

Differences between the Final 2020 Census Urban Area Criteria and the 2010 Census Urban Area Criteria

The following table summarizes the key differences between the final 2020 Census Urban Area criteria described in the March 24, 2022, *Federal Register* (87 FR 16706) and the *Federal Register* Notice *Clarification* (scheduled publication December 29, 2022), and the 2010 Census Urban Area criteria.

Criteria	2010 Census Criteria	2020 Census Criteria
Identification of Initial Urban Area Cores	Census tracts and blocks meeting population density, count, and size thresholds. Use of land cover data to identify territory with a high degree of impervious land cover.	Census block or aggregation of census blocks with a housing unit density of 425. Use of land cover data to identify territory with a high degree of impervious land cover.
Qualifying Urban Areas	Based on a minimum threshold of 2,500 people.	Based on a minimum threshold of 2,000 housing units <u>or</u> 5,000 people.
Urban Area Type	Urbanized areas and urban clusters identified using a 50,000-population threshold.	Urban areas are no longer distinguished as either an “urbanized area” or an “urban cluster.” All qualifying areas are designated as an “urban area.”
Group Quarters Blocks	No additional criteria to specifically account for group quarters qualifying as urban.	Census blocks that do not meet the minimum housing unit density threshold but contain group quarters and a population density of at least 500 population per square mile adjacent to already qualified urban blocks will be included in an urban area.
Inclusion of Noncontiguous Territory via Hops and Jumps	Maximum hop distance 0.5 miles, maximum jump distance 2.5 miles. Intervening low-density jump corridor blocks included in urban area.	Maximum hop distance 0.5 miles, maximum jump distance 1.5 miles. Intervening low-density jump corridor blocks not included in urban area.
Inclusion of Noncontiguous Territory Separated by Exempted Territory	Bodies of water.	Bodies of water and wetlands as identified in land cover data. The intervening, low-density blocks of water and/or wetlands are not included in the urban area.
Additional Nonresidential Urban Territory	Inclusion of groups of census blocks with a high degree of impervious land cover and are within 0.25 miles of an urban area and have a total area of at least 0.15 square miles.	Inclusion of groups of census blocks with a high degree of impervious land cover or contain a three-year average of at least 1,000 commuter destinations that are within 0.5 miles of an urban area and have a total area of at least 0.15 square miles.

Criteria	2010 Census Criteria	2020 Census Criteria
Inclusion of Airports	Currently functioning airport with an annual enplanement of at least 2,500 passengers and is within 0.5 miles of an urban area.	Currently functioning airport with an annual enplanement of at least 2,500 passengers and is within 0.5 miles of an urban area or is a qualified cargo airport within 0.5 miles of an urban area. Additional census blocks adjacent to an urban area not initially identified by automated delineation that have a high association with airports.
Merging Individual Urban Areas	Merge qualifying territory from separately defined 2010 Census urban cores that share territory contained within the boundaries of the same Census 2000 urban area. Merge only occurs if an area is at risk of losing urbanized area or urban status and is preventable by the merge.	Merge qualifying territory from separately defined 2020 Census Urban Areas in cases where the combined territory contains at least one area with a high-density nucleus and one without, the component areas are within 0.25 miles, both have at least 1,000 housing units or 2,500 population, and there is a 3-year mean worker-flow of at least 50 percent between candidate urban area pairs.
Splitting Large Urban Agglomerations	Split location is guided by location of Census 2000 urbanized area boundaries. Potential split locations also consider metropolitan statistical area, county, incorporated place, census designated place, and/or minor civil division boundaries as well as distance from each component urbanized area.	2010 Census Urban Areas and areas connected via low density fill during the 2020 Census Urban Area delineation are used to identify split candidates. The location of the split boundary is identified using worker flow data between candidate urban area pairs. If necessary, split location is further guided by other commuter-based communities and secondarily by other geographic area boundaries and/or physical features.
Assigning Urban Area Titles (Names)	Clear, unambiguous name based on commonly recognized place names derived from incorporated places, census designated places, minor civil divisions, and the Geographic Names Information System.	Clear, unambiguous name primarily based on commonly recognized names of places within a high-density nucleus, derived from incorporated places, census designated places, governmental minor civil divisions, and the Geographic Names Information System.

