

# AQuadtree: an R Package for Quadtree Anonymization of Point Data

by Raymond Lagonigro, Ramon Oller and Joan Carles Martori

**Abstract** The demand for precise data for analytical purposes grows rapidly among the research community and decision makers as more geographic information is being collected. Laws protecting data privacy are being enforced to prevent data disclosure. Statistical institutes and agencies need methods to preserve confidentiality while maintaining accuracy when disclosing geographic data. In this paper we present the AQuadtree package, a software intended to produce and deal with official spatial data making data privacy and accuracy compatible. The lack of specific methods in R to anonymize spatial data motivated the development of this package, providing an automatic aggregation tool to anonymize point data. We propose a methodology based on hierarchical geographic data structures to create a varying size grid adapted to local area population densities. This article gives insights and hints for implementation and usage. We hope this new tool may be helpful for statistical offices and users of official spatial data.

## Introduction

Data privacy is a main concern of statistical institutes, national agencies and any other institution responsible for the collection and delivery of statistical information. Current spatial data processing techniques enable linking accurate geographic information to other statistical data (Armstrong and Ruggles, 2005). Thus, the disclosure of geolocated data needs special attention in terms of privacy to avoid re-identification processes. For instance, individual information could be revealed with reverse geocoding techniques when the data delivered includes the location (Curtis et al., 2006; Zimmerman and Pavlik, 2008; Cassa et al., 2008).

Besides, in order to perform quality spatial analysis, there has always been a great demand by researchers and decision makers for accessing accurate geographic data, at fine scales (Duncan and Pearson, 1991; O’Keefe and Rubin, 2015; Chen et al., 2017). There is a strong need to develop techniques and methods to preserve confidentiality when publishing geographic information while, at the same time, providing accurate data. Statistical disclosure control techniques for geographic data must balance both goals, accuracy and privacy.

Several masking methods and frameworks for spatial point data have been proposed and analyzed (Cox, 1996; Armstrong and Ruggles, 2005; Zimmerman et al., 2007). Some geographic masking techniques alter the position of each point event to ensure the actual locations cannot be discovered. On the other hand, geographic aggregation techniques group individual point information (Zimmerman et al., 2007). Political or administrative institutions are often used as units of aggregation, because data is normally collected and summarized for those units. For instance, national agencies usually use counties, neighbourhoods or census tracts to gather and distribute statistical information. Alternatively, information can be collected and summarized on a regular or irregular net of geographically referenced grid cells (Tammilehto-Luode et al., 2000; Tammilehto-Luode, 2011). Grid datasets avoid the dependence on administrative boundaries which may introduce biases on the data.

Some authors have defined different measures of disclosure risks on anonymized datasets to effectively provide guarantees for privacy protection. Sweeney (2002) introduced the concept of *k-anonymity* and proposed generalization and suppression techniques to preserve privacy and truthfulness. An anonymized database accomplishes *k-anonymity* if the set of attributes leading to the identification of an individual cannot be distinguished from at least  $k - 1$  other individuals. In the context of geographic data privacy, *k-anonymity* requires that for any individual in the dataset, his location is indistinguishable from at least  $k - 1$  other individuals. Thus, to achieve it, geographic aggregation methods must ensure that all the geographic areas created in the aggregation process include at least  $k$  individuals (Vu et al., 2012). While *k-anonymity* refers to the identification of individuals, it cannot completely prevent attribute disclosure. For instance, low diversity or background knowledge are situations which may allow identification of a sensitive attribute for individuals in a geographic area. To avoid revealing confidential or sensitive information, geographic data privacy frameworks must apply additional techniques to complement *k-anonymity* limitations (Machanavajjhala et al., 2007; Li et al., 2007).

There are some packages providing functions for data privacy protection in R, although they do not address spatial data. For instance, *anonymizer* (Hendricks, 2015) is a package that provides hash functions to anonymize data containing personal identifiable information. The *SciencePo* package

(Marcelino, 2013), aimed to analyse political behaviour data, provides the anonymize function that replaces individual identifier variables with combinations of random samples. The package **sdcmicro** (Templ et al., 2015) provides a more exhaustive list of functions for the anonymization of micro-data. It implements methods to evaluate and anonymize confidential micro-data sets with micro-aggregation techniques. Several perturbation methodologies are implemented in the package, such as, shuffling, micro-aggregation, post-randomization, local suppression and some others. This package may also be used for measuring information loss and disclosure risk of anonymized data.

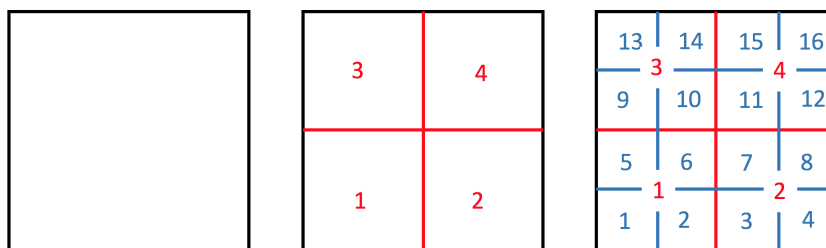
The lack of specific methods in *R* to anonymize spatial point data motivated the development of the **AQuadtree** package (Lagonigro et al., 2020). The package implements functions for the analysis and anonymization of spatial point data sets with aggregation and local suppression techniques and provides an *S4 R* class for the creation, manipulation and export of spatial grids. This article presents the **AQuadtree** package and explains the anonymization methodology used in the package.

## Quadtree anonymization

The novel framework proposed here pursues the data accuracy at the smallest possible areas avoiding individual information disclosure. Aggregation and local suppression of point data is performed using a methodology based on hierarchical (quadtree) geographic data structures. The final result is a varying size grid adapted to local area population densities as described in Lagonigro et al. (2017). It follows the guidelines for grid datasets of GEOSTAT project (GEOSTAT, 2014) and uses the grid coding system defined in INSPIRE Data specifications (INSPIRE, 2010).

