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World Urbanization Prospects 2025

Frequently Asked Questions

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Urbanization is one of the most significant demographic shifts in human history, fundamentally altering how and where people live and build communities. For the first time, the 2025 edition of World Urbanization Prospects presents population estimates and projections using the “Degree of Urbanization” methodology. This new framework provides harmonized and comparable estimates and projections across three distinct categories along a continuum—cities, towns, and rural areas—revealing that urbanization is more widespread than national statistics often suggest. This approach offers a new lens for understanding settlement patterns and crafting integrated policies that support sustainable development in an increasingly urban world.

*The following frequently asked questions refer to the **World Urbanization Prospects 2025: Summary of Results** and datasets, prepared by the Population Division of the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UN DESA).*

I. Launch, Scope, and Updated Data Inputs

- 1. When was the World Urbanization Prospects 2025 (WUP 2025) publicly released?** The WUP 2025 revision was publicly launched in **November 2025**. Specifically, the scheduled launch date was **Tuesday, November 18, 2025, at 12:45 PM** (New York time).
- 2. How many revisions of the World Urbanization Prospects (WUP) have been produced by the UN Population Division?** The WUP 2025 is the **22nd edition** of the series. The previous one was issued in 2018.
- 3. What time periods are covered by the new estimates and projections in WUP 2025?** The WUP 2025 provides annual population estimates for the period **1950–2025** (estimates for land area and Built-up area are available for 1975–2025) and projections up to **2050**. This revision supersedes all previous urbanization-related estimates and projections published by the United Nations.
- 4. What is the scope and coverage of the WUP 2025 edition?** The WUP 2025 presents estimates and projections for **237 countries and areas** of the world. Crucially, it provides population estimates for **over 12,000 cities** with 50,000 inhabitants or more in 2025.
- 5. What new information or focus areas distinguish the WUP 2025 from previous revisions like WUP 2018?** For the first time, this edition integrates a **harmonized geospatial methodology**—the Degree of Urbanization (DEGURBA)—to measure urbanization alongside traditional national definitions. The report also features new analyses examining the **built-up area per capita** and city population density. The revision leverages extra information on recent levels and trends of urbanization derived from the results of the **2020 round of censuses**. The underlying national estimates used census data or estimates referring to 2019 or later for 155 countries and areas, providing a much richer empirical base than previous revisions.
- 6. Has the coverage of individual urban settlements been expanded in WUP 2025 compared to previous editions?** Yes, the WUP 2025 significantly **expands geographical coverage** by lowering the minimum population threshold for cities from 300,000 inhabitants (used in WUP 2018) to **50,000 inhabitants**. This increased the number of urban centres analyzed to **over 12,000** for 2025.
- 7. Who prepared the WUP 2025 report and the associated data?** The WUP 2025 report was prepared by the Population Division of the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs. The underlying data related to the Degree of Urbanization were prepared by the European Commission’s Joint Research Centre (JRC).

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8. **How are the WUP 2025 population projections related to other UN demographic products?** The data in the WUP 2025 revision are **consistent with the total populations** of countries and areas estimated and projected according to the **medium variant of the World Population Prospects 2024** (WPP 2024).

