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Reconstructing a country: linking over 12 million lives in the Dutch civil registry, 1812-1967

Historical research has profited greatly from the increasing availability of data. The creation of large datasets on historical populations has allowed us to compare individual life courses and move beyond comparisons of aggregated data. In the Netherlands alone, life course reconstitutions using a standardized sample of the population registers – the Historical Sample of the Netherlands – resulted in over 400 publications. These publications have given us a lot of insight into lives in the latter half of the 19th century and first half of the 20th century. However, research is increasingly restricted by the small sample size.

In the Netherlands, the CLARIAH project aims to reconstruct the entire Dutch population between 1812 and 1967. Over the past few years, scores of civil certificates from the civil registry have been digitized. Vital event registers contain all births, marriages, and deaths in the Netherlands from 1812 onwards and are available until 1919, 1944, and 1969, respectively. Currently, we are reconstructing the life courses of everyone who lived in the Netherlands between 1812 and 1967 into one database: LINKS-Netherlands. In our presentation, we give an update on the state of affairs, and the infrastructure that will provide access to the data. The resulting database will be an important impetus to future historical research, as it is much larger than previously available datasets for the Netherlands. For example, ages at death are available for over 12 million individuals, whereas the HSN contains about 65,000 known lifespans. However, the strongest benefit of a digitised civil registry is that it can be matched with other sources and serve as a backbone for further historical reconstruction. Demographic information from LINKS-Netherlands can be linked with other sources, such as the census, land registers, passenger lists, or tax registers.