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. HUD's *A Picture of Subsidized Households*, meanwhile, gives us a look at the quantity and geographic distribution of HUD-subsidized housing.

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

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 brief tutorials on obtaining ACS data is available at https://www.census.gov/data/academy/data-gems.html.

The ACS is a nationwide mandatory survey of approximately 3.5 million addresses annually, conducted by the U.S. Census Bureau. The survey is distributed on a rolling basis, with approximately 295,000 housing units surveyed each month. The 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. Therefore, multiple years of ACS data are combined for smaller areas. The Census Bureau releases five-year ACS data that provides 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. 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 of U.S. residents by prohibiting enforcement. 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 allow users to gain a better understanding of the 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 and can also be useful for housing advocates in measuring the housing needs in their community. The CHAS data use HUD-defined income limits to categorize households as extremely low-, very low-, low-, and moderate-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 2012-2016 ACS. HUD provides a web-based query tool that makes commonly used CHAS data readily available, particularly housing cost burdens, for communities. More advanced users can download the CHAS raw data 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.

The PIT count is a labor-intensive task coordinated at the local level. The result is a point-in-time estimate of the number of homeless 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* (AHAR) to Congress.

The National Alliance to End Homelessness produced a series of research briefs on the state of homeless, including by race, gender, and geography, using PIT data. They are available at https://endhomelessness.org/resources/?fwp_content_filter=data-and-graphics.

The Housing Inventory Count (HIC) 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. 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 were 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, HUD-assisted units were identified through administrative data and oversampled, so comparisons between subsidized and unsubsidized housing would be more reliable than in the past. 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* 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 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.

Affirmatively Furthering Fair Housing Data and Mapping Tool

See https://www.hudexchange.info/resource/4867/affh-data-and-mapping-tool/ 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 section(s) in Chapter 7 of this guide).

HUD's AFFH Data and Mapping Tool (AFFH-T) provides some of the data HUD required communities to include in their AFH. The AFFH-T provides maps of demographics, combined with job proximity, school proficiency, environmental health, poverty, transit, and housing burdens. The map data also include the location of publicly supported housing and Housing Choice Vouchers. A User Guide with instructions for using the AFFH-T is also available. HUD last updated the AFFH-T in 2017.

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, Project Based Section 8, Section 236, Section 202, and Section 811. This dataset allows users to examine the income, age, 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 (CART) 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 (PAHRC) 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 http://www.consumerfinance.gov/hmda/.

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 vs. 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.

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) 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.

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' data products depend on it.

Advocacy organizations, such as NLIHC and its state partners, use a variety of 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, for example. provides 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.

- 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

Association of Public Data Users, http://apdu.org/.

HUD Office of Policy Development and Research, https://www.huduser.gov/portal/home.html.

The Census Project, https://thecensusproject.org/.