A Guide to Neighborhood Housing Assessment: A Student Workbook

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I. What is a neighborhood housing assessment?

A neighborhood housing assessment (NHA) is a detailed analysis that focuses on: 1) the structural characteristics and conditions of dwellings; 2) the demographic structure of the neighborhood; and 3) local housing and other issues that pertain to housing in the area. The purpose of a NHA is to provide the empirical basis upon which community groups and residents can jointly develop an understanding of the housing situation in their neighborhood.

By presenting a picture of housing conditions as well as current demographic and housing concerns within a particular neighborhood, an NHA can be the starting point in developing additional housing or focusing housing rehabilitation plans. An NHA can also help a neighborhood assess the success of earlier or ongoing community development efforts. It is important to remember however, that an NHA is only a starting point and is just one part of the overall plan for community development.

What others say:

“The goal of a housing needs assessment is to help focus a community’s efforts on its most critical local problems. The initial emphasis is often on issues of public concern (e.g., housing affordability, at-risk households, or rental housing problems)... The local government’s goal for the resultant strategies may be to ensure that decent, affordable housing is available to meet the needs of specific targeted households (e.g., very low-income families)” (White, Jensen, and Cook 1992, p. 6).

“Housing data are essential to understanding the living conditions of our communities and judging their adequacy. When collected regularly, they provide a basis for assessing changes in conditions over time. They also provide a powerful means to advocate for action to address the shelter needs of people who lack decent and affordable housing” (Housing Assistance Council 1992, p. 1).
II. The Five A’s: Availability, Adequacy, Appropriateness, Affordability, and Amenities

“Housing needs can be demonstrated in several ways and are generally represented by three categories of housing problems: 1) inadequate or substandard housing conditions; 2) overcrowding; and 3) cost burden or paying more than the household can afford” (Housing Assistance Council 1992, p. 2).

Availability
Vacancy rates are a common measure of the availability of housing in a particular market area. One common rule of thumb is that a community needs to have an overall vacancy rate of 5 percent in order to provide enough housing options. A variety of housing is necessary because households vary in their needs and in their ability to pay for housing. Therefore, communities need to evaluate vacancy rates for various kinds of housing: rental units, existing home sales, senior housing, or low-income housing.

Sample questions regarding availability may include:

- What kind of housing already exists in your community (review the current housing stock)?
- How many housing units are currently available for rent or for sale?
- How many units are of the following housing types?
  - single-family detached homes
  - apartments
  - townhouses/condominiums
  - manufactured homes
- What percentage of the housing is available:
  - for sale?
  - for rent?

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1 This section is based on Ziebarth, Brown, and Elgatian 2000.
Adequacy
Housing adequacy focuses on the condition of the housing in the neighborhood, especially housing that is available for sale or rent.

“Inadequate or substandard housing conditions are revealed through data on the number of units without complete plumbing, complete kitchen facilities, adequate heating equipment, or safe water supply, or with physical deficiencies (such as water leaks, holes in the walls or floors, and cracked plaster)” (Housing Assistance Council 1992, p. 2).

Here are some sample questions about housing adequacy:

How many homes or apartments are units in substandard condition, with:

- deteriorating appearance?
- inoperable plumbing?
- inadequate wiring?
- leaking roofs?
- crumbling foundations?
- unsafe steps?
- porches in poor condition?

What is the total number of substandard homes in the neighborhood?

Are people in the neighborhood living in garages, sheds, or automobiles?

Are there homeless people evident in the neighborhood or surrounding area?

Appropriateness
Matching housing and household needs: How well does the housing in the neighborhood match the people who live there, as well as potential residents.

“Overcrowding is measured by the number of people per room. A housing unit is considered overcrowded when it is occupied by more than one person per room (for example, four people in a three room apartment). Overcrowding is different from doubling up, a term that pertains to more than one household living in the same housing unit” (Housing Assistance Council 1992, p. 2).

Sample questions regarding housing appropriateness may include:

Do persons with physical or mental disabilities have homes that support them, or do their living situations create barriers to the best quality of life possible?
Are families living in overcrowded places too small to comfortably accommodate the number of people living there?

Is there a mix of housing available for those who would like to move to a bigger or smaller home?

Is housing available for those who are renting but would like to become homeowners?

Affordability
The expected allocation of a household’s budget for housing has steadily increased over time. In the early 1900s, a thrifty household was expected to budget 20 percent of its income for housing. Today, the standard set by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) is 30 percent of household income or less.

Housing affordability is the ratio of a household’s shelter cost (rent or mortgage payment plus the cost of utilities) to its household income. For example, a household having one worker earning $7.50 per hour ($1,200 month) needs housing that costs less than $400 per month (including utilities) to be affordable. For families considering buying a home, the interest rate can directly impact monthly mortgage costs.

Another measure of housing affordability is whether the cost of housing is so high that it puts people into poverty.

Here are some sample questions about housing affordability:

Is housing available in your neighborhood so that households across the entire range of incomes can obtain it without spending more than 30 percent of their income?

