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: <u>factfinder.census.gov</u>. Click on the box labeled "Data Sets."

© 1990 Summary Tape Fille 3 (STF 3) - Sample data Summary Tape File 3 (STF 3) contains sample data weighted to represent total population for 34 coputation items and 27 housing tems and 100percent counts and unweighted sample counts for total persons and total housing units.

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.")



Data Sets

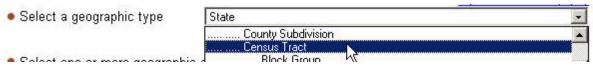
Complete subject and

geographic coverage for FactFinder Data Sources

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



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



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.

Select one or more geographic areas and click 'Add'

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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."

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Private school	373	60	96	969	165	147	172	
Enrolled in college:	-							
Public school	253	81	153	496	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	

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:

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.

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