II. Core Methodological Innovations: The Degree of Urbanization (DEGURBA) Methodology

9. **What is the key innovation in the WUP 2025 revision?** The key innovation is the **full integration of new geospatial methods** through the **harmonized Degree of Urbanization (DEGURBA) methodology**. This enables measuring urbanization consistently across countries and time for settlements along the continuum of cities, towns and rural areas, alongside retaining results based on binary national definitions of urban and rural settlements.
10. **What is the Degree of Urbanization (DEGURBA) and how does it differ from traditional ways to measure urbanization?** The DEGURBA addresses the challenge that traditional estimates relied on data reported by national authorities according to **country-specific definitions**, which led to inconsistencies in international comparisons. The DEGURBA provides a **harmonized, spatially based approach** endorsed by the UN Statistical Commission in 2020 for international statistical comparisons. It provides a consistent framework to classify the entire territory of a country along a **continuum including cities, towns and rural areas** based on standardized criteria, addressing the issue that definitions of urban areas vary widely by country. The continuum enables a more nuanced understanding of human settlement patterns than the previous urban/rural binary classification.
11. **What are the three main settlement classifications defined by the Degree of Urbanization?** The DEGURBA methodology classifies the entire territory of a country into three main types of areas based on population size and density thresholds applied to 1 km² grid cells: **cities** (densely populated areas), **towns and semi-dense areas** (intermediate density areas), and **rural areas** (thinly populated areas).
12. **How does the DEGURBA specifically define a “city” within the WUP 2025 framework?** A “city” is a contiguous agglomeration of 1-km² grid cells with a density of at least **1,500 inhabitants per km²** and a total population of at least **50,000**.
13. **Does DEGURBA capture each city separately or does it also capture conurbations (multiple cities that have grown together)?** Most cities as delineated by DEGURBA are individual settlements that can easily be named. Some capture two settlements that have completely grown together, such as Brighton and Hove in the United Kingdom. Some are well-known conurbations such as the Ruhrgebiet in Germany, which includes Essen, Dortmund and Duisburg.
14. **Does DEGURBA combine too many cities into a single conurbation?** In countries where population data were only available at relatively coarse resolution and densities are generally high, these estimates may include conurbation that are too large. For example, the DEGURBA-defined city that includes Hajipur in India appears to aggregate multiple distinct cities and towns. Using finer grained population data or even better a population grid based on a geo-coded census may lead to this conurbation shrinking and turning into a multitude of individual cities and towns.
15. **How does the Degree of Urbanization method draw the line between a city and surrounding towns?** To precisely delineate a City (technically called an “Urban Centre”) from its surroundings, the DEGURBA uses a rigorous, two-stage classification process based on uniform 1 km² population grid cells. First, **clusters of these contiguous grid cells are identified using strict thresholds of high population density (at least 1,500 inhabitants per km²) and a large total population size (at least 50,000 inhabitants)**. This step ensures the classification is spatially consistent everywhere, independent of the varying shapes and sizes of national administrative or census units. Areas that meet these stringent criteria are designated as the dense core of a City. **The boundary between a City and adjacent settlements is drawn when population density drops significantly below the “City” threshold**. The surrounding areas that still feature moderate density (at least 300 inhabitants per km²) and intermediate total population sizes (at least 5,000 inhabitants) are classified as Towns and Semi-dense Areas (“Urban Clusters”). These typically represent the semi-dense suburban or peri-urban transition zones between the dense city core and sparsely populated rural areas.

16. **Does GHS-POP radically underestimate rural populations?** A recent [paper](#) 'Global gridded population datasets systematically underrepresent rural population'¹ by Láng-Ritter and others (2025) claims that all the global population grids have a large anti-rural bias. The paper, however, makes a fatal mistake in its assumptions. To verify the rural accuracy, it counts the estimated population in rural areas that at a later point in time have been covered by water due to the construction of dams. It finds almost no population in these areas before the construction of the dam, while people were living there. The paper generalizes from this observation to the entire rural domain. However, all the population grids investigated use a time-invariant water mask. In other words, all these grids by design do not allocate population to places that are today covered by water. The paper interprets the absence of population in these areas as a bias, while it is the simple and logical consequence of using a water mask, which was clearly stated in the documentation of all these population grids. In short, the claim that these grids radically underestimate rural population is completely unfounded. A reply to this paper is under review.
17. **What underlying geospatial data is the DEGURBA classification based upon?** The DEGURBA methodology is applied to **gridded population and built-up area data**, drawing on the **Global Human Settlement Layer (GHSL)** project that provides built-up surface grids (GHS-WUP-BUILT-S), population grids (GHS-WUP-POP), and settlement classification grids (GHS-WUP-DEGURBA).
18. **What complementary data products related to cities are released alongside WUP 2025?** Supplementary online resources include the multi-temporal urban centre database (**GHS-WUP-MTUC**), which integrates data from Copernicus Services, population census and global population projections (WPP 2024). In addition, tables with population, land and built-up area by DEGURBA at the national (GHS-WUP-COUNTRY) and sub-national level (GHS-WUP-DUC) are provided.
19. **How does the WUP 2025 analyze the difference between the DEGURBA results and national urban definitions?** Comparison of population estimates for urban areas according to national definitions to those for cities and towns according to the Degree of Urbanization indicates that national definitions tend to classify fewer settlements as urban, and this can lead to lower urban figures than the combined population of cities and towns. This occurs because **many settlements that meet the definition of "town" by consistent criteria of population size and density are seen and classified by countries as "rural" areas** rather than being included in their national urban population totals. This is especially true for many countries in Central and Southern Asia and in sub-Saharan Africa. In contrast, for countries in the Americas and Europe the urban figures based on DEGURBA tend to be slightly lower than those based on national definitions.
20. **Which international organizations collaborated on the development and application of the Degree of Urbanization methodology?** The methodology was jointly developed by six organizations: the **European Commission**, the **Food and Agriculture Organization**, the **United Nations Human Settlements Programme (UN-Habitat)**, the **International Labour Organization**, the **Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development**, and **The World Bank**.

