

Important Terms and Concepts for Working with Census Data

American Factfinder Glossary:

factfinder2.census.gov/help/en/american_factfinder_help.htm#glossary/glossary

American Community Survey (ACS): An ongoing statistical survey that samples a small percentage of the population every year giving communities the information they need to plan investments and services. The survey produces 1 year, 3 year, and 5 year estimates of population and housing characteristics and produces data for small areas, including tracts and population subgroups. Questions asked are similar to those on the decennial census long form of the 2000 Census.

Census (Decennial): A census is a complete enumeration, usually of a population, but also of businesses and commercial establishments, farms, governments, and so forth. The U.S. decennial census is a census of population and housing, taken by the Census Bureau in years ending in zero. Article I of the Constitution requires that a census be taken every ten years for the purpose of reapportioning the U.S. House of Representatives and the allocation of federal funding.

Census Block: A subdivision of a census tract, a block is the smallest geographic unit for which the Census Bureau tabulates data. Many blocks correspond to individual city blocks bounded by streets, but blocks—especially in rural areas – may include many square miles and may have some boundaries that are not streets. Thus, the population of a census block can vary greatly.

Census Block Group: A subdivision of a census tract, a block group is made up of a cluster of census blocks having the same first digit of their four-digit identifying numbers within a census tract. Block groups optimally contain 1,500 people.

Census Tract: A small, relatively permanent statistical subdivision of a county delineated by a local committee of census data users for the purpose of presenting data. Census tract boundaries normally follow visible features, but may follow governmental unit boundaries and other non-visible features in some instances; they always nest within counties. Designed to be relatively homogeneous units with respect to population characteristics, economic status, and living conditions at the time of establishment, census tracts average about 4,000 inhabitants.

County Subdivisions: The primary divisions of counties and equivalent entities. They include census county divisions, census subareas, minor civil divisions, and unorganized territories and can be classified as either legal or statistical. Each county subdivision is assigned a five-character numeric FIPS code based on alphabetical sequence within state and an eight-digit National Standard feature identifier.

Margin of Error (MOE): The difference between an estimate and its upper or lower confidence bounds. Confidence bounds can be created by adding the margin of error to the estimate (for the upper bound) and subtracting the margin of error from the estimate (for the lower bound). All published ACS margins of error are based on a 90-percent confidence level.

Metropolitan Statistical Areas: Areas that have at least one urbanized area of 50,000 or more population, plus adjacent territory that has a high degree of social and economic integration with the core as measured by commuting ties. Qualification of an MSA requires the presence of a city with 50,000 or more inhabitants, or the presence of an Urbanized Area (UA) and a total population of at least 100,000 (75,000 in New England). The county or counties containing the largest city and surrounding

densely settled territory are central counties of the MSA. Additional outlying counties qualify to be included in the MSA by meeting certain other criteria of metropolitan character, such as a specified minimum population density or percentage of the population that is urban.

Micropolitan Statistical Areas: Areas that have at least one urban cluster of at least 10,000 but less than 50,000 population, plus adjacent territory that has a high degree of social and economic integration with the core as measured by commuting ties.

Minor Civil Divisions (MCDs): The primary governmental or administrative divisions of a county in many states (parishes in Louisiana) and the county equivalents in Puerto Rico and the Island Areas. MCDs in the United States, Puerto Rico, and the Island Areas represent many different kinds of legal entities with a wide variety of governmental and/or administrative functions. MCDs include areas variously designated as barrios, barrios-pueblo, boroughs, charter townships, commissioner districts, election districts, election precincts, gores, grants, locations, magisterial districts, parish governing authority districts, plantations, purchases, reservations, supervisor's districts, towns, and townships. The Census Bureau recognizes MCDs in 29 states, including New York.

Place: The Census defines cities, towns, villages and boroughs with significant populations or jobs as a "place" (Syracuse, NY is an example of a place according to the census definition).

Rural: Rural consists of all territory, population, and housing units located outside Urbanized Areas and Urban Clusters.

Sampling Error: The uncertainty associated with an estimate that is based on data gathered from a sample of the population rather than the full population.

Urban: For the 2010 Census, the Census Bureau classified as urban all territory, population, and housing units located within urbanized areas (UAs) and urban clusters (UCs), both defined using the same criteria. The Census Bureau delineates UA and UC boundaries that represent densely developed territory, encompassing residential, commercial, and other nonresidential urban land uses. In general, this territory consists of areas of high population density and urban land use resulting in a representation of the "urban footprint."

ZIP Code Tabulation Area (ZCTA): ZCTAs are approximate area representations of U.S. Postal Service (USPS) five-digit ZIP Code service areas that the Census Bureau creates using whole blocks to present statistical data from censuses and surveys. The Census Bureau defines ZCTAs by allocating each block that contains addresses to a single ZCTA, usually to the ZCTA that reflects the most frequently occurring ZIP Code for the addresses within that tabulation block. Blocks that do not contain addresses but are completely surrounded by a single ZCTA (enclaves) are assigned to the surrounding ZCTA; those surrounded by multiple ZCTAs will be added to a single ZCTA based on limited buffering performed between multiple ZCTAs. Data users should not use ZCTAs to identify the official USPS ZIP Code for mail delivery. The USPS makes periodic changes to ZIP Codes to support more efficient mail delivery. The ZCTAs process used primarily residential addresses and was biased towards ZIP Codes used for city-style mail delivery, thus there may be ZIP Codes that are primarily nonresidential or boxes only that may not have a corresponding ZCTA.