

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 *housing unit* is any single-family residential structure (like a house or a manufactured home) **or** any distinct unit in a multi-unit building where the unit provides privacy for the occupants, **and** the unit has access to the outside, **and** occupants can come-and-go as they wish (not a custodial facility), **and** occupancy is independent of any institutional affiliation.
- 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.

Group Quarters

There are residential situations that do not meet all of the four criteria listed above for housing units. The Census Bureau refers to these other residential situations as *group quarters*.

- A *group quarters* facility is one that houses multiple, unrelated people, where occupants do not have privacy, **or** there is controlled access to entering/leaving, **or** it's a facility that houses only an institutional or service-receiving population. A number of specific cases are listed below.
- In the decennial census, group quarters statistics also include makeshift shelters, or places without shelter, where homeless people are found to sleep.

A simple housing unit test

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

- A housing unit provides privacy for the occupants,
- **and** the unit has access to the outside without having to pass through others' residential space,
- **and** occupants can come-and-go as they wish (not a custodial facility),
- **and** occupancy is independent of any institutional affiliation (housing not restricted to an institution's population).

Is this a housing unit?

- **College dorm room:** A college dorm room meets the first three criteria – but because of the 4th criteria, a college dorm room is a group quarters facility.
- **Single Room Occupancy (SRO):** A room in a month-to-month SRO building probably meets all 4 criteria. A SRO room is 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 have to rely on short-hand labels. If all we have is a label, then the following are usually identified as housing units and group quarters:

Housing Units

- Independent living
- Assisted living
- Commercially-managed apartments

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/2018GQ_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: 2010 Census of Population and Housing: Technical Documentation, Pg. B-20)

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 living in week-to-week or month-to-month motels/hotels: These 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, RV parks, or temporary carnival sites: 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 without shelter, or who shelter in cars, tents, or makeshift shelters *outside* of formal campgrounds: These people count toward the group quarters population in the decennial census. Their shelters are not considered housing by Census Bureau

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.

August 2020