

## County definitions for 1980-2020

The United States is divided into counties or county equivalents for political and administrative purposes and for the census. In 47 states, the county-equivalent entities are counties; in Louisiana, they are designated as parishes; Virginia has both counties and independent cities; Alaska has boroughs, census areas, municipalities and cities; and the entire District of Columbia is treated as a single county. We use the term “county” to refer to these county-equivalent entities.

Between 1980 and 2020, the boundaries and names of some counties [changed](#); some new counties were created; and some were eliminated or combined with others. To provide consistent comparisons of county populations across decennial censuses conducted in this period, we made some modifications to the counties defined at the time of each census. We refer to the counties by the names and official FIPS (Federal Information Processing Series) codes used in 2020, with the exception of several areas in Alaska noted below. The result of our changes is 3,140 consistently defined areas across the five censuses rather than the number defined by the Census Bureau for each census (3,143 in 2020, for example). These definitions are used for the data in [“U.S. Hispanic population continued its geographic spread in the 2010s,”](#) [“Hispanic Population Growth and Dispersion Across U.S. Counties, 1980-2020,”](#) and the Excel workbook of [data for all U.S. counties](#).

Several counties kept the same boundaries for the five censuses, but their names and FIPS codes were changed. Miami-Dade County, Florida (12-086) was Dade County (12-025) in the 1980 and 1990 censuses. Oglala Lakota County, South Dakota (46-102) was Shannon County (46-113) in 1980-2010. Kusilvak Census Area, Alaska (02-158) was Wade Hampton Census Area (02-270) in 1980-2010. Northwest Arctic Borough, Alaska (02-188) was Kobuk Census Area (02-140) in 1980. Finally, Prince of Wales-Hyder Census Area, Alaska (02-198) is roughly equivalent to Prince of Wales-Outer Ketchikan Census Area (02-201) in 1980-2000.

Four areas were absorbed by surrounding counties and became part of a larger territory. Three of these were independent cities in Virginia that became part of counties: Alleghany County, Virginia (51-005) absorbed Clifton Forge city (51-560) after the 2000 census; Bedford County, Virginia (51-019) was combined with Bedford city (51-515) before the 2020 census; and Halifax County, Virginia (51-083) absorbed South Boston city (51-780) in the mid-1990s. We combined data for the cities and their new counties. Yellowstone National Park, Montana (30-113) was treated as a separate county in 1980 and 1990. The populated part of Yellowstone National Park became part of Park County, Montana (30-067) after 1997.

In a number of areas, new counties were created by subdividing existing counties. La Paz County, Arizona (04-012) was created in the 1980s from Yuma County (04-027); Cibola County, New Mexico (35-006) from Valencia County (35-061). In our 1980 census data, the precincts making up the new counties were aggregated to provide data for 1980, and these areas were subtracted from their original counties. Broomfield County, Colorado (08-014) was created as a county following the 2000 census by converting Broomfield city into a county. The former city had areas in four existing counties: Adams (08-001), Boulder (08-013), Jefferson (08-123) and Weld (08-123). In our data for 1980-2000, Broomfield City was treated as a county, and its population in each of the original four counties was subtracted from those counties.

The census areas in Alaska may have undergone more changes in the last 40 years than counties in any other state. The Aleutians East Borough (02-013) and Aleutians West Census Area (02-016) were created in the 1980s from the Aleutian Islands Census Area (02-010). The Lake and Peninsula Borough (02-164) was created from part of the Dillingham Census Area (02-070), which remained as a census area, in the 1980s. In the next decade, Yakutat City and Borough (02-282) was created from the Skagway-Yakutat-Angoon Census Area (20-231) while the rest of the area was renamed as the Skagway-Hoonah-Angoon Census Area (02-232). Around the same time, the Denali Borough (02-068) was created from the Yukon-Koyukuk Census Area (02-290), but the remainder retained the same name. In each of these cases, for the censuses before the new areas were created, we combined the data for precincts that would fall within each of the new areas to get historical data for them.

Finally, three areas in Alaska were subdivided into new areas, but for our estimates, we retained the original groupings. Before the 2020 census, the Valdez-Cordova Census Area (02-261) was split into the Chugach Census Area (02-063) and Copper River Census Area (02-066); in our 2020 data these two are combined as Valdez-Cordova. Similarly, after the 2000 census, Wrangell-Petersburg Census Area (02-280) was split into Petersburg Census Area (02-195) and Wrangell City and Borough (02-275). In addition, the newly created Skagway-Hoonah-Angoon Census Area (02-232, see above) was split again into Hoonah-Angoon Census Area (02-105) and Skagway Municipality (02-230). In our analysis, these areas are combined in the relevant censuses so that we have a consistent set of data covering 1980-2020 for: Skagway-Hoonah-Angoon Census Area (02-232), Valdez-Cordova Census Areas (02-261) and Wrangell-Petersburg Census Area (02-280).

As a result of the various combinations and divisions, our analysis covers 3,140 counties and county equivalents for five censuses, 1980-2020, not the 3,143 counties for which census totals are available in 2020. In addition to the specific changes incorporated into our analysis, there have been [a number of other annexations and territory exchanges](#), mostly involving relatively small populations. Virginia had about 35 additional shifts, all before 2007. Denver, Adams and

Arapahoe Counties in Colorado and Montgomery and Prince George's County in Maryland had notable boundary shifts before 2000. In all of these cases, the population shifts resulting from boundary changes are part of the measured population change between censuses.