



PROPOSED CHANGES: CENSUS URBAN AREA

BACKGROUND

On February 19, 2021 the Census Bureau posted proposed [Urban Areas for the 2020 Census—Proposed Criteria](#). The proposed criteria included several changes, most notably:

1. *Defining Criterion*: Shift to housing density as the primary criterion for determining whether a census block is urban, rather than population
2. *Agglomerations*: Using LEHD commuting data for merging/splitting urban areas where two or more urban areas are largely contiguous
3. *Hops/Jumps*: Changes to “hops” and “jumps” may prevent some urban areas from merging or agglomerating, this will most likely be seen along the edges.

In response to these proposed changes AMPO formed a working group from members within the Technical and Policy Committees, and Data and GIS & Data Visualization Working Groups to explore the potential impacts, share analyses, and prepare formal comments for submittal.

TIMELINE & PROCESS

AMPO is collecting feedback from the working group and members through May 7, 2021 followed by final consideration by the Board of Directors. Comments are due to the Federal Register May 20, 2021.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- [AMPO Census Briefing Recording](#)
 - [Slides](#)
 - [Q&A Report](#)
- [CTAA Overview](#)
- [NARC Overview](#)
- [AASHTO Webinar](#)
- [Census Bureau Proposed Changes Viewer](#)

SUBMIT YOUR COMMENTS

If your agency or state MPO association has written comments regarding these proposed changes, please let us know so we can ensure we accurately reflect our member's concerns.

Image Source: Census Bureau Urban Area Proposed Criteria Viewer

KEY DEFINITIONS

US Census Bureau Terms and Definitions

Urban Area

The Census Bureau's urban areas represent densely developed territory (>2,500 people), and encompass residential, commercial, and other non-residential urban land uses. Not to be confused with FHWA's definition of Urban Area, which is >5,000 people.

Proposed Change:

Change Urban Area criteria to either 4,000 housing units or 10,000 people. No longer distinguish types of urban areas below.



Urbanized Area (UA)

An urbanized area consists of densely developed territory that contains 50,000 or more people.

Proposed Change:

Eliminate naming convention

Urban Cluster (UC)

A urban cluster is at least 2,500 and less than 50,000 people.

Proposed Change:

Eliminate naming convention

US DOT definitions that *will not* be affected by these proposed changes:

- Urban Area
- Urbanized Area (UZA)
- Adjusted Urbanized Area

Additional Sources: [FHWA FAQ](#)
[Title 23, U.S.C.](#)

OMB definition that *will not* be affected by these proposed changes, but is also currently under review:

- Metropolitan Statistical Area (MSA)
 - [AMPO's Comments to Federal Register](#)

MPO DESIGNATION

It is important to note that MPO designation is based on FHWA's definition of urbanized area. So while the Census has proposed eliminating the distinction within urban areas, the underlying data will remain available for FHWA's definition.

It is our understanding, after conversations with FHWA that there are no current plans to alter the threshold for MPO designation.

ANTICIPATED EFFECTS

WHAT COULD THESE CHANGES MEAN FOR MPOs?

While it is not possible to fully predict the effects of these proposed changes on the MPO community, AMPO has collaborated with its working group, FHWA and sister agencies to hypothesize anticipated effects.

Urbanized Areas Could Shrink/Grow

In some cases urban areas could shrink due to these proposed updates.

- Small-urbanized MPOs (50,000 - 200,000): These could fall below the threshold however falling below 50,000 does not automatically de-designate an MPO. [23 U.S. Code § 134 \(d\)\(5\)](#) [23 CFR § 450.310 \(g\)](#).
- Transportation Management Areas (200,000+): These could fall below the threshold and lose their TMA status. While FHWA does allow an MPO to apply for an exemption to this, it would not guarantee them the ability to sub allocate federal funds.

Regions with stagnant or decreasing growth since the last decennial census or those areas with topography that limits contiguous development are most at risk of population loss. Also, due to the change in hops and jumps other may also experience shrinkage. Some may experience growth, especially if the LEHD commuter data forces an agglomeration with a nearby urbanized area or if an urban area has housing density due to seasonal population changes.

Potential Loss in Funding

Since many funding formulas are based on population, any MPO with a decrease in population could experience a negative impact on funding.

Irregular Boundaries

The proposed changes could result in irregular urbanized boundaries. FHWA has a process to create an adjusted urbanized area that will help smooth boundaries but this will not add additional population to the UZA or provide additional funding to the MPO even if the adjustment technically increases the total area and population.

Functional Classification Systems Will Need Updates

This is true of every decennial census update, and is recommended in FHWA's [Highway Functional Classification Concepts, Criteria and Procedures](#). It is important to note though, as depending on how much the urbanized boundary changes certain roadways may lose their eligibility for federal funds.



SAMPLE ANALYSES AND METHODOLOGIES

CENSUS BUREAU

The Census Bureau produced an [interactive web map](#) to illustrate the proposed 2020 Urban Area criteria applied with 2010 Census population and housing unit data in 2010 Census blocks. These examples are provided solely to inform and support review and comment on the proposed 2020 Urban Area criteria and should not be used for any other purposes. The boundaries of urban areas based on the 2020 proposed criteria, and the names associated with those areas, are not official and likely will change when the 2020 Urban Area final criteria are applied with 2020 Census data in 2020 Census blocks.