Is the cost of housing such that the remaining income level is within two-thirds of the poverty level adjusted by household size?
Amenities
It is important to assess the amenities (e.g., parks, schools, shopping) that are available in the neighborhood (and nearby areas). Sometimes determining a neighborhood’s amenities is difficult and can be subjective. However, these questions may provide useful starting points.

Sample questions regarding amenities include:

- Are housing development resources available?
- Do local lenders provide housing development loans?
- Are contractors available to build new apartments or homes?
- Are contractors available to do home repair, renovation, and remodeling?
- Are educational programs available for first-time homebuyers?
- Are there sufficient employment opportunities?
- Are the schools of high quality?
- Are retail services available?
- Is day care available?
- What are the recreational facilities and opportunities in the area?
- Are medical services (doctor, dentist, clinic, hospital, pharmacy) available?
- Is public transportation available?
III. Quantitative Analysis of Neighborhood Housing

Using U.S. Census Data
To develop an understanding of your neighborhood, a useful first step is to use quantitative data from the U.S. Census or from other secondary data sources.

One of the most valuable sources of secondary data is the U.S. Census that is conducted every ten years. Because the data is only collected at ten year intervals, the timeliness of the Census data varies. The Census Bureau has recently released information collected during 2000.

The amount of information varies according to geographic area. For the largest geographic areas for example, the United States as a whole, there is a great deal of detailed information available. For smaller geographic areas such as a census tract (a small area of the city), less detailed information is available. The reason for this is that the Census is required to protect the confidentiality of individuals.

To get an idea of the amount of information available from the U.S. Census, go to their website, www.census.gov.

“Data on housing conditions and costs are particularly useful when combined with household information such as income, race, age, and family compositions to answer questions such as: How many poor households live in substandard housing? Are poor minority households disproportionately affected by housing problems? Do female-headed families have greater affordability problems than two-parent families?” (Housing Assistance Council 1992, p. 2).

Sample questions that can be answered with secondary data include:

Demographic based questions:

- How many people live in the neighborhood?
- Is the population of the neighborhood growing or declining?
- Who lives in the neighborhood?

- Have the people living in the neighborhood changed over time?
  - race/ethnicity (e.g., African-American, Hispanic, Asian, White)?
  - employment (e.g., manufacturing, services, construction)?
  - occupation (e.g., white collar, blue collar)?
  - income (e.g., percent below the poverty line)?
  - family type (e.g., married, female-headed families)?
What is the age structure of the people in the neighborhood?
- under 5?
- under 18?
- over 65?

Housing based questions:

What is total number of dwellings in the neighborhood by type (e.g., single-family homes, apartments)?

Describe the housing stock in terms of square footages, number of bedrooms, and year built.

What is the tenure (e.g., homeowner, tenant) status of the residents?

How much does housing cost (e.g., median home value, average rent) in the neighborhood?

How much do residents pay in property taxes?
IV. Neighborhood Housing Conditions

Reading the landscape: The visual analysis of neighborhood housing conditions

An assessment of the condition of housing in your neighborhood can be made on foot or by automobile (i.e., “windshield survey”). The advantage of carrying out the housing conditions survey on foot is that you will be able to more closely evaluate the condition of the dwellings. However, a windshield survey will allow you to cover more ground. In some cases, a combination of the two approaches might be utilized; a windshield survey to get an idea of the characteristics of housing in the entire neighborhood and a foot survey of areas of particular interest. A sampling strategy might also be used; here you might carry out a foot survey of randomly selected blocks.

Some basic guidelines for conducting a housing conditions survey:

- Be aware of your surroundings
- Work in teams—always have a partner with you.
- Be prepared to identify yourself and respond to resident’s questions.
- Be systematic—carry your checklist and fill it out as you proceed.
- Compare notes—for reliability and consistency compare your ratings with those of your partner(s).

The purpose of a housing conditions survey is to provide an analysis of the general condition of housing in your neighborhood. Of particular interest is the extent of deterioration in the housing stock and whether housing in poor condition is concentrated in any particular part of the neighborhood (Iowa Department of Economic Development n.d.).

You will be collecting data to evaluate the exterior condition of each dwelling (including out-buildings, sidewalks, detached garages, fences). It is important that all members of the survey team use the same criteria and identifying marks and are in agreement as to what constitutes “standard housing” in the community or housing market.

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2 This section is based on a document produced by the Iowa Department of Economic Development.
The following provides an example of housing condition criteria that may be used in a neighborhood analysis, with photos that may represent each condition overall:

- **Good (1)** – A structure recently built and meeting codes or which, if somewhat older, has had careful maintenance of both structure and grounds. No surface wear is apparent and repairs are not needed.

- **Fair (2)** – (Minor Deficiency). A sound structure but in need of surface maintenance and possibly showing small signs of wear. The structure is not as well maintained as the “good” category and the pavement or accessory building may need repairs. Minor maintenance needed.
- **Poor (3)** – (Major Deficiency). Significant surface wear is noticeable. The structure is slightly out of plumb with cracks, holes, or breaks evident in walls, foundation, and roof. Paint is blistered and windows, steps, etc., may need to be replaced. Major maintenance is needed.