The European Forum for Geography and Statistics (EFGS), within the GEOSTAT project, promoted a common framework for grid based statistics across all the European countries (GEOSTAT, 2011, 2014). The project aimed to represent several European characteristics in a  $1\text{km}^2$  regular grid dataset and developed the guidelines for datasets and methods to link census-based data with grid datasets. The following recommendations were established regarding grid cell sizes: “ $1\text{km}^2$  appears to be a good compromise between data availability, data confidentiality and suitability for national to European study areas. The project also recommends introducing intermediate grid sizes based on a two-level quadtree (i.e.  $250\text{m}$  and  $500\text{m}$  as subdivision of the  $1\text{km}$  grid)” (GEOSTAT, 2011, p. 17). The project also proposes the INSPIRE grid coding system (INSPIRE, 2010) to unambiguously identify each cell of the grid dataset. INSPIRE Data specifications consider the European Terrestrial Reference System 89 and the Lambert Azimuthal Equal Area projection (ETRS89-LAEA), although other Coordinate Reference Systems (CRS) and projections are also possible. Each cell of the grid is identified by a code composed by the cell’s size and the coordinates of the lower left cell corner in the ETRS89-LAEA system. The cell’s size is denoted in meters (“m”) for cells’ sizes up to 1000 meters, or kilometers (“km”) for larger cells’ sizes. To reduce the length of the string, values for northing and easting are divided by  $10^n$  (where “n” is the number of zeros in the cell size value measured in meters). For instance, the cell code “ $1\text{km}N2599000m, X=4695000m$ ” identifies the  $1\text{km}^2$  grid cell with coordinates of the lower left corner:  $Y=2599000m, X=4695000m$ .

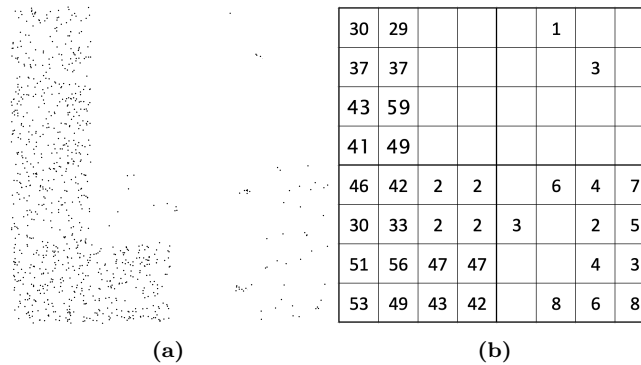
The aggregation process implemented in the **AQuadtree** package uses a hierarchical (quadtree) data structure and follows a recursive decomposition of space (Samet, 1984; Behnisch et al., 2013). The methodology recursively splits each squared area into four equal-sized quadrants. The process builds an initial regular grid of a given cell size, where each initial cell is identified following the INSPIRE grid coding system. The initial cells are then recursively subdivided into quadrants. A second identifier containing a sequence of numbers to indicate the position of the cell when successive disaggregation has been performed (see Figure 1) is assigned to each new cell; for instance, the sequence identifier corresponding to the right top cell on the third image in Figure 1 would be *416*, i.e. *fourth cell in the first division, and sixteenth cell in the second division*.



**Figure 1:** Three level quadtree splitting cell numbering example. Initial cell on the (left); first quadtree subdivision (center); second quadtree subdivision (right).

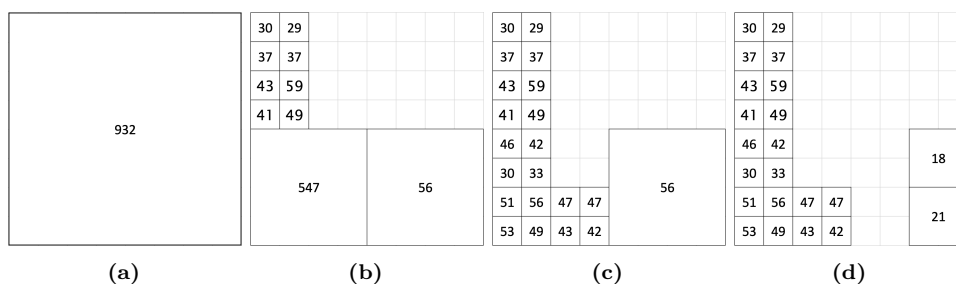
In the **AQuadtree** package, the spatial points are aggregated considering the *k-anonymity* requirement (Vu et al., 2012). The hierarchical subdivision process applies a minimum threshold on the number of points per cell. Hereafter we will refer to this threshold as the anonymity threshold. A cell is recursively split while the number of points in each sub-cell is greater than this threshold. Additionally, in order to avoid attribute disclosure, it is possible to set thresholds for sensitive attributes. Then, the number of points per cell in groups defined by the attributes should be greater than these supplementary thresholds.

During the splitting process all the resulting cells need to satisfy the threshold restriction, otherwise the division is not performed. In some cases, the threshold restriction may prevent the division of a cell with a very irregular point pattern, which would result in less accuracy on the cell resolution. For instance, Figure 2a, presents a pattern of 932 points unevenly distributed on a 1km cell and Figure 2b shows the corresponding grid of 62.5m cells with no threshold restrictions (the total number of points aggregated in each cell is shown).



**Figure 2:** Set of spatial points (a) and the corresponding 62.5m grid with no threshold restrictions (b) (the numbers indicate the points aggregated in each cell).

Given the cell in Figure 2a and using, for example, a value of 17 as the anonymity threshold, the subdivision process could not proceed because one out of the four resulting quadrants contains only four points. The privacy mechanism would aggregate all the points in the initial cell as presented in Figure 3a, masking an irregular spatial distribution. In order to get more resolution accuracy the **AQuadtree** algorithm considers the suppression of some points before continuing the disaggregation. For instance, the disaggregation shown in Figure 3b is clearly more accurate to the underlying spatial distribution and it would result from suppression of the four points in the top right quadrant of Figure 2b. Moreover, the elimination of more data points would lead to further disaggregation (Figure 3c and Figure 3d).



**Figure 3:** Disaggregation examples with an anonymity threshold value of 17 points per cell. a) no disaggregation and no loss; b) disaggregation with suppression of 4 points; c) more disaggregation with suppression of 12 points; c) maximum disaggregation with suppression of 29 points.

Such cases require a strategy, balancing the need of keeping the maximum number of points (minimum information loss) and getting the finest scale cells (maximum resolution accuracy). In order to do this, the method computes the Theil index of inequality (Theil, 1972) for the number of points in the possible quadrants as well as the percentage of suppressed points needed for the division to be carried out. Going back to the example in Figure 2, the initial cell can be subdivided into four quadrants with 547, 56, 325 and 4 points respectively (see Figure 4). The Theil measure four quadrants is given by  $\sum (x_i \cdot \ln(x_i/\bar{x})) / \sum x_i = 0.514$ , indicating high inequality, i.e. if the cell is not subdivided it masks a very uneven distribution of points. Suppressing the four points in the fourth quadrant to split the cell produces a 0.43% loss of points.

