



Local Census Statistical Areas Committees and Other Local Assistance

Small-Area Geography

Since the turn of the century, the Bureau of the Census has directed major efforts toward identifying geographic statistical units at the subcounty level that are sufficiently populous to provide statistically significant data. The Census Bureau has developed several programs to provide a geographic framework for the tabulation and analysis of demographic and economic data at a subcounty scale.

The Census Bureau recognizes numerous legally defined geographic entities for data presentation purposes, entities that generally are well known, such as States, counties, cities, and townships, whose governments function to provide services to the people living and working within their borders. These governmental units, however, usually do not provide sufficient geographic coverage to give a comprehensive, detailed picture of the distribution of the population on the landscape, especially in highly populated counties. Moreover, many of these governmental units have frequently changing boundaries, vastly differing population densities, extensive variation in population characteristics, and wide-ranging area sizes. These situations make it difficult for data users to summarize and analyze census statistics.

To meet the need for geographic areas that would effectively supplement and complement the legally established areas, the Census Bureau, in association with data users across the Nation, has devised several types of geographic entities that generally define small, relatively permanent geographic areas for which the Census Bureau can present statistics.

Purpose of Local Participation

The division of counties, highly populated places, and other entities into small geographic areas based on their statistical significance, rather than on the basis of Census Bureau operational considerations alone, requires

a knowledge of local geographic conditions and small-area variations in the physical environment and local demographic and economic characteristics. On a nationwide scale, this task is not only immense, but it requires expert local knowledge that generally is not available at the Federal level of government. The most widely used subcounty statistical entity is the census tract. Other small-area statistical geographic units of analysis devised by the Census Bureau include census county divisions (CCDs), unorganized territories (UTs), census designated places (CDPs), block numbering areas (BNAs), block groups (BGs), and census blocks.¹

Originally, local census tract committees, now called Census Statistical Areas Committees (CSACs), assisted the Census Bureau in establishing and maintaining census tracts for use in presenting data from each census of population and housing. In addition, they served as local liaisons between data users and the Census Bureau. Later, these committees expanded their role slightly when they identified specific census tracts as central business districts (CBDs) for the census of retail trade.

With the expanding scope of the Census Bureau's small-area geographic programs, the role of the CSACs expanded as well. During the 1970s, and even more so in the 1980s, the CSACs became advocates for, and very involved with, the delineation and review of several other small-area statistical geographic entities; areas that are no longer part of the inventory of small-area statistical geography: the data collection units for earlier decennial censuses, enumeration districts (EDs), and two entities used for several earlier censuses of retail trade, central business districts (CBDs), and major retail centers (MRCs). The 1990 census no longer required EDs, so the Census Bureau invited the CSACs to participate instead in the delineation of BGs in order to improve the usefulness of these areas to data users; although participation was optional, most committees participated to some degree.

The rather limited geographic areas served by these committees, often only one or a few counties, left large expanses of territory with no local participation. This led the Census Bureau to seek partnership with State

and tribal officials to oversee the local involvement in geographic area delineation and data user assistance. This chapter provides an overview of the specific technical functions performed by the CSACs, numerous State and other agencies, and tribal officials involved in delineating, reviewing, and maintaining small-area geographic units for purposes of data presentation. It also discusses the manner in which many of these committees, agencies, and officials operate, and their relationship to the Census Bureau's operations and to the opportunities posed by the automation of the Census Bureau's Geographic Support System.

Role and Function of Local Committees

Development of Cooperative Efforts

Dr. Walter Laidlaw, a clergyman, originated the concept of small, permanent geographic areas that retain their identity for long periods of time and are not subject to the vagaries of the location and relocation of boundaries of various legal entities. In 1905, he proposed dividing the city of New York into small, permanent geographic areas, later called *census tracts*. The Census Bureau adopted his plan as part of the 1910 decennial census. Beginning in the 1920s, Howard Whipple Green, a statistician in Cleveland, became a leading advocate of census tracts and other small areas. For more than 25 years, Green encouraged local citizens, via Census Tract Committees, to establish such areas and to use the resulting data for local applications. He actively promoted the Census Tract Committees as a mechanism for preparing census tract plans, and worked tirelessly to make data users aware of the value of small-area statistics.

