

University of Idaho

General cautions about using data

I. Data are only as good as their sources

This is why most data on the [Indicators Idaho](#) website come from reputable federal sources that provide standardized data for all areas of the nation. This means that when you look at per capita income in Kootenai County, Idaho, you can compare it directly to per capita income in Bonneville County, or even Spokane County, Washington. When data are not available from federal sources (e.g. teen birth rate and infant mortality), [Indicators Idaho](#) relies on state agencies. These data cannot be compared from state to state unless it is verified that the states use identical data collection methods.

II. Data revisions and updates

Several of the data sources used for the [Indicators Idaho](#) website update their data with revised data, meaning the agency will recalculate and then re-release previously released data. This means that the numbers you see on the website may change slightly from one time to another. Indicators from the following data sources will be updated based on these revisions from time to time:

- Census Bureau - intercensal estimates only
- Bureau of Economic Analysis
- Bureau of Labor Statistics

Pay close attention to "To get the most out of this indicator" when you review each indicator's notes.

III. Definitions matter

Pay close attention to each indicator's definition. Some indicators may sound similar, but actually measure different things. For example, several agencies produce income numbers, but each collects and reports the data in a different way. The Census Bureau asks people directly about their income, while the Bureau of Economic Analysis uses data from administrative records. Likewise, several agencies produce employment numbers, but one counts number of jobs where people live, while another counts number of jobs where people work, which is not always the same place. Pay close attention to data definitions so you can be sure to interpret the numbers correctly.

IV. Missing Data

When reviewing data from the Bureau of Economic Analysis (BEA) and other sources, you may notice empty spots in some tables. Instead of a number, you will see a letter or other symbol denoting that the number was withheld for disclosure reasons. This means the data were suppressed to protect the confidentiality of information about individual businesses or school districts, etc.

UI Extension Community Data Tools

<http://www.uidaho.edu/extension/community-data-tools/toolbox>

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V. Can I get data about my city or town?

One problem with county-level data is that much of the diversity you see throughout your county does not show up in a single county-level number. Also, smaller towns in your county are not always well-represented by the county-level figures. Unfortunately, most data sources do not provide data for cities and especially not for small towns. Fortunately, the Census Bureau DOES gather and report data for places of all sizes with the American Community Survey. This is the best place to get town-level information to expand on the county-level data found on the [Indicators Idaho](#) website.