Census Bureau Geography

The Role of Geography in Census-Taking

"In its best interests, a civilized nation counts and profiles its people and institutions. Doing so ably and objectively is the abiding mission of the United States Census Bureau. We honor privacy, shun partisanship, invite scrutiny, and share our expertise globally. Striving to excel, we chronicle the Nation's past, describe its present, and illuminate its future."[1]

As the factfinder for the Nation, the Bureau of the Census, an agency of the U.S. Department of Commerce, collects, tabulates, and disseminates statistical data to meet a variety of needs. The original and foremost Census Bureau obligation is to provide the most complete and accurate population count possible for apportionment of the seats in the U.S. House of Representatives. Beyond this obligation, numerous other needs for Census Bureau data have developed over the years, such as the redistricting of States for congressional and legislative representation purposes, the charting of social and economic trends, the distribution of public funds authorized in Federal and State legislation, and the administration of public and private programs. All these needs require that the Census Bureau recognize many kinds of geographic areas—legal, administrative, and statistical—as the framework for the tabulation and presentation of data from its decennial, economic, agriculture, and governments censuses, as well as its periodic sample surveys and estimates programs.

The success of a census or sample survey depends not only on how well the Census Bureau designs the questionnaire, collects the data, and processes the results, but also on how well it links the collected data to geographic areas. In defining the geographic area framework for each specific census or survey, the geographic requirements consist of identifying the legal, administrative, and statistical entities to be used; promulgating official standards for those entities, where appropriate; determining the names, numeric codes, and boundaries for the entities selected; entering the required information about these entities into the

MAF/TIGER system; preparing the maps necessary to support the data collection and data dissemination functions; linking the address appearing on each census or survey questionnaire to its proper geographic location (for example, with-in a census block, a city, or a county); and providing the reference files and technology needed to assign the data collected to the full set of geographic entities used to report the results of that census or survey.

The value of most census and sample survey data relates directly to the ability of the Census Bureau to classify the data accurately and usefully into geographic areas, and to portray the geographic entities comprising those areas correctly and meaningfully on maps and in the resulting data products. The many geographic entities the Census Bureau recognizes and delineates often result in a geographic pattern that is quite complex.

Providing a Selection of Geographic Area Choices for Data Users

The Census Bureau strives to provide data for those geographic areas most useful to the many and varied users of those data. To do this, the Census Bureau presents data summaries for the Nation's many legal and administrative entities, including States, American Indian and Alaska Native areas, counties, minor civil divisions (MCDs), incorporated places, congressional districts, and voting districts. To supplement these legally defined entities, the Census Bureau also provides data for a variety of other geographic entities that are helpful to the data users. To do this, the Census Bureau, usually in cooperation with State and local agencies, establishes, identifies, and delineates geographic entities referred to as *statistical areas*. These include regions, divisions, urbanized areas (UAs), census county divisions (CCDs), unorganized territories (UTs), census designated places (CDPs), census tracts, block groups (BGs), and census blocks. The data user community, composed of numerous individuals, businesses, and agencies at all levels of government, each with somewhat different needs, can then select the geographic entity or set of entities that most closely represent their geographic area of interest. For examples of how data users can meet their geographic needs, see Table 1.

Table 1. **User Needs and Data Product Choices**

Data User Situations	Data Product Choices
A student writing a history term paper needs the current and past population totals for a city.	A good starting point is the ***2010 Census of Population and Housing CPH-2 report series***, a set of publications that contains tables showing place populations in 1990, 2000 and 2010. The comparable 1980 publication provides historical population counts for the previous two censuses while the 1970 and 1960 publications provide historical population counts for those incorporated places with 10,000 or more inhabitants, the former by decade from 1900 and the latter by decade from the earliest decennial census when each place existed.
A large manufacturer of consumer goods wants to evaluate its division of the Nation into marketing regions, advertising territories, and areas for conducting sample surveys of existing and potential customers.	The various censuses and sample surveys of the Census Bureau offer a wealth of socioeconomic data. These are available in ***printed reports, digital media (CD-ROM & DVD), or downloadable from*** ***www.census.gov***. Standard summary statistics from censuses and sample surveys, plus estimates of population and income, are available for numerous kinds of large-area geographic entities such as regions, divisions, States, metropolitan areas, large cities, and counties. In addition to the standard data products, there are ***public-use microdata files*** that contain the full range of population and housing information from the 2010 census; these include several independently drawn sample files that feature different configurations of large-area geographic entities.
A religious organization is planning to expand its activities by establishing several new congregations throughout a metropolitan area. It needs socioeconomic profiles for a network of small areas within several counties. It also would like to combine these statistics with local sources of information.	Census tracts are the most versatile units of small-area decennial census geography because they define small, relatively permanent areas designed to be homogeneous when originally established and because they average around 4,000 residents. The ***American Factfinder*** contains many tables of demographic, social, economic, and housing statistics from the 2010 Census of Population and Housing as well as a variety of surveys including the ***American Community Survey***. Census tract data are available for the Decennial Census and the American Community Survey's 5-year estimates.