In 1931, the American Statistical Association (ASA) appointed Green chairman of its newly created Committee on Census Enumeration Areas. This committee, with the Census Bureau's support, encouraged the creation of census tracts in the most populous cities throughout the Nation. Although the establishment of census tracts has always been a matter of local initiative, the Census Bureau has, nonetheless, taken a keen interest in the work of the Census Tract Committees. In

1934, it issued the *Census Tract Manual*, a set of instructions that specified the delineation procedures and prescribed standards such as a minimum population size and acceptable boundaries. Such guidelines assured that data could be gathered and published systematically and consistently for census tracts. The publication of the manual marked an important early effort on the part of the Census Bureau to promulgate its geographic standards at the local level. For further information about the Census Bureau's geographic standards, see Chapter 2, "Geographic Overview," and Chapter 10, "Census Tracts and Block Numbering Areas."

Expansion of Census Tract Committee Functions

The functions of the committees gradually broadened through introduction by the Census Bureau of additional programs requiring the identification and delineation of new geographic units. One example of this increased local involvement occurred in the 1950s when the Census Bureau asked the Census Tract Committees to expand their functions by designating, for the census of retail trade, the whole census tract (or group of census tracts) that constituted the CBD of each metropolitan area. This expansion in functions was a direct recognition of the valuable work done by the committees on census tracts. Many committees also assisted in identifying MRCs even though these areas did not cover whole census tracts. This function continued with each of the economic censuses through 1982, after which, due to cost considerations, the declining relevance of CBD statistics, and a lack of local interest in identifying MRCs, the Census Bureau discontinued using CBDs and MRCs as standard data reporting units.

For the 1950 census, the Census Bureau officially established the concept of the CDP, then known as an *unincorporated place*. The Census Bureau consulted with the Census Tract Committees on the identification and delineation of CDPs within their area of jurisdiction for the 1960 census, and included CDP delineation as a standard part of the responsibility of each committee for the geographic preparations in advance of the 1970, 1980, and 1990 censuses.

For the 1960, 1970, and 1980 censuses, the Census Bureau offered local officials the opportunity to submit ED plans for consideration when it prepared field assignment maps. Some committees participated in this voluntary program, and the Census Bureau subsequently tabulated decennial census data for EDs. During the 1970s, a few committees became involved in the definition of BGs and the related numbering of census blocks through their work with the GBF/DIME-Files.² In 1975, the Census Bureau recognized the broadening responsibilities of the Census Tract Committees by renaming them *Census Statistical Areas Committees*. For the 1980 census, the Census Bureau asked the CSACs to review its recommended revisions to CCD plans in metropolitan areas. The present status of the CSACs is the result of decades of evolution with increasing levels of participation in the delineation of small-area geographic units.

Other Cooperating Agencies and Groups

Although local census statistical areas committees are one of the most important groups involved in the definition of small-area geography, they are not the only ones. State, tribal, local officials and agencies who participate in the Census Bureau's geographic areas programs also play important roles. Over the years, their involvement has produced invaluable contributions to the Census Bureau's geographic framework of legal/administrative entities and statistical entities.

By means of the Boundary and Annexation Survey (BAS), the Census Bureau maintains an inventory of local general-purpose governments (counties, MCDs, and incorporated places) and obtains up-to-date information on their boundaries and status. The success of the BAS program is due to the cooperation of thousands of State, county, and municipal officials (see Chapter 9, "Places"). Another cooperative effort is the 1990 Census Redistricting Data Program, in which 46 State governments identified their election districts, precincts, legislative districts, and wards—generically termed *voting districts (VTDs)*—in

terms of census blocks, and were able to obtain statistical information from the Census Bureau's data tabulations (see Chapter 14, "Voting Districts").

