Using Federal Data Sources for Housing Advocacy

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Housing advocates have long used federal data to measure, visualize, and communicate their communities' unmet housing needs to inform policy at the national, state, and local levels. Data from the American Community Survey (ACS), for example, allow us to quantify the critical housing shortage for extremely low-income renters and the racial disparities in housing affordability. HUD's _Picture of Subsidized Households_, meanwhile, shows the quantity and geographic distribution of HUD-subsidized housing. Nonprofit organizations also rely on federal data to create accessible third-party public data platforms, like the _National Housing Preservation Database_.

The following section provides a brief overview of federal data sources for housing advocacy. Members of Congress often threaten to cut financial resources for data collection and dissemination, making it imperative that advocates and organizations promote and protect these programs.

HOUSING NEED, SUPPLY, AND QUALITY

American Community Survey (ACS)

See https://www.census.gov/programs-surveys/acs/ and https://data.census.gov/cedsci/.

A series of tutorials on obtaining and using ACS data is available at https://www.census.gov/programs-surveys/acs/guidance/training-presentations.html.

The ACS is a nationwide mandatory survey of approximately 3.5 million addresses conducted by the U.S. Census Bureau. The survey is distributed on a rolling basis, with approximately 295,000 housing units surveyed each month. Annual data provide timely information on the demographic, economic, and housing characteristics of the nation, each state, the District of Columbia, and other jurisdictions with at least 65,000 residents.

The sample size from one year of ACS data is not large enough to draw annual estimates for smaller populations. To produce estimates for smaller areas, the Census Bureau combines multiple years of ACS data. Five-year ACS data provide a five-year moving average for all communities, down to census tracts. The five-year data are not as timely as the annual data, but they are more reliable (because of the larger sample) and available for many more communities. ACS data are often used by federal agencies to determine how money is distributed across the country.

The ACS provides housing advocates with important information. For example, the ACS captures data on housing costs and household income, allowing us to calculate the prevalence of housing cost burdens across communities by race and ethnicity. The data also allow us to measure the shortage (or surplus) of housing for various income groups. NLIHC uses ACS data to produce its annual report, _The Gap: A Shortage of Affordable Homes_, which estimates the shortage of affordable rental housing in each state, DC, and the largest metropolitan areas. Other important variables in the ACS include race, household type, and employment.

Legislation has been introduced in recent years to make participation in the ACS voluntary rather than mandatory. Research from the Census Bureau shows that a voluntary ACS would lower response rates by as much as 20% (see _The American Community Survey: Development, Implementation, and Issues for Congress_), forcing the Bureau to send surveys to a larger number of households and spend more time following up with them in person and by telephone to encourage participation. These additional steps would add to the Bureau's expenses. If the ACS

became voluntary and the Bureau did not take these additional steps, the survey's sample size would decline, resulting in less accurate data especially for small communities and hard-to-reach populations.

Comprehensive Housing Affordability Strategy Data

See https://www.huduser.gov/portal/datasets/cp.html.

The U.S. Census Bureau provides HUD with custom tabulations of ACS data that show housing problems among households of different income levels. The Comprehensive Housing Affordability Strategy (CHAS) data are primarily used by Community Development Block Grant (CDBG)-entitled communities in their HUD-required Consolidated Plan, but they can also be useful for housing advocates in measuring the housing needs in their community. CHAS data use HUD-defined income limits to categorize households as extremely low-, very low-, and low-income. The data also count the number of housing units affordable to each of these income groups. Therefore, the data provide a count of households at different income levels and the number of housing units affordable to them at the national, state, and local levels. The data also provide important information on cost burdens, overcrowding, and inadequate kitchen and plumbing by income level. The data can also be broken down by race, elderly/non-elderly status, household size, and disability status.

The most recent CHAS data are from the five year 2014-2018 ACS. HUD provides a web-based query tool that makes commonly used CHAS data readily available, particularly housing cost burdens, for communities. The CHAS raw data can be downloaded for more detailed analyses.

NLIHC uses the CHAS data to estimate the shortage (or surplus) of rental housing by income category for every county and place in the U.S. Data can be obtained by contacting the NLIHC research team at aaurand@nlihc.org.

HUD Point-in-Time Count and Housing Inventory Count

See www.hudexchange.info/resource/3031/pit-and-hic-data-since-2007 and https://www.hudexchange.info/programs/hdx/guides/ahar/#reports.

