

## Rethinking Detroit<sup>†</sup>

By RAYMOND OWENS III, ESTEBAN ROSSI-HANSBERG,  
AND PIERRE-DANIEL SARTE\*

*This paper studies the urban structure of Detroit—one that is clearly not optimal for its size—which features a business district immediately surrounded by largely vacant neighborhoods. A model is presented where residential externalities lead to multiple equilibria at the neighborhood level. Specifically, neighborhood development requires the coordination of developers and residents, without which it may remain vacant even with sound fundamentals. Given this mechanism, existing strategic visions to revitalize Detroit are evaluated within a quantitative spatial model that can rationalize Detroit's current allocations. Alternative plans that rely on “development guarantees” are also considered and shown to yield better outcomes. (JEL D62, R11, R23, R32, R58)*

The city of Detroit, an iconic example of urban development associated with modern industrialization, is in disarray. Large declines in population over several decades have resulted in a city structure that is clearly inefficient and that severely inhibits positive economic outcomes in the city. The Detroit business area, which contains the headquarters of large companies such as General Motors, Quicken Loans, and Ally Financial, and employs tens of thousands of people, is surrounded by nearly deserted residential areas that have been mostly abandoned or demolished. This city structure violates the most basic economic principles of urban design, where residents utilize areas close to their employers to minimize commuting costs. The incentives to revitalize these vacant areas, which form a rough half-ring around downtown Detroit and its surroundings, are not generating the needed investments and changes in the city. In this paper, we propose a quantitative economic model of the city of Detroit that can help us rationalize the current state of the city and evaluate a variety of plans and policies that have been proposed to improve its structure.

The problems of Detroit are not unique. Many cities throughout the industrialized world have experienced similar problems. The decline in manufac-

\* Owens: Research Department, Federal Reserve Bank of Richmond, 701 E Byrd St, Richmond, VA 23219 (email: raymond.owens@rich.frb.org); Rossi-Hansberg: Department of Economics and Woodrow Wilson School, Princeton University, 289 Julian Rabinowitz Building Princeton, NJ, 08544 (email: erossi@princeton.edu); Sarte: Research Department, Federal Reserve Bank of Richmond; 701 E Byrd St, Richmond, VA 23219 (email: pierre.sarte@rich.frb.org). Matthew Shapiro was coeditor for this article. The views expressed herein are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent the views of the Federal Reserve Bank of Richmond or the Federal Reserve System. We thank Daniel Schwam, Daniel Ober-Reynolds, and Eric LaRose for outstanding research assistance, as well as participants at seminars and conferences for useful comments.

<sup>†</sup> Go to <https://doi.org/10.1257/pol.20180651> to visit the article page for additional materials and author disclosure statement(s) or to comment in the online discussion forum.

turing employment, and the displacement of manufacturing activity from urban centers, have resulted in the decline of many cities for long periods of time. As Glaeser and Gyourko (2005) argue, these declines can be protracted as a result of the durability of the housing stock. Negative shocks to the industries operating in a city, or to the regional economy, lead to immediate declines in land rents but also to protracted declines in population that follow the slow depreciation of buildings and structures. Detroit has lost well over one hundred thousand habitable housing units since the 1980s. In an effort to circumvent the deleterious effects associated with a slowly depreciating housing stock, the Detroit Demolition Program has demolished close to 20,000 units since 2014. Despite this effort, the city has not experienced any substantial new construction or adjustment in its basic layout or structure, so that the slow depreciation of housing initially built before the 1930s cannot be the main culprit of its evolution. This lack of adjustment in Detroit has arguably led to an underutilization of its urban infrastructure. The system of streets and highways built for a population three times its current size is not serving new booming industries but rather, as in many other Rust Belt cities, is weighing on its recovery. In particular, the high cost of maintaining this large infrastructure has led to fiscal problems, an under-provision of essential public services, and ultimately to bankruptcy and default (Detroit filed for Chapter 9 bankruptcy in 2013).

Sectoral and local shocks that have led to these salient changes in urban landscape are not exceptional. As new production technologies and trading possibilities lead to declines in today's booming industries and shift the comparative advantage of countries and regions, similar secular changes are to be expected in the future. Moreover, environmental changes such as climate change and related coastal flooding will likely alter the productivity and residential amenities of today's cities. Dealing effectively with declining cities is an important challenge that requires careful policy design and measurement. Developing the appropriate policies to improve the structure of declining cities can generate not only gains for its residents, but could also lead to a better and more efficient use of resources and spatial allocation of economic activity in the United States and the world.

A stylized look at the structure of the city of Detroit reveals a surprising pattern: a downtown area with healthy numbers of employees and employers, all surrounded by a half-ring of vacant neighborhoods. Most of these neighborhoods have been abandoned or demolished over the years, and in some of these areas, the city has struggled to provide services. One main question arises when confronted with this structure, vividly captured in Figure 1:<sup>1</sup> why do residential developers not move into these areas and develop residential communities where downtown workers can live?<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>While many new developments, including the construction of a new sports arena, have taken place in the area shown in Figure 1 since 2014, promising recent developments in Detroit have mostly happened in a 7-square-mile area centered on downtown. At the same time, the large majority of neighborhoods in Detroit's 139 square miles have continued to see population losses.

<sup>2</sup>Detroit Future City (DFC), a civic organization created in 2012, reports that in 2014, of the 258,000 jobs in Detroit, about 158,000 were filled by suburban residents commuting into the city. Additionally, nearly 60 percent of these commuters had jobs that paid \$40,000 or more per year, well above the average household income of \$26,000 per year in the city (see Detroit Future City 2017).



FIGURE 1. THE NEIGHBORHOOD OF BRUSH PARK IN THE FOREGROUND, DOWNTOWN DETROIT IN THE BACKGROUND, AS CAPTURED BY *THE NEW YORK TIMES*, OCTOBER 14, 2014

With residential areas close to downtown, workers would clearly save on commuting costs, and downtown Detroit would benefit from more foot-traffic and demand for retail and other services. The basis of our argument is simple and intuitive: residents do not want to be isolated in a neighborhood. They desire other residents with whom to socialize and who require the same services they wish to consume. Neighborhood development then requires a large enough scale because of residential and housing externalities (as in Rossi-Hansberg, Sarte, and Owens 2010), one that individual residential developers might not find profitable to provide on their own in particular neighborhoods. Hence, neighborhoods have two equilibria: one that features a residential area with enough development and residents to make it sustainable, and one in which no investment is made and no residential activity occurs. The potential entry of large developers that internalize the residential externality can eliminate equilibria with no investment in neighborhoods where housing prices rise above costs and developers make positive profits. However, in neighborhoods where the developed equilibrium leaves some land undeveloped, housing prices simply reflect costs and developers do not have incentives to enter. In these neighborhoods, equilibrium multiplicity and its associated coordination problem persist independently of the scale of developers.

The issue of coordination among developers, and between developers, residents, and local governments, is explicitly recognized as a key challenge in previous studies of Detroit's ailments. Among the most comprehensive of those studies is a set of reports and proposals provided by Detroit Future City (DFC), a civic organization created in 2012 that includes planning experts, community leaders, and residents. The mission of DFC is to guide and help implement the revitalization of Detroit. The DFC report repeatedly refers to challenges in coordinating

different parties as a key impediment to revitalization and development.<sup>3</sup> Thus, we place this coordination problem at the center of our analysis and embed it in a quantitative spatial economics framework that allows us to model the city of Detroit in detail. We then use the model to design and quantify the effects of a variety of policy proposals, including different strategic visions proposed, but not quantified, by DFC. The general equilibrium framework we develop for Detroit is close to the literature on quantitative spatial economics recently reviewed in Redding and Rossi-Hansberg (2017). The key addition to this literature, aside from carefully quantifying an urban model for the city of Detroit, is the existence of residential externalities that lead to the coordination problem and multiplicity of neighborhood equilibria described above. This novel mechanism allows us to both rationalize current allocations in the city of Detroit and quantify the effects of various policy proposals.<sup>4</sup>

To quantify the importance of these neighborhood externalities, we first assume that residential amenities stem entirely from residential externalities, which we assume are log-linear in the number of residents. Using the rest of the quantified model, this assumption allows us to estimate the strength of residential externalities for each neighborhood. Of course, one might argue that these residential amenities result in part from exogenous neighborhood characteristics unrelated to density. Hence, in further robustness exercises, we reestimate residential externalities allowing for a local exogenous component of neighborhood residential amenities. Estimating the strength of residential externalities then requires us to find exogenous population shifters that can help identify the elasticity of residential amenities to neighborhood residents. We propose several instrumental variable strategies such as productivity levels, changes in productivity, and distance to automobile manufacturing plant closings during the Great Recession. We show that all of these strategies yield very similar residential externalities and counterfactual exercises.

We carry out our analysis at the census tract level, which is the smallest unit for which commuting data can be accurately matched to other aspects of Detroit such as workplace wages, employment, residential prices, and land use.<sup>5</sup> We collect data from a variety of sources that includes bilateral census commuting data, local development and price data from assessors, local Detroit organizations focused on measuring urban blight, and Google Analytics data on actual commuting times and distances between census tracts. The resulting dataset is quite rich and allows us to quantify the model at a high level of detail.

<sup>3</sup>In particular, the DFC Strategic Framework (2012) stresses that “Detroit’s ability to address its problem property issues is impeded by its severe fiscal and market constraints, but it is equally impeded by the absence of a systematic, coordinated approach to the problem, in which all public and private stakeholders are fully engaged.”

<sup>4</sup>See Ahlfeldt et al. (2015) and Allen, Arkolakis, and Li (2015) for quantitative urban models of cities using similar methodologies. Guerrieri, Hartley, and Hurst (2012) present a complementary interpretation of the decline of some of the neighborhoods in Detroit.

<sup>5</sup>In principle, commute data is available at the block level from the Longitudinal Employer-Household Dynamics, Origin Destination Employment Statistics (LODES) dataset. However, LODES indicates that uncertainties in block coding make block analyses unreliable—see Abowd et al. (2005). Moreover, as pointed out in Couture and Handbury (2015), noise infusion to maintain confidentiality at the block level further encourages aggregation to the tract level for accurate analysis.

The policies that we assess all involve coordinating on vacant residential neighborhoods. In particular, we consider “development guarantees” to resolve coordination challenges where the city government or some other outside institution guarantees a minimum investment in residential development in a neighborhood targeted for development. We then use our quantitative framework to compute the magnitude of the required guarantees that would allow a neighborhood to coordinate in the equilibrium with a positive number of residents and residential investment. If the policy is successful, the guarantee is never called upon and the policy is costless. We compute the overall effect of policies addressing different areas of Detroit on a variety of outcomes in the treated and non-treated neighborhoods. In our analysis, these outcomes reflect in part all general equilibrium linkages embedded in the spatial structure of Detroit. We show that carrying out the analysis in a general equilibrium framework, where locations are linked by commuting, is essential for the generated outcomes. We further use our quantitative setup to design policies that maximize the net gains for Detroit, and compare their effects with those stemming from various proposals that DFC has advocated, but not quantified, as possible equilibria. The policies we evaluate show gains of hundreds of millions of dollars in additional land rents per year. Of course, these outcomes depend on the specific tracts selected, the structural model we propose, as well as its quantification. The hope is that our quantitative framework will inform the decision-making process in Detroit and other declining cities, and facilitate their transformation into cities that can host the industries of the future.

The rest of the paper is structured as follows. Section I provides a brief account of Detroit’s recent history. Section II presents the model and Section III describes how it is given quantitative content. Section IV discusses the policy counterfactuals and designs of alternative policies. Section V concludes. Online Appendix A provides additional derivations not included in the text, while online Appendix B presents additional tables for robustness. In addition, the online Appendix provides a detailed description of the data used to inform our analysis, and considers a variety of additional policy counterfactuals and alternative model assumptions.<sup>6</sup>

## I. City of Detroit

To get a sense of Detroit’s evolution from a world-famous, thriving city to its current state, it is useful to note that the city entered the twentieth century as a mid-tier American city of about 286,000 residents. Connected to the Great Lakes through its location on the Detroit River, the city had access to waterborne shipments of iron ore from Minnesota as well as coal and oil from areas to the south. Metal-related production, from smelting to machinery production, arose in Detroit, among other types of production.

By 1900, automobile producers were active in Detroit, though vehicle production numbered only a few hundred units per year before rising to a few thousand by mid-decade. Two developments changed the city into the center of automobile

<sup>6</sup>See [https://www.princeton.edu/~erossi/RD\\_App.pdf](https://www.princeton.edu/~erossi/RD_App.pdf).

production. The first was Ford Motor Company's design of a simple, rugged automobile—the Model T. The second was Henry Ford's adoption of the assembly line for automobile production beginning in late 1913. In combination, these developments provided a viable product for the rough roads of the United States and technology that lowered labor costs required to assemble the Model T, making automobiles affordable to the masses. The assembly line was rapidly employed by other automobile producers.

As demand for automobiles soared, Ford and other producers constructed factories that stretched a half mile (or more, in some instances). To operate the vast factories, Ford and other companies in Detroit needed far more labor than was available locally. This led to higher wages, which attracted labor from the American South, Europe, the Middle East, and other regions around the world (Sugrue 2007, 2015).

To house the workers, residential developers constructed vast tracts of single-family homes in seemingly endless blocks. Detroit's population reached nearly a half million by 1910, almost one million by 1920, and approached 1.5 million by 1930. Figure 2 shows that housing constructed before 1930 (in red) mainly surrounded the existing city in a broad band.<sup>7</sup> Census records from 1910 and 1920 indicate that many workers living in this band worked in automobile-related manufacturing jobs (Minnesota Population Center 2013). Subsequent census data from 1920, 1930, 1940, and 1950 show that the density of blue collar manufacturing jobs remained higher in this band than in other areas of Detroit (Bogue 2006; Minnesota Population Center 2013).

As of 1950, Detroit built one of every two cars produced in the world, and the city's population topped 1.8 million. But two developments during the decade laid the foundation for a prolonged period of decline for the city. The first was a decision by the automobile companies to locate production plants outside of the Detroit area. Both labor unrest in Detroit and the desire to locate closer to customers are cited as reasons for diversifying plant locations. A second development was the construction of the interstate highway system, which would bring express highways through the city beginning less than a decade later (Sugrue 1996, 2007, 2015).

As the 1960s arrived, Detroit saw mounting job loss and population decline related to automobile production. Unemployed households increased rapidly in the band surrounding downtown that had been built prior to 1930 (Bogue 2006; Minnesota Population Center 2016). Related to the ongoing job losses and diminished economic prospects, residents of the area became increasingly on edge and racial tensions became more pronounced. Tensions exploded in the summer of 1967 with five days of rioting and looting following a police raid on an illegal club. Over 2,500 stores were burned, looted, or destroyed in the episode, nearly all of them businesses located within the band of housing built before 1930.

