

THE DISTRICTS THAT VANISHED: ADMINISTRATIVE REORGANISATION AND THE SILENT UNBALANCING OF A NATIONAL PANEL

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ABSTRACT

Administrative datasets are indexed by present-day geography, but the entities recorded in them are compared across time. This note documents what happens when the two disagree. The national expenditure portal for Indonesian regional government returns 508 district-level organisations for the fiscal years 2023 and 2024, and 482 for every year from 2017 to 2022. The 26 missing organisations did not come into existence in 2023; they were reassigned in 2022 to four newly created provinces, and the portal indexes each district under the province to which it belongs now rather than the one it belonged to then. An analyst who takes whatever the source returns therefore compares 482 organisations in 2017 with 508 in 2024 while believing the population constant. The consequence is measurable and one-directional, because the reassigned organisations are unlike those retained: their personnel share of expenditure is 21.65 per cent against 35.19 per cent for the rest, and they carry Rp 44.18 trillion of expenditure between them. Comparing the endpoints on whatever the source returns puts the fall in the national personnel share at 3.27 percentage points; on a consistent panel of the same 482 organisations it is 2.66 points. Nineteen per cent of the apparent change is composition rather than behaviour.

1. INTRODUCTION

Research on organisations increasingly uses administrative data assembled for administration rather than for research. The advantage is coverage: a national reporting system holds every organisation in a population, not a sample of the willing. The cost is that the system is organised around the administrator's needs, and one of those needs is to describe the country as it is now.

This note documents a case where that requirement silently unbalances a panel. The Indonesian regional expenditure portal indexes every district-level government under the province to which it currently belongs. Four provinces were created in 2022. The 26 districts transferred to them are retrievable under their new parents for 2023 and 2024 and not at all for the years before, although the organisations existed throughout and filed returns throughout.

An analyst who queries the source year by year and keeps whatever it returns therefore builds a panel of 482 organisations for 2017 to 2022 and 508 for 2023 and 2024, with nothing in the output to signal the change. The organisations that appear are not a random subset: their personnel share of

expenditure is 13.5 percentage points below the panel mean, and they carry Rp 44.18 trillion of annual expenditure.

The research gap is not that unbalanced panels are unknown — they are among the first things a methods course covers — but that this particular mechanism produces one without any of the usual warning signs. There is no attrition, no non-response, no entry and no failure. The organisations were reclassified, and reclassification is invisible in a source that reports only the present classification.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Administrative data as a research instrument

The first strand concerns what administrative records can and cannot support when they are put to research use.

Lamothe (2024) examines the reliability of a widely used administrative dataset on local government and finds that its research properties differ from its administrative ones in ways users do not always appreciate. Zhu, Xiao and Wu (2022) trace how the construction of an administrative information system shapes what the bureaucracy can subsequently see, which implies that the system's categories become the analyst's categories. Rajala and Jalonon (2025) identify contradictions in public-sector accountability that arise when a record built for one purpose is read for another.

The common point is that an administrative source carries the administration's ontology. Where the administration reorganises, the ontology changes, and a series built on it changes with it whether or not the underlying entities did.

2.2 Comparability across administrative units

The second strand concerns the comparison of subnational organisations, which is the use to which these data are usually put.

Kim and Kang (2024) treat administrative intensity as a construct comparable across public bodies, and Tran and Dollery (2022) apply the same construct to local governments empirically; both require that the set of bodies be stable to be interpretable across time. Pill (2024) argues that local capacity is a property of the organisation rather than of the jurisdiction, a distinction that becomes operational precisely when jurisdictions are redrawn around unchanged organisations.

Collazos-Ortiz and Schakel (2023) note that comparative work on subnational administration is generally constrained by the availability of consistent units, and Jacobsen (2023) shows that structural characteristics of local government drive outcomes in ways that require the structure to be measured consistently. Lee (2026) finds local officials implementing central policy selectively, which is a within-population difference that only a stable population can detect.

2.3 Composition effects and what they resemble

The third strand concerns the specific error at issue: a change in the set of units mistaken for a change in the units.

