Commentary: Improving Housing Policy with Neighborhood Data

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Abstract

This volume demonstrates many past and potential applications of administrative data that inform and change housing policy. We identify three areas to enhance the use of local administrative data based on our experiences from the National Neighborhood Indicators Partnership: 1) collaborating with residents and community organizations to inform research questions and findings; 2) improving infrastructure around court records, zoning, and parcel data; and 3) integrating data across sectors, such as health, housing, education, and others. With cross-sector collaboration and investments in building community data capacity, researchers, advocates, foundations, the private sector, and governments at all levels can play a role in improving the availability and use of administrative data to inform housing policy to ensure all neighborhoods are places where people can thrive.

Introduction

In the 1990s, organizations in several communities, including the Center on Poverty and Community Development at Case Western Reserve University in Cleveland, developed an innovative approach to tracking changes at the neighborhood level using a variety of administrative data sources for the purpose of informing community action (Kingsley, Coulton, and Pettit, 2014).[1] These data provided more timely and granular information, allowing users to explore differences in trends across neighborhoods and develop a shared understanding of community conditions across sectors. The organizations came together with the Urban Institute to form the National Neighborhood Indicators Partnership (NNIP), which shares practices to accelerate progress on the ground and spread its approach to new communities. Since its formation, NNIP has specialized in

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[1] Coulton (2008) cataloged a number of state and local administrative data sources that can be used for neighborhood-level indicators.

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transforming local administrative data sources and helping local actors use the data to support their own priorities so that all neighborhoods are places where people can thrive.

The NNIP network has elevated its collective experience from the local partners to share insights nationally on programs and policy for housing. Among other projects, it has worked with parcel data to support government and nonprofit decisionmaking, layered many data sources to inform neighborhood stabilization, combined data to understand the effects of foreclosures on children and schools, and used mixed methods to explore displacement risk in recovering housing markets (Federal Reserve, 2011; Kingsley and Pettit, 2007; Pettit, Cohen, and Levy, 2019; Pettit and Comey, 2012). This issue of *Cityscape* demonstrates the range of housing policy issues that people can address by analyzing administrative data—including resident health, the impacts of flooding, investor speculation, displacement pressures on unsubsidized housing stock, evictions, and tenant outcomes.

This essay focuses on three areas in which the field can improve access and application of administrative data: (1) collaborating with residents and community organizations to inform research to advance more inclusive policies, (2) improving data infrastructure, and (3) continuing to innovate with data integration for cross-sector insights.

Collaborating with Residents and Community Organizations

A great deal of administrative data exist related to housing, and this volume demonstrates its application to inform housing policy. The field now needs to increase collaboration with residents and community organizations at all stages of the research process. Doing so can improve the research by ensuring that the focus and results are salient for community-driven priorities and presented in the format needed for advocacy. Such efforts can help put information into the hands of residents and communities historically marginalized from decisionmaking and enable them to advocate for the changes they seek.

NNIP's cross-site project, *Turning the Corner*, was formed after community organizations in recovering housing markets expressed concerns about displacement risk. In the resulting report, Pettit, Cohen, and Levy (2019) documented that a mixed methods approach involving analysis of quantitative data (including administrative data), interviews, and focus groups helped lift up a variety of perspectives, including those of renters and homeowners, long-term residents, newcomers, and people of different racial and ethnic backgrounds. Residents provided important insights for understanding the changes seen in quantitative data and helped researchers articulate their implications.

In "Assessing How Gentrification- and Disinvestment-Related Market Pressures Drive the Loss of Small Multi-Unit Housing in Chicago Neighborhoods," the team at DePaul University's Institute for Housing Studies (IHS) documented their analysis of parcel and sales data of two- to four-unit buildings in Chicago (Duda, Smith, and Jiao, 2024). The team worked closely with community organizations to understand their concerns about these properties and helped quantify what has been happening since the early 2010s. Community organizations raised concerns about displacement risk for tenants living in this largely unsubsidized affordable housing stock, first from foreclosures and then later from gentrification pressure around The 606 trail. IHS helped the

organizations document the loss of this housing stock and worked with the Chicago Department of Housing as they formulated policies to reduce displacement (Burton, 2021). Based on these efforts, the Chicago City Council passed anti-deconversion ordinances in 2021 for two neighborhoods with increased displacement risk to prevent this stock from being converted into single-family houses. IHS collaborated with a coalition of community organizations, led by Elevated Chicago, to advocate for the Connected Communities Ordinance, which was passed by the Council in 2022 to limit deconversion in two- to four-unit buildings in markets with displacement pressure near transit and bring equitable transit-oriented development policies into the city's zoning code (Burton, 2023).