III. Changes in Projection and Analysis (What is New or Different in Methods?)

21. **How are urban and rural populations estimated for each country?** The WUP 2025 estimates and projections for urban and rural populations are provided using a dual-track approach: one based on national definitions and one based on the internationally comparable Degree of Urbanization methodology.
A. Estimation based on the Degree of Urbanization (DEGURBA) Methodology: Estimates are derived from geospatial datasets, particularly the Global Human Settlement gridded population data (1 km² resolution) for 1975–2020, and projections are generated using the new CRISP (Cities and Rural Integrated Spatial Projections) model for the three DEGURBA categories: cities, towns (and semi-dense areas), and rural areas.
B. Estimation based on national definitions: In this case, the proportion of the population residing in urban areas for each country is typically estimated from the most recently available census or official population estimate. These estimates are then extrapolated to the base year (2025). The most recent national population data available were from 2019 or later for 155 countries, covering 65 per cent of the world's population. Once the proportion urban is established, the total urban population is calculated by multiplying the projected proportion urban by the total population figures from the current revision of the World Population Prospects (WPP 2024), and the rural population is the residual. The estimates and

¹ <https://www.nature.com/articles/s41467-025-56906-7>

projections were produced using an approach based on statistical structural-break detection, logistic regression, and Hermite polynomial interpolation, as explained in the methodological report (forthcoming).

- 22. How is “urban” defined in WUP 2025?** The definition of “urban” relies on the two parallel methodologies, leading to dual definitions: **A. “Urban” based on the Degree of Urbanization (DEGURBA) Methodology (Harmonized Definition):** The DEGURBA classifies the entire territory along an urban-rural continuum, resulting in three main classes (Level 1): cities, towns and semi-dense areas and rural areas. In the context of the DEGURBA, the concept of the “urban domain” or “urban areas” generally refers to the combination of cities plus towns and semi-dense areas, but the use of the three classes is recommended instead because it is more informative than a simple urban-rural dichotomy. **B. “Urban” based on National Definitions:** the definitions are generally those used by national statistical offices in carrying out the latest available census. These national definitions vary widely based on different criteria like administrative status, population size, population density thresholds, predominant economic activity, and urban characteristics. When the definition used in the latest census was not the same as in previous censuses, the earlier data were adjusted whenever possible so as to maintain consistency. In cases where adjustments were made, that information is included in the sources listed online. United Nations estimates and projections are based, to the extent possible, on actual enumerations. In some cases, however, it was necessary to incorporate other estimates of urban population size. When that is done, the sources of data indicate so.
- 23. How has the methodology for projecting urbanization based on *national definitions* changed in WUP 2025?** A **new, more robust projection method** has been implemented for national urban definitions, utilizing a **segmented framework with weighted logistic regression for all observations**. This contrasts with earlier projection methods, which relied on the latest observed urban-rural growth differences and assumed convergence toward a global norm.
- 24. What model is used for projecting the *geospatial* (DEGURBA) population data?** The WUP 2025 projections for the Degree of Urbanization utilize the **CRISP (Cities and Rural Integrated Spatial Projections) model**, which links population shifts to built-up area growth using universal rules and disaggregates national-level population estimates to a high-resolution grid.
- 25. Previous UN city projections were sometimes criticized for having an upward bias. How does this new methodology address forecast accuracy?** Previous projections sometimes displayed a tendency toward **upward bias**. The upward bias in previous projections was due to the reliance on a global model of urbanization that imposed high rates of urban growth onto many developing countries regardless of their stage of urbanization. This was often exacerbated by relying on widely inconsistent national definitions of “urban” and incorrectly counting population gains from expanding city boundaries (reclassification) as migratory growth, thereby inflating projected growth rates. The new DEGURBA projection methodology grounds instead its projections in physical growth using the CRISP model, and relies on a bottom-up approach starting at the grid cell level, with urbanization trends emerging from a gravity model reflecting spatial attractiveness and surrounding contexts, rather than relying on predefined national trends. It also ensures consistency at the national level by rescaling projections to match the **World Population Prospects 2024 (WPP 2024)** national total population.
- 26. What new demographic measures are included in WUP 2025, enabled by the geospatial data?** The WUP 2025 uses built-up area data to introduce **new analyses** examining the **expansion of human settlements**, including levels and trends in the **built-up area per capita** and **city population density**.
- 27. What happens when a country’s historical urban definition changes?** Historically, WUP faced challenges due to changes in official definitions. These definitions typically come from national statistical offices and are based on the most recent census. If the definition used in the latest census differs from earlier ones, previous data are adjusted when possible to ensure consistency. Any such adjustments are noted in the sources available online. An attempt was also made to use national definitions within a statistical model to improve long-term projections. However, this method did not produce consistent or meaningful results.

