

Defining “city” and “urban”

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Global trends in urbanization raise questions about how cities are defined. An analysis of 228 countries and areas of the world by the United Nations shows that governments use different definitions, underscoring the degree to which the concept is contested, and pointing to the difficulties of gathering data in a field without standard definitions:

- > **105** countries base their city data on **administrative** criteria, usually geographic boundaries such as “city limits” (83 use this as their sole method of distinguishing urban from rural).
- > **100** countries define cities by **population size or population density** (57 use this as their sole urban criterion). However, the minimum population deemed necessary to constitute a city ranges broadly, from a low of **200** to a high of **50,000**.
- > **25** countries specify **economic** characteristics as significant, though not exclusive, in defining cities — typically, the proportion of the labour force employed in non-agricultural activities.
- > **18** countries count the availability of **urban infrastructure** in their definitions, including the presence of paved streets, water supply systems,

sewage systems or electric lighting.²

Interestingly, **25** countries provide **no definition** of “urban” at all, whereas **six** countries regard their **entire populations** as urban.³

While “city” and “urban” are often used interchangeably, they can denote different concepts. Though “city” normally refers to the statistical grouping of people in a single area, “urban” can refer to the transformation in mindset that occurs in cities. “Urban” generally denotes the altered patterns of social, economic, political and cultural interaction unique to cities that develop as a result of different kinds of employment, diversified social and political structures, and the built environment, among other factors. The 1938 characterization of “urban as a way life” by Louis Wirth continues to inform the study of the modern city and urbanization trends worldwide.⁴ ●

global urban growth.⁹ This figure will represent almost all population growth on the planet in the next quarter-century, as rural populations are expected to decline after 2015.¹⁰ However, much of this urban expansion is occurring in a context of rapid but highly inequitable economic growth. With many municipal governments already lacking the capacity to provide basic security to all urban dwellers, such rapid urbanization means that each year more and more people are living in impoverished, informal slums in and around urban areas.

Human security in urban spaces

The term “human security” has now been in widespread use for about a decade.¹¹ It emerged as a critique of approaches to the promotion of international peace and security that focused almost exclusively on the security of states and their governments. The essential idea of human security is that people rather than nation-states are the principal point of reference, and that the security of states is a means to an end rather than an end in itself. In an increasingly interdependent world, the security of people in one part of the world depends on the security of people elsewhere. International peace and security is ultimately constructed

1 For more information, see www.globalcities.ca.

2 United Nations, *Principles and Recommendations for Population and Housing Censuses, Revision 1* (New York: United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 1998) and *World Urbanization Prospects: The 2003 Revision* (New York: United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2004).

3 United Nations, *Principles and Recommendations* (1998) and *World Urbanization Prospects: The 2003 Revision* (2004).

4 Louis Wirth, “Urbanism as a Way of Life,” *American Journal of Sociology* 44 (1938) 1-24.