HUD's Point-in-Time (PIT) count is the primary tool for measuring the extent of homelessness in the nation. Continuums of Care (CoC) that provide housing and services to people experiencing homelessness must conduct a count each January of sheltered homeless persons in emergency shelter, transitional housing, and Safe Havens. A separate count is conducted every other January (every two years) of unsheltered homeless persons whose primary nighttime residence is not ordinarily used as a regular place to sleep, such as a car, park, abandoned building, or bus or train station. Although not required, HUD encourages CoCs to conduct an annual count of unsheltered homeless persons.

PIT count is a labor-intensive task coordinated at the local level. The result is a point-in-time estimate of the number of people experiencing homelessness in the U.S. and among specific subpopulations, such as individuals, families with children, veterans, unaccompanied youth, and the chronically homeless. These estimates are published in HUD's *Annual Homeless Assessment Report* to Congress.

The National Alliance to End Homelessness produces a series of research briefs on the state of homelessness, including by race, gender, and geography, using PIT data. These are available at https://endhomelessness.org/resources/?fwp_categories=point-in-time-counts&fwp_content_filter=data-and-graphics.

The Housing Inventory Count is an inventory of beds available for the homeless population by program, including emergency shelters, supportive housing, and rapid rehousing.

American Housing Survey

See http://www.census.gov/programs-surveys/ahs.html.

The national American Housing Survey (AHS) is a

longitudinal survey of housing units that provides information on the size, composition, and quality of the nation's housing stock. It is funded and directed by HUD and conducted by the U.S. Census Bureau every odd numbered year. The AHS is unique in that it follows the same housing units over time. The survey includes questions about the physical characteristics and quality of housing units and about their occupants, so users can identify how the price, quality, and occupants of dwellings change over time. The same sample of housing units was followed from 1985 to 2013 with changes to the sample to account for new construction, demolitions, and conversions.

A new national sample of housing units was drawn for the 2015 AHS. The core national sample represents the nation plus its 15 largest metropolitan areas. For the first time in 2015, HUD-assisted units were identified through administrative data and oversampled to produce more reliable comparisons between subsidized and unsubsidized housing. Supplemental samples in the AHS provide data for additional metropolitan areas, contingent upon HUD's budget. The 2015 AHS also included supplemental questions on food security, healthy homes, housing counseling, and neighborhood arts and culture. Supplemental questions typically change from survey year to survey year. The 2017 AHS included supplemental questions on delinquent housing payments, disaster preparedness, and commuting. The 2019 AHS included supplemental questions on food security, accessibility of homes for persons with disabilities, and post-secondary education.

The AHS is the data source for HUD's *Worst Case Housing Needs Report,* which is provided to Congress every two years. This report identifies the number of very low-income households in the U.S. who either spend more than half of their income on housing or live in severely physically inadequate housing. The AHS sample is not large enough to calculate estimates for specific states or smaller areas other than the metropolitan areas for which HUD includes a supplemental sample.

Fair Market Rents

See https://www.huduser.gov/portal/datasets/fmr.html.

Fair Market Rents (FMRs) are published by HUD each year for every metropolitan area and nonmetropolitan county in the U.S. FMRs represent the estimated cost of a modest apartment for a household planning to move. They are used to determine payment standards for Housing Choice Vouchers (HCVs), initial renewal rents for some expiring project-based Section 8 contracts, and initial rents in the Moderate Rehabilitation Single Room Occupancy program. FMRs also serve as rent ceilings for the HOME Investments Partnership program and the Emergency Solutions Grants program.

In most metropolitan areas and nonmetropolitan counties, FMRs are set at the 40th percentile of gross rents, which is the top end of the price range that movers could expect to pay for the cheapest 40% of apartments.

HUD published a final rule on November 16, 2016 that requires local public housing agencies in 24 metropolitan areas to use Small Area FMRs rather than traditional FMRs to set HCV payment standards. Small Area FMRs reflect rents for U.S. postal ZIP codes, while traditional FMRs reflect a single rent standard for an entire metropolitan region. The intent of Small Area FMRs is to provide voucher payment standards that are better aligned with neighborhood-scale rental markets, resulting in relatively higher subsidies in neighborhoods with more expensive rents and lower subsidies in neighborhoods with lower rents. Small Area FMRs are intended to help households use vouchers in higher opportunity neighborhoods. Small Area FMRs for all metropolitan areas are available on HUD's FMR webpages.

