



LRO SNAPSHOT

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A Beginner's Guide to the United States Census

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The mission of the U.S. Census Bureau is to serve as the leading source of data about the nation's people and economy. To accomplish this mission, the Census Bureau measures and disseminates information about the nation's economy, society, and institutions.

For legislators, legislative staff, public policy experts, businesses, and others, the data and information collected by the Census Bureau is available at www.census.gov. The data and information can be used to foster economic growth, advance scientific understanding, and facilitate informed public policy decisions.

This snapshot provides an overview of the major censuses and surveys conducted by the Census Bureau, highlighting the wealth of information available by topic, geography, population, and time period. The Census Bureau is responsible for a variety of censuses and surveys (collectively known as products), including the Decennial Census, Economic Census, Census of Governments, and American Community Survey.¹

Decennial Census

The oldest, most well-known census conducted by the Census Bureau is the Decennial Census. The Decennial Census is mandated by Article I, sec. 2, of the U.S. Constitution, and was first conducted in 1790. Since that time, it has been conducted every 10 years. Census Day this year is April 1, 2020.

The first census consisted of six questions and resulted in a count of 3.9 million people. The 2020 Census consists of nine questions and is expected to result in a tally of nearly 300 million people. Decennial census results are used to apportion congressional representation, redistrict political boundaries, and distribute nearly \$675 billion in grants and other assistance throughout the country.

Due to the ongoing coronavirus pandemic, the Trump Administration has announced it will ask Congress for a 120-day extension to complete the Census. As of today, 54 percent of Nebraskans have already responded to the Census. The previous response rate had 71.1 percent of Nebraskans self-reporting during the full 2010 Census.

Economic Census

The Economic Census is conducted every five years. Nearly four million businesses provide data to this census. The Economic Census provides baseline information that paints a picture of major trends in the economic makeup of the country, including gross domestic product, producer price index, and other economic indicators. Businesses use the data when making decisions regarding operating sites, capital investments, and product development. The next Economic Census is scheduled for 2022.

Census of Governments

[The Census of Governments](#) (COG) collects information and data on counties, cities, townships, and school districts, including organizational information, data relating to employment and payroll, and financial information. Like the Economic Census, the COG is conducted every five years; the next census is scheduled for 2022 and data will be available in 2024-2025.

American Community Survey

[The American Community Survey](#) (ACS) is an ongoing survey designed to capture metrics not included in the 2020 Decennial Census, such as education, employment, internet access, and transportation. The data and information collected help determine how to distribute nearly \$675 billion of federal grants and assistance each year.

The ACS is sent to approximately 3.5 million households, 20,000 group facilities, and 194,000 other residences. The ACS helps leaders determine the need for programs, economic development, and emergency management and to understand other local issues and conditions.

Other Surveys

The Census Bureau conducts a variety of other surveys, which can be divided into three broad categories: demographic surveys, economic surveys, and sponsored surveys. Generally, (1) demographic surveys work to identify population, age, sex, and racial composition, as well as social, housing, and other information identifiable to each individual; (2) economic surveys include principle economic indicators, market potential surveys, and manufacturing surveys; and (3) sponsored surveys include educational surveys, the National Health Survey, and labor statistics surveys.



Navigating the website and accessing census data

The breadth and depth of information collected by the Census Bureau can be daunting. Census data is available not only on a nationwide scale, but also available for regions², states, counties, census tracts³, block groups⁴, and census blocks.⁵ The following hypothetical search provides a step-by-step tutorial on how to access information via the website.

Step 1
Log on

Visit the new U.S. Census Bureau data site:
<https://data.census.gov/cedsci/>

Step 2
Search

Search for a topic you want information on. Example: *What is the average travel time to work for residents in Douglas County, Nebraska?*

The Census Bureau is the leading source of quality data about the nation's people and economy.

Q What is the average travel time to work in Douglas County, Nebraska? X Search

Step 3
Analyze

In this case, the search produced **Table B08135**, showing the estimates for the number of commuters, the categories of time, and the margin of error for each category.

AGGREGATE TRAVEL TIME TO WORK (IN MINUTES) OF WORKERS BY TRAVEL TIME TO WORK
 Survey/Program: American Community Survey
 Years: 2018,2017,2016,2015,2014,2013,2012,2011,2010 Table: B08135

	Douglas County, Nebraska	
	Estimate	Margin of Error
Aggregate travel time to work (in minutes):	5,486,900	+/-158,660
Less than 10 minutes	189,495	+/-15,400
10 to 14 minutes	534,850	+/-35,073
15 to 19 minutes	955,230	+/-51,369
20 to 24 minutes	1,164,760	+/-66,615
25 to 29 minutes	526,460	+/-55,758

According to the table, most Douglas County residents (1,164,760) take between 20 to 24 minutes getting to work. Your search may bring up related tables, with pertinent information from a different survey or time frame.

Census Assistance

While the tutorial illustrates how the census website can be used to find information, there are many other ways to use the website. For further help in accessing census data and using the website, visit the Census Academy at www.census.gov/academy, which offers tools and education designed to help users understand census products.

1. Many of the censuses conducted by the bureau are prescribed by federal law, (13 U.S.C §§ 131-195).
 2. A region for the Census is divided into 4 categories Northeast, Midwest, South, and West.
 3. Census tracts are small statistical subdivisions of a county with a population size between 1,200 to 8,000 people with an optimum size of 4,000 people.
 4. Block Groups are statistical divisions of census tracts, are generally defined to contain between 600 and 3,000 people.
 5. Census Blocks are statistical areas bounded by visible features, such as streets, roads, streams, and railroad tracks, etc. which are small in size in urban areas and can be larger in rural areas.