- **Deteriorated (4)** – (No Rehabilitation Feasibility). The structure is unsound and totally substandard. The foundation, roof, and bearing elements have substantial defects.
V. **Listening to the Community: Neighborhood Housing Issues and Trends**

Although it is important to collect a standardized set of data and conduct a systematic analysis of housing conditions, we also must recognize that each neighborhood is likely to have its own particular set of housing concerns and issues. To develop a better understanding of neighborhood housing issues and concerns, it is important to listen to and speak with public officials, staff members of local neighborhood organizations, as well as the general public.

For this part of the housing assessment take the time to talk to staff members of the neighborhood organizations with which you are working. In addition, to further promote your understanding of neighborhood housing issues, attend a community meeting that pertains to housing or sit in on a board meeting.

Sample questions to ask your neighborhood partners include:

- 📚 What is the major housing issue in this neighborhood?
- 📚 How is the major issue different from housing issues in other neighborhoods in the city or region?
- 📚 How is the neighborhood (including neighborhood organizations) trying to address its pressing housing challenges?
- 📚 Which outside groups is the neighborhood working with (i.e. public, private or philanthropic agencies)?
Appendix 1: A preliminary outline of neighborhood housing assessment

Background Information
1. Description of neighborhood organization
   - purpose
   - history

2. Description of neighborhood
   - location
   - history
   - current status

3. Demographic analysis of neighborhood (see attached example)

4. Analysis of housing in the neighborhood (see attached example)

5. Analysis of housing conditions (field survey)
   - description of how the survey was undertaken (methodology)
   - analysis of housing conditions (text, photos, and map)

6. Analysis of neighborhood housing issues and trends

7. Summary and discussion
   - suggestions for housing assessment methodology
Appendix 2: U.S. Census variables

Each variable should be expressed both in term of raw numbers and percentage

Demographics
- total population 1990, 2000, % change
  - male 1990, 2000, % change
  - female 1990, 2000, % change
  - by age (by five year age groups) 1990, 2000, % change
  - median age
  - by race/ethnicity 1990, 2000, % change (note change in question structure between the two Census’)

- relationship (households, group quarters) 1990, 2000, % change

- household by type 1990, 2000, % change

Housing
- Housing occupancy
  - total
  - occupied
  - vacant
  - homeowner vacancy rate
  - rental vacancy rate

- Housing tenure
  - owner-occupied
  - renter-occupied
  - average household size of owner-occupied units
  - average household size of renter-occupied units

Additional data (may be obtained from other sources):
- home costs
  - value of unit
  - median rent

- home construction activity—by number and by type (e.g. single-family, multiple unit)

- demolition of housing in neighborhood
Appendix 3: Housing conditions survey form

Date: __________________________ Style: __________________________
Address: __________________________ City: __________________________

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Housing Conditions:</th>
<th>Good</th>
<th>Fair</th>
<th>Poor</th>
<th>Deteriorated</th>
<th>Comments</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Foundation</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Roof</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Siding</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Doors/Windows</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yard</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chimney</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Garage</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- **Good (1)** – A structure recently built and meeting codes or which, if somewhat older, has had careful maintenance of both structure and grounds. No surface wear is apparent and repairs are not needed.
- **Fair (2)** – (Minor Deficiency). A sound structure but in need of surface maintenance and possibly showing small signs of wear. The structure is not as well maintained as the “good” category and the pavement or accessory building may need repairs. Minor maintenance needed.
- **Poor (3)** – (Major Deficiency). Significant surface wear is noticeable. The structure is slightly out of plumb with cracks, holes, or breaks evident in walls, foundation, and roof. Paint is blistered and windows, steps, etc., may need to be replaced. Major maintenance is needed.
- **Deteriorated (4)** – (No Rehabilitation Feasibility). The structure is unsound and totally substandard. The foundation, roof, and bearing elements have substantial defect.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Building Occupancy Status:</th>
<th>Check One</th>
<th>Building Material:</th>
<th>Check One</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Fully Occupied (House or multi-family complex appears to be fully inhabited)</td>
<td></td>
<td>Wood</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Partially Occupied (Some units appear vacant; some appear inhabited. Clues to look for vacancy: no names on mailboxes, no curtains or blinds, broken out windows, etc)</td>
<td></td>
<td>Masonry (brick or block)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unoccupied and Boarded (Residence is entirely unoccupied; all windows and doors are securely boarded)</td>
<td></td>
<td>Stone</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unoccupied and Unboarded (Residence is entirely unoccupied; one or more windows and doors are not securely boarded)</td>
<td></td>
<td>Metal (includes vinyl siding)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td></td>
<td>Other</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Evidence of Recent Improvement:**

- **Yes** (obvious recent improvements to building, such as new porch, new roof, new siding, new paint)
- **No** (no obvious improvements)

**Evidence of Active Improvement:**

- **Yes** (Evidence of current improvement activity. Building materials, ladders, work crew or posted building permit still on locations)
- **No** (No current improvement activity)