Adoption of a Housing Unit Density Threshold for Qualification of Census Blocks

The Census Bureau adopted a housing unit density of 425 housing units per square mile as the primary criterion for determining whether a census block qualifies for inclusion in an urban area, replacing the use of population density. Housing unit density provides a more direct measure of the densely developed landscape than population density. The use of housing unit density allows the Census Bureau to more accurately account for areas with substantial concentrations of housing that are considered part of the urban landscape but have less than average people per housing unit or seasonal populations or both. This change also provides the ability to update the extent of urban areas between censuses, based on housing unit information in the Census Bureau's Master Address File. In addition, the Census Bureau's decision to adopt Differential Privacy methodology as a means for protecting the privacy of individual responses to the decennial census has been accompanied by the decision that published census block-level populations should be variant—that is, the published population count for any given census block may vary from the enumerated population count in order to protect individuals from reidentification. This decision affects the calculation of population density at the census block-level. Housing unit counts, however, are invariant and will reflect the number of housing units enumerated in each block, and thus are a more consistent measure for urban area delineation.

Qualify Urban Areas Based on a Minimum Threshold of 2,000 Housing Units or 5,000 People

An area will qualify as urban if it contains at least 2,000 housing units or has a population of at least 5,000. The 5,000-population minimum threshold is based on continued research by Census Bureau subject matter experts and public comments, questions, and concerns. The 2,000-housing unit threshold approximates the 5,000-population threshold based on the national average of 2.6 people per household.

Cease Distinguishing Different Types of Urban Areas

The Census Bureau no longer distinguishes different types of urban areas. The 50,000-population threshold that has been used to distinguish between urbanized areas and smaller urban areas (whether urban places outside urbanized areas or urban clusters) no longer has the same meaning as when it was adopted in 1950 and, therefore, should no longer be used to distinguish types of urban areas. Further, the threshold was, to some extent, arbitrary; that is, as far as the Census Bureau has been able to determine from scholarship, there is no reason to assume that an urban area of just over 50,000 population is fundamentally different in terms of economic and social functions and services than an area with just under 50,000 population. Lastly, other government agencies apply a range of thresholds to various urban-rural classifications. These thresholds can be applied to the published data by the individual agencies to meet their own objectives.

Group Quarters Blocks

For the 2010 Census, no specific criteria were designed to address the presence of an institutional group quarters within a census block during the identification of urban territory. Nonetheless, to qualify as an urban area on its own for the 2010 Census, the territory identified according to the urban area delineation criteria must have encompassed at least 2,500 people, at least 1,500 of which reside outside institutional group quarters. This criterion was designed to avoid the delineation of an urban area comprising only a few census blocks in which an institutional group quarter is located. For the 2020 Census Urban Area delineation, a census block containing an institutional group quarter may be added to an urban area if it has a block-level density of 500 people per square mile. The adjusted criterion for group quarters is designed to better identify adjacent census blocks as urban that have large population counts but few housing units due to group quarters.

Inclusion of Noncontiguous Territory via Hops and Jumps

The Census Bureau reduces the maximum jump distance from 2.5 miles in 2010 to 1.5 miles in 2020. Data users, analysts, and some urban geographers expressed concern that the 2.5-mile maximum jump distance adopted for the 2000 Census was too generous and resulted in overextension of urban areas. The Census Bureau proposed reverting to 1.5 miles in the proposed criteria for the 2010 Census, but responses from commenters were inconclusive and, as a result, no change was made. The impervious surface criteria adopted in 2010 better accounted for non-residential urban land uses, many of which also were in mind when extending the jump distance to 2.5 miles for the 2000 Census. Thus, the two criteria serve largely the same purpose, but are applied separately, and when taken together, they can result in overextension of urban territory.