The jurisdiction of the CSACs is limited in most cases to the most highly populated areas; elsewhere, chiefly in nonmetropolitan areas, the Census Bureau relies on State agencies to help create, maintain, and update its framework of subcounty units. Their assistance has been particularly helpful in achieving consistent standards for BNAs, BGs, CDPs, and in States where they exist, CCDs (see Chapter 8, "County Subdivisions," and Chapter 11, "Census Blocks and Block Groups").

Some geographic entities are designed to identify geographic areas of special interest to indigenous populations, the American Indians and Alaska Natives. To establish these entities, the Census Bureau works with local tribal officials and native groups, as well as the appropriate Federal and State agencies (see Chapter 5, "American Indian and Alaska Native Areas"). A similar approach is used for Puerto Rico and the Outlying Areas, where the geographic entities often differ from their stateside counterparts (see Chapter 7, "Puerto Rico and the Outlying Areas").

An important service of the CSACs, State agencies, and tribal officials is to aid in the Census Bureau's efforts to publicize the significance of the decennial census and the other censuses and surveys, and to explain the statistical data and geographic entities available to data users. Another common function for many of these groups relates to making available to the Census Bureau the expert knowledge of their members on the sometimes complex relationship between the boundaries of legally established local entities and the Census Bureau's statistical entities.

Evolution of a Local Census Statistical Areas Committee

Establishing a Census Statistical Areas Committee

The Census Bureau encourages the existence and active participation of a local CSAC wherever local data users are willing to organize a committee to work on the delineation of small-area geographic entities for use in various Census Bureau programs. Members of a CSAC, representing a

wide variety of public and private agencies and organizations, have extensive knowledge about the development of an area, its communities and neighborhoods, population shifts, land use, and other information pertinent to establishing or updating small-area geographic units. Moreover, they are in the best position to identify and resolve any conflicting local needs regarding the specific structure of the small areas for which both the Census Bureau and local agencies present data.

The Census Bureau offers guidance on effective techniques for establishing CSACs. If requested, the Census Bureau will send a technical expert to speak at the formative meeting of a new or reactivated committee and to (1) advise them on the operating procedures other CSACs find successful, (2) explain the types of work the Census Bureau expects them to perform, and (3) describe how they can participate in the Census Bureau's geographic programs. In return, the Census Bureau requests that the CSAC provide information regarding its membership, and that it participate meaningfully in the geographic preparatory work for the Census Bureau's programs.

The Census Bureau does not pay for any CSAC expenses; the work is all voluntary. For the local data user community, the primary benefit of the involvement of local committees in the geographic areas definition process results from the development of small, statistically significant areas of local interest for the presentation of census data. The fact that such local entities are statistically meaningful also helps both the casual and the national user. Further, as a result of their long-term familiarity with the Census Bureau's geographic programs, the members of the committees are in a position to acquire an understanding of the associated Census Bureau procedures. This enables them to serve as a conduit of accurate information from the Census Bureau to the local data user community. The committees also assist in keeping the Census Bureau informed of local data user needs.

Experience suggests that the statistical areas work is accomplished most effectively when a CSAC establishes small working subcommittees to

handle specific tasks. This organizational structure seems to work particularly well in large, multicounty metropolitan areas. In a typical situation, a subcommittee prepares a preliminary proposal for census tracts, BGs, CDPs, or other requested geographic areas using the Census Bureau's specifications, standards, criteria, and/or guidelines. In large multicounty metropolitan areas, a subcommittee often exists for each county. The subcommittee submits its proposals to the full CSAC, at which time each member has an opportunity to review and discuss all preliminary proposals and make recommendations for modifications. This in-depth review is an important part of the process because it helps to ensure that the proposal takes into consideration all important local statistical requirements. The Census Bureau assumes that all submitted recommendations have the approval of the majority of the CSAC.

