The History Behind Census Geography

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Today’s Presentation…

• A brief look at the history behind some of the Census Bureau’s geographic areas.

• Focus on:
  – History behind census geographic areas.
  – Changes to census geographic area concepts and criteria in response to changing settlement patterns and data user needs.
Census Geography: The Long View

• The Census Bureau’s geographic areas reflect the variety of ways in which Americans have organized the settlement landscape.

• 1790-1890, census geography was largely limited to a small number of types of legal areas.

• The history of changing census geography has largely been one of increasing types and numbers of statistical geographic areas.
Changes to Census Geography

• Over the past century, the number and types of census geographic areas, and the criteria used to define areas, have changed in response to:
  – Changes in technology (i.e., GIS, databases) providing for more efficient exchange, collection, management, and dissemination of data.
  – Changes in user needs and expectations.
  – Improvements in spatial resolution of data.
  – Changes in theoretical approaches to interpreting and understanding geographic concepts.
Census Geography: Key Dates

- **Late-19th Century**: introduction of small statistical areas, such as enumeration districts, sanitary districts. Tabulation of data by city ward.
- **1910**: Introduction of census tracts (8 cities).
- **1910 – 1940**: Industrial districts, metropolitan districts.
- **1930**: Census tract coverage expanded to 10 additional large cities.
- **1940**: block-level data for cities of 50,000 or more population. Unincorporated communities supplementary report.
- **1950**: Introduction of standard metropolitan areas, urbanized areas, census designated places (CDPs), census county divisions (CCDs).
- **1990**: Nationwide coverage for blocks; census tracts/block numbering areas.
- **2000**: ZIP Code Tabulation Areas (ZCTAs), urban clusters, micropolitan statistical areas. Census tracts nationwide.
WESTWARD MIGRATION OF AMERICAN POLITICAL GEOGRAPHY: COUNTIES AND COUNTY SUBDIVISIONS
Chesapeake Counties and New England Towns…
and a Middle Path in the Mid-Atlantic

• Our basic units of local political geography largely stem from three colonial hearths:
  – The Chesapeake Region of Maryland and Virginia
  – New England
  – Pennsylvania
• The political landscape in the Chesapeake formed around counties.
• In New England, the basic unit of local government was the town/township.
• In Pennsylvania, we see a mix of counties, cities, and townships.
• As Americans moved west, they tended to take their political geography preferences with them
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Illinois County Subdivisions

• Non-governmental precincts are found in 17 counties, mostly in the southern half of the state.
FILLING IN THE GAPS: CENSUS DESIGNATED PLACES
Unincorporated/Census Designated Places

- 1940: Supplementary report for unincorporated places. Must have population of at least 500.
- 1950: unincorporated places defined only outside urbanized areas. Must have a population of at least 1,000.
- 1960 through 1990: defined inside urbanized areas, with the minimum population threshold declining from 10,000 to 5,000, then to 2,500 during this period. Outside urbanized areas, population of at least 1,000.
- 2000 to present: no minimum population threshold.
In states in which communities tend not to incorporate as cities, towns, or villages, CDPs are critical for providing place-level data.
Census 2000: Minimum population requirements for Census Designated Places were eliminated to support identification of colonias and other small, unincorporated communities to improve access to data about demographic characteristics.
Starr County, TX Colonia/CDPs

Mikes CDP/colonia
STANDARDIZING “PLACE” IN CENSUS BUREAU PRODUCTS
Standardizing the Definition of Place in Census Bureau Products

Why does this matter?

• Local and regional perceptions of what is a place do not always match the Census Bureau’s definition.

• Definitions differ across Census Bureau tabulation programs and products.

• Differences cause challenges to data users when integrating Census Bureau data.
Economic Place Concept

Includes:

- Incorporated places
- Towns/townships in the Northeast as well as Michigan, Minnesota, and Wisconsin (the 12 “strong-MCD” states)
- Census designated places (except in the 12 “strong-MCD” states)
- Balance of county
- Balance of town

For the 2012 Economic Census, places encompass
- 2,500 or more people, or
- 2,500 or more jobs
Incorporated Places and CDPs, Paducah and Vicinity
Economic Census Places, McCracken County
Places and Towns, Providence County, Rhode Island
Economic Census Places, Providence County, Rhode Island
URBAN AND METROPOLITAN AREAS: DEFINING THE STRUCTURAL AND FUNCTIONAL LANDSCAPE
Urban/Rural and Metropolitan

• The history of urban/rural and metropolitan classifications has been one of response to:
  – Changes to settlement patterns in and around cities; i.e., increasing suburbanization.
  – Changes in theoretical approaches to interpreting and understanding the growth of urban areas.
  – Improved technology (i.e., GIS, digital databases) making it easier to manage large amounts of data.
  – Increased spatial resolution of statistical and geospatial data.
1790: 2,500 threshold adopted.
1950: urbanized areas of 50,000+ adopted.
Industrial Districts (1905) and Metropolitan Districts (1910-1940)
Urbanized Areas, 1950-1990

- Adoption of concept to account for increased suburban growth around large cities.
- Adherence to place boundaries.
- Delineated manually/interactively.
- Delineation built from previous decade’s boundary.
1960 Census: Twin central cities totaling 50,000 or more persons.

1970 Census: “Extended cities” split between urban and rural components.
Changes to the Urban Area Concept and Criteria for Census 2000

• Urban clusters adopted, extending the urbanized area concept to smaller places.
• Place boundaries not considered when delineating areas.
• Automated delineation to improve efficiency and consistency.
Metropolitan Areas: 1950-2013

• Though the names have changed, the concept remained (essentially) the same:
  – Standard Metropolitan Areas
  – Standard Metropolitan Statistical Areas, Standard Consolidated Statistical Areas
  – Metropolitan Statistical Areas, Consolidated Metropolitan Statistical Areas, Primary Metropolitan Statistical Areas
  – Metropolitan and Micropolitan Statistical Areas, Combined Statistical Areas, Metropolitan Divisions
Standard Metropolitan Areas: 1950

Figure 13.—STANDARD METROPOLITAN AREAS: 1950

United States Census Bureau
Economics and Statistics Administration
U.S. CENSUS BUREAU
Concluding Thoughts

- Census Bureau geography reflects the variety of geographic areas that exist and vary across the nation.
- This variety has some basis in historical settlement patterns, but also reflects changing perceptions and data user needs.
- Understanding the history behind Census Bureau geography helps us to understand the reasons for the variety, and adds richness to statistical data.
Questions? Comments?

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