The fiscal literature supplies several instances in which the composition of a comparison drives the result. Bury, Feld and Burret (2024) quantify fiscal incentives in an equalisation system where the set of recipients determines the measured incentive. Masi, Savoia and Sen (2024) examine whether resource rents depress fiscal capacity, a question whose answer depends on which resource-producing jurisdictions are in the sample. Porto, Puig and Vidal (2026) model subnational budget adjustment where the adjustment path is estimated across a panel whose membership must be constant for the dynamics to be identified.

Aikins (2023) and Singh and Dubey (2026) both study how subnational governments respond to fiscal shocks, and both rely on panels assembled from national reporting systems. Neither reports the construction problem examined here, which is not a criticism: the problem is invisible unless one asks the source the same question about different years and compares the answers.

2.4 The research gap

The gap is that composition changes arising from administrative reclassification are not treated as a distinct threat to validity, because they do not resemble the threats that are. Attrition leaves a trace in the form of missing observations for known units. Non-response leaves a trace in the form of a response rate. Reclassification leaves no trace at all, because the source answers every query completely and correctly for the geography it is describing.

This note supplies a documented instance, quantifies the resulting bias in two headline statistics, and proposes a check that would have caught it.

3. METHOD

The source is the Regional Financial Information System portal of the Directorate General of Fiscal Balance, queried on 30 August 2026 for realised expenditure by Indonesian district-level governments in fiscal years 2017 through 2024. Each query specified the twelfth reporting period, which returns the year complete.

The retrieval procedure is the one an analyst would naturally use. The portal exposes a list of provinces; for each province and year it exposes a list of the organisations belonging to it; for each organisation it returns a statement of budgeted and realised expenditure by account. The procedure iterates over provinces, requests the organisation list for the year in question, and retrieves each organisation's return. Provincial governments and the portal's own roll-up rows are excluded, leaving district-level organisations only.

Two panels are then constructed. The first is the one the procedure yields directly: every district-level organisation the source returns for each year, whatever their number. The second

retains only organisations present in all eight years. The note compares statistics computed on the two.

Three limitations apply. The returns are self-reported and unaudited at this disaggregation. The portal is a live system whose figures are revised, so the analysis is a snapshot of one date. And the note establishes what the portal returns, not what any other source would return; a data series indexed on historical rather than current geography would not exhibit the problem, and Section 4.8 discusses that alternative.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 *What the source returns*

Table 1 reports the number of district-level organisations the retrieval procedure obtained for each year.

Table 1. District-level organisations returned by the source, by fiscal year

Fiscal year	Organisations returned	Total expenditure (IDR trillion)	Note
2017	482	718.18	—
2018	482	732.64	—
2019	482	795.31	—
2020	482	753.24	—
2021	482	759.50	—
2022	482	803.94	Four provinces created during this year
2023	508	854.81	26 organisations appear
2024	508	981.89	—

Compiled by the authors from the Directorate General of Fiscal Balance Regional Financial Information System portal, retrieved 30 August 2026. Expenditure totals are for the organisations returned in each year.

The count is constant at 482 for six years, then rises to 508 and stays there. Nothing in the source announces the change: each annual query returns a complete and internally consistent set of organisations, and the totals reconcile to the portal's own national aggregates for the geography it is reporting.

The naive reading is that 26 organisations were created in 2023. They were not. Every one of them existed throughout the period and filed returns throughout it. What happened in 2022 was that they acquired a different parent province.

4.2 *What actually happened*

Four provinces were created in Indonesia in 2022, all of them in Papua, by four separate statutes.

Table 2. The four provinces created in 2022 and the organisations reassigned to them

Province	Statute	Districts	Districts named
Papua Selatan	Law No. 14 of 2022	4	Merauke, Boven Digoel, Mappi, Asmat
Papua Tengah	Law No. 15 of 2022	8	Mimika, Nabire, Paniai, Puncak Jaya, Puncak, Dogiyai, Intan Jaya, Deiyai
Papua Pegunungan	Law No. 16 of 2022	8	Jayawijaya, Yahukimo, Pegunungan Bintang, Tolikara, Mamberamo Tengah, Yalimo, Lanny Jaya, Nduga
Papua Barat Daya	Law No. 29 of 2022	6	Sorong, Kota Sorong, Raja Ampat, Sorong Selatan, Maybrat, Tambrauw

Compiled by the authors from the establishing statutes and from the province and organisation lists published by the Directorate General of Fiscal Balance Regional Financial Information System portal, retrieved 30 August 2026.

