

Data definitions table

A quick reference for communities & counties

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Indicator (noun): key statistic used to analyze conditions and forecast trends involving population, income and poverty, employment, housing, family and children, education, health, crime and safety, and more in a community, county, state, or nation.

Definitions matter

This publication provides information about economic and social indicators (statistics) that may be used to assess human welfare and provide a picture of the effects of economic and/or social development within a community.

This reference table

- Defines data sources, and
- Suggests information to consider when discussing the data.

County indicators—not all data can be compared

Data definitions are vital in interpreting, analyzing, and presenting county realities and trends. When using data and county indicators, pay close attention to each indicator's definition. Sometimes you cannot compare data due to the ways they were collected and reported.

Also, indicators may sound similar but actually measure different things. For example, several agencies produce income numbers but collect and report the data in different ways. The U.S. Census Bureau asks people directly about their incomes while the U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis uses administrative records data such as birth/death certificates, tax returns, and so on. Likewise, several agencies produce employment numbers. One may count jobs where people live, and another might count jobs where people work.

Questions to ask

When using data to make a point, a number all by itself will never tell a complete story. It might grab your attention, but it's only one small piece of the larger picture. Look at a range of relevant indicators to tell the story. Ask yourself:

- How does the indicator change over time?
- What trends are happening?
- How does your county compare to neighboring counties, the state, the nation?
- Do the indicators make sense given changes you see in your community?

When used with another University of Idaho Extension publication—*Reliable data tools for Idaho counties and towns* (find it online at <http://info.ag.uidaho.edu/pdf/CIS/CIS1145.pdf>)—this publication helps users know how to correctly use data and how to

interpret county brochures and presentations.

Data tools for understanding communities: A University of Idaho Extension project

This publication is part of a larger project, *Data Tools for Understanding Communities*, designed to help University of Idaho Extension Educators become proficient data experts in their counties. It also can help civic and business leaders and citizens in Idaho and elsewhere. Find the project at <http://www.extension.uidaho.edu/communitydevelopment/datatools/index.html>

It offers a variety of resources including

- Downloadable brochures for each Idaho county,
- A sample PowerPoint presentation that can be used to communicate local trends, plus
- Resources for understanding local data and locating additional sources of data.

All materials are aimed at people who are new to data analysis.

The data tools project may be of particular interest to elected officials, business leaders, nonprofit organizations, grant writers, students, and others wanting to know more about any Idaho community's conditions and trends.

The data tools project is based on indicators reported at another project created and maintained by University of Idaho researchers. It is the Indicators Northwest Website at <http://www.indicatorsnorthwest.org/>.

The Indicators Northwest Website is funded by the Community Action Partnership headquartered in Lewiston.

Table 1. General Definitions. These are terms you will come across in Table 2, in other data tools materials, and in the Indicators Northwest Website. Knowing what they mean will help you better understand the indicators.

	Indicator name	Definition	Keep in mind
General Definitions	Decennial census	Occurs every 10 years in years ending in zero. Its purpose is to count the population and housing units for the entire U.S. It also describes social, economic, and housing characteristics. The U.S. Census Bureau produces it.	Decennial census data become less useful the further we get from the census date. During intervening years, estimates are collected for various indicators. Be sure to use the most current data collected.
	Intercensal estimates	Annual data estimates for population size and certain characteristics (age, race, ethnicity, and sex) produced by the U.S. Census Bureau.	Intercensal estimates use the most recent decennial census data as the base year and then are adjusted according to vital statistics (births and deaths) and administrative records (migration trends). Interpret estimates with care. Accurate estimates are difficult to make, especially for places where the population is changing rapidly, in small communities, and for the years nearest the end of the decade.
	Inflation	The overall increase in the price movement of goods and services in an economy.	The inflation rate is based on the Consumer Price Index (CPI), which is calculated monthly. For more information on CPI or to access the CPI tables go to: http://www.bls.gov/CPI/ .
	Real dollars	Data adjusted for inflation based on the Consumer Price Index (CPI). (See Inflation).	If data are reported in real dollars, this means the data have been adjusted for inflation and can be compared to data from other years. Find the CPI at: http://www.bls.gov/CPI/ .
	Median	The level at which half of the population has a higher value and half a lower value—the midpoint.	Median values are used in population, income, and housing indicators. A median value is simply the midpoint. Median values, as opposed to averages, are not skewed by large numbers at either end of the spectrum.