Contact: geo.urban@census.gov

SOUTHEAST MICHIGAN COUNCIL OF GOVERNMENTS

The Southeast Michigan Council of Governments (SEMCOG) has undergone a review of the changes proposed by the Census Bureau to delineating urban area in the 2020 Census. As part of this process, SEMCOG staff estimated the impact of the proposed changes on the region by replicating the process outlined in the Federal Register notice for all census blocks in the SEMCOG region. Four of the region's seven counties are estimated to lose urban population, with two counties losing close to 20% of their urban population. A detailed description of the steps taken to conduct this analysis can be found [here](#).

Contact: Jeff Nutting
nutting@semcog.org



A NOTE ABOUT THESE SAMPLES

Due to several factors, including not having access to the 2020 data, these analyses are to be used as best-guess scenarios for what could potentially change and in no way are guaranteed to accurately reflect the official Census changes; this is particularly true of the actual urban area boundary determination.

AMPO is providing this guide to explain proposed changes, share how other agencies are attempting to visualize those changes, let our members know that we are preparing to respond to the federal register and give agencies the opportunity to contribute to that response.

EAST-WEST GATEWAY COUNCIL OF GOVERNMENTS

East-West Gateway COG created an [interactive map](#) that shows what would happen if the proposed criteria were applied to 2010 block data. Orange shows areas that were rural in 2010, but that meet the initial density or imperviousness criteria. Note: EWG hasn't attempted to simulate hops or jumps, so some of these areas will be too far from the core to have any chance of switching from urban to rural.

Dark green shows areas that were urban last time but are expected to be rural this time. For most areas that fall into this category, the reason is that last time the initial delineation was done at the tract level, which ended up including some undeveloped areas at the edge of the urban area. This time, the initial delineation is at the block level, which removes some of these areas. Detailed instructions for recreating this map can be found [here](#).

Additionally, regarding LEHD, EWG used a [SQL script](#) to examine if the St. Louis UA would be merged with the Alton UA (East-West Gateway serves both UAs).

Web Map Contact: Ted LaBoube
ted.laboube@ewgateway.org

SQL Script Contact: Michael Wohlstadter
michael.wohlstadter@ewgateway.org

BALTIMORE METROPOLITAN COUNCIL

The Baltimore Metropolitan Council was able to examine four areas of the proposed changes:

- [Urban Area by Housing Unit Density](#): This analysis only looks at the question of how different the 2010 UA would look using the proposed housing unit density instead of the previous population density thresholds. This map uses standard 2010 Census block data.
- [Housing Unit Density \(with permits\)](#): This analysis adds permitted new residential units issues between 2010-2020 to the block housing unit count to attempt to represent a maximum residential expansion scenario.
- [Commuter Flow](#): This analysis attempted to replicate the Census' analysis shown in their AMPO briefing. Areas where more than 50% of the residents work in a different urban area may end up with those blocks switched to that urban area.
- Agglomeration: A fourth analysis was not mapped. Using the same LEHD data as the above map, the total flow between whole urban areas adjacent to BMC were calculated. This was used to determine if there was a chance of BMC merging.

Contact: Mara Kaminowitz
mkaminowitz@baltometro.org



CAPITAL DISTRICT TRANSPORTATION COMMITTEE

The CDTC MPO conducted an exercise to demonstrate how the proposed criteria for defining Urban Areas in the 2020 Census may affect urbanized areas within CDTC's Planning area, and therefore possibly federal funding amounts and eligibility. This exercise only took into account the following two proposed criteria below:

- Adoption of a Housing Unit Density Threshold for Qualification of Census Blocks
- Qualify Urban Areas Based on a Minimum Threshold of 4,000 Housing Units or 10,000 Persons Instead of a Minimum Threshold of 2,500 Persons

Please note that this exercise is not an exact representation of the 2020 Census designated Urban Areas, due to the following reasons: 1) This is based on 2010 data not 2020 data. 2) Defining the Urban Core is the first of a multi-step process used to determine the extent of an Urban Area. Once the Urban Core is defined, impervious surfaces (such as parking lots, malls, office parks, etc.) are added in as well as additional area that is within a certain distance (hops and jumps) from the Urban Core along transportation routes. 3) The proposed changes to defining Urban Areas have not yet been finalized/adopted. A detailed explanation of the exercise and results can be found [here](#).

Contact: Teresa LaSalle

tlasalle@cdtcmppo.org

PENNSYLVANIA STATE DATA CENTER

The Pennsylvania State Data Center created an [interactive map](#) that demonstrates urban area status according to the 2020 definitions when applied to the 2010 data. It found that Pennsylvania has a total of 137 urban areas (including Urban Clusters) that were identified as a result of the 2010 Census. Under the 2020 thresholds, 77 urban areas would no longer qualify. These urban areas have a total population of 340,301 (803 persons per square mile) compared to the 60 remaining urban areas which have a population of 9.65 million (1,735 persons per square mile). The average population of the 77 urban areas that no longer qualify is approximately 4,420 persons compared to the 60 remaining urban areas which have an average population of nearly 161,000 persons. A summary of results can also be found [here](#).

Contact: Tim Schock

timschock@psu.edu

HAVE AN ANALYSIS?

If your agency has conducted an analysis and are willing to share your methodology please contact AMPO staff.