325	4
547	56

**Figure 4:** Quadrant subdivision.

Therefore, where the anonymity threshold value prevents disaggregation, high values of inequality measure suggest the need for further subdivision, while high values of the loss rate suggest to stop the subdivision. The algorithm uses default limits for both measures: 0.25 and 0.4 respectively (both values can be defined by the user between 0 and 1). Thus, if there exists any sub-cell with a number of points lower than the anonymity threshold and the Theil entropy is higher than 0.25, then the disaggregation process continues by suppressing these points as long as the loss rate is lower than 0.4. Hence, going back to the example in Figure 2, the default disaggregation produced by the method would be the one shown in Figure 3b.

In order to minimize the effects of information loss, if the number of suppressed points exceeds the anonymity threshold, suppressed points are aggregated into the initial cell. This cell is maintained and marked as a residual cell. Following with the example in Figure 2, the 29 suppressed points in Figure 3d will be marked as a residual cell (see Figure 5).

30	29	29				
37	37					
43	59					
41	49					
46	42					18
30	33					
51	56	47	47	21		
53	49	43	42			

**Figure 5:** Example of a residual cell.

Next section presents the **AQuadtrees** package. For a given set of spatial points, the package main function creates an *R* spatial object of class **AQuadtrees** representing an irregular grid with varying cell sizes, and provides a summary of the aggregated data. The function accepts several parameters to adjust the characteristics of the resulting grid. For instance, initial cell size, number of recursive subdivisions to achieve, the threshold on the minimum number of points per cell, the threshold for information loss and inequality or the attributes to be summarized. The package defines methods to manipulate or export **AQuadtrees** objects and includes test datasets.

## The AQuadtrees package

### Installation and dependencies

The AQuadtrees package can easily be installed from any CRAN repository by executing the *R* command:

```
R> install.packages("AQuadtrees")
```

The **AQuadtrees** depends on several *R* packages as shown on the corresponding web page on CRAN<sup>1</sup>. The packages **sp** (Pebesma and Bivand, 2005; Bivand et al., 2013) and **dplyr** (Wickham et al., 2020) will automatically be installed along with **AQuadtrees** if the **dependencies** argument is set to **TRUE** on the installation process. The **sp** package provides classes and methods for representation and manipulation of spatial data on which **AQuadtrees** relies. The **dplyr** package provides fast and consistent tools for working with data frames which are used in **AQuadtrees** to decrease computing times on the automatic aggregation processes. The packages **rgeos** (Bivand and Rundel, 2017), **rgdal** (Bivand et al., 2016) are also useful for some extra functions of the package as, for instance, exporting a **shapefile** for the created grid.

<sup>1</sup><https://CRAN.R-project.org/package=AQuadtrees>

```
R> library(AQuadtree)
Loading required package: sp
Loading required package: dplyr
```

## Provided data

In order to probe and test the package functionality, two `SpatialPointsDataFrame` objects are included: `BarcelonaPop` for Barcelona Municipality (Spain) and `CharlestonPop` for Charleston, metropolitan area (USA). Point data was created randomly with the distributions of real data at census scale obtained from different sources.

The package also provides two `SpatialPolygons` objects with the spatial boundaries for each region. `BarcelonaCensusTracts` contains spatial limits of the census tracts for the Barcelona Municipality, and `CharlestonCensusTracts` provides spatial limits of the census tracts for Charleston, metropolitan area.

`BarcelonaPop` comprises 81,359 sample points in Barcelona, Spain. The original information was obtained from the department of statistics of the Ajuntament de Barcelona and it contains population data (age and sex) at census tract level for 2018 ([Ajuntament de Barcelona. Departament d'Estadística, 2018](#)). The points were generated and distributed randomly in space, keeping information at each census tract unchanged. In order to reduce memory allocation, it only contains a 5% sample of points.

```
R> data("BarcelonaPop", package="AQuadtree")
R> summary(BarcelonaPop)
Object of class SpatialPointsDataFrame
Coordinates:
      min      max
x 3655447 3669871
y 2059179 2074546
Is projected: TRUE
proj4string :
[+proj=laea +lat_0=52 +lon_0=10 +x_0=4321000 +y_0=3210000 +ellps=GRS80
+towgs84=0,0,0,0,0,0,0 +units=m +no_defs]
Number of points: 81359
Data attributes:
      age      sex
Min.   : 0.00   man :38472
1st Qu.: 27.00  woman:42887
Median : 43.00
Mean   : 43.94
3rd Qu.: 61.00
Max.   :100.00
```

In a similar way, the `CharlestonPop` object, containing 54,619 random sample points, was created by using information in Charleston1 dataset from the 2000 Census Tract Data for the Charleston metropolitan area (USA) ([Geoda Data and Lab, 2019](#)). For size concerns, it only contains a 10% sample of points.

## The AQuadtree class

An `AQuadtree` class object is a spatial dataset representing a varying size grid and is created performing an aggregation of a given set of points observing a minimum threshold for the number of points in each cell. The main function of the package creates the `AQuadtree` object from `SpatialPoints` or `SpatialPointsDataFrame` objects.

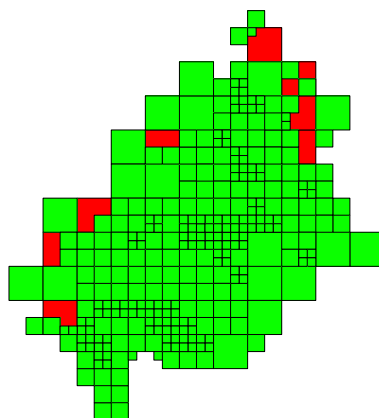
```
R> bcn.QT <- AQuadtree(BarcelonaPop)
R> class(bcn.QT)
[1] "AQuadtree"
attr(,"package")
[1] "AQuadtree"
```

As seen in the example, only the spatial object is necessary. Several extra parameters can be used in order to calibrate the resulting object: `dim`, `layers`, `colnames`, `threshold`, `thresholdField`, `fun`s, `as`, `ineq.threshold`, `loss.threshold`. All parameters are optional and have default values. For

instance, the anonymity threshold is equal to 100 by default. In the next sections all the parameters are detailed.

