

2. GEOGRAPHIC BOUNDARIES, VINTAGES, AND FREQUENCY OF UPDATES

The American Community Survey (ACS) publishes estimates using vintages (the latest available geographic boundaries). For the ACS 5-year estimates, the vintage is the last year of the multiyear period. For example, the 2017 ACS 1-year estimates and 2013–2017 ACS 5-year estimates use the same vintage (2017) of geographic boundaries.

More specifically, ACS data generally reflect the geographic boundaries of legal areas as of January 1 of the estimate year. For example, the 2017 ACS 1-year estimates use the geographic area boundaries in effect as of January 1, 2017, and the 2013–2017 ACS 5-year estimates (covering January 1, 2013, to December 31, 2017) also use the geographic area boundaries effective as of January 1, 2017.

While geographic boundary changes are not common, they do occur, and those changes can affect a data user's ability to make comparisons over time. For example, the city of Jurupa Valley, California, incorporated in July 2011. The U.S. Census Bureau published the first set of data for this city in 2012, and has produced updated data each subsequent year, but ACS data are not available for Jurupa Valley for 2011 and earlier years. The Census Bureau does not revise ACS data for previous years to reflect changes in geographic boundaries.

Congressional districts, which are redrawn every 10 years immediately following the decennial census, provide another example. Congressional district data from the 2012 ACS and later years reflect the new boundaries drawn after the 2010 Census, while ACS data for earlier years reflect the 2000 Census-based boundaries. Given the major changes to district boundaries after each census, a comparison of

congressional district data between 2011 and 2012 is not feasible.

Many statistical areas (like census tracts and block groups) are updated once per decade to reflect the most recent decennial census. Beginning with the 2010 ACS data products, most statistical areas reflect 2010 Census geographic definitions and boundaries. The 2009 and earlier ACS data products use mostly 2000 Census statistical definitions. Most legal areas (like counties, places, and school districts) are updated every year or every other year. Boundary changes for selected legal areas are reported to the Census Bureau through the annual Boundary and Annexation Survey.¹³

TIP: In some cases, a geographic boundary may change, but the GEOID may remain the same, so data users need to pay attention to year-to-year changes to make sure the data are comparable over time. For example, the boundary of Bedford County, Virginia, was modified to add the former independent city of Bedford (effective July 1, 2013).

For a complete schedule of legal and statistical area updates, see the Census Bureau's Web page on Geography Boundaries by Year.¹⁴ Geographic changes for each ACS data release are recorded on the Census Bureau's Table & Geography Changes Web page.¹⁵

¹³ U.S. Census Bureau, Boundary and Annexation Survey (BAS), <www.census.gov/programs-surveys/bas.html>.

¹⁴ U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey (ACS), Geography Boundaries by Year, <www.census.gov/programs-surveys/acs/geography-acs/geography-boundaries-by-year.html>.

¹⁵ U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey (ACS), Table & Geography Changes, <www.census.gov/programs-surveys/acs/technical-documentation/table-and-geography-changes.html>.