

WHAT IS A HOUSING UNIT? WHAT IS A GROUP QUARTERS FACILITY?

Most people live in housing units. But what counts as a housing unit? This information sheet clarifies the basic concepts and provides examples using the Census Bureau's guidelines.

Housing Units

Planners generally use the Census Bureau's definitions of housing units, households, and population in households:

- A *household* is a set of people living together in a housing unit. A nice feature of this definition is that the number of households always equals the number of *occupied* housing units.
- A *housing unit* is any single-family structure (like a house or a manufactured home) **or** any distinct unit in any building where four criteria are met.

A simple housing unit test

The Census's criteria for a housing unit can be assessed in a four-part test:

- A housing unit is a unit that is currently lived in or otherwise available or intended for living quarters
- **and** provides living space that is separate and private for the occupants
- **and** has access to the outside, directly or through common halls, without having to pass through others' private residential space
- **and** conditions of occupancy are independent of any service provision or institutional affiliation (housing not restricted to an institution's population).

All four criteria must be satisfied. A house or other structure may cease to be a housing unit if it is used only for nonresidential purposes, and no longer meets the first condition. A "granny flat" in a larger house may fail to be a second unit if the second and third conditions are not met.

Group Quarters

There are "group living arrangements" that do not meet the second or fourth criteria listed above. The Census Bureau refers to these other residential situations as *group quarters*.

- A *group quarters* facility is a "group living arrangement" that houses multiple, unrelated people, where occupants may not have privacy, **or** the facility houses an institutional or service-receiving population.
- In the decennial census, *group quarters* statistics also include makeshift shelters or places without shelter where homeless people are found to sleep, as well as motel/hotel rooms provided without payment.

Is this a housing unit?

As a practical matter, planning and government statistics agencies often lack details about privacy and egress when builders or developers report new construction. So we rely on short-hand labels. If details are unknown, then the following are usually identified as housing units and group quarters:

Housing Units

- Independent living and assisted living
- Commercially-managed apartments

Nonresidential, commercial buildings

- Motels/hotels

Group Quarters

- Nursing home, nursing facility, or memory care, or other facilities described as having a number of beds, rather than a number of units
- Homeless shelter facility
- Dormitory
- College-owned apartments occupied by 1 or more unrelated students

A longer list of types of group quarters can be found on Census's website: https://www2.census.gov/programs-surveys/acs/tech_docs/group_definitions/2020GQ_Definitions.pdf

Senior Housing Campus

There are some gray area situations. In fact, both housing units and group quarters can exist under the same roof. Documentation from the Census includes the following:

“Housing for the Older Population... Housing units and group quarters may coexist under the same entity or organization and in some situations actually share the same structure. An assisted living facility complex may have a skilled nursing floor or wing that meets the definition of a nursing facility and is, therefore, a group quarters, while the rest of the living quarters in the facility are considered to be housing units. Congregate care facilities and continuing care retirement communities often consist of several different types of living quarters, with varying services and levels of care. Some of the living quarters in these facilities and communities are considered to be housing units and some are considered to be group quarters, depending on which definition they meet.” (Source: 2020 Census of Population and Housing: Technical Documentation, page B-10. https://www2.census.gov/programs-surveys/decennial/2020/technical-documentation/complete-tech-docs/summary-file/2020Census_PL94_171Redistricting_NationalTechDoc.pdf)

Housing when occupants do not have usual residence

Finally, there is a very small number of housing units that show up in decennial census counts, but that local governments do not normally consider as housing units. *For Census purposes, these situations only count when the occupants do not have any other usual residence:*

- People paying for housing in week-to-week or month-to-month motel/hotel rooms: In this situation, motel/hotel rooms count as housing units for Census purposes and are categorized as multi-family housing in Census's American Community Survey. However, local governments will consider motels/hotels to be commercial establishments.
- People living in boats in marinas, tents in campgrounds, or RV parks: These “transitory situations” count as housing units for Census purposes and are categorized as “other” building types in Census's American Community Survey. However, local governments typically do not consider these situations as housing.
- People provided temporary housing, without payment, in motels/hotels or homeless shelters: These people count toward the group quarters population for Census purposes.
- People without shelter, or who shelter in cars, tents, or makeshift shelters outside of formal campgrounds or RV parks: These people count toward the group quarters population for Census purposes. Their shelters are not otherwise considered housing.
- Boats, RVs, tents, and similar shelter that no one is using as a usual residence are not considered housing.

This Fact Sheet has been updated to reflect 2020 Census definitions:

https://www2.census.gov/programs-surveys/decennial/2020/technical-documentation/complete-tech-docs/summary-file/2020Census_PL94_171Redistricting_NationalTechDoc.pdf (Appendix B)

If you have any questions or would like additional information, please contact Todd Graham, Principal Demographer, todd.graham@metc.state.mn.us or 651-602-1322.

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