Although policy researchers are increasingly collaborating with residents and community organizations, more can be done to center residents with lived experience and co-lead research with community members. NNIP articulated several goals for improving the use of data to advance racial equity for its members and to acknowledge and address systemic harms (NNIP, 2021). These goals range from collaborating with residents on research projects to using data to focus on systems and highlighting assets of people and communities. Torres Rodríguez, et al. (2023) also offer guidance for quantitative researchers to incorporate community-engaged methods, which will require researchers to develop new skills and awareness. Doing so will improve the quality of the analyses of housing markets and conditions, which is critical as advocates, practitioners, and policymakers use them to set priorities and plan for action. More examples in a variety of contexts can help to strengthen the methods and result in nuanced findings amongst academics and policymakers.

Improving Data Infrastructure

Although tremendous improvements in the availability of housing data have occurred since NNIP formed in the mid-1990s, and the authors in this issue of *Cityscape* document the utility of these data for policy analysis, certain types of administrative data—namely court records, zoning data, and parcel data—remain very difficult to access and use within a jurisdiction and limit the potential for research and analysis.

Administrative court records are key to understanding the patterns and processes of civil legal actions like eviction and foreclosures, as illustrated by the article from Ellen, Lochhead, and O'Regan on evictions by property type in New York City. However, electronic court records are not universally available, and even when they are, often the most detailed (and relevant) information on causes and outcomes is in scanned images of documents uploaded to the docket records that are not machine readable, making the information unsearchable and hindering analysis. Pioneering efforts like that of Legal Services Corporation's Civil Court Data Initiative have scraped court records to facilitate their use in eviction tracking. Thomas et al. also suggest an approach using natural language processing to identify tenants' names and addresses from the images of court filings and digitizing the text for analysis and action. This could be scaled to other jurisdictions and potentially expanded to extract additional information about the cases from the images.

Improvements in new methods, technology, and collaborations are promising ways to fill in the civil justice information gaps in the short term and should be expanded. As an example, the Civil Justice Data Commons is a repository for civil legal data gathered from courts, legal service

providers, and other civil law institutions available to researchers on a secure data platform (Georgetown Law, n.d.). However, legal decisions or explicit legislation may be needed to protect other stopgap data collection measures like scraping court websites (ACLU, 2023). Longer-term progress will require dedicated funding and technical assistance programs from state and federal governments to modernize the court data systems in ways that support transparency, data access, and policy analysis.

Although shapefiles are often available for the land uses and zones in a jurisdiction's zoning code, interpreting the code itself to understand the potential for new development and density has required manual review and coding. Early efforts have been made to pilot automating the collection of zoning data (Axelrod, Lo, and Bronin, 2023), and a group of cross-discipline researchers collaborating on the National Zoning Atlas housed at the Cornell University Legal Constructs Lab are working to digitize roughly 30,000 U.S. zoning codes (Cornell University, n.d.). The Atlas's research collaborators at the Urban Institute have been experimenting to leverage machine learning, along with surveys and manual review, to unlock zoning data for research and policy (Urban Institute, n.d.). The researchers' sector-spanning efforts merit investments in this key local policy lever, which can be used to expand or deter the supply and types of housing.

Despite being used often by NNIP partners and many of the authors in this issue of *Cityscape*, the accessibility of parcel data varies considerably across jurisdictions. In their study of the feasibility of a national parcel database, Abt Associates and Fairview Industries (2013) document that, although most counties' parcel data were publicly available, some counties charged fees or did not have the capacity to engage with the data request. Hopefully, a decade later, more jurisdictions have publicly available data, although we expect standardization across them remain a challenge and know that several NNIP partner cities require fees or the negotiation of data use agreements for parcel data and sales transactions. Small fees, even under $2,000, could be prohibitive for many nonprofits and community-based organizations.