In the aftermath of the 1967 Detroit Riot, households in the areas impacted by the riot—largely middle class and lower-middle class African American neighborhoods—found fewer businesses to serve them (600 grocery stores were damaged

<sup>7</sup>Both Figures 2 and 3 rely on parcel level build dates primarily provided by the Southeast Michigan Council of Governments (SEMCOG) and supplemented by data from CoreLogic.

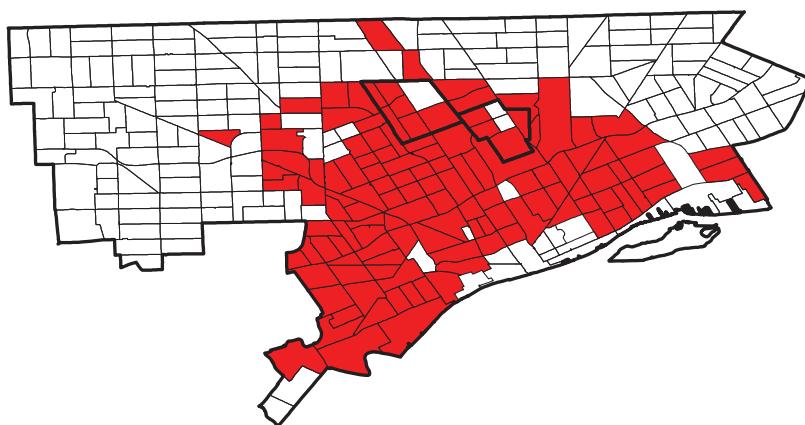


FIGURE 2. PRE-1930 RESIDENTIAL CENSUS TRACTS IN DETROIT WITH AT LEAST 75 PERCENT OF RESIDENTIAL PROPERTIES BUILT PRIOR TO 1930

or destroyed, for example) and were concerned about safety going forward. Many uninsured businesses could not reopen their operations. Those who were insured assessed the changed environment of the area and many were not confident that their customers—both households and other businesses—would remain. The prospect of fewer customers in the area led many to not reopen in the city. With the interstate highway construction well underway by 1967, some businesses and residents chose to relocate to suburbs outside of Detroit. In the end, the perception of increased danger, lower commute costs, and a lack of coordination between residents' location plans and those of neighborhood businesses contributed to an acceleration of the outflow of businesses and residents. Home values fell and new residents entering the area had lower incomes on average.

In the decades following the riot, Detroit's landscape continued to show the ensuing scars. Empty lots emerged where businesses and houses once stood. Spreading vacancies resulted, in part, from lower income residents' inability to maintain their homes, lowering the home value. In turn, falling housing prices reduced incentives for builders to undertake new construction. As shown in Figure 3, essentially no new homes were built in Detroit after the early 1970s. This complete and uniform absence of activity over nearly 50 years is a remarkable feature of the city. Furthermore, the abrupt change depicted in Figure 3, rather than a more gradual decline, is suggestive of a switch to a new equilibrium induced by the severity of the Detroit Riot's impact rather than a more progressive transition.<sup>8</sup>

Over time, houses were abandoned, crime rates rose, and tax revenues declined to the point that the city curtailed services to some areas of the city. Under Mayor Dave Bing, proposals to bulldoze tens of thousands of abandoned homes began in an

<sup>8</sup>Detroit's population fell 9.7 percent in the 1950s, and another 9.3 percent in the 1960s. After the Detroit Riot in 1967, population declined by 20.5 percent in the 1970s. This suggests that the riots themselves contributed significantly to a population outflow from the affected neighborhoods, serving as a catalyst for the switch to a new equilibrium (see Manson et al. 2017).

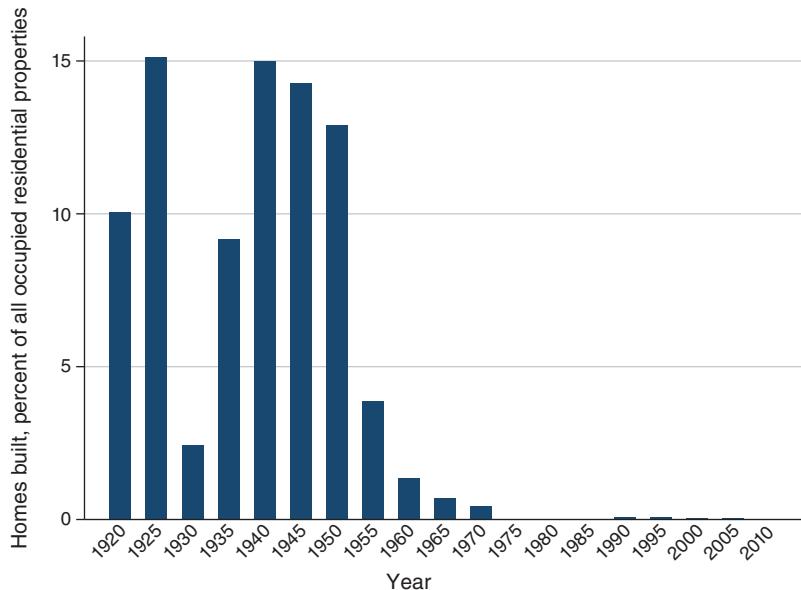


FIGURE 3. CONSTRUCTION OF HOMES IN DETROIT

Source: Southeast Michigan Council of Governments

effort to reduce crime occurring in and around the vacant structures. Proposals from the mayor also suggested clearing sparsely populated areas and relocating remaining residents to more densely populated areas to concentrate the provision of city services to “viable” areas of the city (Bing 2012). But the relocations did not occur, and many blocks adjacent to downtown Detroit remained largely empty. Housing prices fell to essentially zero in some of these areas. As a result, the nation’s once fourth-largest city became the poster child for urban decay.<sup>9</sup> Remarkably, the demise of the city of Detroit has taken place while its broader MSA population has been stable since 1980.<sup>10</sup>

The resulting city structure is presented in Figure 4. The figure classifies the coded census tracts in Detroit and surrounding areas<sup>11</sup> as featuring full residential development, partial residential development, or no residential development (vacant).<sup>12</sup> The census tracts that are labeled vacant largely correspond to the neighborhoods constructed before 1930 (see Figures 2 and 4), and form a rough

<sup>9</sup>The online Appendix shows the distribution of net population change across all cities in the United States (by legal definition according to the US Census) with greater than 25,000 individuals from 1950 to 2010. Detroit saw the most dramatic loss in population among all 445 cities, with more than twice the loss of the city with the third largest population decline, Philadelphia. The five largest population losses over this period are: Detroit, Michigan: -1,135,791; Chicago, Illinois: -925,364; Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: -545,599; St. Louis, Missouri: -537,502; Cleveland, Ohio: -517,993.

<sup>10</sup>Population in the Detroit MSA went from 4.35 million in 1980 to 4.30 million in 2010.

<sup>11</sup>In Figure 4, we define tract 1 as the Central Business District, which contains the headquarters of General Motors. All other tracts are numbered according to the rank of their distance to tract 1.

<sup>12</sup>The methodology underlying this classification is explained in Section III. In practice, tracts that we classify as “vacant” still have some residents living in occupied parcels. However, a large majority of parcels in those tracts are made up of either empty lots or unoccupied residential structures.

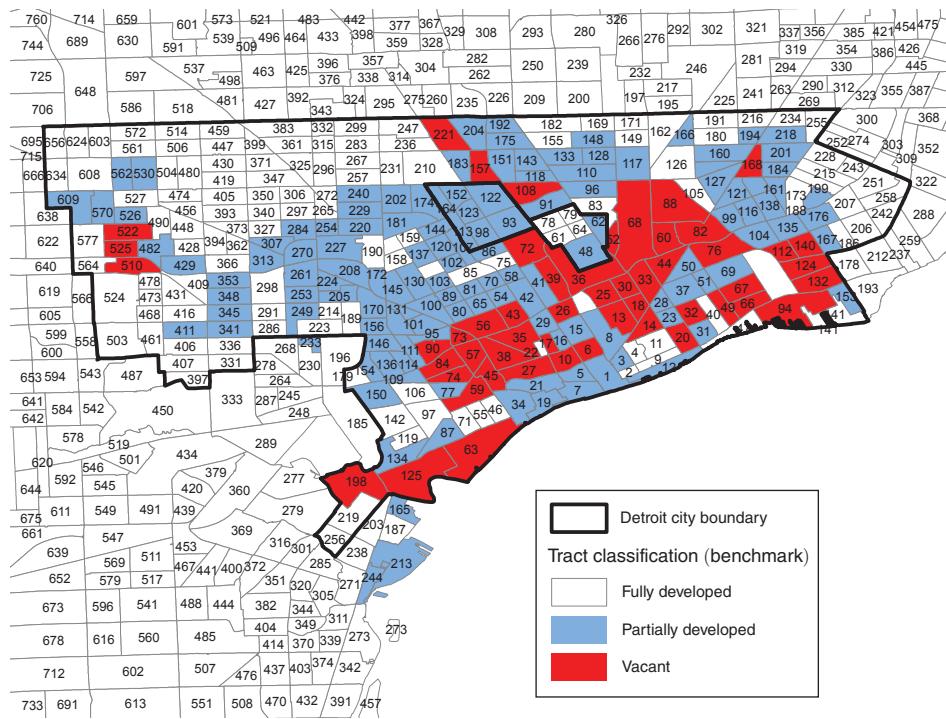


FIGURE 4. EMPTY AND PARTIALLY DEVELOPED CENSUS TRACTS IN DETROIT TODAY

half-ring outside the central business district. In addition, Figure 5 shows that those tracts correspond broadly to areas where structures were most affected by fire damage associated with the Detroit Riot of 1967.<sup>13</sup> These areas also experienced the heaviest population losses in the decade that followed.

## II. The Model

We now explore a spatial framework that will allow us to describe the current state of Detroit quantitatively along various dimensions such as employment, residential population, commuting, and land prices. We then carry out various counterfactual exercises aimed at assessing the effectiveness of different policy proposals.

Consider a city that consists of a set of  $J$  areas located on a two-dimensional surface, indexed by  $j$  (or  $i$ ). Space in these locations can be used for either residential or business purposes, and the amount of space designated for each use is determined by law according to the city's zoning ordinance.<sup>14</sup> We denote by  $\bar{T}_j^b \geq 0$  the total area

<sup>13</sup>The locations of fire damage are available from the Detroit Geographic Expedition, a nonprofit initiative tasked with mapping the state of the city in the aftermath of the 1967 Detroit Riot.

<sup>14</sup>In practice, residential and business uses rarely overlap. In the city of Detroit, 97 percent of residential parcels are located in zoning districts classified as residential, while roughly 80 percent of commercial parcels are located

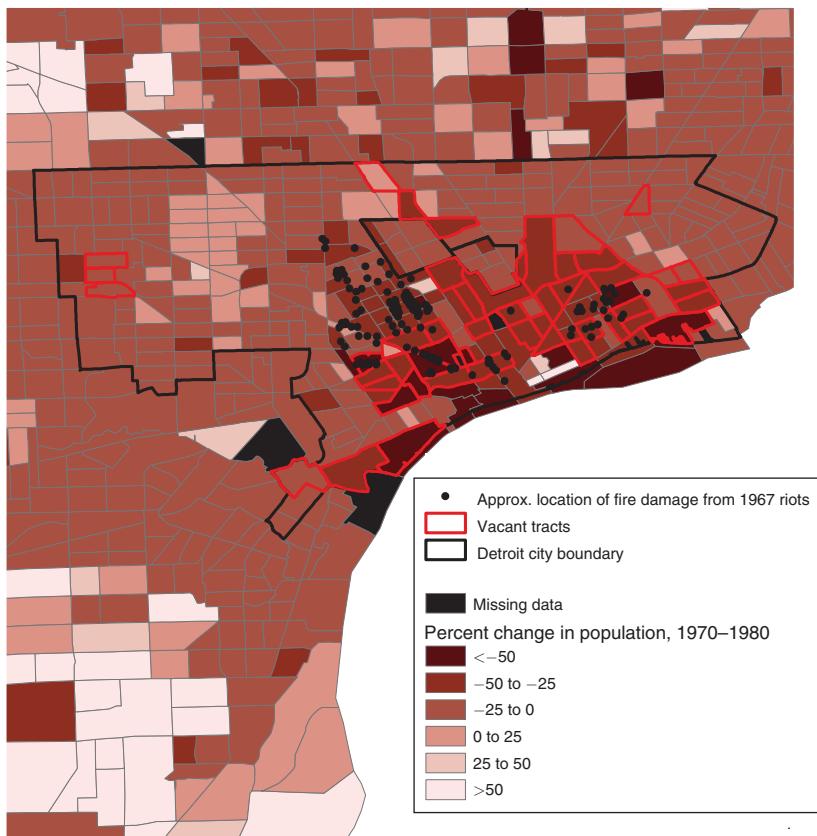


FIGURE 5. LOCATIONS OF FIRE DAMAGE AND POPULATION CHANGES FOLLOWING THE 1967 DETROIT RIOT

Source: Detroit Geographic Expedition and *Detroit Free Press*.

zoned for business land and  $\bar{T}_j^r$  the total area of land zoned for residential purposes at location  $j$ . Actual developed residential land,  $T_j^r$ , is determined in equilibrium, but  $T_j^r \leq \bar{T}_j^r$ . For simplicity, business land is always developed so that  $T_j^b = \bar{T}_j^b$ .<sup>15</sup> Three types of agents live and do business in the city: residents, firms, and residential developers. Individuals can move freely in and out of the city and can obtain expected utility  $\bar{u}$  elsewhere in the economy.<sup>16</sup> If they choose to live in the city, they also decide where to live and work, and how much consumption and housing services to acquire. Firms produce a single consumption good and choose where

in zoning districts classified as commercial. Details of the zoning breakdown of Detroit are described in the online Appendix.

<sup>15</sup>This simplifying assumption reflects our focus on residential development, though our analysis shows that policies that address residential coordination problems also have an effect on business rents.

<sup>16</sup>The model assumes that all individuals are identical up to some idiosyncratic preference for where to live and work. In practice, individuals also differ in their demographics, levels of education, and occupations, which is reflected in their wages. While we abstract from these dimensions in the main analysis, the online Appendix shows that findings obtained with a measure of wages that controls for these additional differences are not materially different from those presented in the main text.

and how much to produce of that good. Residential developers decide where to build housing units that individuals rent to live.

### A. Firms

Firms produce the single consumption good using land and labor and a constant returns to scale technology. Productivity in a location  $j$  is determined by a local component,  $A_j$ , that determines how suitable the location is for goods production, and an agglomeration component determined by the density of employment in the area. This second component constitutes an externality that producers take as given. In particular, if  $L_j$  denotes the total number of workers in location  $j$ , then  $l_j \equiv L_j/T_j^b$  denotes workers per unit of business land in the area, and productivity is given by  $a(l_j; j) = A_j l_j^\alpha$  for  $\alpha > 0$ .

