2. GEOGRAPHIC AREAS COVERED IN THE ACS

Data from the American Community Survey (ACS) are tabulated for a variety of different geographic areas ranging in size from broad geographic regions (Northeast, Midwest, South, and West) to states, cities, towns, census tracts, and block groups (see Box 2.1). Table 2.1 shows the type and number of geographic areas included in the ACS 1-year and 5-year products for 2015. For example, in 2015, ACS 1-year data were available for 830 counties (26 percent of all counties), while the remaining 2,390 counties (74 percent of all counties) received 5-year estimates. Note that the information in this table is based on current geographic boundaries and is expected to change over time. The ACS uses boundaries as of January 1 of the last year of the estimate period. For example, the 2011–2015 ACS 5-year estimates use boundaries as of January 1, 2015, as reported to the U.S. Census Bureau.

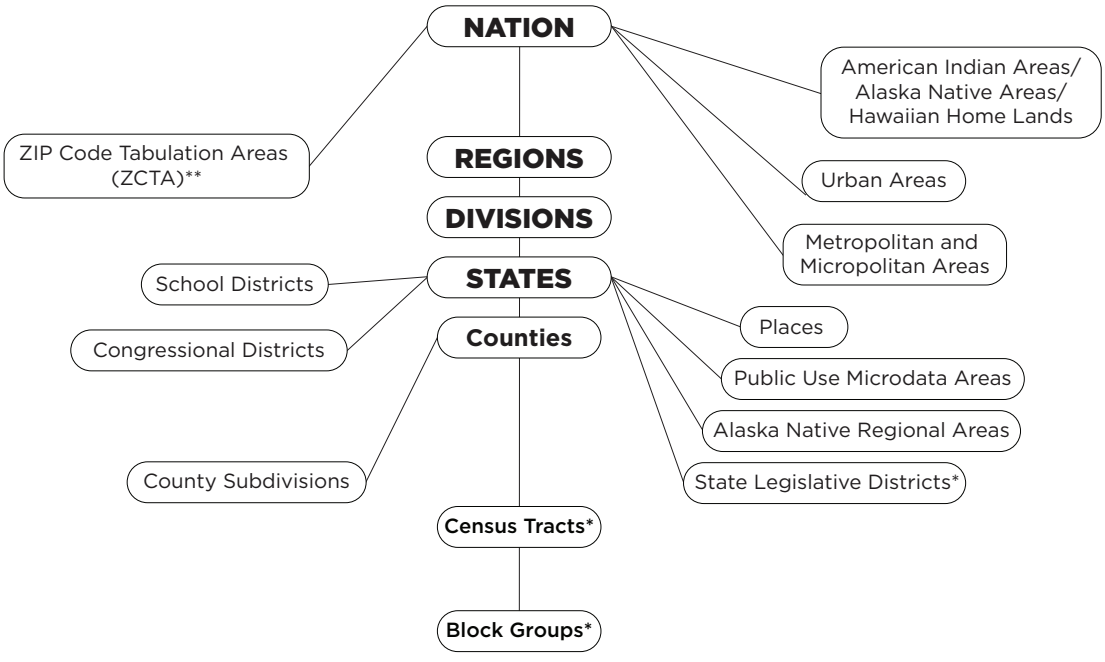
Box 2.1. ***Explaining Census Bureau Geography***

For reporting purposes, the nation is subdivided into two main types of geographic areas, legal and statistical. Legal areas are defined specifically by law, and include state, local, and tribal government units, as well as some specially defined administrative areas like congressional districts. Many, but not all, are represented by elected officials. An example of a legal area is New York State.

Statistical areas are defined directly by the Census Bureau and state, regional, or local authorities, and include census tracts and urban areas. The primary purpose of statistical areas is to tabulate and present census data. An example of a statistical area is the Boston-Cambridge-Newton, MA-NH Metropolitan Statistical Area.

