

# Housing Data from the Census Bureau

What We Collect, Why We Collect  
It, Where to Find It

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# Overview

- Policy context (“why”)
- Data of interest (“what”)
- Sources of data (“what”)
- Obtaining the data (“where”)

# Policy and research through 1990s (“*why*”)

- Poor housing, early 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century
- Great depression – financial crisis
  - National Housing Acts of 1934, 1937
- Housing Act of 1949 (public housing)
  - Current Population Survey first conducted in 1940s
- Public housing built in 1950s and 1960s
- Section 8, Community Development Block Grants (1970s)
  - American Housing Survey begins
- Low Income Housing Tax Credit (1980s)
- Hope VI, Enterprise Zones, FIRREA (1990s)
  - American Community Survey pilot begins

# 2000s: Housing in the forefront

- Early 2000s: “refi boom,” housing bubble
  - Low interest rates, loose underwriting, increased single-family homebuilding
  - Full implementation of American Community Survey
- Promotion of “ownership society”
- Housing bust, default and financial crisis
- 3.5 million foreclosures from 2008 – 2010 (Joint Center for Housing Studies/Harvard), 1 in 4 homeowners “underwater”
- 2011 – 2020: Decade of the renter?

# Contemporary housing concerns

- Establishing new equilibrium for housing market
- Working through foreclosures
- Oversupply of single-family, inadequate supply of multifamily homes (and finding capital for multifamily)
- **AFFORDABLE HOUSING**
  - a third of households spent more than thirty percent of their income on housing (Joint Center for Housing Studies)
- Housing quality

# Housing – Current Snapshot

All housing units	132,353,000	Share of all housing
Occupied housing units	113,550,000	86%
Owner occupied	75,250,000	57%
Renter occupied	38,299,000	29%
Vacant	18,803,000	14%

Source: Current Population Survey / Housing Vacancy Survey, 3<sup>rd</sup> quarter 2011.  
Census Bureau.

# Data of interest (“what”)

- Number of housing units
- Number of owners and renters
- Vacant units, and types of vacant units
- Housing quality (amenities, safety)
- Construction / demolition / conversion activity
- Transactions / originations/ lending activity
- Associated demographics (e.g., age of householder, family composition)

# Sources of data – *General interest*

- Decennial census
- American Housing Survey
- Current Population Survey / Housing Vacancy Survey
- American Community Survey
- Building Permits Survey / Survey of Construction

# Sources of data –

## *Targeted audiences*

- Survey of Market Absorption
- New York City Housing and Vacancy Survey
- Residential Finance Survey
- Property Owners and Managers Survey
- (In progress) Rental Housing Finance Survey

# Decennial census

- What: Tenure and vacancy, demographic
- Where: To the block level
- How: Paper and pencil instrument, mail survey with personal visit follow up
- When: Every ten years
- Strengths: 100% sample, geographic detail
- Weaknesses – Infrequent updates, few (housing) variables

# American Housing Survey

- What:
  - Several hundred variables on all aspects of housing
    - Physical characteristics
      - Quality (Worst case needs report)
      - Amenities
      - Neighborhood quality
      - Energy use
    - Financial characteristics
      - Financing (single family)
    - Demographics (age, family composition, employment)

# American Housing Survey (continued)

## ▶ When:

- Conducted every odd year
- (Metro areas surveyed on ad hoc basis)
- Data released year after data collection

## ▶ Where:

- 60,000 housing units, base national sample
- Supplemental samples of various Metro areas
- Data at regional, urban / suburban, selected Metro areas

## ▶ How:

- Computer-assisted personal interview

# American Housing Survey (continued)

- Strengths:
  - Greatest breadth of housing variables
  - Good source of single family financing data
  - Metropolitan area modules
  - Longitudinal
- Weaknesses:
  - Geographic detail: Only down to selected Metro areas
  - Frequency (every other year)
  - Long survey
  - Cumbersome to use micro data

# Current Population Survey / Housing Vacancy Survey

- What:
  - Quarterly and annual figures on homeownership rate, vacancy rate, and housing inventory
- Where:
  - Sample: 72,000 occupied and vacant housing units in sample (About 11,000 vacant)
  - Data: Figures for nation, regions, states, 75 largest metropolitan statistical areas

# Current Population Survey / Housing Vacancy Survey (continued)

- How:
  - Conduct personal interviews for occupied units and with “knowledgeable person” about vacant units.
- When:
  - Data collection: 4 months in sample, 8 months out, 4 months back in
  - Data distribution: Quarterly and annually

# Current Population Survey / Housing Vacancy Survey (continued)

- Strengths:
  - Only quarterly statistics on vacancy and homeownership
  - Detailed characteristics on vacant for rent and vacant for sale units (asking sales / rental price, number of rooms and bedrooms, duration of vacancy)
- Weakness:
  - Outdated base weights (benchmarked to Census 2000)
  - Controversies over vacancy rate

# American Community Survey

- What:
  - Gathers detailed demographic and housing data previously only collected in the decennial census long form
  - Asks questions about tenure, units in structure, utilities, gross housing payment (rent or mortgages), value, property taxes

