

The American Housing Survey From a Cross-National Perspective

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In all developed economies, housing is an important part of the economy, a major determinant of individual and community well-being, and a dominant part of the urban landscape. Across time periods and international boundaries, real and pressing questions on housing are open for public policy, research, and community debate. The links between the ongoing economic downturn in most developed nations and the subprime mortgage market underline the significance of housing in the contemporary era. The articles in this *Cityscape* symposium highlight both the strength of U.S.-based research and the richness of data available to those investigating a range of housing-related issues. The wealth of articles in this symposium—ranging from disability and housing through to energy costs, the quality of the dwelling stock, housing vouchers, and affordability—serves as testimony to the value of good-quality research infrastructure such as the American Housing Survey (AHS).

The AHS, from an Australian perspective, is a remarkable research asset. It provides a depth and range of data that informs both the fundamental understanding of housing markets and the development of better policy. The AHS is a substantial data collection exercise, both with respect to the range of questions asked and the sample size. The data enable researchers to perform a detailed analysis of issues that would remain unexamined in the data's absence and also provide confidence in the statistical significance of the outcomes of the analysis.

Governments around the globe have embraced evidence-based policymaking efforts and increasingly look to economic modeling and other analyses to identify solutions to many of the intractable problems that confront their direct societies and society at large. In Australia, issues of housing affordability and support for people with disabilities have attracted recent investment from the Australian government. Housing affordability has become a pressing issue in Australia since 2000, because housing demand has far outstripped supply, and this state of market imbalance is expected to continue for decades (Commonwealth of Australia, 2010). In response, the Australian government has invested substantially in social housing and introduced a range of measures to reduce homelessness. At the same time, the government has recently signaled its intention to consider a National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) that would cover all Australians who acquire, or are born

with, a significant disability (Productivity Commission, 2011). The available evidence indicates important relationships among disability, housing costs, and homelessness (Beer and Faulkner, 2011)—but, in the absence of a data set of the quality and scope of the AHS, it is impossible to estimate precisely how NDIS will interact with existing programs and policies and in what ways such an initiative will affect the housing market. To date, Australia’s understanding of the relationships and connections between all dimensions of housing and people with disabilities has been partial, and the modeling of policy outcomes has been patchy and incomplete. The quality of public debate and policy development has consequently been lessened.

From our perspective, one key feature of the articles in this symposium and of the data collected within the AHS is the inclusion of information on the quality of housing. Australia lacks a substantial national collection of data pertaining to dwelling quality and, although specific-purpose surveys allow for the analysis of the relationship between housing and health for Indigenous Australians, the effect of Australia’s housing stock on the wider population remains largely unknown (Baker, 2007). A far stronger contemporary evidence base exists in the United States and is reflected in this collection of articles. As Emrath and Taylor (2012) note, problems of high housing costs relative to income are more widespread than the challenges of poor-quality housing, but, as with Australia, these challenges can have significant effects on the well-being of a person or community.

The capacity for longitudinal analysis is, from the perspective of Australian researchers, a second key feature of the AHS. Some dimensions of the housing market can be understood only through a longitudinal analysis and, unfortunately, no substantial longitudinal data sets exist for the Australian housing market. Microsimulation techniques have been used in a number of instances (Nepal et al., 2008), but they do not provide the depth and surety of insight available through longitudinal analysis. Unfortunately, the prospect of establishing a similar survey to the AHS in Australia seems slim in the foreseeable future because of the costs involved and the strong concerns about privacy that exist in Australia.

Finally, it is worth reflecting on the fact that the AHS is conducted every 2 years and has been a feature of the housing research landscape in the United States since the early 1970s. The ability to have access to such a detailed, high-quality data set on an ongoing basis must be of great benefit to U.S.-based researchers and policymakers. The data allow for both ongoing studies of topics of enduring interest and investigation of emerging issues. There are strong grounds, therefore, for U.S.-based researchers to value the AHS, while those of us who work outside the United States can only look on with envy.

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