Geographic areas are organized in a geographic hierarchy (see Figure 2.1). Larger units, such as states, include smaller units, such as counties and census tracts. This structure is derived from the legal, administrative, or areal relationships of the entities.

Figure 2.1. **Hierarchy of Select Geographic Entities in the ACS**



*Five-year estimates only.

**Five-year estimates only, first released in 2012 for the 2007–2011 ACS estimates.

Table 2.1. **Selected Geographic Areas Published in the 2015 American Community Survey 1-Year and 5-Year Estimates**

Geographic areas	Total number of areas	Areas receiving 1-year and 5-year estimates		Areas receiving only 5-year estimates[1]	
		Number	Percent	Number	Percent
United States	1	1	100.0	0	0.0
Region	4	4	100.0	0	0.0
Division	9	9	100.0	0	0.0
States, the District of Columbia, and Puerto Rico	52	52	100.0	0	0.0
County or equivalent[2]	3,220	830	25.8	2,390	74.2
County subdivision[3]	36,631	223	0.6	36,408	99.4
Subminor civil division (Puerto Rico only)	145	NA	NA	145	100.0
Census tract	74,001	NA	NA	74,001	100.0
Block group	220,333	NA	NA	220,333	100.0
Place (incorporated places and census designated places)	29,574	596	2.0	28,978	98.0
Consolidated city	8	NA	NA	8	100.0
Alaska Native Regional Corporation	12	3	25.0	9	75.0
American Indian Area/Alaska Native Area/ Hawaiian Home Land	693	12	1.7	681	98.3
Specified American Indian Area-Tribal Census Tract	481	NA	NA	481	100.0
Specified American Indian Area-Tribal Census Tract-Tribal Block Group	915	NA	NA	915	100.0
Metropolitan Statistical/Micropolitan Statistical Area	929	516	55.5	413	44.5
Principal City of Metropolitan or Micropolitan Statistical Areas	1,249	388	31.1	861	68.9
Metropolitan Division	31	31	100.0	0	0.0
Combined Statistical Area	169	167	98.8	2	1.2
Combined New England City and Town Area	6	6	100.0	0	0.0
New England City and Town Area	38	25	65.8	13	34.2
Principal Cities of New England City and Town Areas	58	19	32.8	39	67.2
New England City and Town Area Division	10	10	100.0	0	0.0
Urban Area	3,592	432	12.0	3,160	88.0
Congressional Districts, 114th Congress	435	435	100.0	0	0.0
Delegate District, 114th Congress (at Large, District of Columbia)	1	1	100.0	0	0.0
Resident Commissioner District, 114th Congress (at Large, Puerto Rico)	1	1	100.0	0	0.0
State Legislative District, Upper Chamber[4]	1,954	NA	NA	1,954	100.0
State Legislative District, Lower Chamber[4]	4,825	NA	NA	4,825	100.0
Public Use Microdata Area	2,378	2,378	100.0	0	0.0
5-digit ZIP Code Tabulation Area	33,120	NA	NA	33,120	100.0
Elementary School District	2,181	76	3.5	2,105	96.5
Secondary School District	538	90	16.7	448	83.3
Unified School District	10,923	851	7.8	10,072	92.2
TOTAL	428,517	7,156	1.7	421,361	98.3

NA Not available.
[1] Geographic areas with populations of 20,000 or more also receive 1-year Supplemental Estimates, which are simplified versions of popular ACS tables.
[2] County equivalents include Alaska boroughs, municipalities, city and boroughs, and census areas; Louisiana parishes; Puerto Rico municipios; and independent cities in Maryland, Missouri, Nevada, and Virginia.
[3] For 1-year estimates, qualifying Minor Civil Divisions in 20 states only. For 5-year estimates, all county subdivisions.
[4] Legislative session year 2014.
Note: Figures based on geographic area boundaries as of January 1, 2014, new and dissolved incorporations as of January 1, 2015, and population estimates from the July 1, 2015, Census Bureau Population Estimates. The Census Bureau does not publish ACS data for individual blocks.