Composition of a Census Statistical Areas Committee

The Census Bureau considers a CSAC to be an independent body representing a wide variety of public and private agencies and organizations, and it requires that all CSACs maintain an open membership policy and include a broad spectrum of local data users. The Census Bureau recommends that a CSAC be composed of at least five individuals who represent more than one agency in the community. For these reasons, the CSAC organizer should provide opportunities for all interested local agencies, organizations, and private citizens to participate. Often, the most effective members of a CSAC are people affiliated with agencies that use small-area statistics in the planning and operation of their organization. Typically, CSAC members are involved in city, county, and regional government agencies such as planning commissions, councils of government, public transportation authorities, boards of education, local housing authorities, health departments, police departments, welfare agencies, and boards of election. Other CSAC members often come from organizations such as chambers of commerce, colleges and universities, social agencies, church federations, real estate boards, banks, savings and loan associations, newspapers, radio and television stations, public utilities, advertising agencies, market research groups,

and the local chapters of professional organizations including the American Marketing Association, the American Planning Association, and the American Statistical Association. Some CSACs have members from organizations such as State highway departments, insurance companies, neighborhood associations, local political organizations, and American Indian tribes. The Census Bureau encourages the CSACs to make their process open to all interested groups or people.

The Census Statistical Areas Key Person

The Census Bureau requires that each CSAC designate one individual from its membership to serve as the liaison with the Census Bureau. This individual, originally designated as the *census tract key person*, is called the *census statistical areas key person*, in keeping with the expanded role of the local committee. The Census Bureau never selects, appoints, or designates a key person; that is the committee's responsibility. Experience shows that the most important element in the successful formation and functioning of a CSAC is the willingness of one or more energetic, dedicated, and knowledgeable individuals to provide leadership, devote time to liaison activities, and coordinate organizational tasks such as arranging for meeting rooms, finding occasional clerical or typing help, and securing limited office space for the development of geographic proposals.

The CSAC selects the key person, and the Census Bureau recognizes this person as the point of contact with the CSAC when information flows to or from the committee. The key person usually is, but does not need to be, the CSAC organizer. The designation of a key person is a requirement for official recognition of a CSAC by the Census Bureau. Most CSACs select a key person at the initial organizational meeting or soon thereafter. The designated individual serves as key person at the discretion of the committee. The Census Bureau will not automatically recognize the incumbent of a particular position within an agency as the key person.

Typically, the key person functions as the chairperson of, or secretary to, the CSAC, but this is not necessarily the role in which all key persons

function. To avoid misunderstandings and potential conflicts, the Census Bureau expects the key person to be responsible for transmitting CSAC correspondence to the Census Bureau. There are times when the Census Bureau, on very short notice, needs answers to questions concerning the CSAC's proposals or other local census-related matters; the Census Bureau expects the key person to be able to speak for the entire CSAC when there is need for such an immediate response.

The Census Bureau sends all relevant correspondence, selected census publications, procedures and guidelines, and other work materials to the key person. The key person also serves as the local point of contact when CSAC members or other data users need Census Bureau statistics. Accordingly, the Census Bureau expects the key person to make available to all local data users any information provided by the Census Bureau as a resource for the CSAC. Furthermore, the Census Bureau will refer any agency or individual with questions about the locally delineated geographic entities or with suggestions for the revision of such areas to the appropriate key person.

In some areas, the CSAC or the key person names a *work contact* in addition to the key person. Often, the work contacts serve as the chairpersons of the working subcommittees for each county in the larger metropolitan areas. If requested to do so by the key person, the Census Bureau will review procedures and discuss questions concerning geographic area proposals with the work contact rather than the key person.

In areas where there was no local interest in establishing or reactivating a CSAC, the Census Bureau sought advice and suggestions from tribal officials and from State agencies designated by the State governors' offices. By means of their assistance, it was possible to establish BNAs, BGs, CDPs, and other geographic entities. In many instances these State agencies also were involved in the Census Bureau's State Data Center program.³ Only as a last resort did the Census Bureau have its own staff develop the geographic plans for an area.

New Developments During the 1990s

The traditional roles of the Census Bureau's geographic areas programs are (1) to support data collection operations, (2) to provide a spatial framework for the tabulation of the collected data, and (3) to assist in presenting the final results for tabulation and dissemination. These operations are an integral part of the census process. They are present at every level of census geography and encompass all types of geographic entities, whether large or small in population or area. Local cooperation often is an important element throughout these different stages of work, so it is vital that the CSACs, State agencies, and tribal officials share a keen appreciation of the process.