In the case of parcel data, private, proprietary sources have arisen to fill some public-sector gaps—offering data for thousands of counties, making them particularly valuable sources for cross-city analysis. However, several barriers to their use exist, including cost, restrictions on use, and proprietary methodologies used to standardize the data or create indicators. The first barrier limits who can access the data and likely increases existing inequities in access to data. Restrictions on use are problematic because they typically limit the granularity of the information that can be shared publicly or even privately with a third party—which may be less of a concern for policy research but more of a concern for those intending to use data for planning, community investment, and collaborating with residents and community-based organizations. Proprietary methodologies can make it more difficult for the analyst to understand the underlying data quality and the biases of the data or indicators.

The civic sector can play a role in helping make proprietary data sources available in aggregated formats and tools like the Eviction Lab's ground-breaking data release in 2017. However, for jurisdictions that sell their assessor's and/or sales files exclusively to private firms, local researchers and advocates will need to organize to make the case for the public benefit of open data and press

for new state and local policies that mandate the data be provided in an accessible format free of charge or at a reasonable cost.

Continuing Innovation with Data Integration

NNIP was founded on the belief that neighborhoods are important for equity because the places where people live affect their health, security, education, and economic success. Housing policy outcomes are affected by all these issues as well. Integrating data across issue areas helps us understand how these issues intersect and creates the potential for new collaborations across sectors for change. Integrating health and housing data might inspire a healthcare network to invest in affordable housing (Kaiser Permanente Insider, 2021) or school districts to understand the impact of housing mobility and affordability on student absenteeism (Deitrick et al., 2015).

In Cleveland, our NNIP partner at the Center on Poverty and Community Development at Case Western Reserve University (CWRU) matched its integrated data system containing 35 administrative data sources, CHILD, with their integrated property data in NEO CANDO to explore the effect living in distressed properties had on school readiness. Coulton, et al. (2016b) found living in poor-quality housing units or units that are tax-delinquent, owned by speculators, or in foreclosure can lead to lower literacy scores for kindergartners, creating achievement gaps before entering school. Living in such homes is associated with a high risk of elevated blood lead levels, child maltreatment, and residential instability, which all influence literacy scores (Coulton, et al., 2016a). The study found that living near distressed housing is also problematic, affecting children's ability to be healthy and ready to succeed. Kindergartners who lived within 500 feet of distressed properties had lower literacy scores than those living farther away. These findings prompted the City of Cleveland to take a proactive approach to addressing lead exposure by developing a rental registry and requiring inspections. The city also prompted education and early childhood officials to take more holistic views of school readiness and child health that incorporate understanding of the housing and neighborhoods where children live (Hendey, 2018). In this issue of *Cityscape*, the CWRU team continues their efforts to help local stakeholders use data to address lead exposure in Cleveland.

Systems like CHILD and NEO CANDO (CWRU, n.d.) are not built overnight, but they serve as a demonstration of the value of data integration to inform housing policy and connect it to outcomes in other domains that could help bring attention and resources to increase the availability of safe, affordable housing and improve outcomes for children and families. Actionable Intelligence for Social Policy is one organization helping states and other entities overcome the legal and political hurdles to building equitable integrated data systems through peer learning, technical assistance, and documentation of the payoff of these systems. State, federal, and local government investments can accelerate the spread of this advanced data infrastructure by enacting enabling legislation where needed and funding the development and maintenance of integrated data systems. Integrated data efforts are also often centered in service and people-focused agencies, so the field needs a continual reminder of the importance of housing quality and location to people's opportunity and wellbeing to justify the effort of collecting regular address information (Hendey, 2016).

Conclusion

A critical component of expanding the use of administrative data to improve housing policy is to ensure that all communities have the capacity to use data—that is, people living there can access and use data to inform efforts to understand and improve outcomes where they live (Hendey, et al. 2020). "People" refers to everyone—residents, philanthropists, and those in governments, nonprofits, or the private sector—and expanding the use of data can be done in a variety of ways (Hendey and Pettit, 2021). This capacity is not held equitably; historically, people of color and those with low incomes have had fewer opportunities to access data and build skills to use data to advocate for the community changes they seek.

Since the founding of NNIP in the mid-1990s, the field has made remarkable gains in community data capacity and in the other areas discussed in this essay—community-engaged research, data infrastructure, and integrated data. With coordinated efforts, researchers, advocates, foundations, the private sector, and governments at all levels can play a role in improving the availability and use of administrative data related to housing to ensure all neighborhoods are places where people can thrive.

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