U.S. Decennial Census

See http://www.census.gov/programs-surveys/decennial-census/about.html.

The Decennial Census asks U.S. citizens a limited number of questions but serves an important Constitutional and governmental function. Article

1, Section 2 of the U.S. Constitution mandates a full count of American residents every 10 years, which is used to apportion seats in the U.S. House of Representatives among the states. The Census Bureau distributes a questionnaire to every U.S. household and group quarters, requesting basic demographic information, such as age, sex, and race. The count is also used to help determine the distribution of billions of dollars in federal money for infrastructure and other services.

PUBLICLY ASSISTED HOUSING

Picture of Subsidized Households

See https://www.huduser.gov/portal/datasets/picture/yearlydata.html.

HUD's *Picture of Subsidized Households* provides data on the location and occupants of HUD's federally subsidized housing stock. The programs represented in the dataset are Public Housing, Housing Choice Vouchers, Moderate Rehabilitation, Project Based Section 8, the Rent Supplement and Rental Assistance Project, Section 236, Section 202, and Section 811. This dataset allows users to examine the income, age, disability status, household type, and racial distribution of occupants in subsidized housing at the national, state, metropolitan area, city, Public Housing Agency, and project level. The data also include the poverty rate and percentage of minorities in census tracts of subsidized developments to examine the extent to which subsidized housing is concentrated in high-poverty or high-minority neighborhoods.

HUD Community Assessment Reporting Tool

See https://egis.hud.gov/cart/.

The Community Assessment Reporting Tool allows users to map and explore HUD investments in cities, counties, metropolitan areas, and states. The tool provides information about Community Planning and Development competitive and formula grants (e.g., HOME, CDBG, and CoC grants), rental programs (e.g., Housing Choice Vouchers, Public Housing, and Project Based Rental Assistance), mortgage insurance, housing counseling, and other HUD grants and programs. The tool also provides data

on selected demographics of assisted households and on the demographics and cost burdens of the general population.

National Housing Preservation Database

See http://www.preservationdatabase.org/.

The National Housing Preservation Database (NHPD) was created in 2012 by NLIHC and the Public and Affordable Housing Research Corporation to provide communities and housing advocates with the information they need to effectively identify and preserve subsidized housing at risk of being lost from the affordable housing stock. NHPD is an online database of properties subsidized by federal housing programs, including HUD Project-Based Rental Assistance, Section 202, HOME, USDA Rural Development (RD) housing programs, and the Low-Income Housing Tax Credit. This unique dataset includes the earliest date at which a property's subsidies might expire and property characteristics significant in influencing whether the subsidized property might be at risk of leaving the subsidized housing stock, such as neighborhood location and ownership information.

OTHER DATA SOURCES

HUD eGIS Open Data Storefront

See http://hudgis-hud.opendata.arcgis.com/.

HUD eGIS Open Data Storefront is a data portal that provides users with access to multiple HUD datasets, including Community Development activities, HUD-insured multifamily properties, and other rental housing assistance programs. The portal also provides access to HUD's mapping tools.

Home Mortgage Disclosure Act (HMDA) Data

See https://ffiec.cfpb.gov/data-publication/ .

The "Home Mortgage Disclosure Act" requires many lending institutions to publicly report information about mortgage applications and their outcomes. The information that institutions report includes whether the mortgage application was for a home purchase, home improvement, or refinancing; the type of loan (e.g., conventional,

FHA); mortgage amount; the applicant's race, ethnicity, gender, and age; whether the application was approved; census tract of the property's location; and other features of the mortgage. The data can be used to help identify discriminatory lending practices, as well as examine the extent to which lenders meet the mortgage investment needs of communities. Small lenders and those with offices only in nonmetropolitan areas are not required to report data.

POLICYMAP

PolicyMap (https://www.policymap.com/) is an online mapping and data tool that provides information on demographics, housing, employment, and other characteristics of communities across the U.S. Some of PolicyMap's data are available at no charge to the public, while other data require a subscription. The site's housing data include home values, rent prices, vacancy rates, affordability, and federally subsidized housing information.

Affirmatively Furthering Fair Housing Data

See https://datacatalog.urban.org/dataset/data-and-tools-fair-housing-planning and https://egis.hud.gov/affht/.

