2020 Census Urban Areas FAQs

Updated January 2023

Release Schedule

Q: When will the 2020 Census Urban Areas be announced?

A: Release schedule for products:

December 29, 2022:

- Federal Register Notice with list of 2020 Census Urban Areas with their 2020 Census population, housing units, and land area, as well as separate tables of this same information.

January 2023:

- 2020 Census Urban Areas Wall Map
- TIGERweb service updated with 2020 Census Urban Areas
- TIGER/Line Shapefiles
- TIGER/Line Geodatabases
- Relationship Files
- Census Geocoder updated with 2020 Census Urban Areas

Later in 2023:

- Cartographic Boundary Files – May 2023
- Additional maps

Federal Register

Q: When were the final 2020 Census Urban Area criteria published in the *Federal Register*?

A: The criteria for defining 2020 Census Urban Areas were published in the *Federal Register* on Thursday, March 24, 2022., Final criteria clarifications will be published in the **2020 Census Qualifying Urban Areas and Final Criteria Clarifications** *Federal Register* Notice on Thursday, December 29, 2022.

Q: Where can I find the *Federal Register* Notice for the 2020 Census urban area final criteria?

A: https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/FR-2022-03-24/pdf/2022-06180.pdf

Q: Where can I find the *Federal Register* Notice containing 2020 Census Urban Area final criteria clarifications?

A: https://www.census.gov/programs-surveys/geography/guidance/geo-areas/urban-rural.html

Q: When were the proposed 2020 Census Urban Area criteria published in the *Federal Register*?

A: The proposed 2020 Census Urban Area criteria were published in the *Federal Register* on February 19, 2021.

Q: Where can I find the proposed 2020 Census Urban Area criteria *Federal Register* Notice?

A: https://www.federalregister.gov/documents/2021/02/19/2021-03412/urban-areas-for-the-2020-census-proposed-criteria

Urban Areas Criteria

Q: What is the definition of an urban area?

A: Urban areas represent densely developed territory, and encompass residential, commercial, and other nonresidential urban land uses. Each urban area must encompass at least 2,000 housing units or at least 5,000 people. This is a change from the previous minimum of 2,500 people which had been in place since the 1910 Census.

Urban areas are defined primarily based on housing unit density measured at the census block level. Three housing unit densities are applied during the delineation process:

- Initial urban core: at least 425 housing units per square mile. Based on the national average of 2.6 people per occupied housing unit, this density threshold is similar to the 1,000 people per square mile used in 2000 and 2010 when delineating initial urban cores.
- Remainder of urban area: at least 200 housing units per square mile. This is similar to the 500 people per square mile density used for the 2000 and 2010 Censuses, based on the national average of 2.6 people per occupied housing unit.
- At least one high-density nucleus of at least 1,275 housing units per square mile required for qualification. This ensures that each urban area contains a high-density nucleus typical of what one would expect to find within an urban area. In addition to the change in minimum thresholds for qualification and the change to use of housing unit density, the Census Bureau also will no longer distinguish between urbanized areas of 50,000 or more people and urban clusters of less than 50,000 people.

Q: Can you tell us if the population for our urban area is above or below 50,000?

A: The population of each 2020 Census Urban Area is in the **2020 Census Qualifying Urban Areas and Final Criteria Clarifications** *Federal Register* Notice published December 29, 2022 and available on the Census Bureau's Urban and Rural website: https://www.census.gov/programs-surveys/geography/guidance/geo-areas/urban-rural.html.

Q: Why was the change made from the original proposed minimum qualification thresholds of 4,000 housing units or 10,000 people, to the final thresholds of 2,000 housing units or 5,000 people? Was it available for public comment? If so, what were the objections in the public comment?

A: This change was in response to public comment and concerns that the increase from the 2,500-people threshold of the past 110 years (the 2,500-people threshold was adopted in 1910) to 10,000 people or 4,000 housing units was too high and would result in loss of statistical data and loss of statistical comparability for those communities (data will still be available for all incorporated places and census designated places regardless of population size). We have periodically received comments from data users and rural analysts that our 2,500-people threshold was too low, especially when compared to minimum thresholds for urban areas used by other federal agencies. Lowering the threshold to 2,000 housing units or 5,000 people represents a compromise between those concerned about loss of data and those who have expressed concerns that our urban area threshold was too low and out of alignment with thresholds used by other agencies.