The 26 districts named in Table 2 previously belonged to Papua or to Papua Barat. Their returns for 2017 to 2022 are not lost; they were filed under the parent province of the day. But the portal's organisation list is a function of the province code and the year, and for the new province codes it returns nothing before 2023, because the province did not exist to have members.

This is not a defect in the portal. A system whose purpose is to report the finances of the country's present administrative units is behaving correctly when it declines to place a district in a province that had not been created. The difficulty arises only when the system is used for a purpose it was not built for — comparing the same organisations across time.

4.3 The reassigned organisations are not typical

If the 26 organisations resembled the 482, their absence would cost precision and nothing else. Table 3 shows that they do not.

Table 3. The 26 reassigned organisations compared with the 482 continuously observed

Measure, fiscal year 2024	26 reassigned	482 continuous	Difference
Personnel share of expenditure	21.65%	35.19%	−13.54 points
Capital share of expenditure	20.44%	17.15%	+3.29 points
Total expenditure (IDR trillion)	44.18	937.72	4.71% of the panel
Median expenditure (IDR trillion)	1.5924	1.4595	+9.1%

Computed by the authors from Directorate General of Fiscal Balance realised expenditure returns retrieved 30 August 2026.

The reassigned organisations run a personnel share 13.54 percentage points below the continuous panel and a capital share 3.29 points above it. In the population studied by a companion article, a difference of 13.54 points in personnel share spans nearly the entire interquartile range; these organisations sit far into the lower tail of the distribution.

They are not, however, small. Their median expenditure exceeds the panel median by 9.1 per cent, and their combined expenditure is 4.71 per cent of the panel total. This matters because an analyst who noticed the changing count might reason that the additional units are marginal and can be ignored. They are marginal in number and central in size.

Nor is the difference an artefact of one year. In 2023, the first year they appear, the same organisations show a personnel share of 20.40 per cent against 33.03 for the continuous panel and a capital share of 23.59 against 18.32. The gap is stable and in the same direction in both years for which the comparison is possible.

4.4 The size of the error

The practical question is how much the composition change moves a headline statistic. Table 4 answers it for the two shares most often reported.

Table 4. Change between 2017 and 2024 computed two ways

Statistic	As returned	Consistent panel	Composition component
Personnel share, 2017	37.85%	37.85%	Identical: same units
Personnel share, 2024	34.58%	35.19%	0.61 points
Change, 2017 to 2024	-3.27 points	-2.66 points	18.7% of the change
Capital share, 2017	21.87%	21.87%	Identical: same units
Capital share, 2024	17.29%	17.15%	0.14 points
Change, 2017 to 2024	-4.58 points	-4.72 points	3.0% of the change

Computed by the authors from Directorate General of Fiscal Balance realised expenditure returns retrieved 30 August 2026. "As returned" uses whatever organisations the source supplies in each year; "consistent panel" uses the 482 present in all eight.

For the personnel share the error is substantial. The apparent fall of 3.27 percentage points is in truth a fall of 2.66; 0.61 points, or 18.7 per cent of the movement, is produced by adding organisations with unusually low personnel shares to the later year and not to the earlier one.

For the capital share the error runs the other way and is small: the composition change understates the fall by 0.14 points, or 3.0 per cent. That asymmetry is worth stating plainly. The direction and size of the bias depend on how the added organisations differ from the panel on the particular variable, so there is no general correction and no way to know whether a given statistic is affected without doing the comparison.

It is also worth being precise about what is wrong. Both columns of Table 4 are accurate descriptions of something. The left column correctly describes the change in the finances of the districts that the source reports in each year. It simply does not describe the change in the finances of a fixed set of organisations, which is what a sentence beginning "the personnel share of Indonesian district governments fell by" asserts.

4.5 Why this is not attrition

Panel methods have well-developed treatments for missing units, and it is worth setting out why none of them applies.

