

Selection of Geographical Codes for Use in the Workforce Information Database

The selection of the area codes used in the Workforce Information Database GEOG and SUBGEOG tables is an individual state decision. For example, North Carolina uses both state developed county codes as well as the federal FIPS codes for area identifiers for various purposes. Since county level geography represents an instance where the fixed geo-political unit equates to the fixed definition of the federal statistical unit, the FIPS codes were used for the area identifier in North Carolina's Workforce Information Database. The next level of geography where this fixed political-to-statistical definitional conformity occurs is the state level, making state FIPS the logical identifier. If an Workforce Information Database is to include data from multiple states (i.e., Workforce Information Employer Database), utilization of the state FIPS code becomes critical.

MSAs are, by definition, statistical areas that are subject to change in number, composition and even definition by Office of Management and Budget with every decennial census. Existing MSAs do not change FIPS code regardless of content or definitional changes. For example, the 1980 census geographical definition of the Asheville, NC MSA (FIPS 480) included only Buncombe County, NC. The 1990 census geographical definition of the Asheville, NC MSA (FIPS 480) included Buncombe County, NC and Madison County, NC. In addition, MSAs geographical definitions may (and often do) contain cross-state components. For example, the Charlotte, NC MSA contains York County, SC. This has led states to present data (in some situations) for only the in-state component of the MSA. North Carolina, for instance, chooses to produce occupational projections for only the in-state component of the Charlotte MSA. For these reasons, North Carolina uses state specific area identifiers for MSAs. This allows for the extension of an older definition to the present, the creation of historical data under the current definition and the use of state-specific definitions as in the case of Charlotte.

Any geographical codes in the Workforce Information Database, including MSA codes, may be modified as desired; however, the process for doing so is somewhat complex and the consequence for error, significant. The Workforce Information Database recommends such changes be made to a test database prior to replacement on a production database. It is important to note that the use of FIPS codes to identify MSAs brings no inherent gain in data validity, reliability or accuracy gain and introduces the need for additional care to avoid the introduction of analytical errors due to changes in content and area definitions. It is again at state decision on what type of area identifiers are used in their Workforce Information Database.

Additional definitional and area content changes arose as a result of the 2000 Census. Changes in the focus of Workforce Investment Act have resulted in similar definitional changes in the workforce community (e.g. workforce board service area definitions vs. WIRED grant definitions). In all likelihood, reauthorization of the Workforce Investment Act also will bring changes. In order to assist the states in preparation for such changes, the process for modifying area codes will be discussed in future Workforce Information Database training sessions.