Q: Why was the originally proposed density of 385 housing units per square mile raised to 425 housing units per square mile?

A: There are three housing unit density thresholds for the final 2020 UA criteria. The change from 385 to 425 resulted from responses to various aspects of the criteria and our research in response to public comments. Some commenters noted that we utilized two population density thresholds (500 and 1,000 people per square mile, or PPSM) in previous decades and expressed concern that sole reliance on the proposed 385 housing units per square mile (HPSM) threshold (which was equivalent to 1,000 PPSM) would result in underbounding of some urban areas, especially when census blocks on the fringe of an urban area contained urban land uses, but had relatively large land areas, resulting in lower densities. Others expressed concern that exclusion of such blocks from an urban area resulted in too many noncontiguous pieces of qualifying urban territory. To address these concerns, we introduced the "low-density fill" criterion, which utilizes a 200 HPSM threshold to account for irregularly shaped census blocks on the fringe of an urban area that contain urban development, but because of relatively larger land area, have lower population densities. The "low-density fill" criterion also minimizes the number of noncontiguous UA pieces. Based on continued research and review of settlement patterns, we decided to adopt a higher threshold of 425 HPSM for delineation of initial cores in order to avoid initially extending too far into rural territory and then utilize the lower 200 HPSM threshold to fill in gaps. The third density threshold—1,275 HPSM—is utilized to ensure that each urban area contains at least one densely settled nucleus typical of what one would expect for an urban area.

Q: How will the classification of census blocks as urban or rural differ from 2010?

A: There are two main changes to the criteria that affect the classification of blocks as urban or rural. First, we are using census blocks as the only "geographic building block" throughout the entire delineation, whereas for the 2010 Census delineation process census tracts were utilized in the initial stage and then individual census blocks were analyzed and add to the qualifying census tracts. The use of census tracts at the initial stage improved processing of data, but led to the inclusion of some territory with typically rural land uses; that is, the overall population density of the census tract was high

enough to qualify for inclusion in an urban area, with the result that low-density census blocks containing rural land uses were defined as urban. The second change is that we will not be including low-density census blocks that form the hop and jump corridors (resulting in noncontiguous, multi-piece urban areas). Those low-density census block hop and jump connections were included for the 2010 Census as well as in previous decades. Both of these changes will result in blocks no longer qualifying as urban, but will have little impact on the total population/housing unit counts of the urban areas.

Q: How will urban area names change for the 2020 Census, will additional names be added on to the 2010 Urban Area names?

A: A number of 2020 Census Urban Areas have additional place names added because of the inclusion of housing unit counts as the secondary naming criteria. This was designed to provide more accurate naming in seasonal communities such as beach towns and mountain resorts, and more accurately reflect the known names of the urban areas overall. In most cases the primary name stayed the same as that from 2010, but there are cases where additional names were added for 2020.

Q: Why does the Census Bureau review and make changes to urban area criteria?

A: Since 1950, when the urbanized area concept was introduced, the Census Bureau has periodically reviewed and revised the criteria for delineating urban areas and introduced conceptual and methodological changes to ensure that the urban-rural classification keeps pace with changes in settlement patterns, development, and with changes in theoretical and practical approaches to interpreting and understanding the definition and extent of urbanization. This assures that the definitions of, and data for, Census Bureau-defined urban areas reflect changes in the nature of settlement as well as the needs of researchers and analysts when conceptualizing and reporting on the urban-rural landscape and urban-rural settlement. Fundamentally, we are delineating boundaries of a concept—urbanization—that can be seen on the landscape and changes over time as new development occurs and density of settlement increases, but also as changes in terms of the way in data users, researchers, and decision-makers perceive and interpret what is “urban” and what is “rural.” Periodic review of the urban-rural classification and criteria ensures its continued usefulness and relevance for statistical data tabulation and analysis, and ensures that the delineation process utilizes the best possible data, procedures, and methodologies.

