Census Information

What is the census and why is it taken?

The first national census was taken in August 1790, and the census has been conducted every decade since. The Census is mandated by the United States Constitution and the results are used to allocate seats in the House of Representatives, to distribute government program funding, and to define legislature districts.

The census has changed considerably since the first questions were asked over 200 years ago. No two censuses have been exactly alike. These changes reflect the changes in our society, economy and technology. The first census asked for simple head counts of free persons and slaves. For example, the census asked for the name of the “head of the family,” number of people in each household, their status (free or slave) and age. As the need for statistics for planning and legislative decision-making increased, so did the number of questions.

Measuring America: The Decennial Censuses from 1790 to 2000 provides a history of the Census and includes each year’s questionnaire.

Census data in print format is available on Level 3 of the Thomas Jefferson Library. Some historical Census data is available beginning with 1790 and continuing to Census 2000.

Beginning with the 1990 Census and continuing with the 2000 and 2010 Censuses, information is available from the Census Bureau website and through the Bureau's search service called American FactFinder. This service allows individuals to create tables and reports, as well as browse pre-formatted data.

Census Geography

The census provides data for more types of geographic areas than any other major data source. It provides data on the following familiar governmental units: states, counties, and cities. The Bureau also provides data for geographic areas defined for statistical purposes: MSAs (Metropolitan Statistical Areas), census tracts, and census blocks.

Metropolitan Statistical Areas (MSA)

Most MSAs consist of a city of 50,000 or more inhabitants and the county in which it is located. Contiguous counties are included in an MSA if they are socially and economically integrated with the central county. The inclusion of contiguous counties in an MSA is based primarily by census data on commuting patterns. Effective with the 1980 census, a central city (as in the case of St. Louis) can be any size as long as it has an urbanized area of 50,000 or more inhabitants and a total metropolitan area population of at least 100,000.

Incorporated Places

These concentrations of population, such as cities, have legally prescribed boundaries, powers and functions.
**Census Tracts**

Census tracts are statistical areas averaging about 4,000 in population, although they can have between 2,500 and 8,000 residents. Tracts generally have stable boundaries. When census tracts are established, they are designed to be relatively homogenous areas with respect to population characteristics, economic status, and living conditions. Tract boundaries are established with the intention of being maintained over a long time so that statistical comparisons can be made from census to census. When sufficient population increases occur, tracts are subdivided. It is easy to recombine the new tracts for comparison with older tracts. Other changes have included combining two or more tracts and minor realignments of tract boundaries to reflect new or better recognized physical features. Census tracts observe county lines and cover all of the territory within each tracted county. Within a county, tract boundaries may be split by other geographic boundaries. In the case of independent cities, like the City of St. Louis, which is not in a county, the independent city is treated like a county and appears at the end of all of the county tables.

**Block Groups**

These are groups of blocks, as defined below, averaging approximately 1,100 in population. They are the second smallest type of census area.

**Blocks**

These are the smallest type of census area. They average about 70 people and most commonly are small rectangular areas bounded by four streets. Only populated areas were previously assigned block numbers. With the increased need to track population shifts and trends and the advent of computer technology making this easier, the Census Bureau has created block and/or block numbered areas (BNA) for the entire nation beginning with the 1990 census.

For a more complete listing of Census Geography visit the 2010 Geographic Terms and Concepts page.

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**Using American Factfinder to find census data**

There are several ways of accessing the information in American FactFinder. Below are a few examples:

- **Community Facts**: Enter a state, county, city, town, or zip code in the search box to see frequently requested demographic data such as population, income, education, etc.

- **Guided Search**: Select “Get Me Started.” Click on the radio button next to the appropriate demographic category (people, housing, or businesses or industries). The next screens provide additional topics and limiters based on the chosen demographic category.

  For example, if a user chose “people” on the first screen, then their available topics on the second screen will include age, disability, education, employment, and many others. Subsequent screens prompt users to narrow their searches by geography and race/ethnic groups.

  **Hint**: The blue Selections box on the right of the screen includes the number of tables available with the data you have selected. If the number is too low, try removing a topic.
Advanced Search Options

To access additional ways of searching data, click the “Advanced Search” link and then click the “Show Me All” button.

*Hint:* You can select from more than one category in the same search.

**Keyword:** To search for information by topic and geography, use the search boxes located in the middle of the screen. For example, to find the total population of St. Louis County, type “Population” into the box labeled “Topic or Table Name” and choose “Total Population” from the dropdown list. In the next box labeled “Geography,” type in St. Louis and choose “St. Louis County, Missouri” from the list. Click “Go” and selected the desired table from the list of results.

**Topics:** To search by a predefined topic, click the Topics tab on the left. You can search by several topics including People, Housing, Business and Industry, Program and Dataset. Choose your desired topic, close the selection box and then click on a table from the list of results.

**Geographies:** To search using geography, click on the Geographies tab on the left side of the screen. By clicking on the tabs at the top, users can search from a list of geographies, a specific geographical name (i.e. Missouri), by address, or by pointing to a specific place on a map.

**Race and Ethnic Groups:** This option, also located on the left side of the screen, allows users to search for data by tribe or race.

**Industry Codes:** This overlay allows users to search economic data from the Economic Census and the Annual Economic Surveys. To search for data, enter the industry or product name or code in the search box.

Other Research Help

Detailed tutorials and instructions for using American FactFinder are available at the U.S. Census Bureau’s website.

Census data can also be found using a database called Social Explorer. Please visit our tutorial Using Social Explorer for help.

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