The plot method for the **AQuadtree** class overrides the generic function for plotting *R* objects. Figure 6 shows the **AQuadtree** created for Barcelona. It comprises areas with very different sizes. Therefore, highly populated zones are disaggregated in small cells to allow dissemination of accurate data whereas, information on low populated zones is aggregated at a higher scale. In some cases, to improve accuracy and create smaller cells, the function removes some points and groups them in cells marked as residual (those printed in red by the plot method).

```
R> plot(bcn.QT)
```



**Figure 6:** Plot of an AQuadtree for Barcelona.

In the next example the **names** generic function shows the slot names created for each cell in the **AQuadtree** object. Then, in order to show the information from some of the **AQuadtree** cells, we use the overridden **[** (sub-setting) method to extract and print a subset of the cells in the **AQuadtree** (see Section [Class methods and slots](#) for details on overridden methods).

```
R> names(bcn.QT)
[1] "cellCode" "cellNum" "level" "residual" "total"
R> bcn.QT[310:315, ]
An object of class "AQuadtree" with 6 grid cells with sizes between 1km and
125m
```

	cellCode	cellNum	level	residual	total
310	1kmN2072E3665	204	3	FALSE	128
311	1kmN2072E3665	207	3	FALSE	138
312	1kmN2072E3665	208	3	FALSE	166
313	1kmN2073E3666	313	3	FALSE	135
314	1kmN2065E3660		1	TRUE	133
315	1kmN2067E3660		1	TRUE	109

The **cellCode** and the **cellNum** properties identify each cell in the grid, following the mechanism of the INSPIRE grid coding system ([INSPIRE, 2010](#)). As explained in detail in paragraphs 2 and 3 of section Quadtree anonymization: **cellCode** refers to the initial regular grid (the highest aggregation level) and indicates the cell's size and the coordinates of the lower left cell corner in the false origin of the CRS (Coordinate Reference System); **cellNum** refers to the varying size grid and is the sequence of numbers indicating the position of the cell in every successive subdivision of the initial cell. Three more properties are also added to each cell; the **level** attribute, that indicates the scale of disaggregation of the cell; the **residual** logical value, that states whether or not the cell has been created to store residual points; and finally, the **total** property, indicating the number of points aggregated in the cell.

## General usage

The characteristics of the **AQuadtree** object can be adjusted with several parameters. First, the **dim** parameter defines the cell size of the initial grid in meters. The **layers** parameter indicates the number of subdivisions to perform. Thus, specifying the parameters **dim=10000** and **layers=5** would

create a grid with cells sizes ranging between 10km and 625m. If `dim` and `layers` are not specified, the default values define an initial size of 1000 meters and 5 subdivisions.

```
R> charleston.QT <- AQuadtrees(CharlestonPop, dim=10000, layers=5)
```

The `summary` method for `AQuadtrees` summarizes information of an `AQuadtrees` object:

```
R> summary(charleston.QT)
Object of class "AQuadtrees"
183 grid cells with sizes between 10km and 625m
Coordinates:
      min      max
x 2060000 2160000
y  110000 220000
Is projected: TRUE
proj4string:
+init=epsg:26978 +proj=lcc +lat_1=38.56666666666667
+lat_2=37.26666666666667 +lat_0=36.666666666666666
+lon_0=-98.5 +x_0=400000 +y_0=400000 +datum=NAD83
+units=m +no_defs +ellps=GRS80 +towgs84=0,0,0
Initial Cell Size: 10km
Number of valid grid Cells: 179
Number of residual grid Cells: 4
Data attributes:
      total
Min.   : 100.0
1st Qu.: 156.0
Median : 217.0
Mean   : 287.4
3rd Qu.: 358.0
Max.   :2281.0
```

If the original dataset includes individual information, the `colnames` parameter can be used to specify the attributes from the dataset to be summarized in the resulting grid. Factor attributes are deployed and a new attribute for each factor label is created. For instance, an attribute `sex` with two labels, `man` and `woman`, would be deployed into the two new attributes: `sex.man`, `sex.woman`. Additionally, the `funcs` parameter could be used to specify the functions to compute in the summary for each one of the attributes indicated in the `colnames` parameter. If no functions are specified, the `sum` function is used. Next example creates an `AQuadtrees` object with the sample points in Barcelona, retaining two attributes, `age` and `sex`, summarized with `mean` and `sum` functions respectively.

```
R> bcn.QT <- AQuadtrees(BarcelonaPop,
+                      colnames=c('age', 'sex'),
+                      funcs=c('mean', 'sum'))
R> summary(bcn.QT)
Object of class "AQuadtrees"
321 grid cells with sizes between 1km and 125m
Coordinates:
      min      max
x 3659000 3670000
y 2062500 2074500
Is projected: TRUE
proj4string:
+proj=laea +lat_0=52 +lon_0=10 +x_0=4321000 +y_0=3210000 +ellps=GRS80
+towgs84=0,0,0,0,0,0 +units=m +no_defs
Initial Cell Size: 1km
Number of valid grid Cells: 313
Number of residual grid Cells: 8
Data attributes:
```

total		age		sex.man		sex.woman	
Min.	: 100	Min.	:35.28	Min.	: 40.0	Min.	: 44.0
1st Qu.	: 139	1st Qu.	:42.37	1st Qu.	: 64.0	1st Qu.	: 73.0
Median	: 177	Median	:44.42	Median	: 83.0	Median	: 95.0
Mean	: 248	Mean	:44.16	Mean	:117.1	Mean	:130.9
3rd Qu.	: 328	3rd Qu.	:46.18	3rd Qu.	:158.0	3rd Qu.	:170.0
Max.	:1288	Max.	:51.18	Max.	:626.0	Max.	:662.0



## Anonymity threshold

The package applies a default anonymity threshold value of 100 and it can be adjusted with the `threshold` parameter. By default, the threshold restriction is only applied to the total number of points aggregated in each cell (i.e. the `total` attribute added to the resulting dataset). The threshold restriction can also be applied to any attribute with confidential information. The attribute names that must satisfy the given threshold should be specified in the `thresholdField` parameter.

Next example creates an `AQuadtree` applying a threshold value of 17 on the attributes `sex.man` and `sex.woman`. As shown in the summary, the minimum values for both attributes is 17; cells with lower values have been grouped to achieve the minimum threshold.

```
R> bcn.QT <- AQuadtree(BarcelonaPop, colnames=c('age','sex'), funs=c('mean', 'sum'),
+   threshold=17, thresholdField=c("sex.man", "sex.woman"))
R> summary(bcn.QT)
Object of class "AQuadtree"
730 grid cells with sizes between 1km and 62.5m
Coordinates:
      min      max
x 3659000 3670000
y 2062000 2075000
Is projected: TRUE
proj4string:
+proj=laea +lat_0=52 +lon_0=10 +x_0=4321000 +y_0=3210000 +ellps=GRS80
+towgs84=0,0,0,0,0,0 +units=m +no_defs
Initial Cell Size: 1km
Number of valid grid Cells: 713
Number of residual grid Cells: 17
Data attributes:
```

	total	age	sex.man	sex.woman
Min.	: 34.0	Min. :32.63	Min. : 17.00	Min. : 17.00
1st Qu.:	64.0	1st Qu.:41.52	1st Qu.: 30.25	1st Qu.: 33.00
Median	:103.0	Median :43.87	Median : 49.00	Median : 54.00
Mean	:110.5	Mean :43.71	Mean : 52.25	Mean : 58.21
3rd Qu.:	140.0	3rd Qu.:46.08	3rd Qu.: 65.75	3rd Qu.: 74.00
Max.	:807.0	Max. :53.46	Max. :371.00	Max. :436.00