Key Geographic Areas in the ACS

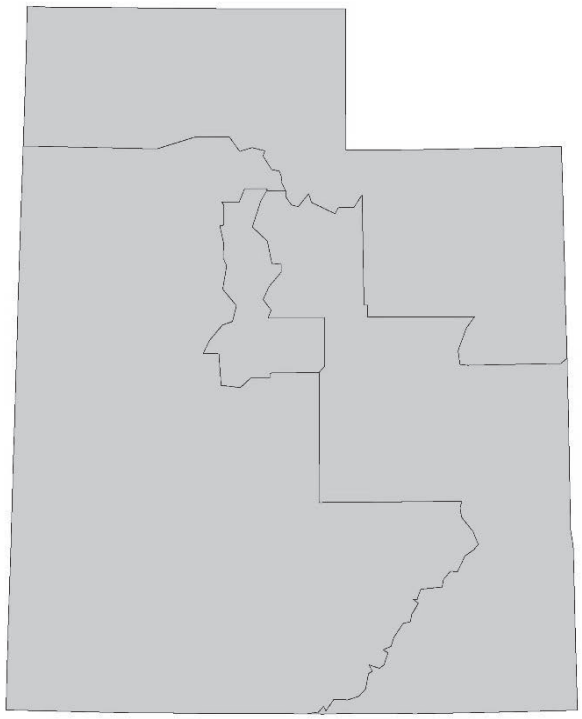
In Figures 2.2 through 2.5, sample maps for four different states—Utah, Kentucky, Iowa, and Vermont—show data users some of the key geographic areas available through the ACS: congressional districts, Public Use Microdata Areas, counties, and census tracts.

Congressional districts are redrawn after each census for the purpose of electing the members of the U.S. House of Representatives. Each of Utah's four congressional districts (shown in Figure 2.2) includes approximately 750,000 people. ACS data on congressional districts can be used to compare the home districts of the 435 House members and how they have changed over time.

The Census Bureau also divides each state into a series of Public Use Microdata Areas, or PUMAs, each of which has a minimum population of 100,000. PUMAs are constructed based on county and neighborhood boundaries and do not cross state lines. Typically, counties with large populations are subdivided into multiple PUMAs, while PUMAs in more rural areas are made up of groups of adjacent counties. PUMAs are especially useful for rural areas because, unlike counties, they all meet the 65,000-population threshold that is needed to produce ACS 1-year estimates. Kentucky's PUMAs are shown below in Figure 2.3.

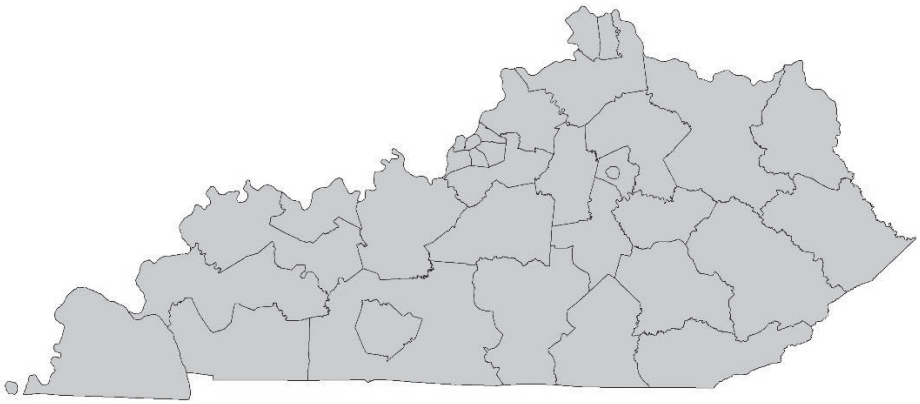
Counties are also important because they are the primary legal subdivision within each state. ACS 1-year estimates are currently available for 10 of Iowa's 99 counties—those with populations of 65,000 or more in 2015 (see Figure 2.4). Iowa has 34 counties with populations of at least 20,000 people that receive 1-year Supplemental Estimates. The 65 counties in Iowa with fewer than 20,000 people only receive 5-year estimates.