Q: Is it true that the Census Bureau is no longer defining urbanized areas?

A: No. The Census Bureau will no longer identify an individual urban area as either an "urbanized area" or an "urban cluster", but we will refer to all qualified areas as “urban areas” regardless of population size. We will publish population and housing counts for each urban area when we announce results of the 2020 Census Urban Area delineation. Data users and programs will be able to use those counts and subsequent American Community Survey estimates to categorize urban areas according to population size.

Urban-Rural Classification

Q: Why does the Census Bureau delineate urban areas?

A: The Census Bureau delineates urban and rural areas for statistical purposes; that is, to tabulate and present data for the urban and rural population, housing, and territory within the United States, Puerto Rico, and the Island Areas. The Census Bureau's urban areas represent densely developed territory and encompass residential, commercial, and other non-residential urban land uses. The Census Bureau's urban and rural classification provides an important baseline for analyzing changes in the distribution and characteristics of urban and rural populations. The Census Bureau's delineation of urban areas also supports the Office of Management and Budget's delineation of metropolitan and micropolitan statistical areas. Urban areas of 50,000 or more people form the urban cores of metropolitan statistical areas; urban areas of at least 10,000 and less than 50,000 people form the urban cores of micropolitan statistical areas.

Q: How does the Census Bureau define "urban" and "rural?"

A: The Census Bureau's urban-rural classification is fundamentally a delineation of geographical areas, identifying both individual urban areas and the rural portion of the nation. The Census Bureau's urban areas represent densely developed territory, and encompass residential, commercial, and other nonresidential urban land uses. For the 2020 Census, an urban area will comprise a densely settled core of census blocks that meet minimum housing unit density requirements, along with adjacent territory containing non-residential urban land uses as well as territory with low population density included to link outlying densely settled territory with the densely settled core. To qualify as an urban area, the territory identified according to criteria must encompass at least 2,000 housing units or at least 5,000 people. "Rural" encompasses all population, housing, and territory not included within any urban area. The specific criteria used to define urban areas for the 2020 Census were published in the Federal Register of March 24, 2022. Final criteria clarifications will be published in the **2020 Census Qualifying Urban Areas and Final Criteria Clarifications** *Federal Register* notice on Thursday, December 29, 2022 as well as separate tables on https://www.census.gov/programs-surveys/geography/guidance/geo-areas/urban-rural.html.

Q: Were there changes to the urban area delineation criteria for the 2020 Census?

A: Yes. A description of differences between the 2020 Census Urban Area criteria and 2010 Census Urban Area criteria are available on our website. Changes include:

- Raising the minimum threshold for qualification as an urban area to 2,000 housing units or 5,000 people.
- Use of primarily housing unit density instead of population density when delineating urban areas.
- No longer including low-density hop and jump corridor blocks in the urban area (resulting in noncontiguous urban areas).

- Use of Longitudinal Employer-Household Dynamics Origin-Destination Employment Statistics (LODES) commuting data to determine whether to split agglomerations of continuous urban development and if so, where to draw the boundary.

Q: What are hops and jumps?

A: "Hops" and "jumps" provide a means for connecting outlying densely settled territory with the main portion of the urban area. A hop provides a connection from one urban area core to other qualifying urban territory along a road connection of 0.5 miles or less in length; multiple hops may be made along any given road corridor. This criterion recognizes that alternating patterns of residential development and non-residential development are a typical feature of urban landscapes. A jump provides a connection from one urban area core to other qualifying urban territory along a road connection that is greater than 0.5 miles, but less than or equal to 1.5 miles in length; only one jump may be made along any given road connection. The jump concept has been part of the urban area delineation process since the 1950 Census, providing a means for recognizing that urbanization may be offset by intervening areas that have not yet been developed. The Census Bureau changed the maximum jump distance from 1.5 miles to 2.5 miles with the Census 2000 criteria and retained the 2.5-mile distance in the 2010 Census criteria. The Census Bureau returned to the 1.5-mile maximum distance with the 2020 Census criteria.

