



## How do households describe where they live?

By Shawn Bucholtz, *The Edge*, August 6, 2020

“Although most existing federal definitions of ‘urban’ and ‘rural’ do not include a ‘suburban’ category, data from HUD and the U.S. Census Bureau (Census) confirm what researchers have long believed: [most Americans live in the suburbs](#).”

“According to [data](#) HUD and Census collected in the 2017 American Housing Survey (AHS), 52 percent of U.S. households describe their neighborhood as suburban, 27 percent describe their neighborhood as urban, and 21 percent describe their neighborhood as rural. The 2017 AHS data also show that federal definitions accurately distinguish urban neighborhoods from rural areas while underscoring the need for an official definition of suburban.”

“The 2017 AHS included a question asking respondents if they would describe their neighborhood as urban, suburban, or rural. HUD wanted to replicate the results of a 2015 survey conducted by economist Jed Kolko and colleagues at the online real estate company Trulia, which asked 2,000 people the same question.”

“The AHS data show that, when distinguishing urban from rural areas, definitions of urbanization from both the Census Urbanized Areas and the Office of Management and Budget’s (OMB’s) metropolitan and micropolitan statistical areas closely match respondents’ perceptions.”

“At the same time, the 2017 AHS data reveal that existing definitions obscure the fact that most Americans live in suburbs.”

“AHS neighborhood description data show that even central cities — which are presumed to be the most urban part of metropolitan areas — are quite suburban.”

“When it comes to individual Urbanized Areas or metropolitan statistical areas — including Los Angeles, Chicago, Dallas-Fort Worth, Houston, and others — the data tell the same story: these areas, with few exceptions, are majority suburban. In fact, all the large metropolitan areas that the AHS surveys are majority suburban.”

HUD created two products using this data: 1) [Neighborhood Study Summary Tables Workbook](#), enabling users to compare various definitions of urban, suburban, and rural to survey respondents’ descriptions of their neighborhoods; and 2) the Urbanization Perceptions Small Area Index ([UPSAI](#)), a nationwide small area urbanization classification product based on people’s descriptions of their neighborhood.

For more information, see the webinar, [“How Do Households Describe Where They Live?”](#)

Read the full message from Shawn Bucholtz, Director of PD&R’s Housing and Demographic



Analysis Division, [here](#).

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**[Return to the September issue of Northern News here.](#)**