# American Community Survey (continued)

- When: Sample queried every month, rolling 1-year, 3-year, and 5-year estimates released annually
- Where:
  - Nationwide sample
  - Data released to the block group level
- How:
  - Mail-out, mail-back survey
  - Non-response follow up via phone or computer-assisted, personal visit

# American Community Survey (continued)

- Strengths:
  - Data available to the block group level
  - Data for various units in structure (unlike census)
  - Data available annually
- Weaknesses:
  - Because methodology differs, not directly comparable to decennial census
  - “Characteristics, not counts”
  - Follow up for nonresponse only conducted on sub-sample of non-respondents

# Building Permits Survey / Survey of Construction

- What:
  - Collect data on housing permits, starts, and completions
  - Data on starts and completions provide info on purpose and physical characteristics of constructed units
- When:
  - Data collected monthly
  - Figures released monthly, quarterly, and annually

# Building Permits Survey / Survey of Construction (continued)

- Where:
  - National survey
  - Permit data available to the place level
  - Starts and completion data available to the regional level
- How:
  - Building Permits Survey: Mail survey to local building permit officials
  - Survey of Construction: Survey of Use of Permits and Nonpermit Survey

# Building Permits / Survey of Construction (continued)

- Strengths:
  - Frequency / timeliness / breadth of data
- Weaknesses:
  - Permit data quality difficult to gauge
  - Not all permits lead to housing units
  - Discrepancies between data collected administratively and through household surveys

# Survey of Market Absorption

- What:
  - Sample drawn from that of Survey of Construction
  - Surveys various characteristics of newly constructed buildings with five or more units
    - Share rented after completion (3 months, 6 months, 9 months, a year later)
    - Purpose (for rent or for sale)
    - Monthly rent (rental units) or sales price (condos and coops)
    - Characteristics (Number of bedrooms, whether furnished or subsidized)

# Survey of Market Absorption (Continued)

- When:
  - Conducted monthly
  - Quarterly and annual estimates (estimates of absorption refer to units completed 3, 6, 9 or 12 months prior)
  - In April, annual report released
  - In July, semi-annual report released
- How:
  - Sample of buildings with five or more units that had been reported completed in Survey of Construction

# Survey of Market Absorption (continued)

- Strengths:
  - Only source of federal data specifically multifamily properties
  - “Bang for buck”
- Weaknesses:
  - Conceptually challenging
  - Small constituency interested in data

# New York City Housing and Vacancy Survey

- What:
  - Rental vacancy rate, detailed housing info: year built, number of stories, condition, utilities, gross housing payment
  - Demographic and labor force characteristics
  - Conducted on a contractual basis with New York City government
- Where:
  - Sample: 18,000 units in New York City, five boroughs
  - Estimates at sub-borough level (areas with 100K people or greater)

# New York City Housing and Vacancy Survey (continued)

- How: Paper-and-pencil personal interviews, conducted by field representatives
- When: Every three years
- Strengths:
  - Detailed housing and demographic data (by tenure, housing assistance etc.)
  - Microdata available
- Weakness: Just New York City

# Residential Finance Survey / Property Owners and Managers Survey

- What:
  - Surveys of property owners, managers, and lenders to measure physical and financial characteristics
- When:
  - Property Owners and Managers Survey last conducted in 1995
  - Residential Finance Survey last conducted in 2001
- Where:
  - POMS: 16,000 rental units
  - RFS – 50,000 units of varying tenure and size
  - National and regional estimates

# Property Owners and Managers Survey / Residential Finance Survey (Continued)

- How
  - Paper and pencil, personal interview
  - RFS: Two-tiered survey – owners / managers AND lenders
  - RFS offered electronic reporting for lending institutions
- Strengths:
  - Only sources of data on how multifamily properties are financed
- Weaknesses:
  - Difficult to administer
  - Quality of data

# In progress: Rental Housing Finance Survey

- What: Data on physical characteristics, management, and debt financing of properties
- Where:
  - Sample: 4,000 properties nationwide
  - National estimates
- How: Paper-and-pencil personal instrument, field representative and self-administered
- When: Every other year

# Rental Housing Finance Survey (continued)

- Strengths:
  - Only federal source of data on physical characteristics of properties (not units), management and financing
  - Experience from previous similar surveys
- Weaknesses:
  - New survey
  - Although simplified design, still logistically challenging (defining unit of analysis, respondent cooperation)

# Obtaining the data (“where”)

- Census Bureau website: [www.census.gov](http://www.census.gov)
- American Factfinder:  
[http://factfinder.census.gov/home/saff/aff\\_transition.html](http://factfinder.census.gov/home/saff/aff_transition.html)
- Data Ferrett: <http://dataferrett.census.gov/>
- Sponsor websites (e.g., [www.huduser.org](http://www.huduser.org))

# Housing statistics – taken together

- Strength: Multiple data sources from which to choose
- Weakness: Multiple data sources from which to choose
  - Piecemeal / patchwork beginning of various household surveys dedicated to housing

# The “best” housing data source –

## *Questions to ask*

- What’s your purpose? / Specific need?
  - Geography
  - Time frame
    - Point in time versus longitudinal
- What associated variables are you seeking, if any?

# Contact

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