



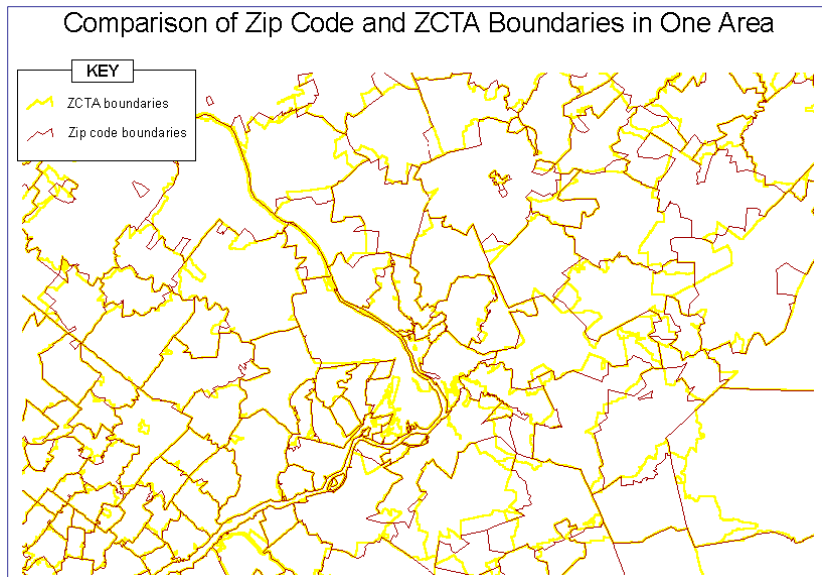
Decision Support

Systems & Services

ABOUT MAPPING ZIP CODES

In creating our maps, we are able to use boundary files both for "zip codes" and for the "ZCTAs" (Zip Code Tabulation Areas) defined for the 2000 Census. However, you should know that drawing zip code boundaries is almost as much art as science, and different sources and methodologies will produce different maps.

You see, zip codes are really just collections of mailing addresses. Most zip codes include many houses, apartment buildings and/or business locations. However, sometimes a single business has one or more zip codes all to itself, or a zip code is assigned only to a collection of post office boxes and has no true geographic meaning. So, zip codes, as defined by the U.S. Postal Service, are not always simple geographic areas that are easily mapped. However, zip codes are great ways to track and display customer and demographic information and, for this, some sort of mapping definition is required. The ZCTAs defined by the U.S. Census Bureau as of the time of the Census (April 2000) were created by assigning a zip code to each geographic Census "block" based on which zip code has the most number of households in that block. (Most census blocks are quite small, but they can be larger in rural areas with low population density.) Commercial sources of zip code boundaries usually assign a block to the zip code with the longest groups of address ranges. Each method also requires some "tidying up" of the borders. In most cases, the differences in boundary definitions are minor and even unimportant, but they can make you crazy if you don't understand the issues. The map above shows an example of the differences between boundaries created using ZCTAs and those from one commercial source (both c.2000).



So, which should you use? Well, if you are mapping Census data, or demographic information based directly on Census data, it's definitely best to use ZCTAs. (Note that not all demographic data is defined using ZCTAs, even if it uses Census data as one source -- ask!) Otherwise, using commercial definitions of zip boundaries is probably fine and these have the added advantage that most vendors update their boundary files periodically to reflect changes made by the U.S. Postal Service (e.g., when they add a new zip code).

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