## Balancing information loss and accuracy

Finally, two more parameters can be used to manage the disaggregation process: the inequality threshold (`ineq.threshold`) and the loss rate threshold (`loss.threshold`). As explained in Section [Quadtree anonymization](#), when the anonymity threshold prevents the subdivision of a cell, then the suppression of some points may be considered to allow a further subdivision (see Figures 2 and 3). This decision depends on the inequality between sub-cells (we use the Theil index) and the rate of points that need to be suppressed (we call it loss rate). As matter of fact, the disaggregation process of a cell continues either when the number of points in each sub-cell is greater than the anonymity threshold (`threshold`), or alternatively when the inequality between sub-cells is greater than the inequality threshold (`ineq.threshold`) and the loss rate is smaller than the loss threshold (`loss.threshold`). The `ineq.threshold` and the `loss.threshold` parameters range between 0 and 1 and the default values are 0.25 and 0.4 respectively. Lower values in the inequality threshold and/or higher values in the loss threshold result in grids with smaller cells.

To illustrate the use of the `ineq.threshold`, in the next example a subset of points corresponding to a cell of 1km, with bottom-left corner (3660000,2065000) and top-right corner (3661000,2066000) is created:

```
R> point.coord<-as.data.frame(coordinates(BarcelonaPop))
R> points.subset<- BarcelonaPop[point.coord[,1]>=3660000 & point.coord[,1]<=3661000
+   & point.coord[,2]>=2065000 & point.coord[,2]<=2066000,]
R> plot(points.subset)
R> length(points.subset)
```

The result is the subset of points shown in Figure 7a, which are clustered mainly on the bottom right and bottom left corners of the area. In order to compare the different aggregation results, three `AQuadtree` objects were created using different `ineq.threshold` values. (Figure 7b, 7c, and 7d). For each case the proportion of residual points as a measure of loss, and the coefficient of variation as a measure of dispersion, are computed.



Using a minimum threshold value of 5 points per cell and the default inequality value (0.25), the function creates the grid shown in Figure 7b. It presents a residual cell containing 2.02% of the points, and the number of points per cell has a coefficient of variation of 0.499.

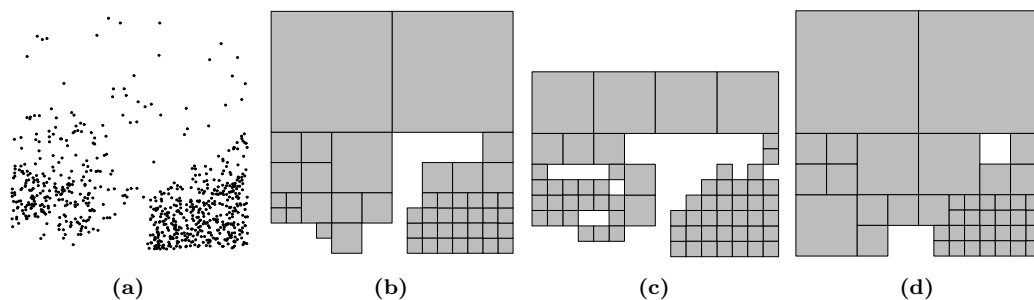
```
R> bcn.QT <- AQuadtree(points.subset, threshold=5)
R> plot(bcn.QT, residual=F, col="grey")
R> bcn.QT[bcn.QT$residual,]$total / length(points.subset)
R> sd(bcn.QT[!bcn.QT$residual,]$total)/mean(bcn.QT[!bcn.QT$residual,]$total)
```

Figure 7c shows a second aggregation example, for the same set of points, with smaller cells, using an `ineq.threshold` value of 0.01, which results in 8.89% of residual points and a coefficient of variation of 0.365 (i.e. the number points in cells is more similar between them).

```
R> bcn.QT <- AQuadtree(points.subset, threshold=5, ineq.threshold=0.01)
R> plot(bcn.QT, residual=F, col="grey")
R> bcn.QT[bcn.QT$residual,]$total / length(points.subset)
R> sd(bcn.QT[!bcn.QT$residual,]$total)/mean(bcn.QT[!bcn.QT$residual,]$total)
```

Figure 7d on the contrary, uses a higher `ineq.threshold` value of 0.5, resulting in aggregation on bigger cells, with no loss, but a coefficient of variation of 0.84 (i.e. the number of points in each cell exhibits more inequality).

```
R> bcn.QT <- AQuadtree(points.subset, threshold=5, ineq.threshold=0.5)
R> plot(bcn.QT, residual=F, col="grey")
R> bcn.QT[bcn.QT$residual,]$total / length(points.subset)
R> sd(bcn.QT[!bcn.QT$residual,]$total)/mean(bcn.QT[!bcn.QT$residual,]$total)
```



**Figure 7:** Examples of the effect of the `ineq.threshold` parameter. a) Subset of points used in the example; b) AQuadtree with default `ineq.threshold` value; c) AQuadtree with `ineq.threshold` value 0.01; d) AQuadtree with `ineq.threshold` value 0.5.

## Class methods and slots

The `AQuadtree` class proposes a collection of methods to manage the generated objects and overrides the generic methods `show`, `print`, `summary` and `[` (subsetting) for the `AQuadtree` signature. The `splot` method overrides the lattice-based plot method for spatial data with attributes from `sp` package (Pebesma and Bivand, 2005), and two extra parameters: `residual`, to indicate if residual cells should be displayed, and `by.density` to indicate if attributes should be divided for the cell areas to make them comparable between zones with different sizes. The `merge` method merges the input data on the `AQuadtree` object with a second data frame using `cellCode` and `cellNum` as the merging attributes. The `writeOGR.QT` method coerces the given `AQuadtree` object to a `SpatialPolygonsDataframe` and uses the `writeOGR` method from `rgdal` package (Bivand et al., 2016) to write out spatial vector data. Finally, the `area.QT` method allows getting the areas of the grid cells in square meters. An `AQuadtree` object can also be coerced to a `SpatialPolygonsDataFrame` or a `SpatialPolygons` object using the generic method `as` from `methods` package:

```
R> bcn.QT <- AQuadtree(BarcelonaPop)
R> class(bcn.QT)
[1] "AQuadtree"
attr(,"package")
[1] "AQuadtree"
R> bcn.SP <- as(bcn.QT, "SpatialPolygonsDataFrame")
R> class(bcn.SP)
[1] "SpatialPolygonsDataFrame"
```

```
attr("package")
[1] "sp"
```