Figure 2.2. **Congressional Districts in Utah**



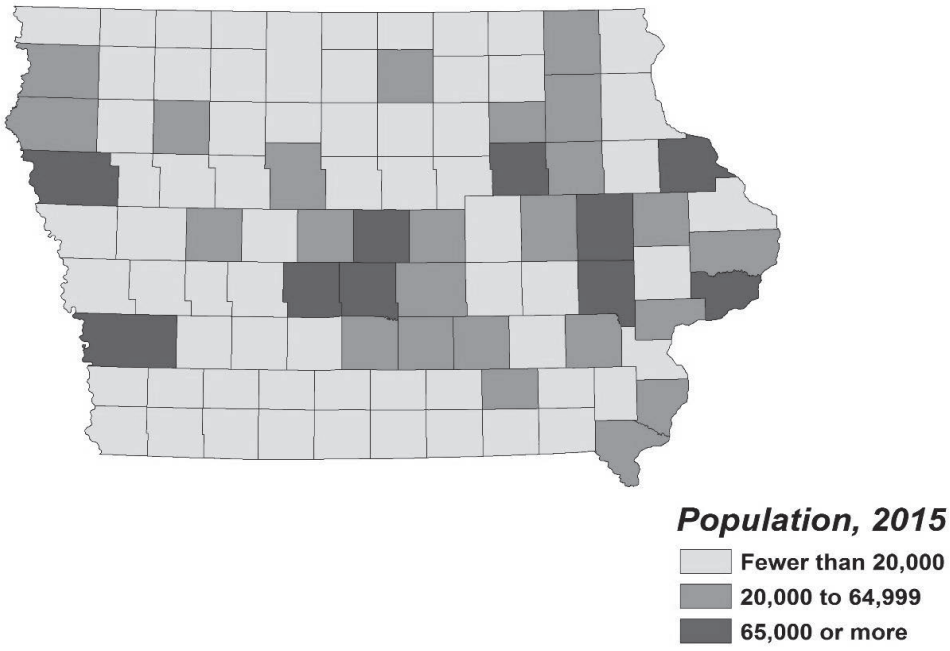
Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Congressional District Cartographic Boundary Shapefiles, accessed at <www.census.gov/geo/maps-data/data/cbf/cbf_cds.html>.

Figure 2.3. **Public Use Microdata Areas in Kentucky**



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Public Use Microdata Sample Cartographic Boundary Shapefiles, accessed at <www.census.gov/geo/maps-data/data/cbf/cbf_puma.html>.

Figure 2.4. **Counties in Iowa by Population Size in 2015**



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Population Estimates; and County Cartographic Boundary Shapefiles, accessed at <www.census.gov/geo/maps-data/data/cbf/cbf_counties.html>.

Figure 2.5. **Census Tracts in Vermont**

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Census Tract Cartographic Boundary Shapefiles, accessed at <www.census.gov/geo/maps-data/data/cbf/cbf_tracts.html>.

Census tracts are small geographic areas—with an average of about 4,000 people each—that are commonly used to present information for small towns, rural areas, and neighborhoods. For example, in Vermont, there are currently 184 census tracts with data available through the ACS 5-year data products (see Figure 2.5).

There are also more than 300 ACS data tables available for block groups—subdivisions of census tracts—that include between 600 and 3,000 people each. In the ACS, block groups are the lowest (smallest) level of geography published. Block group data are only available in the ACS 5-year data products.

Additional Background Information

Geography & ACS
<www.census.gov/programs-surveys/acs/geography-acs.html>
This Web page includes information about changes in geographic boundaries in the ACS, key concepts and definitions, and reference maps.