Q: How often does the Census Bureau update the boundaries of urban areas?

A: The Census Bureau reviews and updates urban area boundaries every ten years, following the decennial census. Census blocks provide the "building blocks" for applying housing unit density and other measures and delineating each urban area. The use of housing unit density at the census block level provides the opportunity to update urban areas between decennial censuses based on address/housing unit counts contained in the Census Bureau's Master Address File, which is updated annually. At this time, however, the Census Bureau has not made specific plans to update urban areas between censuses.

Q: How do urban areas compare to the Office of Management and Budget's metropolitan and micropolitan statistical areas?

A: Urban areas form the urban cores of metropolitan and micropolitan statistical areas, respectively. Each metropolitan statistical area will contain at least one urban area of 50,000 or more people; each micropolitan statistical area will contain at least one urban area of at least 10,000 and less than 50,000 people. Metropolitan and micropolitan statistical areas represent the county-based functional regions associated with urban centers (hence, the generic term "core based statistical areas").

Q: When did the Census Bureau begin defining urban and rural areas?

A: The Census Bureau first defined urban places in reports following the 1880 and 1890 Censuses. At that time, the Census Bureau identified as urban any incorporated place that had a minimum population

of either 4,000 or 8,000, depending on the report. The Census Bureau adopted the current minimum population threshold of 2,500 for the 1910 Census; any incorporated place that contained at least 2,500 people within its boundaries was considered urban. All territory outside urban places, regardless of population density, was considered rural. The Census Bureau began identifying densely populated urbanized areas of 50,000 or more population with the 1950 Census, taking into account the increased presence of densely settled suburban development in the vicinity of large cities. Outside urbanized areas, the Census Bureau continued to identify as urban any incorporated place or census designated place of at least 2,500 and less than 50,000 people. The Census Bureau introduced the urban cluster concept for the 2000 Census, replacing urban places located outside urbanized areas. Urban clusters were defined based on the same criteria as urbanized areas, but represented areas containing at least 2,500 and less than 50,000 people. Starting with the 2020 Census, the Census Bureau ceased distinguishing between urbanized areas and urban clusters. "Rural" continues to be defined as any population, housing, or territory outside urban areas.

Q: How has the Census Bureau's urban-rural definition changed over time?

A: From the 1910 Census through the 1940 Census, the Census Bureau defined "urban" as any incorporated place that contained at least 2,500 people within its boundaries. Additional criteria were applied to classify certain New England towns and other areas as urban. This accounted for selected geographic areas that had urban characteristics but were not identified as incorporated places by the Census Bureau. Increasing suburbanization, particularly outside the boundaries of large incorporated places led the Census Bureau to adopt the urbanized area concept for the 1950 Census. At that time, the Census Bureau formally recognized that densely settled communities outside the boundaries of large incorporated municipalities were just as "urban" as the densely settled population inside those boundaries. The Census Bureau adopted a number of changes to the urban area definition and delineation criteria for the 2000 Census, notably, identifying urban clusters of at least 2,500 and less than 50,000 peoples, defined using the same density-based criteria as urbanized areas. The Census Bureau adopted two key changes for the 2020 Census: 1) raising the minimum threshold for qualification as an urban area to at least 2,000 housing units or at least 5,000 people and 2) using primarily housing unit density to identifying qualifying census blocks instead of population density.

Q: Who uses the Census Bureau's urban and rural definitions?

A: There are a variety of ways in which the Census Bureau's urban and rural definitions are used:

- Data users and researchers interested in analyzing data for urban and rural population and housing use the Census Bureau urban and rural areas, and data tabulated for those areas.
- Analysts use urban area data to study patterns of urbanization, suburban growth and development, and urban/rural land area change.
- Various federal and state agencies use the Census Bureau's urban and rural definitions as the basis for their own urban and rural definitions and settlement classifications for use in tabulating and presenting statistical data. The National Center for Education Statistics uses the Census Bureau's urban and rural definitions in its locale codes classification. The U.S. Department of Agriculture uses the Census Bureau's urban-rural classification as the basis for

various urban and rural classifications used to analyze and report on demographic and economic patterns in rural areas.

