The Quick-Start Guide to TRAC and TRACFED

The Transactional Records Access Clearinghouse (TRAC) is a nonpartisan data gathering, data research and data distribution organization associated with Syracuse University. Its mission:

To provide the American people with comprehensive information they need to fairly judge the effectiveness of the federal government.

Using data obtained from many government organizations largely through the Freedom of Information Act, TRAC has built a democracy oversight tool of unprecedented accuracy, magnitude, and ease of use.

TRAC was established in 1989 as a research center at Syracuse University. It has offices there, and in Washington, D.C. TRAC is supported by Syracuse University, subscriber fees, and numerous charitable foundations. For a complete list of TRAC's foundation supporters, customer case studies or to learn more about these philanthropic organizations, follow the **About Us** link on our home page.

TRAC maintains two Web sites – one is a free public site, the other is a data warehouse known as TRACFED. Both can be accessed from TRAC's public site and home page at: **http://trac.syr.edu**

Public Site

As a public service, TRAC maintains a free online destination that offers data, statistics and reports on six Federal enforcement agencies. The TRAC public site is arranged by agency and features data sets, stats, historical essays and maps for the following agencies: Customs, INS, ATF, DEA, FBI and the IRS. Each of these Sites is updated periodically. These updates are frequently accompanied by TRAC Special Advisories.

The public site is a good starting point for users who are unfamiliar with TRAC or simply wish to obtain a broad overview of agency activity. The public site's **TRAC at Work** link provides summaries and examples of how reporters, lawmakers, researchers and other users have used TRAC data.

The **What's New** link contains news and updates on TRAC's FOIA actions, technology improvements and data updates.

Understanding TRACFED

TRACFED is a unique and powerful resource for comprehensive, authoritative and understandable information about the government's most important activities. Each of the six layers contains essential tools and information for oversight, research, and accountability enforcement.

Each layer of TRACFED comprises many different databases of information. For example:

- Criminal and Civil layers list national and regional trends for enforcement, but can also focus all the way down to case-by-case listings with details on why a case was declined for prosecution or the sentence imposed by the courts on a guilty party.

- The Administrative layer contains information on the administrative proceedings pertinent to the Internal Revenue Service. Information on audit rates, time spent on audits, imposed taxation penalties and other day-to-day activities of the IRS are available.

- The People layer shows broad staffing trends for federal agencies as well as individual employees in individual departments including their name, title, work schedule, and pay grades. The Judges section of the People layer contains a wide-range of information on the performance of federal judges, by workload, sentencing, and other critical factors.

- The Context layer provides recent demographic and economic information for the entire nation. The Context layer contains census statistics for population, income, ethnic and age distributions for every state, county, and judicial district.

Each layer provides up to three tools for retrieving information:

- Express – This tool is available in every layer.

- Going Deeper – This tool is available in the Criminal, Civil, and People and Staffing layers.

- Analyzer – This tool is available in the Criminal, Civil, and People and Staffing layers.

While the tools throughout the layers are similar, they differ according to which layer you are exploring. For example, some layers break down information by agency, geography or other factors that best represent the

information they contain. Some layers may not have certain tools depending on the availability of data or the relevance of that particular analysis.

About TRACFED Data

The TRACFED data warehouse is developed and maintained by Syracuse University researchers who search federal agencies' reports, manuals, websites and other such sources to identify relevant systems of records and transactional databases maintained by different agencies. Based on these leads, TRAC researchers make requests for specific data sets and all of the agency documentation describing the details of what is covered and how the information is organized. The requests usually are made under the Freedom of Information Act. Where administrative requests are not successful, court litigation may be required to secure access.

Once the data sets and documentation are in hand, statistical and other kinds of checks are made to test the completeness and reliability of the information that has been provided. Data from different sources about similar events may be compared or merged as a further check on data set reliability. Data sets and fields not measuring up are not used for analyses. Numerous performance criteria are defined and indicators developed. The linking, grouping, and classification variables that will be used to place the data into geo-political-temporal context are then developed and added to the data. Because the contextual needs of users may be quite different depending on their interests, TRAC attempts to provide as much related information as possible including geography, population, time trends, constant/real dollars, etc. Finally, the data are added to TRAC's data warehouse and made available via specially designed web sites.

TRAC obtains data from many different sources including the Executive Office for United States Attorneys in the Justice Department, the Administrative Office of United States Courts, the Office of Personnel Management, the Internal Revenue Service, the Environmental Protection Agency, the Census Bureau, and a range of other specialized federal agencies. Areas covered include criminal enforcement, civil actions, administrative enforcement by the IRS, federal staffing, federal expenditures and more.

