



Number of Historic Places: Census Block Group

This EnviroAtlas map portrays the number of nationally recognized historic places within each U.S. Census block group. The data were compiled from the National Register of Historic Places that provides the official list of districts, sites, buildings, structures, and objects significant in American history, architecture, archaeology, engineering, and culture.

Why is the number of historic places important?

The National Historic Preservation Act (NHPA) became law in 1966 based on the premise that “the historical and cultural foundations of the nation should be preserved as a living part of our community life.” Prior to NHPA, since the 19th century, a limited number of historical sites had been created for patriotic and educational reasons to honor famous people, and to recognize great architecture.¹ Since the passage of the act, the number of candidate sites has expanded to include over 80,000 properties. More recently, historic district status has been used as a tool for urban revitalization and tourism.¹

To be considered for inclusion in the National Register of Historic Places, a property must be nominated with justifications submitted to a federal, state, or tribal preservation office. To qualify, a building site must have its original construction and integrity of location, design, and materials. It must offer educational value and be associated with a historical period or event, lives of significant people, a building style, or artistic period. Intangible values may also be important in historic designation. Natural areas may be designated if they are sacred to Native American groups or rural historic landscapes may be selected to highlight characteristics that have resulted from continued human use.²

The designation of historic districts has become an important method for revitalizing urban neighborhoods. Most research into historic preservation versus new development has shown that it is efficient and profitable to preserve historical buildings. A study of nine cities in Texas found that historic district designation increased property values in seven of the cities by 5–20%.³ Elsewhere in the U.S., expenditures from renovation have been repaid in the form of new jobs and revenue from museums, convention business, and tourism.⁴

Heritage tourism is a fast-growing segment of the tourism industry. The Travel Industry Association of America found that about 80% of U.S. adults who traveled more than 50 miles



from home in 2003 were cultural and heritage tourists.⁵ According to this study, heritage tourists spent more money and stayed longer than other types of travelers.

The intangible benefits of historic preservation include a sense of place, a feeling of historical connectivity with previous generations, civic pride, and neighborhood cohesion. Some of the benefits of residence in or accessibility to historic districts, such as positive health effects, reduction in stress, and a general sense of well-being, are similar to those provided to residents by urban trees and green space. Urban green space and historical space both provide a sense of identity through continued association with a particular place and continuity with the past, while also providing opportunities for social interaction, physical activity, education, and reflection.⁶

A challenge for planners is to integrate historic preservation into the fabric of the community while preventing it from radically changing local identity. Over time, corporate development of entertainment, shopping, and lodging facilities may change the integrity and character of the historic district. In addition, increasing property values may reduce diversity in the district by making it no longer affordable for low- and middle-income residents.^{1,3}

Recognition of the importance of historical connectivity and neighborhood cohesion grew out of criticism of past urban renewal projects that demolished ethnic and African-American neighborhoods, replacing them with commercial development or generic housing projects. More successful urban renewal projects combined selective clearance and

restoration, maintaining historical connectivity while fitting new construction into the existing community context.⁷

How can I use this information?

This map allows users to evaluate neighborhoods by numbers of historic places. The map may be compared with EnviroAtlas maps of population distribution to assess the accessibility of historic sites to various socio-economic classes. Planners may overlay number of historic sites with other built-environment metrics associated with transit-supportive land use (e.g., transit service frequency and street intersection density) to highlight areas needing improved accessibility. Analysts can identify block groups with few or no historic designations; these areas may benefit from a search for significant historic or cultural sites for preservation. Block groups containing historic sites may also be overlaid with data on environmental effects, such as air and water pollution or waste disposal, to examine possible threats to these sites.

How were the data for this map created?

The data for this map were compiled from the [National Register of Historic Places](#) maintained by the National Park Service. Each type of historical site (historical districts, sites, buildings, structures, and objects) completely within the census block group was counted using Spatial Join in ArcGIS to create a total count of all historical places. The data were also mapped for the entire U.S. at the 12-digit HUC scale.

What are the limitations of these data?

This indicator is most useful for drawing attention to regional patterns and specific neighborhoods where recreational opportunities at nationally significant historic sites are available or lacking. State and locally designated historic sites are not included in this map due to inconsistent data

availability. Summarizing and estimating various metrics across block groups may create misleading results. It is important to remember that development is not distributed evenly throughout the area of a block-group. The aerial-image base map gives an indication of the proportions of developed and undeveloped land in each census block group. A large block group may contain diverse land uses, but jobs, housing and services may be widely distributed with low accessibility (e.g., little or no public transit). In urban centers, block groups may be quite small and rather uniform in land use, even though they may be very close to a more diverse block group.

How can I access these data?

EnviroAtlas data can be viewed in the interactive map, accessed through web services, or downloaded. [National Register of Historic Places](#) data and detailed information about how the historic places are nominated may be obtained at the [National Park Service National Register](#) website.

Where can I get more information?

A selection of resources on the relationships among historic sites, city planning, and environmental quality is listed below. For additional information on data creation, access the [metadata](#) for the data layer from the drop down menu on the interactive map table of contents and click again on metadata at the bottom of the metadata summary page for more details. To ask specific questions about this data layer, please contact the [EnviroAtlas Team](#).

Acknowledgments

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Selected Publications

1. Rose, C.M. 1981. [Preservation and community: New directions in the law of historic preservation](#). *Stanford Law Review* 33:473–534.
2. National Register Bulletin. 1999. [Guidelines for evaluating and documenting rural historic landscapes](#). National Park Service. Accessed November 2019.
3. Leichenko, R.M., N.E. Coulson, and D. Listokin. 2001. [Historic preservation and residential property values: An analysis of Texas cities](#). *Urban Studies* 38(11): 1973–1987.
4. Mason, R. 2005. [Economics and historic preservation: A guide and review of the literature](#). Discussion Paper: Metropolitan Policy Program, Brookings Institution.
5. U.S. Department of Commerce. 2005. [A position paper on cultural and heritage tourism in the United States](#). Developed by the U.S. Department of Commerce and the President’s Committee on the Arts and the Humanities. Accessed November 2019.
6. Fuller, R.A., K.N. Irvine, P. Devine-Wright, P.H. Warren, and K.J. Gaston. 2007. [Psychological benefits of green space increase with biodiversity](#). *Biology Letters* 3(4):390–394.
7. Teaford, J.C. 1999. [Urban renewal and its aftermath](#). *Housing Policy Debate* 11(2):443–465.