Production per unit of land in the business district of location  $j$  is then given by

$$(1) \quad \frac{Y_j}{T_j^b} \equiv y_j = a\left(\frac{L_j}{T_j^b}; j\right)\left(\frac{L_j}{T_j^b}\right)^\beta \equiv (A_j l_j^\alpha) l_j^\beta.$$

Let  $w_j$  denote the wage in location  $j$ . Then, the problem of firm  $k$  is given by

$$(2) \quad \max_{l_{kj}} a(l_j; j) l_{kj}^{\beta} - w_j l_{kj},$$

where  $l_{kj}$  denotes firm  $k$ 's choice of workers per unit of land. We assume that firms are small and do not internalize the local externality. Hence, firms do not take into account the dependence of productivity on equilibrium density,  $l_j$ . The representative firm's first-order condition is given by

$$(3) \quad \beta a(l_j; j) l_{kj}^{\beta-1} = w_j.$$

Since all producers at  $j$  are identical, in equilibrium  $l_{kj} = l_j$  for all  $k$ . Hence, using  $a(l_j; j) = A_j l_j^\alpha$ ,

$$(4) \quad l_j = \left(\frac{A_j \beta}{w_j}\right)^{\frac{1}{1-\beta-\alpha}},$$

so that local labor demand at  $j$  is given by

$$(5) \quad L_j = \left(\frac{A_j \beta}{w_j}\right)^{\frac{1}{1-\beta-\alpha}} T_j^b.$$

Throughout the paper, we assume that  $1 - \beta > \alpha$  to guarantee that local labor demand is downward sloping. Namely, the congestion force, governed by the share of land in production,  $(1 - \beta)$ , that determines the decreasing returns to labor, is stronger than the agglomeration force, determined by the elasticity of productivity with respect to employment density,  $\alpha$ .

Firms compete for land and are willing to bid for business land at  $j$  until they make zero profits. Hence, the commercial rent at  $j$  is

$$(6) \quad q_j^b = (1 - \beta) A_j^{\frac{1}{1-\beta-\alpha}} \left( \frac{\beta}{w_j} \right)^{\frac{\beta+\alpha}{1-\beta-\alpha}}.$$

We assume that business land is owned by absentee landlords.

### B. Individuals

Agents consume goods and housing at their residential location and commute to a business area where they receive a wage. Agents experience their place of residence differently depending on local residential amenities. Amenities depend on the characteristics of the neighborhood—for example, its beauty or convenience—as well as on the number of other residents living in the area,  $R_j$ . In addition, agents are allowed to have idiosyncratic preferences for particular residence-work combinations as in Monte, Redding, and Rossi-Hansberg (2018).

The preferences of an individual living in location  $j$  (with  $R_j$  residents) and working in  $i$ , who consumes  $C_{ij}$  goods, lives in a house that provides housing services given by  $H_{ij}$ , and has idiosyncratic preference for the residence-work pair  $ij$  parametrized by  $s_{ij}$ , is given by

$$(7) \quad U_{ij}(s_{ij}) = \frac{s_{ij} B(R_j; j)}{\kappa_{ij}} \left( \frac{C_{ij}}{\gamma} \right)^\gamma \left( \frac{H_{ij}}{1 - \gamma} \right)^{1-\gamma}.$$

Commuting costs are expressed in utility terms and given by  $\kappa_{ij} \geq 1$ , with  $\kappa_{jj} = 1$ . In particular, commuting costs reduce utility except for agents who work where they live.<sup>17</sup> Residential amenities at location  $j$  are given by  $B(R_j; j)$ , and depend on the number of agents who decide to locate in the neighborhood: a housing externality (as in Rossi-Hansberg, Sarte, and Owens 2010).

As a benchmark, we let  $B_j(R_j; j) = R_j^{\sigma_j}$  so that amenities are mainly related to the number of residents, which we take to reflect individuals' satisfaction in the ability to interact with neighbors and join community groups, or the notion that the number of residents lowers the cost of community services or infrastructure, or discourages crime. In this specification, variations in the characteristics of individual neighborhoods are captured by differences in the elasticity of amenities with respect to residents. Thus, some urban neighborhoods might depend heavily on density-driven externalities, while other more suburban neighborhoods might appeal less to this feature as an amenity. We also explore an alternative case in which variations in location-specific amenities in part reflect exogenous attributes of each location,  $B_j$ , such as the convenience of a particular neighborhood or the characteristics of its

<sup>17</sup> We abstract from joint household decisions with respect to commuting in that workers only take into account their own commute. However, the dataset we describe includes data on all workers and so households with two workers have both represented.

vegetation or views, where  $B_j(R_j; j) = B_j R_j^\sigma$ .<sup>18</sup> We describe below in detail how we address these two cases empirically, and the kinds of neighborhood characteristics that might be included in  $B_j$ , as well as their implications for our findings. For now, in the way that we describe and solve the model in the main text, we proceed with our benchmark assumption. Throughout, we assume that the congestion force embedded in rising housing demand as the number of residents increases (governed by the parameter  $1 - \gamma$ ), with corresponding increasing rents, is dominated by the externality in amenities governed by  $\sigma_j$ . That is, we assume that  $\sigma_j > 1 - \gamma$  for all  $j$ . The implication is that neighborhood demand by residents is an increasing function of its number of residents, as we show below.

Individuals have idiosyncratic preferences for residing in location  $j$  and working in location  $i$ . We assume that  $s$  is drawn from a Fréchet distribution with scale parameter specific to the residence-work location pair,  $\lambda_{ij} > 0$ , and shape parameter  $\theta > 0$ . Namely,

$$(8) \quad \Pr(s_{ij} \leq s) = e^{-\lambda_{ij}s^{-\theta}}.$$

This random idiosyncratic component captures individual-specific reasons that make particular residence-work locations appealing beyond those we model directly, such as wages in the place of work compared to rents in the place of residence, or the commuting costs between the two locations. The scale parameter  $\lambda_{ij}$  in (8) determines the average idiosyncratic utility from working in  $i$  when commuting from  $j$ , and the shape parameter  $\theta$  governs the dispersion of the idiosyncratic component of utility.<sup>19</sup>

Conditional on living in  $j$  and working in  $i$ , the problem of a resident having drawn idiosyncratic utility component  $s$  is given by

$$(9) \quad U_{ij}(s) = \max_{C_{ij}, H_{ij}} \frac{sB(R_j; j)}{\kappa_{ij}} \left( \frac{C_{ij}(s)}{\gamma} \right)^\gamma \left( \frac{H_{ij}(s)}{1 - \gamma} \right)^{1-\gamma}$$

subject to

$$w_i = q_j^r H_{ij}(s) + C_{ij}(s),$$

where  $q_j^r$  is the price of a unit of housing services at  $j$ . We normalize the price of goods in the city to one. Since we assume that transport costs for goods within the city are negligible, the price of goods in all neighborhoods is the same. Hence,

$$(10) \quad C_{ij} = \gamma w_i \quad \text{and} \quad H_{ij} = \frac{(1 - \gamma) w_i}{q_j^r}.$$

<sup>18</sup>This specification is similar to that in Fu and Gregory (2019), which focuses on a city's rebuilding after a disaster rather than the more persistent distress seen in Detroit. In the case of New Orleans and Hurricane Katrina, analyzed by Fu and Gregory (2019), the relevant amenities might include neighborhood flood exposure, and might also depend on the number of pre-disaster residents observed coming back and rebuilding.

<sup>19</sup>Note that  $\lambda_{ij}$  and  $\kappa_{ij}$  are, in general, not independently identified. In the application below, we use commuting cost data to determine  $\kappa_{ij}$ , and identify the  $\lambda_{ij}$  needed to match commuting flows.

Observe that, as the notation recognizes in (10), consumption and housing choices do not depend on the realization of idiosyncratic preferences  $s$ . Thus, the indirect utility function,  $U_{ij}(\cdot)$ , is simply given by

$$(11) \quad U_{ij}(s) = \frac{s R_j^{\sigma_j} w_i (q_j^r)^{\gamma-1}}{\kappa_{ij}}.$$

*Commuting Patterns.*—Given that the idiosyncratic preferences of individuals are drawn from the distribution in (8), the indirect utility derived in (11) implies that

$$(12) \quad \Pr(U_{ij} < u) = e^{-\Phi_{ij} u^{-\theta}}, \quad \text{where} \quad \Phi_{ij} = \lambda_{ij} \left( \frac{R_j^{\sigma_j} w_i (q_j^r)^{\gamma-1}}{\kappa_{ij}} \right)^\theta.$$

Standard manipulations then yield an expression for the expected utility of living in  $j$ ,  $U_j$ , as a function of the weighted sum of the utilities gained from commuting to the different business areas (raised to the  $\theta$ ). Namely,

$$(13) \quad U_j = \Gamma\left(\frac{\theta-1}{\theta}\right) R_j^{\sigma_j} (q_j^r)^{\gamma-1} \left( \sum_{i=1}^J \lambda_{ij} \left( \frac{w_i}{\kappa_{ij}} \right)^\theta \right)^{\frac{1}{\theta}},$$

where  $\Gamma$  is the gamma function.

Let  $\pi_{ij}$  represent the proportion of residents living in  $j$  that commute to  $i$ . Then, if  $R_{ij}$  is the number of residents in  $j$  commuting to the business area of location  $i$ ,  $R_{ij} = \pi_{ij} R_j$ , and  $\sum_{i=1}^J \pi_{ij} = 1$  for  $j = 1, \dots, J$ . Since agents choose freely their optimal residence-work pair,

$$(14) \quad \pi_{ij} = \Pr\left[U_{ij} > \max_{n \neq i} \{U_{nj}\}\right]$$

so that<sup>20</sup>

$$(15) \quad \pi_{ij} = \frac{\lambda_{ij} (w_i / \kappa_{ij})^\theta}{\sum_{n=1}^J \lambda_{nj} (w_n / \kappa_{nj})^\theta}.$$

The proportion of those living in  $j$  who commute to  $i$  for work depends on wages earned in  $i$ , net of commuting costs, relative to average net wages from commuting elsewhere (raised to the  $\theta$ ). Note that the agglomeration effects on amenities by way of  $R_j$  do not affect commuting patterns from  $j$  to  $i$  since all residents of  $j$  experience the same externality equally. The characteristics of  $j$  determine the number of residents, but not where they work.

<sup>20</sup>See Monte, Redding, and Rossi-Hansberg (2018), among others, for a derivation of this result.

*The Residential Market.*—Condition (10) determines housing consumption for those living in  $j$  and commuting to  $i$ ,  $H_{ij}$ . Thus, average housing per resident in area  $j$ ,  $H_j$ , is given by

$$(16) \quad H_j = \sum_{i=1}^J \pi_{ij} H_{ij} = \frac{(1-\gamma)}{q_j^r} \sum_{i=1}^J \pi_{ij} w_i.$$

Since  $T_j^r$  denotes the total number of units of “developed” residential land in location  $j$ , equilibrium in the residential market  $j$  implies that

$$(17) \quad R_j H_j = T_j^r.$$

Thus, residential land rents are such that

$$(18) \quad q_j^r = \frac{(1-\gamma) R_j}{T_j^r} \sum_{i=1}^J \pi_{ij} w_i.$$

Residential land rents increase with the number of residents, decrease with total land developed, and increase with total expenditures by commuters living in the neighborhood, as expected. Observe that  $\sum_{i=1}^J \pi_{ij} w_i$  can alternatively be interpreted as the average wage of location  $j$  residents (where the weights are given by the proportion of residents commuting to each area  $i$  for work).

We model an open city where individuals can move in and out freely and obtain utility  $\bar{u}$  elsewhere in the economy. Hence, if an area within the city has a positive number of residents, it must be the case that  $U_j \geq \bar{u}$ . Using (13), as well as our assumption that  $\sigma_j > 1 - \gamma$  for all  $j$ , we conclude that a neighborhood is viable only if

$$(19) \quad R_j \geq \left( \frac{\bar{u} (1-\gamma) \left\{ \sum_{i=1}^J \pi_{ij} w_i \right\}^{1-\gamma}}{\Gamma\left(\frac{\theta-1}{\theta}\right) (T_j^r)^{1-\gamma} \left[ \sum_{i=1}^J \lambda_{ij} (w_i / \kappa_{ij})^\theta \right]^{\frac{1}{\theta}}} \right)^{\frac{1}{\sigma_j + \gamma - 1}}.$$

Conditional on the amount of developed residential land,  $T_j^r$ , commuting flows,  $\pi_{ij}$ , and wages,  $w_i$ , the number of residents needed to make a neighborhood viable increases with  $\bar{u}$  and with a uniform increase in commuting costs  $\kappa_{ij}$ . Conditional on commuting flows and wages, an increase in developed residential land,  $T_j^r$ , lowers residential rents, and thus makes the need for residential amenities provided by the number of residents less stringent. Conditional on developed residential land and commuting flows, a uniform increase in wages lowers the number of residents needed to make the neighborhood viable. We denote by  $J - \underline{J}$  the number of areas that are viable. These are able to attract the required number of residents and, for these areas, (19) holds with equality. It follows that  $J - \underline{J}$  areas have no residents in equilibrium. We discuss multiplicity in the neighborhood equilibrium in detail below.

### C. Residential Developers

There is a large number of small residential developers, none of which is large enough to internalize residential externalities. Let  $h_j$  denote the number of units of land developed by residential developers active in neighborhood  $j$ . Suppose further that the cost associated with developing  $h_j$  units of land is given by a convex variable cost,  $V(h_j)$ , that we specify as  $V(h_j) = Vh_j^v$  for  $v > 1$ , in addition to a location-specific fixed cost,  $F_j > 0$ . Residential developers then maximize

$$(20) \quad \Pi_j = \max_{h_j} q_j^r h_j - V(h_j) - F_j = \max_{h_j} q_j^r h_j - Vh_j^v - F_j,$$

so that, if  $h_j > 0$ ,

$$(21) \quad q_j^r = vVh_j^{v-1} \Leftrightarrow h_j = \left(\frac{q_j^r}{vV}\right)^{\frac{1}{v-1}}.$$

Developers enter as long as profits are nonnegative, so that  $h_j > 0$  if  $\Pi_j \geq 0$ , or alternatively,

$$(22) \quad h_j q_j^r \geq Vh_j^v + F_j.$$

Substituting for  $h_j$  from the first-order condition, and residential land rents in equation (18),  $\Pi_j \geq 0$  implies that

$$(23) \quad R_j \geq \frac{vV\left(\frac{F_j}{(v-1)V}\right)^{\frac{1}{v-1}}}{(1-\gamma)\sum_{i=1}^J \pi_{ij} w_i} T_j^r.$$

Hence, an individual developer will only invest in developing residential land if the density of residents,  $R_j/T_j^r$ , which determines residential prices, is large enough relative to the local fixed costs,  $F_j$ . These costs would typically include getting the land ready for residential development, the installation of utilities such as water services and sanitary sewer systems, the building of access roads and sidewalks if needed, as well as the handling of permits and legal fees, the design of the development, etc. Condition (23) implies that the number of residents required for developers to be willing to invest in a given location is increasing in the amount of developed residential land, in equilibrium and in the fixed costs of developing residential properties in that location. This is intuitive since developers need high enough demand to cover the fixed costs given the increasing returns in their technology.

