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Geography

Geographic Terms and Concepts - Census Tract

Census Tracts are small, relatively permanent statistical subdivisions of a county or equivalent entity that are updated by local participants prior to each decennial census as part of the Census Bureau's Participant Statistical Areas Program. The Census Bureau delineates census tracts in situations where no local participant existed or where state, local, or tribal governments declined to participate. The primary purpose of census tracts is to provide a stable set of geographic units for the presentation of statistical data.

Census tracts generally have a population size between 1,200 and 8,000 people, with an optimum size of 4,000 people. A census tract usually covers a contiguous area; however, the spatial size of census tracts varies widely depending on the density of settlement. Census tract boundaries are delineated with the intention of being maintained over a long time so that statistical comparisons can be made from census to census. Census tracts occasionally are split due to population growth or merged as a result of substantial population decline.

Census tract boundaries generally follow visible and identifiable features. They may follow nonvisible legal boundaries, such as minor civil division (MCD) or incorporated place boundaries in some states and situations, to allow for census-tract-to-governmental-unit relationships where the governmental boundaries tend to remain unchanged between censuses. State and county boundaries always are census tract boundaries in the standard census geographic hierarchy. Tribal census tracts are a unique geographic entity defined within federally recognized American Indian reservations and off-reservation trust lands and can cross state and county boundaries. Tribal census tracts may be completely different from the census tracts and block groups defined by state and county (see "Tribal Census Tract (/geo/reference/gtc/gtc_tr_ct.html)").

Census Tract Codes and Numbers—Census tracts are identified by an up to four-digit integer number and may have an optional two-digit suffix; for example 1457.02 or 23. The census tract codes consist of six digits with an implied decimal between the fourth and fifth digit corresponding to the basic census tract number but with leading zeroes and trailing zeroes for census tracts without a suffix. The tract number examples above would have codes of 145702 and 002300, respectively.

Some ranges of census tract numbers in the 2010 Census are used to identify distinctive types of census tracts. The code range in the 9400s is used for those census tracts with a majority of population, housing, or land area associated with an American Indian area and matches the numbering used in Census 2000. The code range in the 9800s is new for 2010 and is used to specifically identify special land-use census tracts; that is, census tracts defined to encompass a large area with little or no residential population with special characteristics, such as large parks or employment areas. The range of census tracts in the 9900s represents census tracts delineated specifically to cover large bodies of water. This is different from Census 2000 when water-only census tracts were assigned codes of all zeroes (000000); 000000 is no longer used as a census tract code for the 2010 Census.

The Census Bureau uses suffixes to help identify census tract changes for comparison purposes. Census tract suffixes may range from .01 to .98. As part of local review of existing census tracts before each census, some census tracts may have grown enough in population size to qualify as more than one census tract. When a census tract is split, the split parts usually retain the basic number but receive different suffixes. For example, if census tract 14 is split, the new tract numbers would be 14.01 and 14.02. In a few counties, local participants request major changes to, and renumbering of, the census tracts; however, this is generally discouraged. Changes to individual census tract boundaries usually do not result in census tract numbering changes.

Tribal Census Tracts in American Indian Areas—The Census Bureau introduced the concept of tribal census tracts for the first time for Census 2000. Tribal census tracts for that census consisted of the standard county-based census tracts tabulated within American Indian areas, thus allowing for the tracts to ignore state and county boundaries for tabulation. The Census Bureau assigned the 9400 range of numbers to identify specific tribal census tracts; however, not all tribal census tracts used this numbering scheme. For the 2010 Census, tribal census tracts no longer are tied to or numbered in the same way as the county-based census tracts (see "Tribal Census Tract (/geo/reference/gtc/gtc_tr_ct.html)").

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