

Behind the Numbers takes a look at specific measures or indicators to provide a better understanding of what the data for the indicators mean, how data are used and where you can get them.

Behind the Numbers

Geographic Boundaries

Dictionary definition

Webster defines boundary as “something (as a line, point, or plane) that indicates or fixes a limit or extent.” Boundaries can be visibly marked, like a neighbor’s fence or a sign at the edge of town, but are often not.

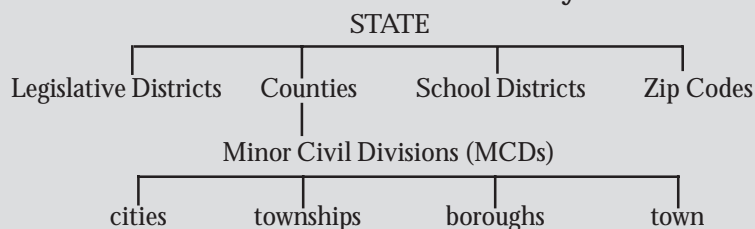
There are two basic types of geographic boundaries, administrative and statistical, which sometimes overlap.

The following Census Bureau standard format of geographies is widely used.

Administrative boundaries

On the administrative side, states are divided into subdivisions normally called counties. Counties are divided into county subdivisions, frequently called minor civil divisions (MCDs) and commonly referred to in Pennsylvania as municipalities. The Commonwealth’s municipality types include cities, boroughs, townships, and one town. All areas in Pennsylvania are part of one, and only one, municipality. Other administrative boundaries include national and state legislative districts, school districts, and zip codes. The following diagram represents the structure of administrative geographies in Pennsylvania.

Administrative boundaries in Pennsylvania



Statistical boundaries

The other side of Census geographies is statistical. Here, counties are divided into tracts, which are based on population size. Census tracts generally have a population size between 1,500 and 8,000 with an optimum size of 4,000. Tracts do not necessarily mesh with administrative boundaries and may cover more than one MCD, or one MCD may include multiple

What is a geographic boundary?

A visible or invisible marker that delineates where one area ends and another begins.

What are the major types of boundaries in Pennsylvania?

Administrative: state, county, municipal, school district, legislative district, zip code

Statistical: Census tract, block, block group, Core Based Statistical Area (CBSA)

Why do we need statistical boundaries?

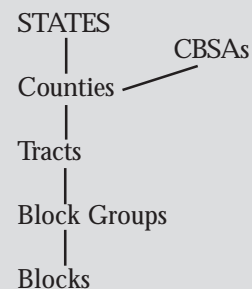
To gather data on neighborhoods that may be smaller than the municipal or zip code area or on communities that may be larger than one county. These data help describe the conditions and needs of residents within a defined area.

What data are available for each type of geographic boundary?

Most state and federal agencies release their data for the state and counties. Some also provide data for municipalities and CBSAs. Education agencies provide school-district-level data. The Census Bureau is the primary, and often sole, source of data at the tract, block group, block, congressional district, or zip code level. State legislative district data usually must be computed.

a central city or cities that are economically tied by commuting-to-work patterns. CBSAs are defined by the federal Office of Management and Budget, not the Census Bureau, and can be Metropolitan or Micropolitan Statistical Areas, depending on the size of the central cities. Not all counties are within CBSAs.

Census geographies



tracts. Tracts are further divided into blocks, the smallest level of geography, which are also based on population. Blocks can be aggregated into block groups, which generally contain between 600 and 3,000 people with an optimum size of 1,500 people. Above the county level are Core Based Statistical Areas (CBSA), which are groups of counties with

Census data are also available for Census Designated Places (CDPs), which are not actual municipalities, but are known by local residents to encompass a certain area that has specific characteristics. An example of a CDP in Pennsylvania is Hershey in Dauphin County. The place called “Hershey” is actually a part of Derry Township, but is known to local and probably not-so-local residents as “Hershey.”

Data from sources other than the Census Bureau’s Decennial Census are usually only available at national, state, CBSA, and county levels.

Geographic codes

Codes are often used as numerical representations for places and can be used to match data sets from various sources. Federal Information Processing System (FIPS) codes are useful because they are universally recognized. Pennsylvania’s state FIPS code is 42. Counties are coded alphabetically using odd numbers with three digits. For example, Adams County is 001, and York County is 133. Each municipality has a unique five-digit ID.

Some Pennsylvania state agencies, however, use their own codes. For counties, some agencies use consecutive numbers beginning with one, in which case Adams County is still 1, but York County is 67. Municipal codes vary among agencies. The chart below offers an example of some different codes used for Abbottstown Borough, Adams County.

Municipal codes used for Abbottstown Borough, Adams County	
Agency	Agency Code
Complete FIPS (state, county, municipal)	4200100116
FIPS	00116
Census	005 (no longer used)
PA Department of Community and Economic Development	01003
PA Department of Transportation (PennDOT)	01401

Counting Pennsylvania’s local governments

Just how many local governments are there in Pennsylvania? County governments are easy to count, sort of. There are 67 counties, a number that dates back to 1878 when Lackawanna County was created from part of Luzerne County. Philadelphia is unique because the county and city are the same jurisdiction, so there is no county government. Therefore, Pennsylvania has 66 county governments. School districts are also somewhat easy. The Commonwealth has 501 school districts. We often see information on just 500, however, since one, Bryn Athyn in Montgomery County, has no enrollment.

Now for the somewhat confusing part... Pennsylvania municipalities. A municipality in Pennsylvania is an incorporated entity. As stated earlier, there are four types in the state: 57 cities, 960 boroughs, 1,547 townships, and one town¹. Counting municipalities is difficult for a number of reasons. First, Bethlehem City and 11 boroughs cross county lines. This makes some data collection confusing since each place is found twice when information is organized by county.

A second but similar issue is that municipalities sometimes merge together or split apart, so the total number is not constant. The box on the bottom of the page lists recent boundary changes, in county order, of which to be aware.

Also, some agencies report only 56 cities because Latrobe in Westmoreland County is a city by homerule declaration only, not by population criteria. Lastly, Cold Spring Township in Lebanon County is a municipality (an incorporated township) but does not have its own government. Because of its small population, Cold Spring relies on the government of nearby Union Township.

¹ Bloomsburg, Columbia County, is the only town in Pennsylvania, incorporated as a town through a special act of the General Assembly in 1870.

Recent boundary changes among Pennsylvania municipalities

Municipality	County	Date	Action
Temple Borough	Berks	1/1/1999	disincorporation, area reverted to Muhlenburg Township
Wyomissing Hills Borough	Berks	2002	merged into Wyomissing Borough
Northern Cambria Borough	Cambria	1/1/2000	created by merger of Barnesboro and Spangler Boroughs
West Fairview Borough	Cumberland	1/1/1998	disincorporation, area reverted to East Pennsboro Township
Fairview Borough	Erie	1/1/1998	disincorporation, area reverted to Fairview Township
East Fork Township	Potter	1/1/2004	merged into Warton Township