Equilibrium in the residential market implies that

$$(24) \quad n_j h_j = R_j H_j = T_j^r \leq \bar{T}_j^r,$$

where  $n_j$  is the number of active residential developers and  $\bar{T}_j^r$  is the upper bound on residential development in  $j$ , assumed to be dictated by zoning ordinance. Since total

developed land is given by  $T_j^r = n_j h_j \leq \bar{T}_j^r$ , substituting from (21), we obtain that the number of active developers is given by

$$(25) \quad n_j = \frac{(T_j^r)^{\frac{v}{v-1}}}{\left(\frac{(1-\gamma)}{vV} R_j \sum_{i=1}^J \pi_{ij} w_i\right)^{\frac{1}{v-1}}}$$

if condition (23) is satisfied, and  $n_j = 0$  otherwise.

#### D. Neighborhood Residential Equilibrium

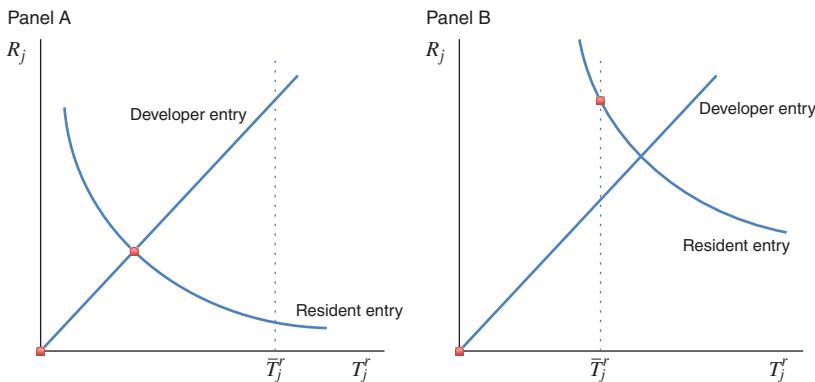
Having described the actions of agents in our economy, we are ready to discuss the determination of the number of residents,  $R_j$ , and the amount of residential land,  $T_j^r$ , in different neighborhoods  $j \in J$ , given the characteristics of the city summarized by the model's parameters, the utility level  $\bar{u}$ , wages  $\{w_i\}_1^J$ , and commuting patterns,  $\{\pi_{ij}\}_{11}^{JJ}$ . The two key conditions in this respect are those that determine resident entry, (19), and developer entry, (23).

In viable neighborhoods, where the number of residents is positive, a neighborhood equilibrium always makes agents indifferent among their location choices, which implies that condition (19) holds with equality. As discussed above, this condition implies a negative relationship between the number of residents,  $R_j$ , and total developed land in the neighborhood. In Figure 6, we illustrate this relationship using the downward sloping curve labeled "Resident Entry."

Consider now developer entry. As explained above, developers enter if condition (23) is satisfied. In a viable neighborhood, either condition (23) is satisfied with equality or the residential zoning constraint binds, so that  $T_j^r = \bar{T}_j^r$ . Consider first the former case, which is depicted in the left panel of Figure 6. The relationship in (23) is a straight upward sloping line starting from the origin. The crossing between the two curves in the left panel of Figure 6 determines one of the neighborhood equilibria.<sup>21</sup> In this case, the zoning restriction does not bind and we refer to such a neighborhood equilibrium as an area that is partially developed or semi-developed. This equilibrium is depicted by one of the red dots in the left panel of Figure 6.

The crossing between these two curves could be such that the resulting amount of developed land violates the zoning restriction. In that case, the number of residents is determined by the crossing between the zoning constraint and the resident entry condition. The developer entry condition is then satisfied with strict inequality and developers potentially make positive profits. Other developers might wish to enter the neighborhood, given the number of residents, but the amount of residential land available for development is exhausted. We refer to neighborhoods that are in this situation as fully developed areas. The equilibrium is depicted as one of the red dots in the right panel of Figure 6.

<sup>21</sup>The diagrams in Figure 6 take as given wages and commuting patterns and so cannot be used alone to make certain arguments. For example, neighborhood equilibrium stability arguments, where a new resident or developer enters or leaves (as an out of equilibrium deviation), would change wages and commuting patterns and thereby shift the resident and developer entry conditions themselves.

FIGURE 6. DETERMINATION OF  $R_j$  AND  $T_j^r$  WHEN  $T_j^r < \bar{T}_j^r$  (LEFT) OR  $T_j^r = \bar{T}_j^r$  (RIGHT)

Conditional on wages and commuting patterns, an equilibrium with developed land and positive numbers of residents always exists and is unique, independent of whether the zoning constraint is binding or not. The reason is that the developer entry condition is continuous, upward sloping, linear, and starts from the origin, while the resident entry condition is continuous, downward sloping, positive, and bounded away from zero. The Intermediate Value Theorem then implies that the two curves cross, and the shape of the curves imply that they cross only once, so that a neighborhood equilibrium with positive  $R_j$  and  $T_j^r$  exists and is unique.

In either case, however, there always exists an additional equilibrium that describes a nonviable neighborhood, specifically an equilibrium where  $R_j = T_j^r = 0$ . The reason is that residential externalities are such that if  $R_j = 0$ , the utility that agents derive from living in the neighborhood is also zero. That is,  $B_j(0; j) = 0$ . At the same time, when  $R_j = 0$  developers supply zero developed land. Therefore, the nonviable allocation is always an equilibrium. It follows that every neighborhood in the city, independent of its fundamental characteristics, might be in an equilibrium where residents and developers coordinate and make it viable, or one in which they fail to coordinate and the neighborhood is vacant. Put another way, in order for an area to coordinate on the equilibrium with positive development, enough developers have to expect that others will also invest, and that a sufficient number of residents will populate the neighborhood. This, in turn, requires that enough residents expect other residents to want to live in the developed neighborhood.

In the coordinated equilibrium, the fundamental characteristics of a given neighborhood ultimately determine the number of residents and amount of developed land required to remain viable. Neighborhoods with relatively good fundamentals (e.g., a low  $F_j$ , or uniformly low  $\kappa_{ij}$ ) require small numbers of residents and developed land to become or remain viable. In contrast, neighborhoods with poor fundamentals need much more coordination as the required magnitude of the external effect on amenities is larger to compensate for the poor fundamentals.<sup>22</sup> We now

<sup>22</sup>Other neighborhood characteristics, such as crime, city services, and even peoples' perceptions, might be captured in reduced form through  $\sigma_j$ , although  $F_j$  or  $\kappa_{ij}$  could capture them partially as well.

proceed to solve for the values of  $R_j$  and  $T_j^r$  in the coordinated equilibrium for the cases of fully and partially developed areas.

*The Case of Fully Developed Areas.*—Consider first the case in which  $T_j^r = \bar{T}_j^r$ . We let  $\Omega^F = \{j \mid T_j^r = \bar{T}_j^r\}$  denote the set of all locations that end up fully developed in equilibrium. This is the case depicted in Figure 6. Since residents can move freely across different areas of the city, condition (19) evaluated at  $\bar{T}_j^r$  has to hold with equality. Namely,

$$(26) \quad R_j = \left( \frac{\bar{u} (1 - \gamma)^{1-\gamma} \left\{ \sum_{i=1}^J \pi_{ij} w_i \right\}^{1-\gamma}}{\Gamma\left(\frac{\theta-1}{\theta}\right) (\bar{T}_j^r)^{1-\gamma} \left[ \sum_{i=1}^J \lambda_{ij} (w_i / \kappa_{ij})^\theta \right]^{\frac{1}{\theta}}} \right)^{\frac{1}{\sigma_j + \gamma - 1}}.$$

From equation (18), we also know that for all  $j \in \Omega^F$ ,

$$(27) \quad q_j^r = (1 - \gamma) \frac{R_j}{\bar{T}_j^r} \sum_{i=1}^J \pi_{ij} w_i.$$

In these locations, since all available land for potential development is already built up, developers may earn strictly positive rents, and so condition (23) will hold with strict inequality, as depicted in Figure 6. Furthermore, residential land rents in fully developed tracts are determined by demand for residential properties rather than the cost of developing residential housing.

*The Case of Partially Developed Areas.*—Consider now the case of neighborhoods in which the zoning constraint is not binding, so  $T_j^r < \bar{T}_j^r$ . We denote the set of these locations as  $\Omega^S = \{j \mid T_j^r < \bar{T}_j^r\}$  and refer to them as semi-developed or partially developed. This is the case depicted in Figure 6. As discussed above, in this case, both (19) and (23) hold with equality. Furthermore, equations (18) and (23) may be combined to give a simple expression for (per unit) residential prices:

$$(28) \quad q_j^r = \nu V \left( \frac{F_j}{(\nu - 1)V} \right)^{\frac{v-1}{v}}.$$

Thus, rents across partially developed neighborhoods vary only because of variation in the fixed costs of developing residential land.

Solving for  $T_j^r$  from equations (19) and (23) gives

$$(29) \quad T_j^r = \left( \frac{\bar{u} (1 - \gamma)^{1-\gamma} \left[ \left( \frac{(\nu - 1)V}{F_j} \right)^{\frac{v-1}{v}} \left( \frac{1 - \gamma}{\nu V} \right) \right]^{\sigma_j + \gamma - 1}}{\Gamma\left(\frac{\theta-1}{\theta}\right) \left\{ \sum_{i=1}^J \lambda_{ij} [w_i / \kappa_{ij}]^\theta \right\}^{\frac{1}{\theta}}} \right)^{\frac{1}{\sigma_j}}$$

where  $T_j^r < \bar{T}_j^r$ . Hence,  $T_j^r$  increases with  $\bar{u}$ , and decreases with  $F_j$ . Note also that a uniform increase in wages,  $\{w_i\}_1^J$ , that leaves commuting patterns constant per

equation (15), decreases  $T_j^r$  if  $\sigma_j < 1$ , leaves it unchanged if  $\sigma_j = 1$ , and increases developed residential land if  $\sigma_j > 1$ . In our quantitative application to Detroit data below, we obtain that  $\sigma_j < 1$  for virtually all neighborhoods, so that residential development,  $T_j^r$ , decreases with wages.<sup>23</sup> This finding is natural; consider a city in which many neighborhoods are not viable because coordination has failed. Since employment opportunities are still available, equilibrium wages will tend to be high throughout the city since residential rents in viable neighborhoods are relatively high. The resulting lower  $T_j^r$  then implies that the level of coordination needed to develop neighborhoods is then lower, all else equal. This mechanism does not necessarily guarantee that coordination will be more pervasive; such an outcome would depend in part on the factors affecting equilibrium selection, including the policies we discuss below. However, all else equal, any attempt to coordinate the relevant agents is likely to be less costly in such a scenario. The response of the neighborhood equilibrium to a uniform increase in wages is illustrated in the left panel of Figure 7.

Another interesting comparative static relates to decreases in  $\kappa_{ij}$ , particularly given the availability of a vast set of limited access highways that reduce commuting costs between Detroit's central business district and its suburbs. A decline in some  $\kappa_{ij}$  reduces  $T_j^r$ . Hence, it is conceivable that these highways had the effect of reducing coordination issues in the suburbs and, through general equilibrium effects on wages, increasing the level of coordination needed in neighborhoods close to downtown areas. The right panel of Figure 7 illustrates the change in neighborhood equilibrium resulting from changes in commuting costs.

It is conceivable that developers might try to solve the coordination problem themselves. To do so, they have two options. First, a developer could internalize the externality and develop the neighborhood herself, or try to coordinate with other developers. Developing alone, whereby  $n_j = 1$ , implies that the individual would entirely bear the increasing marginal costs given  $v > 1$ . Furthermore, in that scenario, a potential competitor operating at an optimal scale would undermine the developer with lower rents, leading to losses for that developer. Second, since  $v > 1$ , multiple developers, whereby  $n_j > 1$ , would also lack the incentives to coordinate either among themselves or with additional developers. Attempting to do so would entail some coordination costs, including those such as providing a financial guarantee and monitoring. If the constraint on available land fails to bind, developers obtain zero operating profits which would then lead to a net loss when coordination costs are taken into account. In contrast, if after the coordination effort, the neighborhood becomes fully developed, such coordination would result in rents that could cover these costs. This logic implies that neighborhoods trapped in the equilibrium without development likely have fundamentals that, in the alternative coordination equilibrium, would result only in partial development and zero profits for developers. In quantifying our framework below, we show that this intuition

<sup>23</sup>In the quantitative application to Detroit that we present in the next section, the mean of  $\sigma_j$  is 0.570, with a standard deviation of 0.046, a minimum of 0.446, and a maximum of 1.024. We only found one census tract for which  $\sigma_j > 1$ .

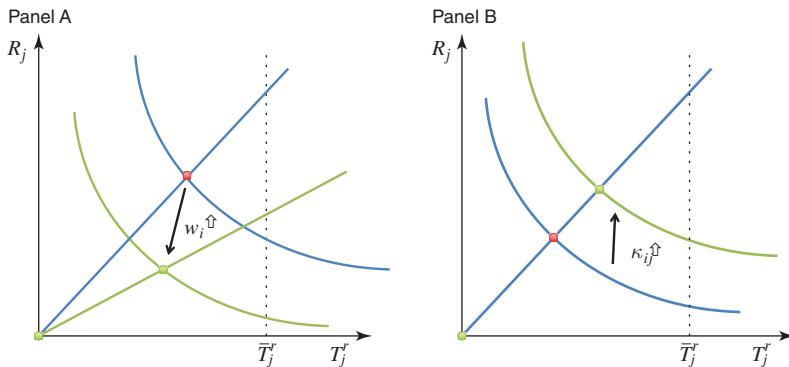


FIGURE 7. NEIGHBORHOOD EQUILIBRIUM AND AN INCREASE IN ALL WAGES (LEFT) OR COMMUTING COSTS (RIGHT)

exactly matches what transpires with all of the vacant neighborhoods when development guarantees are used to solve the coordination problem.

### E. The City Equilibrium

The above discussion determines  $R_j$  and  $T_j^r$  given  $\bar{u}$ , wages  $\{w_i\}_1^J$ , and commuting patterns,  $\{\pi_{ij}\}_{11}^{JJ}$ . We now proceed to discuss the citywide equilibrium where wages and commuting patterns are endogenous. Since transport costs of goods are assumed to be negligible, and we have normalized the price of goods throughout the city to one, the goods market equilibrium is guaranteed by Walras' law. The only remaining market to clear is the labor market.