- Other government agencies use the Census Bureau's urban and rural definitions to determine program eligibility and in their funding formulas. For example, the Federal Highways Administration uses Census Bureau urban areas of 50,000 or more population to establish Metropolitan Planning Organizations. For rural health programs, a clinic qualifies as a rural health clinic if it is located outside the boundaries of any Census Bureau urban area.

Q: Does the Census Bureau allow local governments and other groups to participate in the delineation of urban area boundaries?

A: No. The Census Bureau's urban and rural area definitions provide a baseline for a wide variety of data users, researchers, and analysts; it is important to our statistical data users that we define urban areas in a nationally consistent and objective manner. In addition, although the Census Bureau does not take into account the needs of specific non-statistical programs, we are aware of the potential programmatic advantages or disadvantages deriving from the size of an urban area and urban/rural status. For that reason also, it is important that we define urban areas in an objective manner, applying the same criteria and delineation methodology throughout the United States, Puerto Rico, and the Island Areas. Prior to each decennial census, the Census Bureau publishes in the *Federal Register* proposed criteria for delineating urban areas for public review and comment, in addition to meeting with various data user and stakeholder groups to ensure that the urban area concept and criteria continue to meet users' needs and expectations, while maintaining continuity with previous decades' definitions. The final criteria adopted for application with decennial census and other data to delineate urban areas reflects the comments received through the *Federal Register* comment process.

Q: Is there an appeals process if I disagree with the location of an urban area boundary?

A: The Census Bureau does not have an appeals process for their urban areas. We will work with tribal, federal, state, or local agencies as well as stakeholders, as appropriate, to ensure understanding of our classification and delineation of specific urban areas. The Census Bureau applies published criteria with statistical and other publicly available data to identify a nationally consistent set of urban areas, defined in as objective a manner as possible. Prior to each decennial census, the Census Bureau publishes in the *Federal Register* proposed criteria for delineating urban areas for public review and comment. The final criteria adopted for application to decennial census and other data to delineate urban areas reflect the comments received through the *Federal Register* comment process. Because of the numerous and varied use of the Census Bureau's urban-rural classification, many conflicting even within a single community, the specific definitions are not able to be challenged, rather the specific uses of the Census Bureau's urban-rural classification must be challenged to determine if their use is appropriate.

Q: How will my area's classification affect my funding?

A: Program eligibility and funding formulas are determined by the federal and state agencies making determining eligibility and providing funding. For information about how the new urban and rural

definitions may affect your area's funding, please contact the respective grant-making agencies. The Census Bureau will work with tribal, federal, state, or local agencies as well as stakeholders, as appropriate, to ensure understanding of our classification and the definition of specific urban areas.

Q: The Urban Area T/L Shapefile does not contain housing and population counts for the UAs. Where do I find this information?

A: Geographic files are located here: https://www.census.gov/geographies/mapping-files/time-series/geo/tiger-line-file.html Select the 2023 tab, FTP Archive by Layer, Scroll down to UAC20 and click download the file).

UA population and housing data is locate here: https://www.census.gov/programs-surveys/geography/guidance/geo-areas/urban-rural.html Scroll down to: "List of 2020 Census Urban Areas", Select the first option: "A list of all 2020 Census Urban Areas for the U.S., Puerto Rico, and Island Areas sorted by Urban Area Census (UACE) code [<1.0 MB]"

These files can be joined using Geographic Information System (GIS) software.

Q: How can I find out which Census Tabulation Blocks are Urban and which are Rural?
A: An urban area flag is available on the 2023 data release of 2020 tabulation blocks.

The Urban Area Tabblock20 T/L Shapefiles can be downloaded for each State, Puerto Rico and Island areas at: https://www2.census.gov/geo/tiger/TIGER_RD18/LAYER/TABBLOCK20/

The urban area attributes within the tabblock20 layer are:

- UR20: "U" = Urban, "R" = Rural
- UACE2020: If UR20 = U, then the urban area code will be provided in this field otherwise the field is null
- UATYPE20: "U" = Urban, Null = Not Urban