Attrition arises when units leave a panel, and the standard responses — modelling the selection, bounding the estimate, weighting the survivors — all require knowing which units left. Here nothing left. Non-response arises when a unit fails to report, and leaves a response rate that flags the problem. Here every organisation the source was asked about answered. Entry arises when new units are created, and would be handled by dating them from their creation. Here nothing was created: the 26 districts have existed for decades.

What occurred is a change in the index, not in the population. The source is a function from province and year to a set of organisations, and the function changed because its domain changed. Every value it returns is correct; the set of values across years is not a panel.

The diagnostic consequence is that the usual warning signs are absent. There is no missingness pattern to inspect, no response rate to report, no attrition test to run, and no error message. The count is the only signal, and the count is easy not to look at when the retrieval is automated and the totals reconcile.

4.6 The check that would have caught it

The check is simple and takes one line: count the units returned in each year, and compare the identifiers rather than the totals.

Counting alone reveals the discontinuity in Table 1 immediately, since 482 becomes 508 between two adjacent years. Comparing identifiers goes further and localises it: the 26 additions all carry province codes that appear for the first time in the same year, which points directly at a reorganisation rather than at a data problem. Both operations are cheap and neither requires knowing that Indonesia reorganised its provinces in 2022.

The general form of the check is that a panel drawn from an administrative source should be verified against its own identifiers before it is used, not against its aggregates. Aggregates reconcile because the source is internally consistent; that consistency is exactly what conceals the problem. Zhu, Xiao and Wu (2022) show how an administrative information system shapes what its users can see, and this is a small instance: the portal makes totals easy to verify and membership easy to overlook.

A second check is worth adding where the first fires. Once the additional units are identified, comparing them with the continuous panel on the variables of interest establishes whether the composition change matters at all. In the present case it matters for one statistic and barely for another, and only the comparison distinguishes them.

4.7 What to do about it

Three responses are available and they are not equivalent.

The first is to restrict to the continuous panel, which is what a companion article does. This yields a defensible statement about a fixed set of organisations and gives up national coverage; the resulting population is the country minus a distinctive group, and the loss should be stated rather than left implicit.

The second is to reconstruct the missing years from the historical classification, retrieving the 26 districts under their former parent provinces. This restores coverage and is the right answer where the source permits it. It requires knowing the reorganisation occurred, which returns the analyst to the check in Section 4.6, and it requires the source to retain the historical index, which not all administrative systems do.

The third is to report both, as Table 4 does. This is the most informative option where the composition effect is itself of interest, and the least useful where a single number is required. The choice between the three is a matter of what the statistic is for; the error consists in making it without knowing there was a choice.

4.8 Generality

The mechanism is not peculiar to Indonesia or to fiscal data. It arises wherever an administrative source indexes entities by a container that can be redrawn.

Jurisdictions merge and split in most systems of local government; firms are reclassified between industry codes; establishments are reassigned between reporting units within a group; schools move between districts. In each case the entity persists and the index changes, and a source that reports only the current index will show the entity appearing or disappearing at the moment of reclassification.

Two features make the Indonesian case a clean illustration rather than a special one. The reorganisation is exactly dated by statute, so the discontinuity can be attributed with certainty rather than inferred. And the population is closed — these organisations cannot fail, merge or be acquired — so the count would otherwise be constant, which makes the change conspicuous once anyone looks. In a population with genuine entry and exit the same mechanism would be harder to detect, because a changing count is expected.

Bury, Feld and Burret (2024) and Masi, Savoia and Sen (2024) both estimate relationships across panels of subnational units whose composition must be stable for the estimates to mean what they are taken to mean; Porto, Puig and Vidal (2026) estimate dynamics that require it more strongly still. The point of this note is not that those studies are wrong but that the check they would need is not part of the standard repertoire.

4.9 Why the totals reconcile anyway

One feature of the case deserves separate statement, because it is what makes the error survive the checks an analyst is likely to run.

The portal publishes a national aggregate alongside the per-organisation returns, and the two agree in every year of the series. They agree because the aggregate is computed over the same set of

organisations the portal will hand back individually — the districts of the country as presently constituted. An analyst who sums the returns and compares the sum with the published national figure will find them equal in 2017 and equal in 2024, and will reasonably conclude that the extraction is sound.