Layers

TRACFED is a dynamic site that provides vast amounts of data to examine federal staffing, expenditures, national demographics and federal law enforcement. TRACFED is divided into 6 broad layers that are the overarching themes of TRACFED data:

- **Criminal**
- **Civil**
- **Administrative**
- **People and Staffing**
- **Money and Federal Funds**
- **Community Context**

Criminal

The Criminal Enforcement layer contains data on federal criminal enforcement. This covers all criminal matters handled by the Executive Office for United States Attorneys and specialized divisions of the Justice Department. Data available on this layer cover all matters referred for prosecution by law enforcement agencies and the outcomes of those referrals.

TRAC Help References that may be useful include:
- [Help Section on Criminal Data](#)

Civil

The Civil layer focuses on civil enforcement -- when the federal government sues or gets sued in a civil court action. Common causes of civil actions include civil rights, employment, freedom of information and privacy, antitrust, consumer protection, frauds, torts, forfeitures, taxes, and prisoner suits.

Information available in this layer is limited to matters that are part of the workload of U.S. Attorneys' offices. Thus, conclusions can only be drawn about this component of the federal government's civil enforcement role. Some civil cases are tried outside the jurisdiction of the U.S. Attorneys Office. Certain agencies, like the SEC, are authorized to initiate their own civil matters which are not handled by the Executive Office for U.S. Attorneys. Thus, caution should be used in interpreting results from this layer.

TRAC Help References that may be useful include:
- [Help Section on Civil Data](#)

Administrative

This layer focuses upon the administrative enforcement, i.e. when a federal agency investigates, inspects, audits or otherwise examines individuals and organizations and imposes administrative sanctions when it determines that noncompliance with federal laws has occurred. Administrative enforcement differs from civil enforcement in that these sanctions are imposed *administratively,* without court intervention.

No single existing database covers the diversity of cases encompassed under federal administrative enforcement. ***Currently, this layer allows examination of IRS audit and collection activities.*** TRAC plans to add additional databases to this layer to expand its administrative enforcement coverage as our continuing FOIA efforts result in the release of data.

TRAC Help References that may be useful include:
- [Help Section on Administrative Data](#)

People and Staffing

TRACFED's Staffing layer provides detailed information about most of the civilian employees working for the federal government for the last 25 years. The People and Staffing layer also features a sub-layer to examine in great detail the workload of federal judges.

The Judges sub-layer features both active and inactive members of the federal bench by district. Available tools allow user to examine the in-depth case profile of a judge, compare a judge's record with the records of his peers both in-district and across the nation, and list the specific cases seen by a particular judge.

The Staffing sub-layer allows users to examine staffing trends by agency or geographic break-down. The data analysis tools allow TRACFED users to examine part-time, full-time, supervisory, management, administrative and other employees at a given federal Agency. The People and Staffing layer even lets you drill down to names, salaries, and seniority for most government employees. Currently, the People and Staffing layer does not contain information on Congress, the judicial branch, U.S. Postal Service, uniformed personnel of the Department of Defense and intelligence personnel.

TRAC Help References that may be useful include:
- [Help Section on People and Staffing Data](#)

Money and Federal Funds

The Money and Funding layer of TRACFED contains specific information on the disbursement of Federal funds throughout the United States. The information in this layer shows broad trends in Federal spending as well as dollar expenditures for individual programs and initiatives like the School Lunch Program, Crop Insurance, and Pell Grants in counties, states or judicial districts. Information includes actual dollar expenditures (as well as these figures after inflation adjustments), per capita expenditures, percentages and rankings.

TRAC Help References that may be useful include:
[Help Section on Money and Federal Funds Data](#)

Community Context

The Community Context layer provides a simple and comprehensible means of viewing detailed population data for the entire country as a whole, or states, judicial districts and counties. Population data can be broken down within the Community Context layer to show factors such as income, race, and professions in the geographic areas. Community Context Data provide some "context" to interpret other data that can be found throughout TRACFED.

TRAC Help References that may be useful include:
[Help Section on Community Context Data](#)

Layer Tools

There are three tools for looking at the data in TRACFED:

- **Express**
- **Going Deeper**
- **Analyzer**

First, we'll take a look at Express.

Express

Express provides a simple means of quickly retrieving information from TRAC data warehouses. Express enables users to examine and compare broad categories of information.

Using pull-down menus, users can build dynamic queries based on the available options. Results can be tailored through the query builder so that the desired information is returned in alphabetical order, national ranking order, graphical or map displays. It is not possible to get case-by-case listings using the Express tool, however Express is a great jumping off point for in-depth inquiries.

