

# “Affinity Communities” of Local Communities

## Purpose

This document explains the terms and background of “Six Affinity Communities.” Each one is comprised of local communities that can be distinguished by commonalities / affinities. The research and methodology were designed to aid in service planning and delivery. We are interested in the effects of uncertainty on objectives that overlay and run-through community in a broad sense.

## Integrated Meaning of Community

The term *community* has many uses and meanings. Also, there is no single, universally agreed-upon number of *communities* in the United States. For our purposes, the meaning of community has two aspects: in one sense it a place or area where people live, work, and gather for recreation, connection, and support. The second aspect is the complex set of governmental relationships and public infrastructure networks. This aspect of community incorporates the public service systems - municipalities, counties, and school systems that serve a population group.

Counting the number of communities and understanding the affinity or commonality is necessary for our purposes. The Census Bureau can give numbers for official jurisdictions; however, our broader idea of “communities” doesn’t have a fixed count. Below is some commonly data on numbers of communities:

- **Cities, towns, and villages** – About **19,500 incorporated places** in the U.S. (according to the U.S. Census Bureau). About 4,800 have population greater than 5,000.
- **Counties and county-equivalents** – 3,143 in total. About 2,500 have a population greater than 10,000.
- **Census-defined “places”** – Includes both incorporated places and census-designated places (CDPs), totaling more than **30,000**.

- **Neighborhoods or local communities** – Not officially counted, since they are defined socially and culturally rather than by government boundaries.

## Summary of Methodology

For our purposes, we are using 7,500 as the number of total communities that have recognizable boundaries of a county and/or a municipality. The schools that are most closely aligned with the county or most prominent municipality are included. The population size threshold of 5,000 for municipalities and 10,000 for counties was selected.

By using a mix of criteria, we were able to define six categories of commonality for about 750 communities, 10% of our total. We developed a nomenclature that would make it relatively easy to articulate the “affinity” or “a-likeness” for the communities in each type or category.

## Brief Description of Affinity Communities

**Defense Base Communities:** These are communities with a significant military presence, where bases and personnel are central to the local economy and culture. The term "Defense Community" is generally understood within the context of U.S. military and government operations to describe a city, town, or region with a significant connection to a nearby military installation. This connection can be economic, cultural, or social, and it is often rooted in the presence of active-duty military personnel, veterans, and defense-related industries. The U.S. Department of Defense (DoD) and organizations like the Association of Defense Communities (ADC) use the term "Defense Community" to formally describe municipalities or regions that support the military mission and personnel.

**Town & Gown Communities:** These are cities or counties where colleges and universities play a pivotal role in shaping the local economy and

community life. The Town & Gown community generally includes the cities and counties that support a college or university that enrolls at least 5,000 undergraduate students; many retain characteristics of the classic “college town.” The student and faculty relationships, business and healthcare interactions, and special events make them distinctive from other communities.

**Gateway Communities:** These are typically communities located on the edges of metropolitan regions with populations under 350,000. Larger cities at major entry points can also qualify. They include:

- Access Counties – logistical hubs near borders, transportation centers, or cultural/historical sites, providing lodging, transportation, supplies, and visitor services.
- Exurb Counties – outer-ring areas with low housing density, strong commuting ties to urban centers, and faster population growth than rural areas, though less urbanized than suburbs.

These communities attract residents seeking more space and lower costs while maintaining access to metropolitan jobs and amenities. Not all exurbs are gateways, or all gateways exurbs; classification depends on proximity to landmarks, transport hubs, or cross-border roles.

**Coastal Citadels:** These are coastal area counties and related cities known for commerce, tourism, and urban density, often facing climate and environmental challenges. While there is no universally accepted definition for a “coastal citadel,” the term evokes imagery of a resilient, stable, and enduring community. A coastal citadel can also be more specifically described as “A geographically and socially resilient community situated on or near the Southern Atlantic or Gulf coasts, characterized by its year-round population stability, robust local economy, and enduring cultural or historical significance. These communities often prioritize sustainable

development, weather readiness, and the well-being of residents over transient economic activities tied to tourism or seasonal events.” (Coastal Citadel is distinguishable from Beach Resort Community)

**Great City Communities:** These are major urban centers with significant economic, cultural, and political influence. The Great City community is typically one that exhibits a combination of qualities and characteristics contributing to their high level of prominence, livability, and influence. Criteria for this category include: municipal population greater than 40,000 and less than 350,000, serve as engines of economic growth, foster social equity and environmental sustainability, offer resilience against economic, social, and environmental challenges. (Great City is distinguishable from Major Urban Cities)

**Consolidated Government Communities:** These communities exist where city and county governments have merged into a single entity, or become deeply connected by shared services in order to streamline operations and reduce redundancies. The term consolidated city-county refers to a consolidated jurisdiction in a state that is otherwise divided into counties A consolidated city-county and also mean an independent city – one that is not deemed by its state to be located within the boundary of any county and considered a primary administrative division of its state. A consolidated city-county may contain independent municipalities that did not merge with the rest of the county.

## Conclusion

The descriptions of community affinity should be useful as a starting point for service planning and delivery. The nature of existing communities, boundaries, and population are subject to change. Continuing research is likely to produce new understanding of existing affinities and likely lead to identification of new affinity communities. Insights from readers will be helpful.