Table 2. Indicator Definitions. These data definitions will help anyone interpret economic and social indicators—key statistics used to analyze conditions and forecast trends involving population, income and poverty, employment, housing, family and children, education, health, crime and safety, and more.

	Indicator name	Definition	Keep in mind
Population Characteristics	Population	The total number of people living in an area.	Population is dynamic; it constantly changes due to births, deaths, and migration.
	Migration and natural change	Net-migration is the difference between in-migration and out-migration in a given geographic area during a specified time frame. Natural change is the difference between the number of births and deaths.	This information can be used to determine how much of the population change is due to net migration versus natural change.
	Race	The concept of race as used by the U.S. Census Bureau reflects self-identification by people according to racial categories. Categories include: White; Black or African American; American Indian and Alaskan Native; Asian; Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander; Some Other Race; and Two or More Races.	Because the decennial census and intercensal (data collected on years other than the big 10-year census) estimates do not have identical categories, the two types of data cannot be compared directly.
	Hispanic origin	Hispanics are those who classify themselves in one of the Spanish, Hispanic, or Latino categories on the Census questionnaire. The term refers to the heritage, nationality group, lineage, or country of birth. This may be of the person, person's parents, or ancestors before their arrival in the United States (U.S. Census Bureau).	Hispanic origin is NOT the same as race. The federal government considers race and Hispanic origin to be two separate and distinct concepts. Thus, Hispanics may be of any race. This is not the way many people think about Hispanic origin, so this distinction can be confusing.
	Age	The percentage of the population under 18, 18 to 64, and 65+ years old.	This information can be used to determine the age structure of the area, the breakdown of young, working-age, and elderly populations, and their changes over time.

	Indicator name	Definition	Keep in mind
Income and Poverty	Median household income	Median household income is the level at which half of the households in an area are above the median income level and half below—the midpoint.	This information can be used to determine the middle income for households in your area. Median household income is based on a household's "money income," which is cash income.
	Per capita income	Per capita income is the mean or average income per person.	It is calculated by dividing the total income by the total population. Per capita income is based on personal income, which includes income received from all sources minus contributions to things like Social Security.
	Personal income by source	Three main sources of income are tracked: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Earnings (wages and salaries); • Dividends, interest, and rent; and • Transfer payments (public assistance, retirement, and unemployment compensation). 	This information can be used to see how much of local income comes from people's jobs and other income sources. If transfer payments are high, it is likely that there is a high population of families or individuals who are receiving public assistance and/or retirees.
	Poverty rate	Percentage of individuals whose total annual income is less than the poverty threshold.	The U.S. Census Bureau uses poverty threshold criteria to annually estimate the overall poverty rate, the poverty rate for children (under 18 years of age), and the poverty rate for the elderly (65 years and older). Find federal poverty thresholds at http://www.census.gov/hhes/www/poverty/data/threshld/index.html
	Income less than 200% poverty threshold	This is the percentage of individuals whose total annual income is less than 200% of the poverty threshold or twice the poverty threshold.	This figure includes low-income people who may not have high enough incomes to meet their needs, yet technically do not live below the poverty threshold. For example, if the poverty threshold for a family of four is \$20,000, this figure would include families with incomes of \$40,000 or less.
	Reduced price school lunch program	The National School Lunch Program (NSLP) is a federally assisted meal program. It provides nutritionally balanced, low-cost or free lunches to children each school day. Free lunches are provided to children from families with income at or below 130% of the poverty threshold, and reduced-price lunches are provided to children from families with incomes between 130% and 185% of the poverty threshold.	Not all schools participate in the NSLP. Free and reduced-lunch counts are often used as an indicator of youth poverty because the data can be secured for a small geographic area, such as a community, on an annual basis. However, participation in this program is voluntary for families, and the family may not choose to provide the income data. Thus actual reduced-price school lunch eligibility percentages may be skewed.