IV. Key Demographic Results and Comparisons

28. **What major global shift in population distribution did the WUP 2025 confirm using the DEGURBA classification?** Today, **more people live in cities than either in towns or in rural areas**. City dwellers overtook rural dwellers by the mid-1970s, and the collective population of cities surpassed that of towns in 1996.
29. **Is the rate of global urban growth accelerating or slowing according to the new DEGURBA analysis?** The analysis suggests that fast-paced global growth in city population **is behind us** and that a future slowdown is anticipated across the urban-rural continuum. Globally, the share of the population living in cities grew from 20 to 45 per cent, or from 43 to 58 per cent when combined with the share living in dense towns. These figures are expected to grow to 48 per cent living in cities, or to 61 per cent when combining cities and dense towns.
30. **How does the DEGURBA framework change the global count and ranking of megacities?** The number of megacities (10 million inhabitants or more) has **quadrupled** from only 8 in 1975 to **33 in 2025**. The share of the world's population residing in megacities is nearly 8 per cent.
31. **What are the top three most populous cities in 2025 according to the harmonized DEGURBA definition, and how does this ranking differ from WUP 2018 based on national definitions?** According to the harmonized DEGURBA definition, **Jakarta, Indonesia** (42 million), is the world's most populous city in 2025, followed by **Dhaka, Bangladesh** (37 million), and **Tōkyō (Tokyo), Japan** (33.4 million). This is a significant difference from WUP 2018, where Tokyo was ranked 1st and Jakarta was ranked 30th based on country-specific definitions.
32. **Which regions account for the most rapidly growing cities globally?** Of the approximately 400 cities that grew faster than 4 per cent per year between 2015 and 2025, **one third were in Sub-Saharan Africa** and another **quarter were in Central and Southern Asia**.
33. **Where is most of the new city population growth concentrated (in existing vs. new settlements)?** Between 2000 and 2025, **more than three quarters** of the 1.3 billion new city residents lived in localities already classified as cities in 2000. However, **newly emerging cities** (towns that grow to become cities) are expected to account for a slightly larger share of growth in the future: **28 per cent during 2025–2050** compared to 23 per cent during 2000–2025.
34. **What is the WUP 2025 observation regarding shrinking cities?** **More than 3,000 cities experienced population decline** between 2015 and 2025, four fifths of which had fewer than 250,000 inhabitants. Notably, the megacity **Mexico City** and the large Chinese city of **Chengdu** also experienced population decline during this period.
35. **What is the overall observation regarding the pace of physical urban expansion versus population growth?** In almost all regions and across settlement types (cities, towns, and rural areas), the expansion of **built-up areas has outpaced population growth**.
36. **What is the significance of “towns and semi-dense areas” highlighted by the DEGURBA for policy planning?** The application of the DEGURBA has underscored the **significant role of towns** as human settlements, which can be obscured when populations are classified according to a strict urban-rural dichotomy. This finding highlights that towns require dedicated attention and resources in national urban policies, and regional development strategies must strengthen linkages between towns, cities, and rural areas.
37. **How does WUP 2025 address the challenges of unplanned urbanization, like informal settlements?** The report explicitly notes that **informal settlements (slums)**, which house **over 1 billion people globally**,² epitomize the challenges of unplanned urban growth and inadequate policy response. Case studies from Colombia and Kenya are used to illustrate policy implications for slum upgrading in line with SDG target 11.1.