The basic structure of the **AQuadtree** class is based on a **SpatialPolygonsDataFrame** with some extra information on the object created.

```
R> slotNames(example.QT)
[1] "dim" "layers" "colnames" "threshold" "thresholdField" "loss" "data"
[8] "polygons" "plotOrder" "bbox" "proj4string"
```

The properties **dim**, **layers**, **colnames**, **threshold** and **thresholdField** specify the parameters used to create the grid and denote the grid characteristics: **dim** indicates the scale in meters of the highest level cells; **layers** shows the number of subdivision levels; **colnames** enumerates the attribute names summarized in the resulting grid; **threshold** is the value used for anonymization, indicating the minimum number of points or a minimum number an attribute that a cell may contain; and **thresholdField** specifies the attributes to which the threshold restriction has been applied.

The aggregation process aims to keep all the original points in the summarized grid, but in some cases, when the aggregation at the highest level (the biggest cells) does not satisfy the threshold restriction those points must be suppressed. The **loss** property indicates the number of points suppressed on the subdivision process because their aggregation, at any level, does not accomplish the threshold restriction. The rest of the slots, i.e. **data**, **polygons**, **plotOrder**, **bbox** and **proj4string**, define the grid structure as a **SpatialPolygonsDataFrame**.

## Package functions

The **AQuadtree** package also implements several functions that help working with the proposed grid system. In this section we focus on the capabilities for merging two **AQuadtree** objects, for aggregating spatial points to an **AQuadtree** object and, finally, for creating a fixed size grid.

### Join AQuadtrees

As pointed by [Martin \(2002\)](#), administrative units may change over time, but grid cells are time independent. Therefore, grid datasets from different periods can be compared. In the case of aquadtrees, this is true only when the disaggregation process gets the same resolutions in all areas for the periods being compared; i.e. information in two datasets is only comparable if there are exactly the same cells in both datasets. A problem arises when some cells have different subdivision levels. The function **joinAQuadtrees** is intended to deal with this problem. The function **joinAQuadtrees** merges two **AQuadtree** objects and makes their information comparable. The function creates a new **AQuadtree** object combining the information of the two input objects at the lowest common resolution. The initial size of the highest scale cells should be the same in both input objects.

The resulting **AQuadtree** object maintains the attributes of the two input objects. The attributes are automatically renamed, adding the suffix ".1" or ".2" to indicate whether the attribute comes from the first or the second object. When the grids have different subdivision schemes, the algorithm works in a quadtree manner, it merges the cells to bigger ones and aggregates information. The optional parameters **mean.1** and **mean.2** can be used to indicate a list of attributes that should be aggregated using a weighted mean instead of the **sum** function applied by default. The function can be used to merge **AQuadtrees** with the same attributes, but also with different information.

The following example combines two **AQuadtrees**, with different information. The first **AQuadtree** contains the population of Barcelona maintaining only the **age** attribute with a threshold value 25 on the number of points per grid cell.

```
R> Barcelona.AQT_1<-AQuadtree(BarcelonaPop,colnames="age",threshold=25, fun="mean")
```

A second **AQuadtree** for the same population preserving the **sex** attribute with a threshold value 17 is also created.

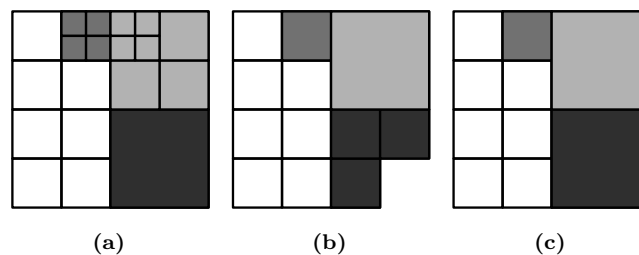
```
R> Barcelona.AQT_2 <- AQuadtree(BarcelonaPop, colnames="sex", threshold=17,
+                               thresholdField=c("sex.man", "sex.woman"))
```

Now both objects are combined to create a new **AQuadtree** aggregating the **age** attribute using the weighted mean.

```
R> Barcelona.AQT_1_2 <- joinAQuadtrees(Barcelona.AQT_1, Barcelona.AQT_2,
+                                     mean.1="age", withResiduals=TRUE)
```

To illustrate how the merging process works we focus on a particular cell.

```
R> plot(Barcelona.AQT_1[Barcelona.AQT_1$cellCode=="1kmN2065E3665",])
R> plot(Barcelona.AQT_2[Barcelona.AQT_2$cellCode=="1kmN2065E3665",])
R> plot(Barcelona.AQT_1_2[Barcelona.AQT_1_2$cellCode=="1kmN2065E3665",])
```



**Figure 8:** Cell join example. AQuadtree objects in a) and b) are joined in c).

Figure 8 presents the results of the previous example, the input grids are shown in Figure 8a and 8b and the output grid is shown in Figure 8c. Some cells have been highlighted in different grey tones to clarify the merging process. For instance, looking at the bottom right cells in Figure 8a and 8b (see the darkest gray-scale level), the three cells in Figure 8b, must be merged to make them comparable to the one in Figure 8a. The resulting grid in Figure 8c preserves the cell in Figure 8a and aggregates the information of the cells in Figure 8b. Table 1 presents the attribute information in each cell of the input and in the output grid to clarify the merging performed.

