

CENSUS GEOGRAPHY AND USING CENSUS FILES¹

The Bureau of the Census must provide information gathered from the Census, and protect privacy (for 70 years after the data are gathered). These two goals conflict. The important goal of protecting privacy results in the Census providing files with less detail than social scientists would sometimes like.

PUMS (Public Use Microdata Samples) are person-level files. They contain entire records for individuals. But, to protect privacy, the level of geographic is less detailed. For most files, the city or the county is the lowest level of geographic detail available.

STF files are summary level files. They provide counts of numbers of peoples in given categories for the given level of geography. Most STF files have records for many different levels of geography in them. Successful use of the STF files requires successfully selecting the records that have the geographic level that you want. Usually, using two variables is required to select the proper record - SUMLEV and GEOCOMP. Once you have made the selection that you think is correct, verify that your selection is correct. Sometimes running a frequency will help. For example, if you intend to select county level data, but make a mistake, some counties may be listed more than once. For example, if part of a county is in a city, and part is outside the city, each part may be listed separately. Or, if you intend to select an MSA record, but select county records instead, you will get multiple records for each MSA – information for each county in the MSA would be on separate records.

At the end of this document, a table will be presented which summarizes what geographic levels can be found in each STF file for 1990.

Levels of Census Geography found in various STF files include:

- United States
- Region
- Division
- State
- Metropolitan Statistical Area (MSAs)
- Consolidated Metropolitan Statistical Area (CMSAs)
- Primary Metropolitan Statistical Areas (PMSAs)
- Central City
- County
- County subdivision with 2,500 or more persons (12 States)
- County subdivision with less than 2,500 persons and in an MSA/CMSA (6 States)
- Place with 2,500 or more persons
- Consolidated city
- American Indian Reservation (with or without Trust Lands) and
- Alaska Native Village Statistical Area
- Place (10,000 or more persons) (or place part)
- Alaska Native Regional Corporation
- Metropolitan Statistical Area/Consolidated Metropolitan Statistical Area
- Urbanized Area
- Zip Codes
- Congressional Districts
- Census Tract/Block Numbering Area
- Block Group
- Block

Some of these may require definitions. (Much of the following text was extracted directly from code books. For

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more detail, refer to code books for STF files.)

1. REGIONS AND DIVISIONS: There are nine divisions nested in four regions.

NORTHEAST REGION

New England Division:

Maine, New Hampshire, Vermont, Massachusetts, Rhode Island, Connecticut

Middle Atlantic Division:

New York, New Jersey, Pennsylvania

MIDWEST REGION

East North Central Division:

Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, Michigan, Wisconsin

West North Central Division:

Minnesota, Iowa, Missouri, North Dakota, South Dakota, Nebraska, Kansas

SOUTH REGION

South Atlantic Division:

Delaware, Maryland, District of Columbia, Virginia, West Virginia, North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia, Florida

East South Central Division:

Kentucky, Tennessee, Alabama, Mississippi

West South Central Division:

Arkansas, Louisiana, Oklahoma, Texas

WEST REGION

Mountain Division:

Montana, Idaho, Wyoming, Colorado, New Mexico, Arizona, Utah, Nevada

Pacific Division:

Washington, Oregon, California, Alaska, Hawaii

2. MSA/CMSA/PMSA

Metropolitan statistical areas (MSA's) are relatively freestanding MA's (metropolitan areas) and are not closely associated with other MA's. These areas typically are surrounded by nonmetropolitan counties.

If an area that qualifies as an MA has more than one million persons, primary metropolitan statistical areas (PMSA's) may be defined within it. PMSA's consist of a large urbanized county or cluster of counties that demonstrates very strong internal economic and social links, in addition to close ties to other portions of the larger area. When PMSA's are established, the larger area of which they are component parts is designated a consolidated metropolitan statistical area (CMSA). In 1990 there were 20 CMSAs, each with component PMSAs. The 20 CMSAs in 1990 were:

Boston--Lawrence--Salem, MA--NH
Buffalo--Niagara Falls, NY
Chicago--Gary--Lake County, IL--IN--WI
Cincinnati--Hamilton, OH--KY--IN
Cleveland--Akron--Lorain, OH
Dallas--Fort Worth, TX
Denver--Boulder, CO
Detroit--Ann Arbor, MI
Hartford--New Britain--Middletown, CT
Houston--Galveston--Brazoria, TX
Los Angeles--Anaheim--Riverside, CA
Miami--Fort Lauderdale, FL
Milwaukee--Racine, WI
Portland--Vancouver, OR--WA
Providence--Pawtucket--Fall River, RI--MA
New York--Northern New Jersey--Long Island, NY--NJ--CT
Philadelphia--Wilmington--Trenton, PA--NJ--DE--MD

Pittsburgh--Beaver Valley, PA
San Francisco--Oakland--San Jose, CA
Seattle--Tacoma, WA

3. CENTRAL CITY

In each MSA and CMSA, the largest place and, in some cases, additional places are designated as "Central cities" under the official standards. A few PMSA's do not have central cities. The largest central city and, in some cases, up to two additional central cities are included in the title of the MA; there also are central cities that are not included in an MA title. An MA central city does not include any part of that city that extends outside the MA boundary.

4. PLACE

Places, for the reporting of decennial census data, include census designated places and incorporated places. Each place is assigned a four-digit census code that is unique within State. Each place is also assigned a five-digit FIPS code that is unique within State. Both the census and FIPS codes are assigned based on alphabetical order within State. Consolidated cities (see below) are assigned a one-character alphabetical census code that is unique

5. CENSUS TRACT AND BLOCK NUMBERING AREA

Census tracts are small, relatively permanent statistical subdivisions of a county. Census tracts are delineated for all metropolitan areas (MA's) and other densely populated counties by local census statistical areas committees following Census Bureau guidelines (more than 3,000 census tracts have been established in 221 counties outside MA's). Census tracts usually have between 2,500 and 8,000 persons and, when first delineated, are designed to be homogeneous with respect to population characteristics, economic status, and living conditions.

Block numbering areas (BNA's) are small statistical subdivisions of a county for grouping and numbering blocks in nonmetropolitan counties where local census statistical areas committees have not established census tracts. State agencies and the Census Bureau delineated BNA's for the 1990 census, using guidelines similar to those for the delineation of census tracts. BNA's do not cross county boundaries.

Tract/BNA numbers are unique within each county. County numbers are unique within each state. To uniquely identify a Tract/BNA, information about the state and county must also be included.

6. BLOCK

Census blocks are small areas bounded on all sides by visible features such as streets, roads, streams, and railroad tracks, and by invisible boundaries such as city, town, township, and county limits, property lines, and short, imaginary extensions of streets and roads. The 1990 census is the first for which the entire United States and its possessions are block-numbered. Blocks are numbered uniquely within each census tract or BNA. A block is identified by a three-digit number, sometimes with a single alphabetical suffix. Block numbers with suffixes generally represent collection blocks that were "split" in order to identify separate geographic entities that divide the original block. For example, when a city limit runs through data collection block 101, the data for the portion inside the city is tabulated in block 101A and the portion outside, in block 101B.

7. BLOCK GROUP

A geographic block group (BG) is a cluster of blocks having the same first digit of their three-digit identifying numbers within a census tract or block numbering area (BNA). For example, BG 3 within a census tract or BNA includes all blocks numbered between 301 and 397. In most cases, the numbering involves substantially fewer than 97 blocks. Geographic BG's never cross census tract or BNA boundaries, but may cross the boundaries of county subdivisions, places, American Indian and Alaska Native areas, urbanized areas, voting districts, and congressional districts. BG's generally contain between 250 and 550 housing units, with the ideal size being 400 housing units.

1990 STF Files	STF1A	STF1B	STF1C	STF1D	STF2A	STF2B	STF2C	STF3A	STF3B	STF3C	STF3D	STF4A	STF4B	STF4C
United States			X				X			X				X
Region			X				X			X				X
Division			X				X			X				X
State	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Congressional District	X			X				X			X			
MSACMSA		X	X		X		X	X		X		X		X
MSA		X	X		X		X	X		X		X		X
PSMA		X	X		X		X	X		X		X		X
Central City		X	X				X	X		X				X
Place	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X		X	X	X	X	X
Consolidated Cities	X	X	X		X	X	X	X		X		X		X
Zipcode									X					
County	X	X	X		X	X	X	X	X	X		X	X	X
Census Tract	X	X			X			X				X		
Block Group	X	X						X						
Block		X												