² UN-Habitat, ed. (2022). *Envisaging the Future of Cities*. World cities report. UN-Habitat. Nairobi, Kenya.

V. Policy Implications and Data Utilization

38. **What region has the largest difference between urban populations based on national definitions and the DEGURBA?** In Central and Southern Asia (e.g., India, Pakistan, Bangladesh), the national urban classification is often **restricted to the population living in cities** (as defined by the DEGURBA) and **excludes large populations living in towns and semi-dense areas**. This means that relying solely on national definitions may lead to the **underestimation or incomplete representation of urban transformation**.
39. **What implications does the difference between DEGURBA and national definitions have for understanding urbanization and economic growth?** When using **national definitions**, there is often an observed correlation between the proportion urban and national income. However, when similar analyses are performed using the **Degree of Urbanization approach**, the association between the proportion of the population in cities and the level of economic development is **far less evident**.
40. **How does the WUP 2025 support the international sustainable development agenda?** The WUP 2025 estimates and projections are an important resource for advancing progress toward achieving the **Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)** and the **New Urban Agenda**. The data can aid Governments in monitoring settlement patterns and designing targeted interventions that foster inclusive, safe, resilient, and sustainable urban development (SDG 11). In particular, the newly available data on Built-up areas can be used to compute indicator 11.3.1, ratio of land consumption rate to population growth rate.
41. **How is the United Nations supporting countries in adopting the Degree of Urbanization methodology?** Support from the European Commission includes a **detailed technical manual³, free software tools⁴, data⁵, and online training courses⁶**. UN-Habitat has organized multi-day in-person workshops, and various UN bodies (UNFPA, UN Statistics Division, OECD) are collaborating to support the implementation of the DEGURBA in numerous countries, complementing the efforts of the European Commission.
42. **What is the Population Division making publicly available for the WUP 2025 launch?** The Population Division will provide various supplementary online resources, including **statistical tables** for DEGURBA results and national definitions, an **interactive data portal** for queries and visualization, and detailed regional and country profiles. The European Commission's Joint Research Centre will provide **GIS datasets and maps⁷**, including the **GHS multi-temporal urban centre Database (GHS-WUP-MTUC)**, and further technical details and materials related to the **Global Human Settlement Layer (GHSL) project** and Degree of Urbanization methodology are available from the [JRC Publications Repository - Introducing the CRISP model to downscale future population projections](https://publications.jrc.ec.europa.eu/repository/handle/JRC143916).⁸ The WUP 2025 methodological report will become available soon after the launch.
43. **What is the official distribution policy for the World Urbanization Prospects (WUP) data?** The contents of the WUP report and its associated data are published under the Creative Commons license CC BY 3.0 IGO (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/3.0/igo/>). Under this license, users are free to share the material (copy and redistribute it in any medium or format) and adapt it (remix, transform, and build upon the material). This permission applies to any purpose, even commercially. The primary requirement is **Attribution**. You must properly credit the source, provide a link to the license, and indicate if any changes were made to the material. A suggested citation provided for the *World Urbanization Prospects 2025* data is: United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division (2025). *World Urbanization Prospects 2025, Online Data*. <https://population.un.org/wup/>. You should ensure that the way you attribute the work does not suggest that the license holder (United Nations) endorses you or your specific use. No additional permission is required beyond providing proper credit for the source of the information used.

³ https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Applying_the_degree_of_urbanisation_manual&oldid=572332

⁴ <https://human-settlement.emergency.copernicus.eu/tools.php>

⁵ <https://human-settlement.emergency.copernicus.eu/GHSLWeGenerateData.php>

⁶ <https://human-settlement.emergency.copernicus.eu/GHSLCapacityTraining.php>

⁷ https://human-settlement.emergency.copernicus.eu/ghs_wup2025.php

⁸ <https://publications.jrc.ec.europa.eu/repository/handle/JRC143916>