Barcelona.AQT_1				Barcelona.AQT_2					Barcelona.AQT_1_2						
cell Num	level	total	age	cell Num	level	total	sex. man	sex. woman	cell Num	level	total .1	age .1	total .2	sex. man .2	sex. woman .2
101	3	79	43.6	101	3	79	37	42	101	3	79	43.6	79	37	42
102	3	133	40.9	102	3	133	75	58	102	3	133	40.9	133	75	58
105	3	63	45.0	105	3	63	37	2	105	3	63	45.0	63	37	26
106	3	93	40.0	106	3	93	54	39	106	3	93	40.0	93	54	39
2	2	65	38.1	203	3	118	81	37	2	2	265	38.1	253	146	107
				207	3	92	47	45							
				208	3	43	18	25							
309	3	79	41.5	309	3	79	38	41	309	3	79	41.5	79	38	41
310	3	121	38.8	310	3	121	54	67	310	3	121	38.8	121	54	67
313	3	89	35.4	313	3	89	50	39	313	3	89	35.4	89	50	39
31451	4	41	44.5	314	3	158	68	90	314	3	158	39.6	158	68	90
31452	4	44	39.4												
31459	4	32	34.1												
31460	4	41	39.2												
411	3	128	39.8	4	2	379	192	187	4	2	379	41.0	379	192	187
412	3	62	40.1												
41553	4	53	46.2												
41554	4	32	35.6												
41561	4	42	41.9												
41562	4	31	41.3												
416	3	31	43.0												

**Table 1:** Cell join example.

The `joinAQuadtree` function can also be used to incorporate a set of points to an existing AQuadtree object building a grid with threshold of 1 point per cell. For instance, let us consider an AQuadtree aggregating the population for the Charleston SCMA using a threshold value 17 individuals per cell and a `SpatialPointsDataFrame` object from the same population selecting white people aged 65 or more:

```
R> Charleston.AQT<-AQuadtree(CharlestonPop, threshold=17)
R> head(Charleston.AQT)
An object of class "AQuadtree" with 6 grid cells with sizes between 1km and 125m
```

	cellCode	cellNum	level	residual	total
1	1kmN0126E2135		1	FALSE	22
2	1kmN0127E2135		1	FALSE	20
3	1kmN0127E2136		1	FALSE	24
4	1kmN0131E2140		1	FALSE	29

```
5 1kmN0133E2134      1    FALSE    45
6 1kmN0133E2135      1    FALSE    20
```

```
R> CharlestonWomen65 <- CharlestonPop[CharlestonPop$origin=='white'
+   & CharlestonPop$age=='over65', 'sex']
```

Both objects can be aggregated by creating an auxiliary **AQuadtree** with threshold value 1 (i.e. with maximum level of disaggregation) for the set of points

```
R> CharlestonWomen65.AQT<-AQuadtree(CharlestonWomen65, threshold=1, colnames='sex')
```

and then joining both **AQuadtree** objects:

```
R> Charleston.AQT.ext<-joinAQuadtrees(Charleston.AQT, CharlestonWomen65.AQT)
R> head(Charleston.AQT.ext)
```

An object of class "AQuadtree" with 6 grid cells with sizes between 1km and 125m

	cellCode	cellNum	level	residual	total.1	total.2	sex.male.2	sex.female.2
1	1kmN0126E2135	1	FALSE	22	4	2	2	
2	1kmN0127E2135	1	FALSE	20	2	1	1	
3	1kmN0127E2136	1	FALSE	24	3	1	2	
4	1kmN0131E2140	1	FALSE	29	2	1	1	
5	1kmN0133E2134	1	FALSE	45	5	4	1	
6	1kmN0133E2135	1	FALSE	20	2	1	1	

The resulting **AQuadtree** object may contain less cells than the original, because joining **AQuadtrees** only merges common geometries.

```
R> length(Charleston.AQT)
[1] 997
R> length(Charleston.AQT.ext)
[1] 856
```

An optimized function to aggregate points to an existing **AQuadtree** object maintaining all the original cells is explained in the next subsection.

### Aggregate points to an AQuadtree

As seen in the previous subsection, a set of points may be converted into an **AQuadtree** object and then it may be joined to another **AQuadtree**. The package includes the **pointsToAQuadtree** function to optimize this process. The function takes two elements, an **AQuadtree** object and a **SpatialPoints** or a **SpatialPointsDataFrame** object, and aggregates the set of points to the **AQuadtree**. The function aggregates numeric attributes of the input set of points using the **mean** function. It also deploys factor attributes creating new attributes for each label of the factor and computing the number of occurrences. The point's attributes added to the resulting **AQuadtree** object are prefixed with "p.". The function also creates a "p.total" attribute to compute the total number of points aggregated to each cell of the input **AQuadtree**.

Following the example given in the previous section (see at the end of previous section), the aggregation of the **CharlestonWomen65** and **Charleston.AQT** objects is given by

```
R> Charleston.AQT.ext<- pointsToAQuadtree(Charleston.AQT, CharlestonWomen65)
R> tail(Charleston.AQT.ext)
An object of class "AQuadtree" with 6 grid cells with sizes between 1km and 125m
```

	cellCode	cellNum	level	residual	total	p.total	p.sex.male	p.sex.female
185	1kmN0142E2133	313	3	FALSE	23	NA	NA	NA
186	1kmN0142E2133	314	3	FALSE	19	1	0	1
188	1kmN0142E2134	101	3	FALSE	27	1	1	0
189	1kmN0142E2134	102	3	FALSE	27	1	0	1
190	1kmN0142E2134	105	3	FALSE	35	4	2	2
191	1kmN0142E2134	106	3	FALSE	32	2	0	2

The resulting **AQuadtree** object has the same cells as the original, and the cells not covering any points contain NA values for the new attributes.

```
R> length(Charleston.AQT)
[1] 997
R> length(Charleston.AQT.ext)
[1] 997
```

## Create a fixed size grid

The `createGrid` function creates a grid with fixed cell size (by default 1km), based on the INSPIRE Specification on Geographical Grid Systems (INSPIRE, 2010). The grid covers entirely a given area which can be a single polygon, a set of polygons or a set of points. The resulting grid will be a `SpatialPolygons` object where the ID of each polygon is the `cellCode` as explained in Section [Quadtree anonymization](#). The size of the grid cells can be specified with the `dim` argument in meters; by default cells will be 1000m. The `intersect` argument specifies whether the resulting grid should be intersected with the given zone; otherwise the function builds a rectangular grid. The `outline` argument, indicates whether the resulting grid should be clipped with the outline borders of the given zone (only applicable with `SpatialPolygons` or `SpatialPolygonsDataFrame` classes).

