

Making Health Visible: Social Science, the Development of Census Tracts, and the Bounding of Urban Space

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Geographers and other social scientists frequently utilize Census tracts to help map and understand the spatial distribution of urban health phenomenon. As a commonly accepted series of spatial units, Census tracts are bound up in scientific approaches to understanding urban health. This paper traces the origins and impetus of the Census tract system, setting the system in its theoretical and conceptual milieu during the 1920s and exploring how Census tracts became the default unit for understanding health phenomena in the United States. Empirically, this paper investigates the role of the University of Chicago School of Sociology in developing and operationalizing Census tracts and how the city of Chicago acted as a 'truth spot' for measuring urban health issues. In the process, this paper examines how various conceptualizations of urban space combined with ideas about health to solidify the boundary systems that we utilize today.

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