Equilibrium in the labor market is guaranteed when, for each business area  $i \in J$ , labor supply is equal to labor demand. Labor supply in neighborhood  $i$  is the sum of the flows of workers commuting from all neighborhoods, specifically  $\sum_{j=1}^J \pi_{ij} R_j$ . Labor demand is, in turn, given by firms' choices in each location  $i$  derived in (5). Hence, equilibrium in the labor market is guaranteed by  $L_i = \sum_{j=1}^J \pi_{ij} R_j$  for all  $i \in J$ , or

$$(30) \quad \left( \frac{A_i \beta}{w_i} \right)^{\frac{1}{1-\beta-\alpha}} T_i^b = \sum_{j=1}^J \pi_{ij} R_j \quad \text{for all } i \in J.$$

Labor demand on the left-hand side is decreasing in  $w_i$  given our maintained assumption that  $1 - \beta > \alpha$ . Labor supply on the right-hand side, in contrast, is more difficult to characterize since it depends on the number of developed tracts,  $J$ , which itself depends on the distribution of wages in equilibrium. In general, however, higher wages will increase labor supply by attracting more residents to the city and to nearby residential neighborhoods, and by lowering the number of residents needed to make neighborhoods viable.

We can substitute (19) with equality for the  $J$  viable neighborhoods in (30), and set  $R_j = 0$  for the remaining neighborhoods, to obtain a system of equations in  $w_i$ ,  $i = 1, \dots, J$ , given the amount of land in business and residential uses as well as commuting patterns throughout the city. The amount of land devoted to business

use is exogenous,  $T_i^b$ , and residential land in viable neighborhoods,  $T_j^r$ , is given by equation (29). Finally, we can substitute equation (15), that determines commuting patterns as a function of wages, for  $\pi_{ij}$  in equations (29) and (30). The result is a system of  $J$  equations in the  $J$  unknown wages. To the extent some subset  $I \subset J$  of tracts does not contain any business activity,  $T_i^b = 0$  and  $\pi_{ij} = 0$  in those tracts, so that (30) holds trivially for  $i \in I$  within this system of equations. The solution to this set of equations characterizes the citywide equilibrium. Online Appendix A provides a description of the algorithm used to compute this solution.<sup>24</sup>

By its nature, the model features multiple equilibria in that any neighborhood may find itself in either a developed or undeveloped state. More subtly, however, conditional on a citywide distribution of developed and vacant neighborhoods, there may also be more than one set of equilibrium allocations and wages consistent with that distribution. We explore this possibility by considering different initial guesses of the wage vector used in the solution algorithm. We find that in all the cases we consider, the algorithm converges to the same citywide equilibrium regardless of the initial guess for the wage vector. Details are provided in online Appendix A.

### III. Quantitative Application

We make use of current data on various aspects of Detroit to quantify the spatial urban framework described above. The benchmark year in our analysis is 2014. Our analysis is carried out at the census tract level, since this is the smallest spatial unit for which we can assemble an accurate and complete matching dataset. Thus an area or neighborhood in the theory above is associated with a census tract in Detroit's metropolitan area. Our analysis covers the 297 census tracts in Detroit, as well as the surrounding adjacent metro area (Wayne County, Oakland County, and Macomb County), which includes 866 additional tracts. We exclude 12 tracts owing to missing or problematic data, and carry out the analysis on the remaining 1,151 tracts. We aim to find values of the underlying characteristics of neighborhoods (amenities, technology, fixed costs, externalities, and residential zoning) for each one of these tracts that rationalize, in our framework, the available data on Detroit. Below, we give a brief description of the various data sources that provide information on the variables of interest, and a detailed discussion of all data definitions and manipulations is provided in the online Appendix.

The data on the number of residents,  $R_j$ , workers,  $L_j$ , and pairwise commuting patterns,  $\pi_{ij}$ , is available from the Longitudinal Employer-Household Dynamics (LEHD), Origin-Destination Employment Statistics (LODES). These data are broken down into different classifications for job types including all private and federal jobs. Wages,  $w_j$ , are primarily determined using monthly wage bins provided by

<sup>24</sup>So far we have assumed that individuals can flow freely in and out of the city: an open city. In the online Appendix we also consider the case of a closed city whereby total population,  $R = \sum_{j=1}^J R_j$ , remains constant. In such a case, instead of having a fixed utility level determined in the wider economy, we let  $\bar{u}$  be determined endogenously so that total population is equal to the observed total population in the city. This case is more pertinent in the short run, when development guarantees may affect the relocation choices of some individuals moving within the region but are unlikely to cause many people to move into the region from outside it. In contrast, the open city setup that serves as our benchmark represents a steady state that incorporates all the general equilibrium effects spurred by the guarantees.

the LODES dataset, and are also complemented with data from the ZIP Business Patterns published by the United States (US) Census Bureau. The complement, in particular, provides an additional bin at the upper end of the distribution, with an upper bound set to \$87,560 per year.<sup>25</sup>

Information on developed residential land,  $T_j^r$ , commercial land,  $T_j^b$ , and residential prices,  $q_j^r$ , is available at the parcel level from several different sources of microdata. The sources include Detroit's Assessment Office, Wayne County's Office of Equalization and Assessment, Oakland County's Office of Economic Affairs and Community Development, and CoreLogic for Macomb County.<sup>26</sup>

Our primary source for measuring commuting costs between census tracts,  $k_{ij}$ , is Google Analytics. In particular, the Application Programming Interface (API) for Google Maps Distance allows the user to specify one-among-many different possible travel methods between any two coordinates (or addresses)—1,151<sup>2</sup> such pairs, in our case. We consider the fastest driving route suggested by the API and do not impose any restrictions, such as avoiding major highways or tolls. Data on both time and distance take into account historical traffic patterns and geography by way of existing road networks.<sup>27</sup>

Finally, we make use of data on active building and demolition permits from Detroit's Demolition Program and Detroit's Buildings, Safety, and Environment Department. This information helps us identify the number of unique contractors in a given census tract,  $n_j$ , with at least one currently active permit. An active permit is any permit issued up until our benchmark year (2014) and still active from that year onward.

<sup>25</sup>The LODES data, available from the Census Bureau's website (<https://lehd.ces.census.gov/data/>), combine state-level administrative data for counts of all jobs (wage and salaried) for states participating in the Longitudinal Employer Household Dynamics program. The data, which contain residences for workers, cover approximately 95 percent of all private sector jobs and a majority of civilian federal employment. Additionally, LODES uses data on active establishments for employers from the Quarterly Census of Employment and Wages (Graham, Kutzbach, and McKenzie 2014), which report data on the number of workers by establishment and establishment location. In the case where an employer reports multiple establishments, states do not report specific employer-establishment locations for individual workers, with the exception of Minnesota. Instead, workers are assigned to the main physical (administrative or HQ) address of the employer (Graham, Kutzbach, and McKenzie 2014; Abowd et al. 2005).

Between 60 to 70 percent of all employees work for employers that report only one establishment. This implies that, in the case of Detroit, we have the exact residence-workplace pair for these workers without having to rely on any kind of imputation.

The remaining 30 to 40 percent of employment belongs to employers that report more than one establishment (Graham, Kutzbach, and McKenzie 2014; Abowd et al. 2005). In this case, LODES assigns workers to a specific establishment for their employer using a probability distribution. Specifically, the probability that a worker is assigned to an establishment is based on (i) the proportion of employees at that establishment relative to all establishments for that employer, and (ii) the great-circle distance from that location's establishment to the worker's residence, relative to all other establishments for that employer (see Abowd et al. 2005 for a full description of the imputation method). Importantly, note that in the case of Detroit, both of these variables or arguments reflect actual Detroit data and not Minnesota data. Minnesota state data are only used to calibrate the parameters of the probability distribution (Graham, Kutzbach, and McKenzie 2014; Abowd et al. 2005).

<sup>26</sup>The advantage of assessors' data is that they exist for the universe of parcels in the Detroit area. However, it can take time for assessors' values to catch up to changes in housing market conditions. For most but not all parcels, CoreLogic has both transactions data and assessors' value in 2014, the most recent sale price and sale date. Among houses sold in 2014, the match between assessors' and transaction prices is generally close (with a correlation of 0.87). Discrepancies arise predominantly for homes with very low sales prices (below \$10,000). That said, many of these homes are located in vacant tracts that the model treats as "empty" in the benchmark equilibrium.

<sup>27</sup>Interestingly, commute data between census tracts are not entirely symmetric in the sense that  $k_{ij}$  can differ significantly from  $k_{ji}$ . For instance, one-way streets and other asymmetries in the road network can lead to differences of ten minutes or more for about 5,800 commute pairs.

### A. Vacant, Partially Developed, and Fully Developed Locations

An important step in matching our model to observed allocations in the city of Detroit is to designate particular tracts as fully developed, partially developed, or vacant. In particular, we need to partition the complete set of tracts,  $\Omega$ , into sets  $\Omega = \Omega^F \cup \Omega^S \cup \Omega^V$ , where  $\Omega^V$  denotes the set of vacant tracts. Note that this classification refers only to residential development in the different tracts. In Detroit, all tracts (except for one) contain business areas with positive measured employment.

*Vacant Tracts.*—We start by describing our methodology to select the tracts  $j \in \Omega^V$ . Our analysis relies on a key survey, known as the Motor City Mapping project (MCM), involving a collaboration of private and public entities. This project was developed in order to label blighted and abandoned properties in Detroit for removal or revitalization. By collecting these data, the goal was to provide policymakers and nonprofit associations with information that would guide urban policies aimed at attracting new residents to the city.

The Detroit Blight Removal Task Force and two other organizations (Loveland Technologies and Data Driven Detroit (D3)), led a physical survey of Detroit's 380,000 parcels of land on behalf of MCM. This physical survey was an expansion of the Residential Parcel Survey conducted in 2009 for 135,000 residential properties in the city of Detroit and now covers commercial properties and parcels used for other purposes (e.g., parks, parking, etc.)

Blighted areas identified by the MCM survey tend to be dominated by vacant lots and unoccupied structures. Consistent with the MCM survey, we classify vacant census tracts in the context of our model (i.e., associated with the no-development residential equilibrium) according to the following three criteria:<sup>28</sup>

- (i) The percentage of parcels in a census tract classified as vacant (i.e., with no physical structure) is greater than or equal to 50 percent *and*
- (ii) The percentage of residential properties in a census tract labeled empty or potentially empty is greater than or equal to 30 percent *or*
- (iii) The percentage of commercial properties in a census tract labeled empty or potentially empty is greater than or equal to 30 percent

Using these thresholds, we arrive at 17.5 percent of census tracts in Detroit being associated with the residential no-development case, which closely matches the percentage of blighted parcels identified by the MCM survey (22 percent).<sup>29</sup> The resulting  $\Omega^V$  set includes 52 tracts. These are the tracts that we identify as currently

<sup>28</sup>While tracts satisfying these criteria are dominated by vacant lots and structures, these criteria do allow for some occupied residential structures. In the online Appendix, we present robustness exercises where more stringent criteria are used to classify tracts as vacant.

<sup>29</sup>DFC, in developing a strategic framework to revitalize Detroit, assessed that 17 percent of its parcels are vacant.

being in the noncoordinated equilibrium, or vacant in terms of residents. The location of these tracts is presented in Figure 4 in Section I. As discussed there, these tracts are closely associated with the expansion of the city of Detroit before 1930 and form a half-ring just outside the business district of the city.

*Fully versus Partially Developed Tracts.*—Of the census tracts not considered vacant, the model distinguishes between tracts that are fully developed,  $\Omega^F = \{j \mid T_j^r = \bar{T}_j^r\}$ , and those that are partially developed,  $\Omega^S = \{j \mid T_j^r < \bar{T}_j^r\}$ . Because the D3 survey, which provides the percentage of empty parcels, is only available for the 297 census tracts within Detroit proper, we have to impute this allotment for the remaining census tracts of Macomb, Oakland, and Wayne counties.

We do so by fitting a linear model of the determinants of the percentage of empty parcels in tracts within Detroit proper, and then use it to estimate the percent of empty parcels in all tracts of the surrounding suburbs. The linear specification that we fit includes tract population,  $R_j$ , developed residential land,  $T_j^r$ , average census tract wages, and commuting costs from downtown. The model's adjusted  $R^2$  is 0.59. Using data on these neighborhood characteristics, as well as the coefficient estimates, we estimate the fraction of empty parcels in each tract in the suburbs.<sup>30</sup> As a benchmark, we then designate a tract where more than two-thirds of its parcels are occupied as being fully developed. Other tracts with less than two-thirds occupancy are considered only partially developed. Figure 4 in Section I presents the resulting selection of tracts (for ease of presentation we leave out some of the suburban tracts).<sup>31</sup> As can be easily appreciated in the figure, most of Detroit proper is designated as partially developed, while most of the suburbs are fully developed.

## B. Parameter Values

The model features three different sets of parameters that differ in their dimensionality: citywide, neighborhood specific, and bilateral across neighborhoods. The citywide parameters  $(\alpha, \beta, \gamma, v)$  are matched to estimates in the literature, except for  $\theta$  and  $V$ , which we set to match, respectively, the slope of the gravity equation, as in Monte et al. (2016), and the distribution of active contractors across neighborhoods. We normalize  $\bar{u}$  to 1. The neighborhood parameters  $(A_j, F_j, \sigma_j, \bar{T}_j^r, \bar{T}_j^b)$  are determined so as to match four neighborhood characteristics  $(w_j, q_j^r, R_j, T_j^b)$ . Since

<sup>30</sup>We estimate

$$(31) \quad \ln \text{PercentVacant}_j = \omega_1 + \omega_2 R_j + \omega_3 T_j^r + \omega_4 \bar{w}_j + \omega_5 \kappa_{1j} + \varepsilon_j,$$

where  $\text{PercentVacant}_j$  is the ratio of vacant parcels and parcels with unoccupied structures to the total number of parcels, and  $\kappa_{1j}$  denotes the distance from  $j$  to the CBD (labeled as tract 1 in our analysis). The resulting coefficients (with standard errors in parentheses) are  $\omega_1 = 6.26$  (0.95),  $\omega_2 = -0.0012$  (0.0002),  $\omega_3 = -0.38$  (0.2),  $\omega_4 = -0.00015$  (0.000024), and  $\omega_5 = -0.06$  (0.0081). The regression has 242 observations and yields an adjusted  $R^2$  of 0.59.