Figure 9 presents an example of a `SpatialPolygons` object representing the census tracts for Barcelona, and three possible grids with different values for the `intersect` and `outline` arguments. Figure 9a provides the census tract spatial limits for Barcelona,

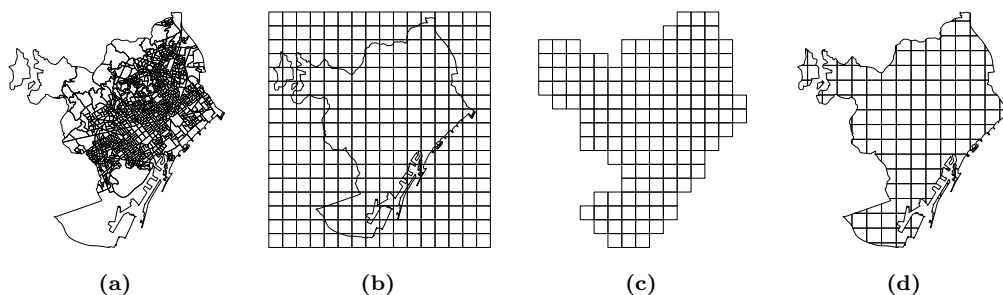
```
R> plot(BarcelonaCensusTracts)
```

Figure 9b provides a rectangular grid covering the current spatial region without intersection. To illustrate the region covered, the boundaries for the Barcelona Municipality have also been plotted,

```
R> plot(createGrid(BarcelonaCensusTracts, intersect=FALSE))
R> plot(rgeos::gUnaryUnion(BarcelonaCensusTracts), add=TRUE)
```

and finally, Figure 9c and Figure 9d provide intersected grids with and without outlined borders,

```
R> plot(createGrid(BarcelonaCensusTracts, intersect=TRUE, outline=FALSE))
R> plot(createGrid(BarcelonaCensusTracts, intersect=TRUE, outline=TRUE))
```



**Figure 9:** Barcelona census tracts (a); grid for Barcelona city without intersection (b); grid intersected (c); grid intersected and outlined (d).

The polygons in the resulting grids are identified by their corresponding INSPIRE cell code (INSPIRE, 2010),

```
R> Bcn.Grid<-createGrid(BarcelonaCensusTracts, intersect=TRUE,
+ outline=FALSE)
R> row.names(Bcn.Grid)
[1] "1kmN2074E3665" "1kmN2074E3666" "1kmN2074E3667" "1kmN2073E3664"
[5] "1kmN2073E3665" "1kmN2073E3666" "1kmN2073E3667" "1kmN2072E3655"
[9] "1kmN2072E3656" "1kmN2072E3657" "1kmN2072E3661" "1kmN2072E3662"
[13] "1kmN2072E3663" "1kmN2072E3664" "1kmN2072E3665" "1kmN2072E3666"
[17] "1kmN2072E3667" ...
```

Once a fixed size grid is created, functionalities of spatial packages like `sp` can be used. For instance, a set of points can be aggregated to the created grid:

```
R> Bcn.Grid.ext<-aggregate(BarcelonaPop[, 'age'], by=Bcn.Grid, FUN="mean")
R> head(as.data.frame(Bcn.Grid.ext))
      age
1kmN2074E3665 42.14286
1kmN2074E3666 39.38129
1kmN2074E3667 39.00000
1kmN2073E3664 66.00000
1kmN2073E3665 39.51493
1kmN2073E3666 40.06069
```

The same result can be achieved using the `spatialPointsCellCodes` function in the **AQuadtree** package. This function provides, for each point in a `spatialPointsDataFrame`, the corresponding cell codes (`cellCode`) of a rectangular grid covering the full set of points.

```
R> Bcn.points<-spatialPointsCellCodes(BarcelonaPop)
R> Bcn.points.agr<-aggregate(age~cellCode, Bcn.points, "mean")
R> Bcn.Grid$cellCode<-row.names(Bcn.Grid)
R> Bcn.Grid.ext<-merge(Bcn.Grid, Bcn.points.agr)
R> head(as.data.frame(Bcn.Grid.ext))
      cellCode      age
143 1kmN2074E3665 42.14286
144 1kmN2074E3666 39.38129
145 1kmN2074E3667 39.00000
139 1kmN2073E3664 66.00000
140 1kmN2073E3665 39.51493
141 1kmN2073E3666 40.06069
```

The advantage of this second method is that it gives more control over the aggregation process, for example, the summarizing functions provided in the **dplyr** package may be used.

```
R> Bcn.points.agr<-summarise(group_by(as.data.frame(Bcn.points), cellCode),
+                             total.points=n(), mean.age=mean(age), sd.age=sd(age))
R> Bcn.Grid.ext<-merge(Bcn.Grid, Bcn.points.agr)
R> head(as.data.frame(Bcn.Grid.ext))
      cellCode total.points mean.age  sd.age
143 1kmN2074E3665          35 42.14286 27.22579
144 1kmN2074E3666         139 39.38129 22.79283
145 1kmN2074E3667           1 39.00000      NA
139 1kmN2073E3664           1 66.00000      NA
140 1kmN2073E3665         268 39.51493 21.95441
141 1kmN2073E3666         346 40.06069 23.05115
```

## Final remarks

In this paper we have presented the R package **AQuadtree** which provides an automatic aggregation tool to anonymize point data using a methodology based on hierarchical (quadtree) geographic data structures. The main goal of the proposed system is respecting privacy of geographic data, while, at the same time, offering best accuracy to perform truthful spatial analysis. The implemented methodology is helpful for the production of official spatial data and for researchers to deal with this type of data. Further research should evaluate the quality and usefulness of ad-hoc datasets created using the package.

Data privacy concerns are built upon the *k-anonymity* concept. The methodology to build the datasets performs aggregation and suppression of spatial data, yet controlled with thresholds defined by the user and covering as many attributes as needed. Thereby, the package can create grids where the set of attributes leading to the identification of an individual cannot be distinguished from at least  $k - 1$  other individuals in the same grid cell. Datasets produced ensure individual privacy as long as the anonymity thresholds used are high enough.

The process has been designed to be time efficient so it can be used with large spatial datasets. It has been tested on a 2,5 GHz Intel 4 Core i7 computer with the Catalanian 2014 population register dataset containing information on 7,566,464 individuals. For instance, a grid with 85,408 cells with sizes between 1km and 31.25m, with a threshold value of 17 individuals per cell was created in 46 seconds.

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Raymond Lagonigro  
 Department of Economics and Business  
 Data Analysis and Modeling Research Group  
 University of Vic - UCC  
 Spain  
 (ORCID: 0000-0002-8091-4296)  
[raymond.lagonigro@uvic.cat](mailto:raymond.lagonigro@uvic.cat)

Ramon Oller  
 Department of Economics and Business

*Data Analysis and Modeling Research Group*  
*University of Vic - UCC*  
*Spain*  
(ORCID: 0000-0002-4333-0021)  
[ramon.oller@uvic.cat](mailto:ramon.oller@uvic.cat)

*Joan Carles Martori*  
*Department of Economics and Business*  
*Data Analysis and Modeling Research Group*  
*University of Vic - UCC*  
*Spain*  
(ORCID: 0000-0002-8400-5487)  
[martori@uvic.cat](mailto:martori@uvic.cat)