It is sound. The extraction faithfully reproduces two different populations described correctly at two different dates. The reconciliation test cannot detect the problem because the problem is not an arithmetic one, and no test built on totals can detect it. Cepiku, Mastrodascio and Wang (2024) find managers using performance information selectively according to what the information system makes salient, and a system that makes totals salient and membership implicit will produce exactly this pattern of attention.

The practical corollary is that reconciliation and validation are different operations. Reconciliation asks whether the numbers add up; validation asks whether they describe the thing the analyst intends to describe. Only the second would have caught this, and only if it were run on identifiers.

4.10 Limitations

Three limitations bound the note. It documents one source and one reorganisation, so the magnitudes reported are specific; the general claim concerns the mechanism, not the size of its effect, which will differ wherever the reclassified units differ differently from the population.

The note does not establish that the historical returns of the 26 districts are unobtainable, only that they are not returned by the portal under their present province. A source indexed on historical geography may carry them, which is the second response in Section 4.7 and which the note recommends where available. And the figures are those of one retrieval date on a live system that revises its contents.

4.11 Managerial implications

Three implications follow for anyone who builds comparative panels from administrative sources, whether for research or for internal reporting.

The first is that a reconciling total is not evidence of a stable population. The most natural validation — checking that the components sum to the reported total, and that the total matches the source's own published figure — passes in every year here and detects nothing. Validation should run on the set of identifiers, not on the arithmetic.

The second is that automated retrieval removes the step at which this would have been noticed. An analyst pulling eight years of returns by hand would have seen the province list grow. A script that iterates over whatever the source offers will not, and will produce a clean dataset with a silent break in it. Any recurring extraction should log the unit count and fail loudly when it moves.

The third is that a comparison between two dates should state the population it is over. The sentence "the personnel share fell 3.27 points between 2017 and 2024" is not false so much as unanchored: it is true of the districts the source reported in each of those years and not of any fixed set

of organisations. Where the comparison is used to judge whether organisations have changed, the population must be the same at both ends, and saying so in the note to the table costs nothing.

4.12 Summary of findings

The factual findings are five. The source returns 482 district-level organisations for fiscal years 2017 to 2022 and 508 for 2023 and 2024, with no indication in the output that the population has changed. The 26 additional organisations were not created in 2023; they were reassigned in 2022 to four provinces established by Laws No. 14, 15, 16 and 29 of that year, and the portal indexes districts under their present province. The reassigned organisations differ systematically from those continuously observed, with a personnel share of 21.65 per cent against 35.19 and a capital share of 20.44 against 17.15 in 2024, while being larger than the panel median by 9.1 per cent and carrying Rp 44.18 trillion of expenditure. Computed on whatever the source returns, the national personnel share falls 3.27 points between 2017 and 2024; on a consistent panel it falls 2.66, so 18.7 per cent of the apparent change is composition. And the same composition change moves the capital share in the opposite direction by 0.14 points, or 3.0 per cent of that statistic's movement.

The interpretive claims are three. The error is not attrition, non-response or entry and is not addressed by the methods that handle those, because the population did not change — the index did. It leaves no diagnostic trace other than the unit count, since every value the source returns is correct and every aggregate reconciles. And the direction and size of the resulting bias depend on how the reclassified units differ from the panel on the particular variable, so there is no general correction and the comparison must be done case by case.

5. CONCLUSION

Twenty-six organisations appeared in a national panel in 2023 without having been created, and their appearance moved a headline statistic by nearly a fifth of its own change. Nothing in the source was wrong, no aggregate failed to reconcile, and no error was raised.

The general claim is that administrative sources indexed by present-day geography will silently unbalance any panel that spans a reorganisation, and that this failure mode is not covered by the standard treatments for missing data because nothing is missing. The check is to validate on identifiers rather than on totals, and to log the unit count on every extraction.

Three extensions follow. Retrieving the 26 districts under their historical parent provinces would establish whether the full panel is recoverable and would quantify what the restriction in the companion article costs. Repeating the exercise on other administrative sources with a reorganisation in the window — industry reclassification, school district boundaries, health service reorganisation — would establish whether the magnitudes here are typical. And examining whether published studies drawing on this portal report a constant unit count across a period spanning 2022 would establish how often the problem has gone unremarked.

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