	Indicator name	Definition	Keep in mind
Employment Characteristics	Unemployment rate	The percentage of the civilian workforce who are unemployed.	<p>The unemployment rate is calculated with two important pieces of information.</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Number of unemployed (individuals over the age of 16 who are without a job, available for work, and have made specific efforts to find work). 2. Civilian workforce (total number of employed and unemployed). People who are neither employed or unemployed are not in the labor force
	Number of jobs	The total number of self-employed, private, and public jobs. It also captures all full-time, part-time, wage and salary jobs.	The number of jobs and number of people working can be different since some people have more than one job.
	Wage per job	Average annual wage or salary per job. The real wage per job is the wage per job that has been adjusted for inflation.	Further earning information is available through the U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis Web site (http://www.bea.gov/regional/reis), which provides data on earnings by industry. Data are also available on earnings from public and private sectors, farm and non-farm sectors, and self-employed.
	Employment by industry	The percentage of all jobs within each major industry. This indicator shows how jobs in the county or state are distributed across different industries, such as construction, manufacturing, retail and wholesale trade, etc.	Industries currently are classified according to the North American Industry Classification System (NAICS). Prior to 2001, employment by industry data were reported by the Standard Industrial Classification System (SIC). Because the industries have been redefined, the data from these two classification systems cannot be directly compared. Both NAICS and SIC classification codes can be found at http://www.census.gov/eos/www/naics .
	Self-employment rate	The percentage of all employed people who have their own businesses.	Idaho, as a whole, has self-employment rates that are significantly higher than national rates. Some of these jobs are created out of necessity, such as when jobs leave an area but residents want to stay. Entrepreneurs take advantage of opportunities to create other jobs.
	Labor force participation rate	The percentage of persons of working age who are participating in the workforce. In other words, it is the share of the population who are working or seeking work.	To be considered as participating in the workforce, one must be 16 or older, employed, or unemployed and looking for a job. People in that age group who are not counted as participating in the labor force are typically students, homemakers, and retirees. In the United States, the labor force participation rate is usually around 67% to 68%.

	Indicator name	Definition	Keep in mind
Housing	Total housing units	Defined as a house, apartment, mobile home, group of rooms, or a single room occupied as separate living quarters. Housing units are classified as being occupied (either by owners or renters) or vacant.	This information can be used to gauge if and how fast the local housing stock is growing, what percentage of residents rent or own their own homes, or how many homes are vacant.
	Value of owner-occupied housing	The estimated value of an occupied property (house, mobile home, or condominium) if it were for sale. The census respondent estimates values.	The values are self-reported and may not reflect the current market. Use the U.S. Census Bureau's American FactFinder to get more detailed housing data: http://factfinder.census.gov .
Family and Kids	Household type	There are two major household types. A family household consists of a householder and one or more people related to the householder. It may also include people not related to the householder. A non-family household can be a person living alone or a householder living with nonrelatives only.	A household refers to all of the people who occupy one housing unit. A householder refers to the person who owns, is buying, or is renting the housing unit. More detailed household type information can be found at the U.S. Census Bureau's American FactFinder: http://factfinder.census.gov .
	Teen birth rate	The proportion of births to females ages 15 to 17 per 1,000 females in that age range.	In counties with small populations, a small change in the number of teen births may affect the results drastically.
	Teens unemployed and not in school	Young adults between the ages of 16 to 19 who are not looking for a job, enrolled in school, or working.	This group, often called idle teens, can be important to track.

	Indicator name	Definition	Keep in mind
Education	Educational attainment	The highest level of education completed.	Educational attainment is reported for people 25 years and older, as this group is likely to have finished going to school.
	High school dropout rate	The proportion of students in a given age range who drop out in a given year. A high school dropout is defined as a person who was enrolled in high school at some time during the previous school year but who was not enrolled at the beginning of the current year.	This does not include students who have graduated or completed a state or district-approved program; nor does it include students who have transferred to another school. These data are provided by the National Center for Educational Statistics. Information is available at the school district level: http://nces.ed.gov/ccd/drpagency.asp .
	Student-teacher ratio	The number of teachers in a school compared to the number of students who attend the institution.	For example, a ratio 10:1 indicates that there are 10 students for every one teacher. The term can also be reversed to create a teacher-student ratio. In the previous example, the teacher-student ratio would be 1 teacher for every 10 students.
Crime and Safety	Juvenile arrests	Number of arrests of juveniles, 10 to 17 years of age, who have committed serious crimes. The juvenile arrest rate is expressed per 10,000 youth of the same age.	Serious crimes include murder and non-negligent manslaughter, rape, robbery, aggravated assault, burglary, larceny-theft, motor vehicle theft, and arson. Misdemeanors and statute violations are not included in this indicator. In counties with relatively few people, a small change in the number of juvenile arrests may have a significant effect on rates from year to year.
	Violent crimes reported	Violent crime is composed of four offenses: murder and non-negligent manslaughter, forcible rape, robbery, and aggravated assault. According to the Uniform Crime Reporting (UCR) Program's definition, violent crimes involve force or threat of force. This figure is reported as a rate per 10,000 population.	In counties with relatively few people, a small change in the number of violent crimes reported may have a significant effect on rates from year to year.
	Total crimes reported	The number of reported incidences of serious crimes reported as a rate per 10,000 population.	Serious crimes include murder and non-negligent manslaughter, rape, robbery, aggravated assault, burglary, larceny-theft, motor vehicle theft, and arson. Misdemeanors and statute violations are not included in this indicator. In counties with relatively few people, a small change in the number of total crimes may have a significant effect on rates from year to year.