Recent decades have brought major advances in automated systems. These advances have opened the door for many new applications of the Census Bureau's geographic units and maps. The Census Bureau recently completed an immense effort used initially for the 1990 decennial census, the automation of its geographic processes as part of the TIGER System. These processes include map production; the assignment of every housing unit, group quarters, and business establishment to its correct geographic location; the classification of that location to all appropriate geographic areas; the recording of boundaries and their associated names and codes, as well as a variety of cultural and physical features, into computer-readable form; and other geographic functions that support the Census Bureau's programs. This extensive project facilitated the preparation of all Census Bureau map series, including the maps used in the 1990 census field operations; permitted more flexibility in the presentation of geographic information on maps; and, most importantly, ensured consistency between the geographic information on the Census Bureau's maps and in its data presentations.

It is already evident that this scheme has provided more opportunity for participation by the CSACs, State agencies, and tribal officials. As an example, the Census Bureau encouraged these groups to participate in the BG and CDP delineation programs for the 1990 census. To do so effectively, these groups needed to be aware of the Census Bureau's operational requirements for establishing, delineating, and numbering BGs and blocks. In this

regard, the automation of the Census Bureau's geographic processes facilitated their work, but it also introduced important new tasks and challenges.

From the TIGER data base, the Census Bureau provided the CSACs, State agencies, and tribal officials with computer-prepared base maps to use in their review of CDPs, American Indian reservations, trust lands, and other selected geographic entities. As in the past with the committees, preparations for the 1990 census relied on these groups to develop, and then review, an overall geographic plan for their area of jurisdiction or interest. Procedural manuals, developed by the Census Bureau for the 1990 decennial census, documented the technical details and specific tasks that it asked them to perform.

Future Cooperative Relationships

Throughout the planning period preceding a census, there is a close working relationship and interchange of technical materials between each CSAC, State agency, appropriate tribal official, and the Census Bureau. It is not unusual for committees to become dormant after a decennial census has been completed. As the Census Bureau begins implementing plans for the next decennial census, it will seek to reactivate the CSACs. When requested, the Census Bureau provides guidance by mail, telephone, or a visit, as appropriate, on technical problems a committee, key person, or other participant may encounter. The Census Bureau also informs the CSAC routinely of additional and revised technical guidelines on small-area geographic units developed during the planning for a census, reviews the proposed delineations, and, in some instances, revises the work (in consultation with the key person) in order to protect the integrity and comparability of the resulting statistics and/or to maintain a minimum standard on a national basis.

The Census Bureau attempts to keep all participants informed of other Census Bureau activities occurring in each area so that they can function effectively as the census voice for their area; promotes communication on the subjects of census tracts, other geographic units, and the related

data; and periodically may convene special meetings, sometimes in conjunction with meetings of professional associations.

Before the 1980 census, the Census Bureau dealt with most CSACs, State agencies, and tribal officials directly from its headquarters outside of Washington, DC. For the 1990 census, the Census Bureau decentralized its geographic programs in an effort to be more responsive to local needs and interests. As a result, most CSACs, State agencies, and tribal officials now deal directly with the geographic staff in the Census Bureau's 12 regional offices.

Notes and References

- ¹ For further information about these areas, consult the “County Subdivisions,” “Places,” “Census Tracts and Block Numbering Areas,” and “Census Blocks and Block Groups” chapters in this manual.
- ² The GBF/DIME (Geographic Base File/Dual Independent Map Encoding)-Files are computerized versions of the Census Bureau’s Metropolitan Map Series with segment-by-segment address ranges and x, y coordinate values at intersections.
- ³ The State Data Center program involves over 1,300 agencies and organizations to which the Census Bureau provides selected statistical products and appropriate training for further dissemination among data users. See Appendix B, “Sources of Assistance,” in the Census Bureau’s *Census Catalog and Guide—1991*.