<sup>31</sup>We choose a 2/3 threshold to define fully developed census tracts in our benchmark. While this threshold is somewhat arbitrary, it acknowledges that desirable development also requires some empty and recreational areas. To the extent that obtaining development rights, permits, and residents' approval becomes more difficult as fewer tracts remain unoccupied or empty, increases in housing demand will start driving up rents in existing housing services. In the online Appendix, we present robustness exercises where this threshold is raised to 3/4, 5/6, and 9/10. These more stringent thresholds used to define fully developed tracts turn out to be immaterial for our main results.

tracts in equilibrium are either partially or fully developed, with different residential pricing implications,  $F_j$  and  $\bar{T}_j^r$  cannot both be inferred from the data for the same tract. Specifically, as explained below,  $F_j$  and  $\bar{T}_j^r$  may be inferred for  $j \in \Omega^S$  and  $j \in \Omega^F$  respectively. Therefore, conditional on tract classification and citywide parameters, characteristics of the city are exactly matched as equilibrium benchmark allocations, and exactly identify the neighborhood parameters. Finally, we choose the bilateral amenity matrix,  $\lambda_{ij}$  to match bilateral commuting patterns in the data,  $\pi_{ij}$ , conditional on observed commuting costs,  $\kappa_{ij}$ .

We set the values of the citywide parameters using standard sources in the literature. Table 1 presents the values of the five citywide parameters and the relevant source. We estimate two parameters either because the literature does not offer a clear counterpart or because the context of Detroit is somewhat unique. The first of these involve the parameter  $V$ , which governs the level of the variable cost of residential construction. Combining equations (25) and (18), we know that the number of residential developers in viable neighborhoods is

$$(32) \quad n_j = (\nu V)^{\frac{1}{\nu-1}} (q_j^r)^{\frac{\nu}{1-\nu}} (1 - \gamma) R_j \sum_{i=1}^J \pi_{ij} w_i.$$

Given our data, for this purpose  $(q_j^r, R_j, w_i, \pi_{ij})$  and the parameters in Table 1, we determine  $V$  to match the mean of the distribution describing the number of contractors with active permits in the benchmark year (2014) across partially developed census tracts. These data are available from the Detroit Demolition Program and Buildings, Safety Engineering and Environmental Department. The resulting mean of  $n_j$  in the data and model is 9.25 contractors with active permits per census tract. We can also compare the standard deviation of  $n_j$  in the data and model. The standard deviation of  $n_j$  in the data is 4.52 and that implied by the model is 4.51, a remarkable similarity given that we do not target this moment.

The second parameter we estimate within the model is  $\theta$ , which governs the elasticity of commuting flows with respect to commuting costs. In particular, from equation (15), we can express commuting patterns in terms of the Head and Ries (2001) index as

$$(33) \quad \frac{\pi_{ij}}{\pi_{jj}} = \frac{\lambda_{ij} (w_i / \kappa_{ij})^\theta}{\lambda_{jj} (w_j / \kappa_{jj})^\theta}.$$

Similarly to Monte et al. (2016), we estimate the following equation,

$$(34) \quad \log\left(\frac{\pi_{ij}}{\pi_{jj}}\right) = -\theta \log\left(\frac{\kappa_{ij}}{\kappa_{jj}}\right) + \mu_i + \mu_j + \lambda_{ij},$$

which, given commute costs data (distance or time) and fixed origin and destination effects,  $\mu_i$  and  $\mu_j$ , allows us to estimate  $\theta$ . We invoke standard mean independence assumptions on the error term  $\lambda_{ij}$ , which in this case governs the mean of the idiosyncratic bilateral amenity. Here,  $\kappa_{ij} \in [1, \infty)$ . Thus, if  $\pi_{ij} = 0$ , then either  $\lambda_{ij} = 0$  or  $\kappa_{ij} \rightarrow \infty$ .

The resulting estimates of  $\theta$  using different measures of commuting costs are shown in Table 2. We present results using  $\kappa_{ij}$  measured by the straight-line distance

TABLE 1—CITYWIDE PARAMETER VALUES AND SOURCES

Parameter	Value	Source
$\alpha$	0.06	Ciccone and Hall (1996)
$\beta$	0.80	Ahlfeldt et. al (2015)
$\gamma$	0.76	Davis and Ortalo-Magné (2011)
$\theta$	8.34	Gravity equation for commuting
$\nu$	2.50	Ahlfeldt and McMillen (2015)
$V$	175,472,386	Equation for mean number of contractors

TABLE 2—GRAVITY EQUATION ESTIMATION USING DIFFERENT MEASURES OF COMMUTING

	Straight-line distance	Google distance	Google time
$\theta$	6.57	4.62	8.34
Standard error	(0.017)	(0.013)	(0.022)
Work fixed effects	Yes	Yes	Yes
Home fixed effects	Yes	Yes	Yes
Observations	1,187,423	1,187,423	1,187,423
$R^2$	0.39	0.37	0.38

between the centroid of  $i$  and  $j$ . This yields an estimate of  $\theta$  of 6.57. If we rely instead on distance estimates obtained from Google Analytics, we obtain a lower estimate of  $\theta$  given by 4.62. This measure of distance is arguably more accurate since it takes into account the road infrastructure and geography in the city of Detroit. Our estimate for  $\theta$  using this distance measure is very similar to that obtained by Monte, Redding, and Rossi-Hansberg (2018) using commuting patterns across counties, 4.43. We also compiled data on an alternative measure of commuting costs based on all pairwise commute times between census tracts. Such estimates are arguably more pertinent within a city since they take into account road speed and average traffic.<sup>32</sup> Using this alternative measure of commuting costs, we estimate a larger elasticity for  $\theta$  at 8.34. This is the value that we use in our benchmark calibration.

Given  $\theta$ , we may immediately obtain  $\lambda_{ij}$  as the residual in equation (34). We further set  $T_j^b = \bar{T}_j^b$  for all  $j \in \Omega$ . Hence, the neighborhood-specific parameters left to determine are  $(A_j, F_j, \sigma_j, \bar{T}_j^r)$ . Given data on residential prices,  $q_j^r$ , residential population,  $R_j$ , wages,  $w_i$ , and commute flows,  $\pi_{ij}$ , we recover either the development fixed costs  $F_j$ , for partially developed neighborhoods, or the upper bound on land development,  $\bar{T}_j^r$ , for fully developed tracts. The observed allocations are informative in different ways depending on whether a tract is partially or fully developed, which allows us to recover one parameter or the other but not both, depending on the tract's current classification. In particular, we can use equation (26) in the case of fully developed tracts to solve for  $\bar{T}_j^r$  using information on  $(w_j, q_j^r, R_j, \pi_{ij})$  and  $\gamma$ .

<sup>32</sup>These issues are likely less relevant across counties than within cities, which explains why the Monte, Redding, and Rossi-Hansberg (2018) estimate using distance is closer to our estimate using distance rather than time.

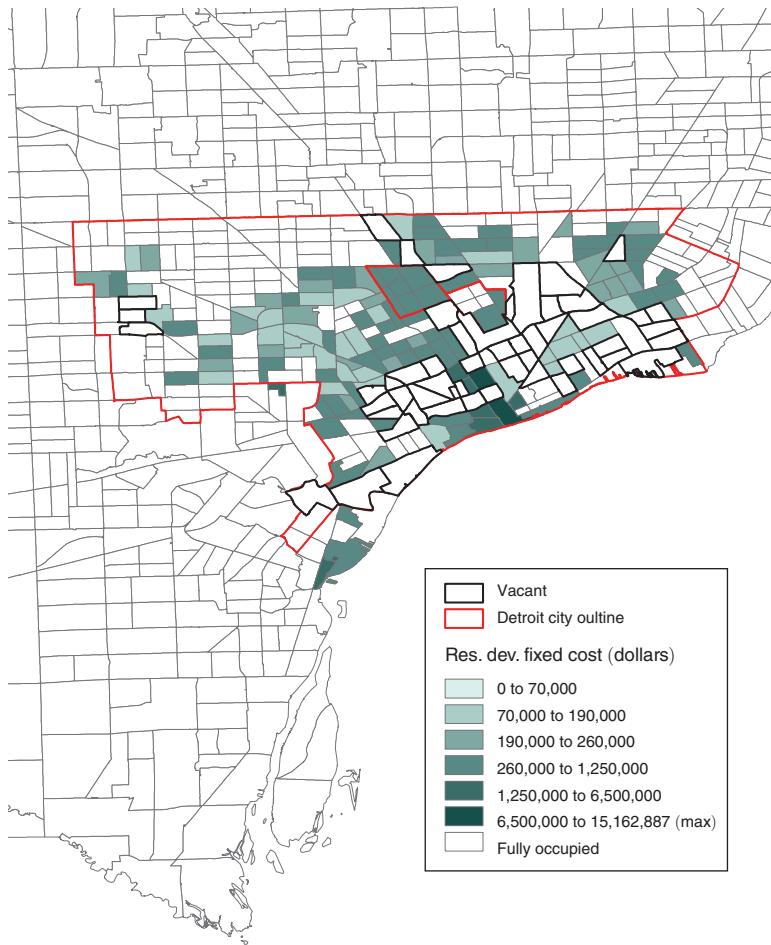


FIGURE 8. RESIDENTIAL DEVELOPMENT FIXED COST,  $F_j$ , IN THE BASELINE QUANTIFICATION

Alternatively, we use citywide parameters and  $q_j^r$  to obtain  $F_j$  using equation (28) for partially developed tracts. The resulting values of  $F_j$  are presented in Figure 8 and show a wide range of values. Naturally, we find the highest fixed costs in downtown Detroit.

*Residential Externalities at the Tract Level.*—To compute  $\sigma_j$  in our benchmark case, observe that equation (19) implies that

$$(35) \quad \sigma_j = \left( \frac{1}{\ln(R_j)} \right) \ln \left( \frac{\bar{u} (1 - \gamma)^{1-\gamma} \left\{ \sum_{i=1}^J \pi_{ij} w_i \right\}^{1-\gamma}}{\Gamma \left( \frac{\theta-1}{\theta} \right) (T_j^r)^{1-\gamma} \left[ \sum_{i=1}^J \lambda_{ij} (w_i / \kappa_{ij})^{\theta} \right]^{\frac{1}{\theta}}} \right) - \gamma + 1,$$

where  $T_j^r = \bar{T}_j^r$  when  $j \in \Omega^F$  and  $T_j^r$  is given by equation (29) when  $j \in \Omega^S$ . The resulting values for  $\sigma_j$  are presented in Figure 9. These average to 0.57 across

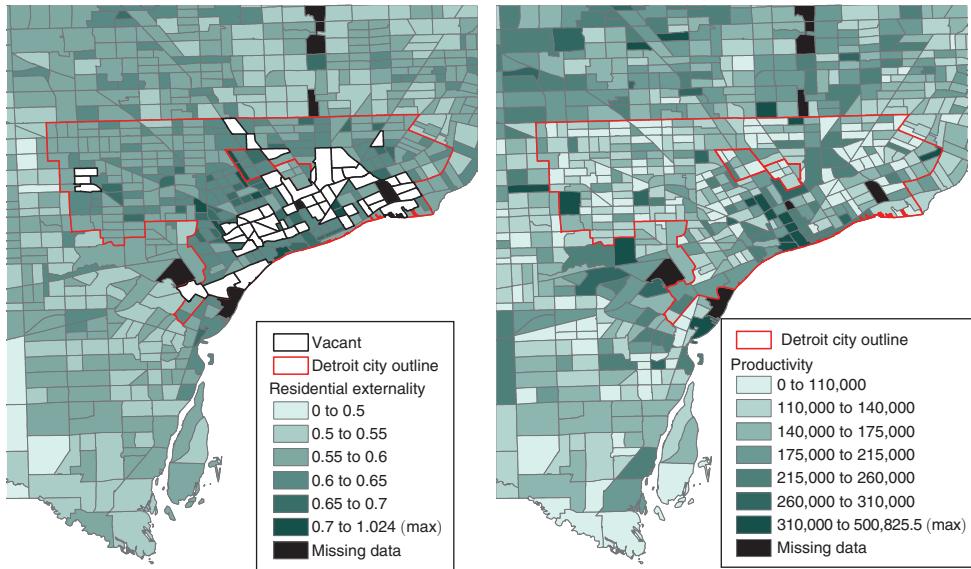


FIGURE 9. RESIDENTIAL EXTERNALITY,  $\sigma_j$ , AND PRODUCTIVITY  $A_j$ , IN THE BASELINE QUANTIFICATION

neighborhoods and do not exhibit large variations. The minimum value is 0.446, which guarantees that  $\sigma_j > 1 - \gamma = 0.24$ ; that is, this restriction is naturally satisfied in our model, given observed Detroit allocations, without being explicitly imposed.

As mentioned earlier, we also explore a case in which variations in location-specific amenities in part reflect intrinsic attributes of each location,  $B_j$ , such that  $B_j(R_j; j) = B_j R_j^\sigma$ . In that case, equation (19) becomes

$$(36) \quad B_j R_j^\sigma = \frac{\bar{u} (1 - \gamma)^{1-\gamma} \left\{ \sum_{i=1}^J \pi_{ij} w_i \right\}^{1-\gamma}}{\Gamma\left(\frac{\theta-1}{\theta}\right) R_j^{\gamma-1} (T_j^r)^{1-\gamma} \left[ \sum_{i=1}^J \lambda_{ij} (w_i / \kappa_{ij})^\theta \right]^{\frac{1}{\theta}}},$$

where the model inversion thus far allows us to match the data on the right-hand side of the equation by construction. Equation (36), therefore, gives us a measure of total amenities,  $\bar{B}_j = B_j R_j^\sigma$ , for each tract in our benchmark year (2014). Since we also have tract population,  $R_j$ , taking logs and decomposing  $\ln(B_j)$  into a constant,  $b$ , and an error term,  $e_j$ , we obtain an equation that we can estimate at the tract level,

$$(37) \quad \ln(\bar{B}_j) = b + \sigma \ln(R_j) + e_j.$$

To the extent that  $B_j$  captures fixed amenities specific to individual tracts, we construct various controls to that effect summarized in a vector  $X_j$ . As shown in Figure 1, empty census tracts are relatively uniform in the sense of having been cleared of housing and now constituting mainly vacant land, and they differ mostly in their location in space. Thus, for each tract, we include in  $X_j$  its distance to the Detroit River or Lake St. Clair (i.e., its distance to the closest tract on the water), its

distance to the airport, its distance to a limited access highway (i.e., its distance to the closest tract containing or bordering a highway), its distance to a state park or Metropark, and its distance to the closest four-year college or university.<sup>33</sup> The equation that we estimate, therefore, ultimately takes the form

$$(38) \quad \ln(\bar{B}_j) = b + \sigma \ln(R_j) + \varphi X_j + e_j.$$

Because  $R_j$  is endogenous in equation (38), we make use of neighborhood productivity,  $A_i$ , as an instrument, chosen to match the observed distribution of wages and employment across census tracts in the benchmark equilibrium using the labor market clearing condition. This assumes, therefore, that business productivity is exogenous and not itself affected by residential amenities across tracts or the population distribution it generates. Hence, consistent with the model we have put forward, this estimation relies on the lack of knowledge spillovers within or across tracts. Figure 9 presents the computed values of  $A_i$ . The results are very intuitive. Productivity is high in downtown Detroit, but it declines dramatically in some of the surrounding areas. It increases again in some of the suburbs where automobile industry plants are located, such as in Dearborn, Michigan.