The Census Bureau also no longer includes within an urban area the low-density territory intervening between the main body of the urban area and the outlying qualifying urban territory that is the destination of a hop or a jump. Review of 2010 Census Urban Areas indicates that, due to their often irregular and relatively large geographic extent, including the corridor blocks resulted in the inclusion of population, housing, and territory that is otherwise of a rural nature and contains land uses that are not consistent with those found in the densely developed urban blocks on either end of the hop or jump corridor. A primary reason in the past for including the corridor blocks was to create contiguous geographic areas that were easier for cartographers to map rather than for any reason to improve the urban-rural classification and its resulting data. Geospatial cartographic tools and technology have progressed and some degree of noncontiguity is no longer as significant of an issue.

Identification of Exempted Territory

The Census Bureau considers both bodies of water and wetlands as exempted territory when qualifying noncontiguous urban territory via hops and jumps. For the 2010 Census Urban Area delineation, bodies of water included in the Census Bureau's Master Address File/Topologically Integrated Geographic Encoding and Referencing Database were the only specific class of territory identified as exempted. The Census Bureau added additional classes of exempted territory for the 2020 Census Urban Area delineation, when better and nationally consistent land cover data sources have become available. Further, the reduction of the jump distance to 1.5 miles for the 2020 Census mitigated the over extension of urban territory with the addition of more territory identified as exempted through the wetlands criteria.

Additional Nonresidential Urban Territory

In the 2020 Census Urban Area delineation, the Census Bureau recognizes large commercial and/or industrial land uses that are separated from an urban area by a relatively thin "green buffer," small amounts of undeveloped territory, and/or narrow census blocks required for tabulation (such as a water feature, offset boundary, road median, or area between a road and rail feature) as urban. In addition to review of additional nonresidential urban-related land cover that is noncontiguous, yet near an urban area, the Census Bureau also considers commuter destination nodes as potential urban territory.

Qualification of Airports for Inclusion in Urban Areas

The Census Bureau includes whole census blocks primarily representing airports in urban areas. In order to qualify, an airport must report a minimum annual enplanement of 2,500 passengers as reported by the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) for at least one calendar year from 2011 and 2019, similar to the criteria set forth for the 2010 Census Urban Area delineation. For the 2020 Census, FAA-qualified cargo airports are now also included in an urban area for a more robust definition of functioning airports. Additional census blocks (either partial or whole) primarily associated with airports not initially identified by the automated delineation are also considered for inclusion in an urban area to further improve recognition of airport boundaries.

Splitting Large Agglomerations and Merging Individual Urban Areas

For the 2020 Census, 2010 Census Urban Areas and areas connected via low density fill during the Census Urban Area delineation are used to identify agglomerations eligible for splitting. The Census Bureau uses worker flow data to identify the location of the split using commuting patterns. The resulting splits reflect contemporaneous commuting patterns, which in turn, serve as proxy measures for other kinds of economic and social interactions within urban areas rather than perpetuating historical split boundaries based on previously defined metropolitan statistical areas.

Similarly, worker flow data is used to determine whether separately defined urban areas share enough commuting to suggest they represent a single functional entity better represented through the merger of the two urban areas. The inclusion of measures based on commuting patterns rather than simply using past delineation results to guide decisions on when and where separate urban areas should be merged improves urban boundaries and better represents current land cover and land use conditions.

Assigning Urban Area Titles (Names)

A clear, unambiguous title (name) based on commonly recognized place names helps provide context for data users and ensures that the general location and setting of the urban area can be better identified and understood. For the 2020 Census, priority is given to places that represent the most densely settled areas of the urban area. Thus, the name of an urban area identifies the place that is the most populated within the high-density nucleus of the urban area. All population and housing unit requirements for places (incorporated places or census designated places) and governmental minor civil divisions apply to the portion of the entity's population that is within the specific urban area being named.