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UP 494-AG: *Neighborhood Analysis*

Weekly Reflection #2

* *What are the challenges associated with representing neighborhoods quantitatively?*
* *What are the benefits of using quantitative data to represent neighborhoods?*
* *What can we learn? What is likely to be missed?*

The immediate challenge in representing neighborhoods quantitatively is how incomplete of a story numbers tell about a place. Looking at poverty rates, median household incomes, school test scores etc. diminish how important context is in being able to analyze places. Leaving the discussion into what numbers or changes show leaves observers, with highly different motives, to create the narratives that best suit their agenda. While some earnest public servants might see low outcomes as grounds to push reinvestment and working with neighborhood pillars to accomplish their dreams, developers and neoliberal leaders could see the strategy to improving an outcome through investment in a massive “revitalization” scheme. Quantitative data also come from limited, and often dated, means of collection. Census, being decadal, gives estimates for the years (and two five year periods) in between. I doubt these researchers are going to every neighborhood and tracking the changes to make these estimates, or if there is a pragmatic way to make investments that uses local conditions. And political agendas will determine how data are collected, or if effort will be placed in doing it intentionally and thoroughly. That can of worms is for a different day.

Quantitative data can give good benchmarks for measuring progress if collected with intentionality and actively checked with objective, honest, and transparent collection. As previously mentioned, many free online sources make quantitative data easily accessible for better or for worse. These sets require less codification and do not require significant translation to be analyzed and visualized. Powerful people want to see data that shows a problem is worth their time and quantitative measurements convey this through a more familiar and compelling (to them) lens than qualitative sources would. And while trends over time can be used to mislabel the neighborhood’s experience and cause-effect, quantitative data clarify that these trends exist and might back up the notion that times are tough or getting better. And obviously, the data are ready to be plugged into R or other machine processing systems.

We can learn how the neighborhood is doing on paper, what the impact of tough times nationally, locally, or at the state level has made on the neighborhood, and how the neighborhood performs compared to others with similar characteristics. We can also learn more about the types of neighborhoods that are undercounted and what enables others, with otherwise similar characteristics, to have fuller data sets. We can also have a clearer idea into what types of social programs can create positive changes when looking at the trends and potential initiatives that improving neighborhoods have implemented. Yet, we will never see how people feel about their neighborhood, what caused these feelings, or why these neighborhoods are represented by these quantities. Finding these and getting to meaningful, place-based solutions requires a different type of data collection. Some of this data can be translated to numbers, but a lot of it needs to stay within words and narratives that the data should be used to empower.