The first column of Table 3 shows the results associated with this empirical approach. The  $F$ -statistic associated with the first stage regression is 13.32, thus underscoring the validity of the instrument with a  $p$ -value well below 0.01. Of the local tract characteristics we constructed, distance to the water and distance to the closest four-year college or university are statistically significant at the 1 percent level (using Conley standard errors with a distance cutoff of 10 kilometers), and of the correct sign (i.e., being further away lowers amenities).<sup>34</sup> A tract's distance to the airport or to a limited access highway capture the offsetting effects of convenience but also noise and congestion, and thus do not appear as significant. Observe that the constant is also statistically insignificant, which is approximately consistent with our benchmark case. The elasticity of amenities with respect to residential population is now estimated to be 0.64, close to the average 0.57 under our benchmark, and is statistically significant at the 1 percent level. When we include only the tract attributes in  $X_j$  that are statistically significant, shown in the second column of Table 3, the estimated elasticity of amenities with respect to the number of residents becomes 0.55 and is significant at the 1 percent level. In both these cases, the estimated value of the parameter governing residential externalities continues to satisfy the condition  $\sigma > 1 - \gamma$ . In solving the model under this alternative specification for residential amenities, we now require  $B_j$  (which solves  $\ln(B_j) = b + \varphi X_j + e_j$  and thus reflects local amenities  $X_j$ ) as well as  $\sigma$  in equation (38), to obtain the tract-specific parameter  $\bar{B}_j$ .

Additional concerns are that productivity might be endogenous to a degree, or that some of these cross-sectional characteristics of neighborhoods are themselves

<sup>33</sup>These institutions include Lawrence Technological University (founded in 1932), Madonna University (1937), Marygrove College (1927), Oakland University (1957), Rochester College (1959), the University of Detroit Mercy (1927), the University of Michigan-Dearborn (1959), and Wayne State University (1868).

<sup>34</sup>Alternative distance cutoffs of 5, 15, and 25 kilometers yield no material differences in the findings.

TABLE 3—ESTIMATION OF  $\sigma$  IN THE PRESENCE OF LOCAL TRACT AMENITIES

Variables	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
$\ln(R_j)$	0.635 (0.221)	0.553 (0.206)			
$\ln\left(\frac{R_{j,t}}{R_{j,t-1}}\right)$			0.531 (0.182)	0.519 (0.173)	0.604 (0.234)
log distance to park	0.00926 (0.0215)				0.0266 (0.0186)
log distance to highway	0.0150 (0.0108)				-0.00720 (0.0119)
log distance to airport	-0.0703 (0.0411)				0.0458 (0.0168)
log distance to water	-0.101 (0.0341)	-0.0887 (0.0327)			0.00483 (0.00917)
log distance to college	-0.256 (0.0957)	-0.228 (0.101)			-0.0328 (0.0228)
Constant	0.687 (1.061)	0.950 (1.097)	0.0694 (0.0313)	0.0679 (0.0306)	-0.0648 (0.105)
Dependent variable	$\ln(\bar{B}_j)$	$\ln(\bar{B}_j)$	$\ln\left(\frac{\bar{B}_{j,t}}{\bar{B}_{j,t-1}}\right)$	$\ln\left(\frac{\bar{B}_{j,t}}{\bar{B}_{j,t-1}}\right)$	$\ln\left(\frac{\bar{B}_{j,t}}{\bar{B}_{j,t-1}}\right)$

Note: Conley standard errors appear in parentheses using a distance cutoff of 10 kilometers.

endogenous to the number of residents in a neighborhood. Hence, to further explore the robustness of our results, we exploit not only the cross-sectional dimension of our dataset but also the implications of changes over time in estimating the elasticity of amenities with respect to the number of residents. In particular, we collect data on residents,  $R_j$ , wages,  $w_i$ , and residential prices,  $q_j^r$ , in the earliest year for which all variables are available—2004. Using these variables, we can then compute total amenities in 2004 using equation (36). This allows us to write equation (38) in difference form,

$$(39) \quad \ln\left(\frac{\bar{B}_{j,t}}{\bar{B}_{j,t-1}}\right) = \tilde{b} + \sigma \ln\left(\frac{R_{j,t}}{R_{j,t-1}}\right) + \tilde{e}_j,$$

where  $t - 1$  and  $t$  denote 2004 and 2014 respectively,  $\tilde{b} = b_t - b_{t-1}$ , and  $\tilde{e}_j = e_{j,t} - e_{j,t-1}$ . To implement an instrumental variables approach, we now require a variable that can explain the change in tract population over the period 2004–2014 but which is at the same time not directly related to the change in amenities over that period.<sup>35</sup> To that end, we identify four plant closures over the period 2007–2010, owned by Ford Motor Company, General Motors, and Chrysler, and construct as an instrument the mean distance from each tract to the four census tracts

<sup>35</sup>The various controls constructed above fall out of the regression since distances to various fixed landmarks do not change with time.

containing those plants.<sup>36</sup> Because the plant closures stemmed from the general decline in automobile sales associated with the Great Recession, we take them as largely exogenous to the characteristics of neighborhoods in Detroit.<sup>37</sup>

The third column of Table 3 displays the results from estimating equation (39). This column uses only mean distance to plant closures as an instrument, which yields a first stage regression *F*-statistic of 148.84. The four plant closures of the “Big Three,” therefore, appear to have been strongly related to tract population changes in our dataset. In this specification, the elasticity of amenities with respect to residential population is estimated to be 0.53 and is significant at the 1 percent level, very close to 0.55 in column 2, which used neighborhood productivity as an instrument when the cross-sectional regression was run in levels with individual tract attributes  $X_j$ . In the fourth column of Table 3, we use both the mean distance to plant closures and the change in neighborhood productivity over 2004–2014 as instruments. The joint *F*-statistic in the first stage regression of the latter specification is 76.93, and the estimated parameter governing residential externalities now becomes 0.52 and is significant at the 1 percent level. Finally, the fifth column of Table 3 shows that when the tract characteristics summarized in  $X_j$  are included in the specification run in first differences, all but one attribute become statistically insignificant at the 1 percent level as suggested by equation (39).

#### IV. Coordinating Vacant Residential Tracts

In quantifying our theoretical model above, we exactly match the current configuration of Detroit and its surrounding counties given the tract level data we use. Thus, we can now also make use of our framework to quantify the effects of alternative, counterfactual, urban configurations of the city. We identified 52 census tracts as being vacant, in the sense of being empty of residents, although we also saw that all tracts (but one) contain some measure of business activity. The model rationalizes the existence of these vacant neighborhoods as those that have failed to achieve coordination and that find themselves, therefore, in the neighborhood equilibrium with no residents and no residential development. In this section, we compute the value of a change to the alternative equilibrium for these neighborhoods, whereby these areas coordinate into the equilibrium with positive amounts of residential development and residents.

Most of the policies that have been advocated to revitalize the city of Detroit involve a reconfiguration of sorts, including a degree of coordination and government involvement to revitalize specific parts of the city. Crucially, our framework can help determine the magnitude of the gains under a given policy or tract selection

<sup>36</sup>These four plants include Ford’s Wixom Assembly Plant, closed in 2007; General Motors’ Pontiac Assembly Center, closed in 2009; Chrysler’s Detroit Axle Plant, closed in 2010; and General Motors’ Powertrain Livonia Engine Plant, closed in 2010.

<sup>37</sup>A potential concern is that plant closings affect amenities directly, thereby violating the exclusion restriction. Note that the amenities we compute using our structural model do not include the value of access to high paying jobs, up to model miss-specification, since we model the value of commuting explicitly. Hence, in order to violate the exclusion restriction, plant closings would need to affect amenities directly by making neighborhoods less desirable to live for reasons independent of the accessibility to high-paying jobs. This might be important for tracts directly neighboring these plants, but it is unlikely to be relevant for most of the 1,151 tracts in the city.

and is—to the best of our knowledge—the first attempt to quantify the magnitude of such gains in a spatial general equilibrium framework informed by microdata. Within the bounds of our modeling choices, we can also identify the set of census tracts where these policies might be most successful.<sup>38</sup> There are a variety of policies that could change equilibrium selection in a neighborhood. Our model, as with many models that feature multiple equilibria, is not explicit about equilibrium selection. As with these other applications, however, we can think about policies that can eliminate the degenerate equilibrium, in our case the zero residential development neighborhood allocation.<sup>39</sup> Development guarantees by the government or an outside third party is one example of such a policy.

A development guarantee would credibly commit the issuer to invest a minimum amount of resources in the treated area. Such investment guarantees would imply that  $T_j^r > 0$  and, therefore, can help select the neighborhood into an equilibrium that involves coordination among both residents and developers. If the guarantee is not large enough, residential developers and residents would fail to coordinate in the neighborhood and the guarantee ends up being used (in which case the guarantor is nevertheless committed to invest in the neighborhood, a likely undesirable outcome). However, if the guarantee is large enough, so that  $T_j^r$  is at least as large as it would be in the equilibrium with coordination, and fully credible, developers would be willing to build and residents would be willing to live in the neighborhood. In such a case, the guarantee would not end up being used and thus the policy would be ultimately costless. In fact, development guarantees, if credible, need only be high enough to induce the marginal entrant to build in the neighborhood. Put another way, in real terms, the guarantee needs to be greater than  $(n_j - 1)(Vh_j^y + F_j)$ , where  $n_j$  and  $h_j$  are the values that obtain in the neighborhood equilibrium with coordination. By determining the value of  $T_j^r$  in the nondegenerate equilibrium (which itself depends on the configuration of the whole city and any guarantees in place in other vacant neighborhoods), our analysis allows us to quantify the magnitude of the required guarantees for the policy to be successful, and the potential set of resources that have to be promised (and could be at risk if something fails).<sup>40</sup>

In the analysis below, we present a series of counterfactuals that consider three approaches: (i) we allow all 52 vacant neighborhoods to move into a coordinated

<sup>38</sup>The results from counterfactuals we present might be best interpreted as comparisons across long-run outcomes. The model abstracts from explicit dynamics that would otherwise highlight an explicit role for expectations over shorter horizons even if over a decade. However, while Detroit is still losing population, annual population declines have substantially slowed down since the Great Recession. In particular, between 2000 and 2010, Detroit lost 25 percent of its population; but between 2010 and 2017, Detroit's population only declined 5.7 percent. It seems, therefore, that expectations of future declines might be relatively contained.

<sup>39</sup>In banking, for instance, the seminal work of Diamond and Dybvig (1983) features both a bank run and a no-run equilibrium that also hinge on a coordination problem among agents, and deposit insurance has been advocated as an effective way to avoid the bank run equilibrium.

<sup>40</sup>In addition, development guarantees analyzed here may be complemented by a local government or nonprofit institution by way of grants, tax incentives, or public subsidies to developers. For a recent example of such efforts in Detroit, see Kusisto (2017). That article describes the experience of a developer who, in 2007, before such incentives, attempted to build luxury apartments in an area where "skyscrapers were vacant and storefronts were boarded up." The project "flopped before it got off the ground." In 2017, with incentives in place, things had changed somewhat. Developers, characterized in the article as "a small group of mostly local business-people," were starting to experience success. The difference? A number of residential projects were underway in 2016 and early 2017, with about 2,000 units in total or the same number "of units built in the city over the previous 16 years."

equilibrium at the same time, (ii) we allow each vacant neighborhood to move into a coordinated equilibrium one at a time, and (iii) we allow particular tract groups to move into a coordinated equilibrium in a way that resembles the desired outcome for plans advocated by nonprofit and other agencies to improve the city. In particular, for the latter scenarios, we make use of the various proposals that the DFC—an organization of planning experts, citizens, and civic leaders—has put forward as perhaps the most well-known strategic vision for the future of Detroit. To our knowledge, our analysis is the first to quantify the potential benefits and effects on allocations of these policies.

### A. Computing Counterfactuals

To compute counterfactual scenarios, where we allow some previously vacant residential tracts to move into a coordinated equilibrium, we must first make a few choices. In particular, we need to assign neighborhood-specific parameters to the vacant tracts. Since all tracts contain some business activity, we already have values for productivity,  $A_j$ , and the amount of business land,  $\bar{T}_j^b$ . We are then missing  $F_j$ ,  $\sigma_j$ ,  $\bar{T}_j^r$ , and  $\lambda_{ij}$ . To determine  $F_j$ ,  $\sigma_j$ , and  $\lambda_{ij}$  for a given tract  $j \in \Omega^v$ , we adopt the corresponding values in its nearest partially developed census tract, obtained in Section III. Straight-line distances are used to determine the nearest tract to a given vacant tract. To determine  $\bar{T}_j^r$ , we make use of data on total available residential land in the tract under consideration, and less of business and public land as reported by the city assessor's data.

In addition to assigning values to the local parameters for vacant residential neighborhoods, we need to assign values of  $F_j$  for all fully developed tracts. Indeed, in computing a counterfactual exercise, we need to account for the possibility that some previously fully-developed tracts might revert to being partially developed as a consequence of the policy.<sup>41</sup> Throughout the analysis, we assign the median level of  $F_j$  to fully developed tracts in the city since, in the suburbs of Detroit where most tracts are fully developed (see Figure 4), the nearest tract can be very far. Observe also that in a counterfactual exercise, partially developed tracts might conceivably become fully developed. Thus, an upper bound  $\bar{T}_j^r$  is needed for those tracts as well, which we obtain in exactly the same way as for the vacant tracts as described in the data Appendix.

### B. The Value of Coordination in One Tract

In an open city, where individuals can move in and out of the city at a given utility level  $\bar{u}$ , changes to the structure of the city have by construction no effect on the welfare of workers. The gains or losses that result from a change in the organization of the city can, however, be measured by other criteria. One such criterion relates to the corresponding increase or decrease in total residential rents. This change would

<sup>41</sup> As described in Section I, between 1910 and 1930, many if not all of the presently vacant tracts in Detroit contained large contiguous neighborhoods composed of single-family structures. In practice, having allowed for this possibility in our quantitative simulations, no fully developed tract reverts to a semi-developed state.

reflect any additional aggregate residential investment that the city generates following the change in policy, in addition to any rent change in tracts where developers earn positive profits. Evidently, a change in policy would also affect the number of agents in the city, as well as the rents generated by business land. We can, therefore, also measure its effects based on corresponding changes in population size or changes in total business rents. In fact, given that we postulate the presence of absentee landlords who own commercial land, and that these landlords are the only agents who gain from the policy (recall that workers all get  $\bar{u}$ , while final goods firms and developers make zero profits, except in fully developed areas for the latter), increases in business land rents constitute a pure economic gain from the policy. Thus, perhaps the clearest way to measure the economic gains resulting from a given policy change is to sum the change in profits earned by residential developers and the change in business rents. Below, we consider different policy proposals according to these three alternative criteria.