Crime and Safety (continued)	Indicator name	Definition	Keep in mind
	Number of police officers	The number of sworn police officers in a certain population reported as a rate per 1,000 population. This number includes the total of sworn officers for a county, its cities, and universities.	As defined by the FBI, sworn officers meet the following criteria: “They work in an official capacity, they have full arrest powers, they wear a badge (ordinarily), they carry a firearm (ordinarily), they are paid from governmental funds set aside specifically for payment of sworn law enforcement representatives.”
Health	Late or no prenatal care	The percentage of births to mothers who don’t receive prenatal care or who wait for care until the third trimester of pregnancy. This indicator is expressed as a rate per 100 live births.	These data come from state agencies, so they cannot be compared to data for counties in other states.
	Low birth weight babies	Babies with a birth weight under 2,500 grams, or approximately 5 lbs 8 oz. The percentage of low birth weight babies is calculated by dividing the number of low birth weight babies by the number of live births and multiplying by 100.	These data come from state agencies, so they cannot be compared to data for counties in other states.
	Infant mortality	Death of an infant whose age is under one year. The rate is calculated as the number of deaths per 1,000 live births.	The infant mortality rate is an important measure of the well-being of infants, children, and pregnant women because it is associated with a variety of factors, such as maternal health, quality and access to medical care, socioeconomic conditions, and public health practices. These data come from state agencies, so they cannot be compared to data for counties in other states.
	Number of physicians	Number of physicians (MDs in patient care) per 1,000 people.	This is calculated by dividing the number of physicians (in patient care and not employed by the federal government) by the population, then multiplied by 1,000.

References

Federal

Federal Bureau of Investigation, Uniform Crime Report, <http://www.fbi.gov/ucr/ucr.htm>

National Center for Education Statistics, Local Education Agency (School District) Universe Survey Dropout and Completion Data, <http://nces.ed.gov/ccd/drpa-agency.asp>

National Center for Education Statistics, Public Elementary/ Secondary School Universe Survey Data, <http://nces.ed.gov/ccd/pubschuniv.asp>

U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis, Local Area Personal Income, <http://www.bea.gov/regional/reis>

U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, Local Area Unemployment Statistics Program, <http://www.bls.gov/LAU/>

U.S. Census Bureau, American FactFinder, <http://factfinder.census.gov>

U.S. Census Bureau, Population Estimates Program, <http://www.census.gov/popest/estimates.html>

U.S. Census Bureau, Census of Population and Housing and Small Area Income and Poverty Estimates by School Districts, Counties, and States, <http://www.census.gov/hhes/www/saipe/index.html>

U.S. Census Bureau - County Business Patterns (CBP), Metro Business Patterns (MBP), and ZIP Code Business Patterns (ZBP) <http://www.census.gov/econ/cbp/index.html>

U.S. Census Bureau - A to Z Index to all data, <http://www.census.gov/main/www/a2z/>

U.S. Department of Agriculture, National Agricultural Statistic Service, <http://www.nass.usda.gov/>

Idaho / University of Idaho

Idaho Department of Health and Welfare, <http://www.healthandwelfare.idaho.gov/>

University of Idaho Extension, <http://www.extension.uidaho.edu/>

University of Idaho Extension Data Tools Project, <http://www.extension.uidaho.edu/communitydevelopment/datatools/index.html>

Other

Indicators Northwest Website, <http://www.indicatorsnorthwest.org/>

About the authors

All authors of this publication—Sarah Schumaker, Barbara Bromley-Brody, Lyle Hansen, Garth Taylor, Christy Dearien, Sue Traver, Debbie Gray, Ben Eborn, Luke Erickson, and Mary Schmidt—are members of the University of Idaho Extension Community Development Topic Team and Data Tools sub-committee. The goal of the Data Tools project is to develop a variety of resources to help users understand, interpret, and utilize economic, social, and demographic information.

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