

Census 101: A beginner's guide to getting just a little local data

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If you're a beginner, it's the best and worst of times: There are gigabytes of fresh Census data. How does a beginner with just a browser and a spreadsheet keep from drowning? One way is American FactFinder, the Census Bureau's data dissemination site. After a long, clumsy development period, it actually will let you drill down to a small area, extract just a little bit of data and download or print it easily. To get ready for this summer's release of the good stuff from the 2000 Census, it's a good idea to pull and look at local 1990 Census data.

Here's a step-by-step guide to getting just one county worth of neighborhood-level data on one subject. The example uses 1990 Census public and private school enrollment for Bucks County, Pa., but you can adapt as needed:

1. Go the American FactFinder web site: factfinder.census.gov. Click on the box labeled "Data Sets."



2. On the page that opens, click in the radio button for "1990 Summary Tape File 3."

3. You'll see that the page reloads, and a list of links appears to the right. Choose "List All Tables." (It's a good idea to have a printed list of tables and their categories saved in a three-ring binder for reference. A link to that list is shown at right as "Technical Documentation.")



4. On the list of tables, scroll down to P054, highlight it and click the "Next" box at lower right corner of the page.

Data Sets ► List all tables

Current Data Set: [1990 Summary Tape File 3 \(STF 3\) - Sample data](#)

• Select a table and click 'Next'

P051. Aggregate Travel Time To Work (In Minutes)
P052. Time Leaving Home To Go To Work
P053. Private Vehicle Occupancy
P054. School Enrollment And Type Of School
P055. Race By School Enrollment

5. On the page that opens, click on the drop-down arrow for "Select a geographic type" and choose "Census tract."

• Select a geographic type



• Select one or more geographic areas and click 'Add'

6. You'll see the page reload. Then choose your state from the list and watch the page reload again to present a list of counties. Choose one and watch the page reload again with a list of census tracts.



7. Click on "All Census Tracts" and then on the blue "Add" button. The list of tracts will appear in the box below. Then push the blue button "Show Table."



Be patient while the table loads, especially if you're doing an urban county. Here's what you'll see:

Notice the links to documentation on the table's categories and definitions, to the data set itself and to the "Variance Document for STF3." Since these numbers come from a survey, there's a little cloud of uncertainty around each number. The variance document tells you how to figure out how big that cloud is for your numbers so you don't overstate what they say.

8. Notice at upper right how the "Print/Download" button opens into both options when your cursor hovers there. Choose "Download."

Detailed Tables

Change Selections | Print / Download | Related Items

Print

Download

Current Selections

P054. SCHOOL ENROLLMENT AND TYPE OF SCHOOL - Universe: Persons 3 years and over
Data Set: 1990 Summary Tape File 3 (STF 3) - Sample data

NOTE: For information on confidentiality, sampling error, nonsampling error, and definitions, see <http://factfinder.census.gov/home/en/data/notes/expst050.htm>

	Tract 1001.01, Bucks County, Pennsylvania	Tract 1001.02, Bucks County, Pennsylvania	Tract 1002.01, Bucks County, Pennsylvania	Tract 1002.05, Bucks County, Pennsylvania	Tract 1002.06, Bucks County, Pennsylvania	Tract 1002.07, Bucks County, Pennsylvania	Tract 1002.08, Bucks County, Pennsylvania	Tract 1002.09, Bucks County, Pennsylvania
Enrolled in preprimary school								
Public school	114	0	5	33	45	23	58	
Private school	101	16	52	160	84	58	33	
Enrolled in elementary or high school								
Public school	1,217	240	844	1,538	520	579	715	
Private school	373	60	95	469	165	147	172	
Enrolled in college								
Public school	253	81	153	498	179	154	249	
Private school	217	42	62	230	132	46	124	
Not enrolled in school	7,409	1,971	3,330	7,200	3,182	2,158	4,375	

U.S. Bureau of the Census
1990 Census of Population and Housing

Standard Error/Variance documentation for this dataset:
[Variance Document for STF 3](#)

9. In the window that pops up, leave the default selection "Comma delimited" but make sure to click in the box marked "Transpose rows and columns." Then click "OK." When the box pops up prompting you to save the file, steer it to the directory you prefer and save it, then open it with Excel. Or just click on "Open this file from its current location." You'll get something like this:

Detailed Tables » Download

Data Set: 1990 Summary Tape File 3 (STF 3) - Sample data
Tables: P054. SCHOOL ENROLLMENT AND TYPE OF SCHOOL - Universe: Per

Format: ☐ Comma delimited - spreadsheet format (.csv file)
☐ Tab delimited (.txt file)

☒ Transpose Rows/Columns

OK Cancel

10. Make sure to save the file as an Excel file – choose "Save As" from the File menu and give it a name that ends with *.xls. Then you can start calculating percentages, sorting, etc.

"Census Tract 1001.01" may not mean much to you, but your local planners can probably equip you with a paper map that shows census tracts in relationship to landmarks like streets and rivers. If not, you can get one from the Census Bureau either by downloading it as an Adobe Acrobat file (http://ftp2.census.gov/plmap/pl_trt/) or buying one on paper. (A county is 1 to 7 sheets, \$25 minimum order: <http://www.census.gov/mp/www/geo/msgeo60z.html>.)

If you'd like to change or make new selections, just go back to FactFinder and choose from options at the top right of the screen.

American FactFinder can do lots of other things as well – it serves so many purposes that navigation can be daunting. You might try blazing off from this trail if you see something interesting. But these simple steps will let you find and grab just the data you need.

Microsoft Excel - BucksCounty.xls

File Edit View Insert Format Tools Data Window Help

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	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H
1	P054. SCHOOL ENROLLMENT AND TYPE OF SCHOOL - Universe: Persons 3 years and over							
2	Data Set: 1990 Summary Tape File 3 (STF 3) - Sample data							
3	NOTE: For information on confidentiality, sampling error, nonsampling error, and definitions, see http://factfinder.census.gov/home/en/data/notes/expst050.htm							
4								
5								
6		Enrolled in preprimary school:		Enrolled in elementary or high school:		Enrolled in college:		Not enrolled in school
7		Public school	Private school	Public school	Private school	Public school	Private school	
8	Tract 1001.01	114	101	1,217	373	253	217	7,409
9	Tract 1001.02	0	16	240	80	81	42	1,971
10	Tract 1002.01	6	52	844	95	153	62	3,330
11	Tract 1002.05	33	160	1,538	469	496	230	7,200
12	Tract 1002.06	45	84	520	155	179	132	3,182
13	Tract 1002.07	23	58	579	147	154	46	2,158
14	Tract 1002.08	59	33	715	172	249	124	4,375
15	Tract 1002.09	61	73	789	331	413	249	5,270
16	Tract 1002.10	98	118	936	464	267	207	4,781
17	Tract 1003.02	99	46	730	257	141	68	3,736
18	Tract 1003.03	7	46	700	322	170	66	3,927
19	Tract 1003.04	34	16	325	98	77	49	1,682
20	Tract 1003.05	72	52	859	199	444	48	6,178
21	Tract 1004.01	64	77	805	235	239	121	4,639
22	Tract 1004.02	26	60	951	326	317	115	4,981
23	Tract 1004.03	37	11	315	119	69	28	1,752
24	Tract 1004.04	62	79	728	275	377	111	5,048
25	Tract 1004.05	95	88	1,243	398	374	124	6,206
26	Tract 1004.06	47	63	328	375	150	108	2,369