knowledge of individual behaviour, family organisation, and demographic outcomes during the period when Sweden was transformed from an agricultural to an industrial society and the welfare state was founded, (b) improve our understanding of contemporary behaviour through a full life-course approach, (c) analyse the role of intergenerational factors on such behaviour and (d) analyse the influence of economic change and development of welfare institutions on behaviour and the macro consequences thereof.

The cornerstone of this effort will be an expansion of the existing Scanian Demographic Database (SDD) to add data on individuals and families from the period 1895 to 1968. The Scanian Demographic Database currently comprises individual- and family-level data for the residents of a sample of urban and rural Scanian parishes from 1646 to 1895. It has already proven to be a rich source for the study of interrelationships between socioeconomic change and demographic behaviour during the eighteenth and nineteenth century. By extending the SDD forward in time to 1968, we will be able to follow individuals and families through time as Sweden transformed from a largely agricultural society in the nineteenth century to a modern industrial society in the middle of the twentieth century. Thus, for example, it will be possible to use the SDD to analyse the influence of the social and economic changes during the first half of the twentieth century on social mobility, migration, family formation, fertility, health, and mortality. The time depth of the data, moreover, means that it will not only be possible to follow individuals from birth until death, but that it will be possible to follow families from one generation to the next, and therefore study intergenerational associations in economic, social, and health outcomes.

Once the data from 1895 to 1968 have been added to the existing SDD, we will link them to existing data registers that cover the entire Swedish population from 1968 until today. This will allow us to follow our study population to the present day, regardless of where they live in Sweden. In fact, through additional data linkage, we can also trace them if they migrated to the other Nordic countries. As a result, we will be able to follow a sample of Scanian families and individuals for almost 350 years, from the mid-seventeenth century to the present.

Closing the data gap between 1895 and 1968 will remove a key obstacle in understanding the sources and implications of Sweden’s economic, social, and demographic transformations in the first half of the twentieth century. Even though this was the period during which Sweden industrialised and modernised, and the social policies that remain a defining feature of contemporary Sweden were first introduced, the existing gap in individual- and family-level data means that we have only a broad outline of the processes associated with these changes, which is derived from aggregated data. In the absence of micro-level data, we have little information about how the timing of important social and demographic changes varied across different segments of the population. Nor do we know much about how the implications of political, social, and economic change varied for different segments of the population.

Closing the data gap will yield new insight into several long-standing questions, such as the causes of the fertility decline in Sweden during the first half of the century. With individual- and family-level data, we will be able to identify the segments of the population that led or lagged in the decline and thereby gain insight into the complex interplay of motivations and strategies that underlay fertility change. Since the early twentieth-century, fertility decline was the precursor to the contemporary era of very low fertility. Understanding it better will yield insight into the current situation.

Closing the gap will also yield insight into the dramatic decline of infant and child mortality in Sweden at the beginning of the twentieth century, as well as a number of other important transformations. Through analysis of micro-level data, we will be able to assess whether these changes were the result of investments at the familial or societal level, investments that might differ between socioeconomic groups, or might have differing impacts. With appropriate data at the individual-level, we will be able to model this process in an adequate way. Again, the long-term effect is
important, since improvements in living conditions during childhood have long-lasting effects on health; one of the factors that contribute to individual ageing today.

The data will illuminate not only processes of demographic change, but also processes of economic and social change. Among the phenomena that we will be able to examine are changes over time in labour force participation, migration, social mobility, and the shift from single-earner to two-earner households. Even though all of these processes lay at the heart of the formation of contemporary society, there is a lacuna of knowledge, particularly in understanding how they unfolded at the level of individuals and families, and varied across different segments of the population.

Finally, the data will allow for evaluation of the implications of the economic and social policies that are a defining feature of contemporary Sweden. The modern welfare system dates back to institutional changes at the beginning of the twentieth century, when Sweden was the first country in the world to launch a pension system covering the entire population. The only problem was that the elderly could not live on the pensions alone until the 1950s. Meanwhile, family, former employers, and the local community played an important role in providing care for the elderly, as well as for the sick and the poor. In what mix it was provided, we do not know. The extended SDD can also in this respect play an important role in that it will allow us to evaluate these various welfare interventions at an individual level taking sex, age, and socioeconomic group into account, as well as the importance of kinship. While other countries, in certain respects, have even better welfare systems today, Sweden is world known to have widest coverage throughout the life-course. However, much of this development took place fairly recently. It was only in the 1970s that the welfare systems were expanded to cover the entire lifespan in a fairly generous way. This was also the decade when specific programs and measures aimed at facilitating the labour force participation of women and economic equality between Swedish men and women (e.g. parental leave, subsidized public childcare, and individual income taxation) were instituted.

The data gap is not due to lack of sources but to the fact that the data, for various reasons, never have been digitised. The situation is similar in almost all countries, which is one reason why we have taken the initiative to an international project in this area. Another reason is that we have previously gained tremendously from our international comparative research, as it has allowed us to study similar processes in different environments. In the new research environment, we expect the gains from international collaborations to be even greater, since our aim is to analyse processes which change only slowly over time, like the fertility and mortality transitions. Here, comparisons between different social and economic settings are potentially even more valuable. We have therefore already taken a number of steps to secure international collaborations and comparisons as well as other measures to develop a new area of research.

It is obvious from what has been said above that “closing the gap” provides great potential for new findings within the main areas of Economic Demography. The same goes, we would argue, for findings related to demographic aspects of family formation, the labour market, health issues, and the development of early modern welfare systems. By closing the gap we are opening up a rich new area of social and economic research. The database can, in addition, be used for research in many other research areas as well.