Tip:

When examining criminal and civil enforcement activities, yearly counts for referrals, prosecutions, convictions or declinations do not always appear to "add up." A data table, for example, occasionally may show that in one year there were more prosecutions than referrals. How could this be? The explanation is that matters flow through the criminal justice system over time, with a particular matter sometimes being referred in one year, prosecuted in the next and reaching the verdict stage in a third.

The Express tool provides a series of data perspective options based on the layer the user is exploring (e.g. Express provides "Agency" and "Programs" Perspectives in the Criminal layer, or "Judicial District" and "County" Perspectives in the People layer).

Data Perspectives by Layer

Express offers different Perspectives for looking at the data. Perspectives offered in each of the layers sometimes differ according to the subject matter. In the criminal layer you can look at data by agency, program and lead charge. The Perspectives offered in other layers differ according to

the nature of the data. Following is a table listing each layer and the Perspectives available:

Criminal Layer	Civil Layer	Administrative Layer	People and Staffing Layer	Money Layer	Context Layer
Overall Agencies Programs Lead Charge	Overall Agencies Causes	National District Income Classes Selection Reason Auditor Type	State Federal District County	State Federal District County	State Federal District County

Perspective Tools

Each data Perspective has a series of data Perspective Tools. Each of these Perspective Tools provides different ways to breakdown and analyze a given set of data.

TRACFED layers generally feature the same perspective tools. They are:

Focus

Focus provides focused information on a user-selected topic on different geographic areas. For example, the user can choose Focus and obtain a breadth of information about the activities of a given agency in any one of the 90 federal judicial districts in the United States or in the nation as a whole.

Rank

Rank orders the appropriate geographic units depending on the layer, on a user-selected factor. These can include state, federal judicial district, IRS district, county, etc. Under Rank, the user can determine how various kinds of enforcement efforts of selected agencies in different geographic areas measure up to each other.

Compare

Compare provides comparisons of all or some agencies, programs, staffing, spending or other activities based on a user-selected factor for a particular district, state or the U.S. as a whole. The Compare tool does not compare states or districts to one another. For this information, select Rank.

Trend

Trend provides graphs and tables showing long-term federal activity, in some cases, going as far back as the mid-1970s. Trends are available for enforcement, staffing and spending specific agencies. In the Context layer, for example, Trend allows the examination of population changes a

particular county, district, state, or the U.S. as a whole. In the Criminal Layer, you can compare the criminal enforcement activities of major agencies from 1986 to the George W. Bush administration with three earlier presidential administrations -- Clinton, Bush, and Reagan -- in your district or in the nation as a whole.

Going Deeper

The Going Deeper tool is a more sophisticated data analysis resource than Express. Going Deeper allows users to zoom all the way in to individual case-by-case information on criminal and civil matters. For the People and Staffing layer, Going Deeper lets users zoom all the way in to individual employees. The design of Going Deeper allows for complete dynamic query development that enables users to determine the order in which they can view certain variables.

Going Deeper is currently available for three of the six layers:
- Criminal
- Civil
- People and Staffing

Going Deeper is an extremely powerful tool, and despite its daunting appearance, it is surprisingly simple to master. You must select Drill Variables in the proper order, first and foremost. Each layers' Going Deeper tool has query building steps and options that are slightly different according to the variables in each layer.

Both the Criminal and Civil Going Deeper tools have three steps:
- Select Drill Variables
- Select Stage to Focus On
- Select Performance Stats

The People and Staffing Going Deeper tool only requires two steps:
- Select Drill Variables
- Select Staffing Statistics

Starting Off: Drill Variables

Each layers' Going Deeper tool will first ask you to select "Drill Variables". These variables are the most important aspect of creating your Going Deeper query. They determine the type of information you will receive and the order in which they are selected (or de-selected) determines the order that certain variables will be returned to you on the screen. You can select more than one variable from the list and a separate table is created

for each. For example, if you choose "Fiscal Year," first, and "Agency" second, then the table produced will begin with one row of data for each year. After selecting a year, you will then be given a list of available agencies for this data.

Tip:

Selecting the drill variables in the proper order will facilitate comparisons. For example, if you are interested in using the Civil data to examine how referrals for social security appeals have varied over the years in a certain district, the last drill variable you choose should be year.

On the other hand, if you want to look at how a district compares to other districts on referrals for social security appeals for this year, then the last drill variable should be district. In both cases, the drill variables are the same (year, district, cause of action), but the last variable chosen will determine the table that will be used for the comparison.