HUD's Affirmatively Furthering Fair Housing (AFFH) rule required CDBG-entitled jurisdictions to conduct an Assessment of Fair Housing (AFH) as part of their five-year Consolidated Plan. The purpose of the AFFH rule was to provide jurisdictions with a planning approach to help them address patterns of segregation, promote fair housing, and foster inclusive communities free from discrimination. HUD effectively suspended implementation of the rule in August 2018 (see the AFFH sections in Chapter 7 of this guide).

In July 2020, after HUD took AFFH data and tools offline, the Urban Institute made an archived copy of the data available in its Data Catalog. HUD's AFFH Data and Mapping Tool provided data on demographics, job proximity, school proficiency, environmental health, poverty, transit, and housing burdens. The Urban Institute

resource includes raw data from February 2018 and July 2020 used in the data and mapping tool, along with data documentation and a user guide. These resources can be used to identify fair housing issues across the country.

Other Surveys

The Current Population Survey (CPS) (www.census.gov/cps) is a joint venture between the Department of Labor and the Census Bureau and is the primary source of labor force statistics for the U.S. population. The CPS Annual Social and Economic Supplement provides official estimates of income, the poverty rate, and health insurance coverage of the non-institutionalized population.

The Housing Vacancy Survey (www.census.gov/housing/hvs) is a supplement of the CPS that quantifies rental and homeowner vacancy rates, characteristics of vacant units, and the overall homeownership rate for states and the 75 largest metropolitan areas.

The Survey of Market Absorption (www.census.gov/programs-surveys/soma.html and https://www.census.gov/data-tools/demo/soma/soma.html) is a HUD-sponsored survey conducted by the Census Bureau of newly constructed multifamily units. Each month, a sample of new residential buildings containing five or more units is selected for the survey. An initial three-month survey collects data on amenities, rent or sales price levels, number of units, type of building, and the number of units taken off the market (absorbed). Follow-up surveys can be conducted at six, nine, and 12 months. The data provide the absorption rate of new multifamily housing.

The Rental Housing Finance Survey (https://www.census.gov/programs-surveys/rhfs.html) is a HUD-sponsored survey, first conducted by the Census Bureau in 2012, that collects data on the financial, managerial, and physical characteristics of rental properties nationwide. Data are released triennially. Owners or property managers are surveyed about operating costs and revenue characteristics for the rental housing stock.

Starting in 2020 and continuing into 2022, the Census Bureau's Household Pulse Survey (https://www.census.gov/programs-surveys/household-pulse-survey.html) collects real-time data on the social and economic effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on American households. Among the questions posed respondents are asked about their housing tenure, employment status, confidence in paying upcoming rent, and whether they are caught up on rent payments. The current survey also includes whether renters have applied for or received emergency rental assistance.

WHAT ADVOCATES SHOULD KNOW

High-quality data that accurately reflect the population requires participation. Housing advocates should encourage everyone to fully participate in the Decennial Census, ACS, and other federal surveys for which they are selected. The accuracy and reliability of the Census's data products depend on it.

Advocacy organizations, such as NLIHC and its state partners, use federal data to quantify the scarcity of housing affordable to the lowest-income families, which makes it easier to set specific and defensible goals for expanding the affordable housing stock. NLIHC uses these data to provide housing profiles for each U.S. state and Congressional district, which can be found at https://nlihc.org/housing-needs-by-state by selecting the state and then clicking on the Resources tab.

WHAT TO SAY TO LEGISLATORS

Housing advocates should remind Members of Congress of the importance of reliable and unbiased data to understanding and addressing housing needs. Specific issues that advocates should highlight to Members of Congress include:

- Adequate funding for the ACS, AHS, and other federal surveys is imperative for up-to-date and reliable data regarding the nation's housing supply and needs. ACS data are the foundation for HUD's fair market rents and income-eligibility thresholds.

- Participation in the ACS needs to remain mandatory. Changing the ACS to a voluntary survey would lower response rates. The reliability of the survey's findings would decline without the Census Bureau spending millions of additional dollars each year to send the survey to a larger number of households and to conduct in-person or phone follow-ups to encourage participation.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

The Census Project is a network of national, state, and local organizations that advocates for sufficient funding for the U.S. Decennial Census and the ACS: https://thecensusproject.org/.

The Association of Public Data Users advocates to strengthen and protect federal statistical agencies and programs: http://apdu.org/.

HUD's Office of Policy Development and Research hosts research, publications, and data sets on housing and community development: https://www.huduser.gov/portal/home.html.