Either way, by clicking the final drill variable, Going Deeper will ultimately present a case-by-case listing of all the records that pertain to the query criteria.

Tables in Going Deeper are linked so that when a table is returned you can click on a particular row and then only the cases in that row are included in the next table. This selection process lets you focus your attention on interesting subsets of data that you define incrementally by choosing row categories in each sequential table.

At the end of this selection process you will be able to view the individual records in the data subset you have defined. There is a limit of 500 records which can be displayed. If your subset is larger than this you need to refine your selection criteria by choosing additional drill variables.

Viewing the Data: Enhancing Going Deeper Queries

Once you have selected "Drill Variables" in Going Deeper, you are presented with options based on the data available in the particular layer. For example, the Criminal layer's Going Deeper asks for "Stage Focus" – this selection will return the cases that are at the various stages within the criminal enforcement process. Since the Civil Enforcement process is quite different, the "Stage Focus" options are different too.

You may select multiple stages to focus on. However, when you drill down to the individual referral-by-referral records, the "top" variable chosen for the "stage" will control the subset of individual records selected to list at the last step.

Tip:

When selecting "Stage to Focus on", be sure to distinguish between Referrals Received and Referrals Disposed of. If you are interested in outcomes such as declinations, court filings, convictions, sentences, monetary relief, etc., then you want to be sure to select Referrals Disposed of to view.

The third option available in both the Criminal and Civil layer is "Select Performance Stats". These optional variables produce statistical representations of the selected data. You may select multiple variables to display.

Tip:

It is recommended that you always select the relevant count along with the corresponding percents, averages or rates. This is because statistics based upon a small number of occurrences can be misleading. For example, if you are interested in the "Referral Rate," to display the relevant case-by-case listings and their outcomes.

The second Going Deeper option in the People and Staffing layer concerns "Staffing Statistics". This provides a breakdown based on the Office of Personnel Management's criteria on federal employees. Again, you may select more than one staffing statistic when you are building a Going Deeper query.

Analyzer

Analyzer is a more advanced and powerful tool than both Express and Going Deeper. Analyzer lets you create your own data slice on a selected subject like civil rights or the environment, or by a specific agency or statute. Analyzer then creates a custom data slice and lets you analyze it using tools for detailed analysis similar to those found in Express.

Like Going Deeper, Analyzer is only available on the following three layers:
* Criminal

- Civil
- People and Staffing

Because Analyzer is a more powerful tool, we highly recommend that you first take the **Guided Tour** for Analyzer to familiarize yourself with the available choices.

Creating a Data Slice

Once you have familiarized yourself with Analyzer, the first step is to create your own data slice by selecting the "**Data**" link on the left-hand menu bar. This data can concern variables like geographic area, year, or agency. The pull-down menus allow you to pick from a list of most common variables. For greater detail, click "**codes**" to peruse the complete list of available options. Once you have selected the variables for your data slice, click *"create data slice."*

Tip:

Don't use the default "mydata" name for your data slice. Name your data slice something different that you will remember. This will keep Analyzer from writing over data slices of the same name. And it will also help you to remember your request later.

When you select *"create data slice",* your order is transmitted to TRAC's server, and the data slice is created and then stored in your Web Locker for later analysis. The Web Locker is an online data repository specific to an individual user or group.

Because creating a data slice may take more time than is normally necessary in Express and Going Deeper, the user may need to use the "Job Refresh" button in the Web Locker or request e-mail notification when processing is complete.

Using Analyzer's Power Features

Once your data slice has been successfully created, you will use the four power analysis options to analyze it. The four analysis options are:

- List
List enables you to display the individual referral-by-referral records in their entirety – like the list that can be generated in Going Deeper, except without the restrictions on number of records.

- Explore

Explore lets you examine the makeup of your data slice along a number of relevant categories.

- Focus

Focus allows you to undertake the same close examination capabilities found in Express, except here the Focus is on the special data slice that you have created.

- Rank

Rank enables the same ranking analysis found in Express, but again Analyzer lets you perform this task on your specific data slice.

These analyses will be completed and returned to your Web Locker.

Learn More About TRAC

There is a great deal more to learn about the Transactional Records Access Clearinghouse and TRACFED.

From our Web pages, you can learn more about our supporters, our research and our ongoing efforts to procure public information from the Federal government.

Here is a link to our online brochure: http://trac.syr.edu/whatsnew/brochure.pdf

If you need help using TRAC please refer to our online help pages, our online FAQ sheet or call our tech support help-line at (202) 518-9000.

And here is how you can contact us in our offices in Syracuse and in Washington, DC:

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