Figure 10 presents the increase in total citywide residential rents as a result of solving the coordination problem in each of the 52 vacant tracts one at a time. The color associated with each tract in Figure 10 represents the total increase in citywide rents from a move to the coordinated equilibrium in that tract only. The heterogeneity in the increase in total rents across tracts (and corresponding residential investments) is quite pronounced. The vacant tract that generates the largest increase in citywide rents, were it to be in the equilibrium with coordination, is tract 52, a small tract at the boundary with the city of Hamtramck (which is surrounded by the city of Detroit). With a move to the equilibrium with positive population and residential development, that tract alone generates an increase in citywide residential land rents of about \$7.5 million. This result reflects, in part, the fact that its closest neighboring tract—tract 48 in Hamtramck—is itself a relatively prosperous and dense neighborhood with high residential prices for Detroit. In contrast, other tracts generate less than one-tenth of that amount in additional citywide residential rents. That said, political considerations would make it unlikely that development guarantees in actuality would only target one tract. Moreover, when developing a larger number of tracts, gains from development guarantees tend to be less sensitive to tract selection.

We also compute the total citywide increases in population and business rents resulting from moving each of the 52 vacant tracts to a coordinated equilibrium one at a time. As with residential rents, we observe substantial heterogeneity of outcomes from moving a single tract to an equilibrium with residential development and population. Population in the city can increase from less than 80 residents to more than 800, while business rents would rise to between half a million and more than two and a half million. One conclusion that emerges from these figures, however, is that the ranking of tracts in terms of the overall effects of development guarantees, put into effect in each tract individually, is quite similar across all three measures. The tracts that generate the largest effects on residential rents also tend to generate the largest effects on population and business rents. This finding suggests that policy proposals, all else equal, might more easily achieve some degree of consensus among concerned stakeholders, since different stakeholders might weight these effects in different ways.

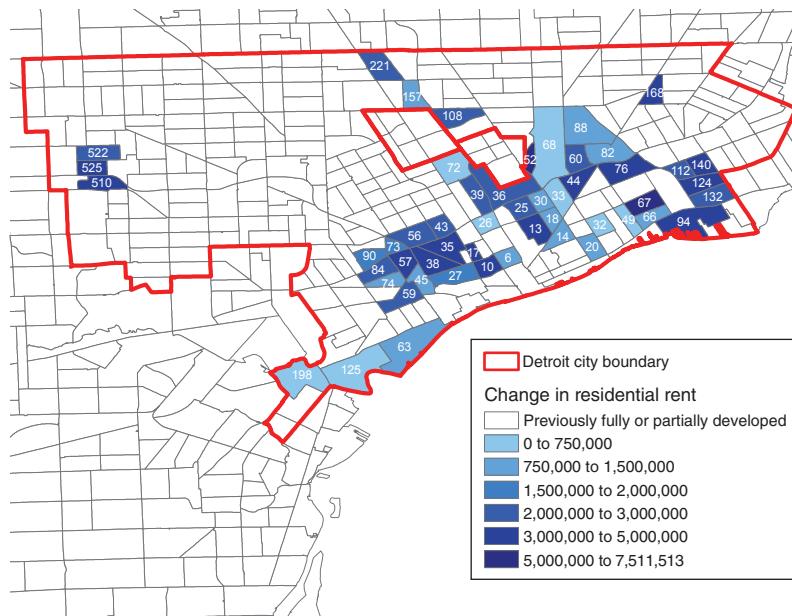


FIGURE 10. TOTAL CITYWIDE RESIDENTIAL RENT INCREASE FROM COORDINATING RESIDENTIAL DEVELOPMENT IN ONE TRACT

### C. Detroit Future City

Detroit Future City (DFC) is a civic organization created in 2012 with the mission of providing guidance in laying out a vision for the future of Detroit. The Detroit Future City Strategic Framework lays out perhaps the best known desired image of what the city of Detroit should look like ten, twenty, and fifty years into the future.<sup>42</sup> This framework points to both the strengths and weaknesses of Detroit's current urban configuration. In highlighting the significant amount of vacancies near the city center that contribute to blight and declining property values, the DFC Strategic Framework in part focuses on key zones for residential development that align with a subset of the vacant census tracts in our study. In particular, DFC proposes several distinct plans for development that emphasize different criteria. In this paper, we focus on residential development and quantify the effects of several of the DFC proposals for its vision of Detroit fifty years into the future. The most ambitious proposal, which we refer to as the Detroit Future City (DFC) counterfactual, involves 22 tracts. This DFC proposal considers different residential land-use typologies. Examples of such typologies include “green residential,” which emphasizes landscape-based neighborhoods, “traditional low density,” characterized by detached single-family houses on large parcels, or “live plus make,” where housing is located near artisan workshops or small fabrication facilities. These various residential land-use typologies include different combinations of a smaller number of

<sup>42</sup>In the last few years, Detroit Future City has more narrowly focused its efforts on favorable developments in the downtown area and the short-run stabilization of population in Detroit's neighborhoods.

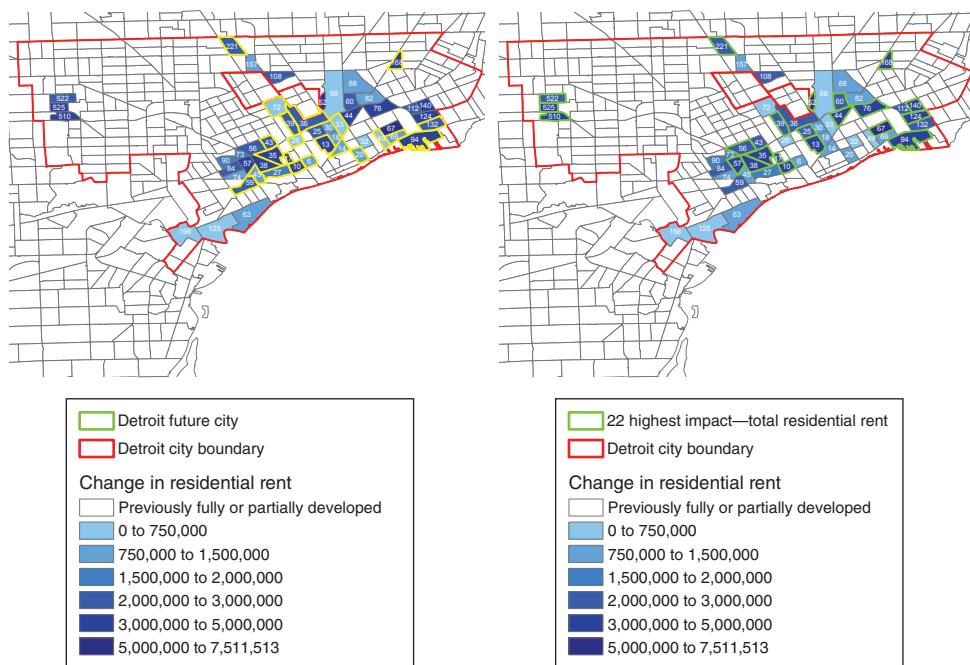


FIGURE 11. DFC STRATEGIC AND BEST 22 RESIDENTIAL PLANS COMPARED TO GAINS IN TOTAL RENT FROM COORDINATING INDIVIDUAL TRACTS

residential tracts and are individually evaluated and compared as counterfactuals in the online Appendix.

We carry out the DFC counterfactual by exploring an equilibrium where the 22 tracts matched to the DFC's strategic framework have switched from a no-development equilibrium to one with positive residential population. We then explore other potential configurations of 22 tracts that can potentially yield larger gains.

The first step in the analysis requires that we identify the tracts in the DFC proposal on a map of Detroit, and compare them with the individual tracts identified in the previous sections as yielding the largest gains with respect to land rents and investment. Figure 11 reproduces Figure 10 but adds an outline of the tracts in the DFC proposal (left). It also shows an outline of an alternative plan where we select the 22 tracts that provide the highest increases in residential rents as each tract switches to an equilibrium with residential population individually (right). We refer to the latter plan as the "Best 22 Residential" plan. It is evident from the maps that the two proposals overlap only in part, sharing only 11 out of 22 tracts. One of the qualitative differences is that the DFC proposal focuses on developing the areas closest to the downtown core, while the Best 22 Residential plan covers some of the same areas but also areas in a wider outer ring.<sup>43</sup>

<sup>43</sup>In recent years, major investors such as Dan Gilbert, the founder of Quicken Loans, have been purchasing and developing several properties in downtown Detroit and surrounding areas. Because much of this work was already ongoing in 2014, these areas reside in tracts considered to be partially developed in our analysis.

One might argue that the comparison above is not entirely complete since it does not take into account the complementarities that could result from coordinating several tracts jointly rather than one at a time.<sup>44</sup> Below, we compare the implications of these proposals when the combined effects from coordinating groups of tracts jointly are taken into account. However, it is important to note that the proposal we refer to as the “Best 22” grouping does not select the best 22 tract combination out of all possible tract combinations, taking any complementarity effect into account. Rather, we simply rank the citywide effects resulting from moving each tract individually to an equilibrium with coordination as the main criterion, and then choose the 22 tracts with the largest gains. A direct implication is that the true optimal policy might differ slightly from our “Best 22” calculation. Finding the best combination of tracts out of all possible combinations constitutes a prohibitively large computational task, and we cannot guarantee that such a policy would be identical to our “Best 22” proposal.<sup>45</sup> However, given that the effects on residential rents of switching a vacant neighborhood to an equilibrium with positive residential population are fairly local, the difference in tract sets is unlikely to be large. In any case, within the confines of our model, we might consider the “Best 22” proposal as a lower bound on what an optimal policy could feasibly achieve.

We also carry out similar exercises with alternative criteria to determine the best 22 tracts. In particular, we consider the tracts that yield the largest increases in population or aggregate business rents in a coordinated equilibrium with positive residential development and population. The resulting tract selection using these alternative criteria ends up looking quite similar. Using citywide changes in population, 21 tracts end up being selected in common with those selected according to the largest increases in residential land rents, implying that only one tract differs. Using changes in citywide business rents, 18 tracts are common to the selection according to citywide residential land rents, while only four tracts differ. Figure 12 outlines the 22 tracts that, when individually switched to an equilibrium with coordination among residents and developers, yield the largest gains in citywide population and business rents. One notable qualitative difference is that the selection of “Best 22” tracts based on implied changes in business rents focuses on coordinating only the tracts located in a relatively tight ring across the business area, leaving out those farther away from the central business district.

Table 4 presents some citywide statistics corresponding to the various policy counterfactuals. The first column in Table 4 presents the outcomes for the benchmark equilibrium, which matches by construction the data used to identify the model parameters in Section IIIB. The second column presents findings from the policy

<sup>44</sup> DFC’s selection of tracts close to downtown suggests potential gains to such tracts from cross-tract spillovers in those areas. However, DFC’s land-use scenario, and subsequent choice of tracts, is based mostly on qualitative neighborhood features such as food security, diversity of population, health and environmental remediation, and other factors. This is not to say that cross-tract spillovers do not exist, in which case our findings might be treated as a lower bound, but rather that such spillovers are not driving the difference between the set of tracts that we select and that DFC selects. Admittedly, these qualitative factors would likely play a role in policymakers’ choices of tracts to target. Observe, however, that some of these factors are captured in our model through our estimates of tract-level amenities.

<sup>45</sup> Taking into account all possible 22 tract combinations, out of 52 vacant tracts, amounts to  $\frac{52!}{30! \times 22!}$  counterfactual scenarios.

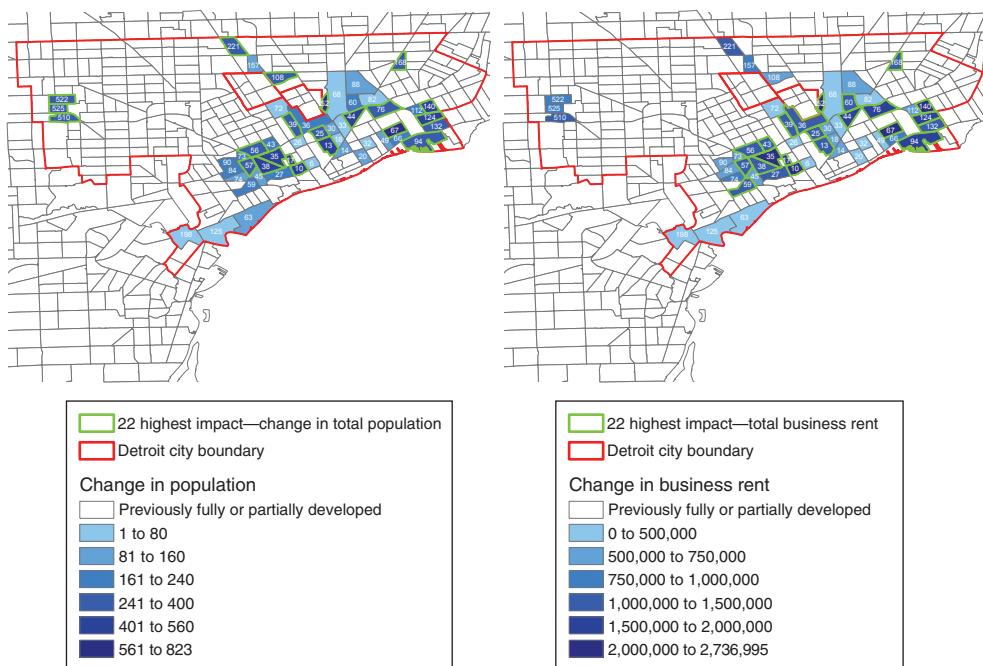


FIGURE 12. BEST 22 TRACTS BASED ON POPULATION AND BUSINESS RENT

TABLE 4—DETROIT OUTCOMES FOR ALTERNATIVE POLICIES

Detroit	Benchmark	DFC	Best 22 bus.	Best 22 res.	Best 22 pop.	All 52
Residents	126,430	131,466	134,784	135,286	135,312	139,455
Mean wages, \$	31,996	31,922	31,869	31,875	31,875	31,801
SD wages, \$	10,137	10,099	10,111	10,130	10,132	10,082
Mean res. rents, \$/sq. ft.	1.47	1.43	1.43	1.43	1.43	1.38
SD res. rents, \$/sq. ft.	0.64	0.65	0.64	0.64	0.64	0.65
Total res. rents, mill. \$	1,223	1,270	1,301	1,304	1,303	1,343
Total bus. rents, mill. \$	2,181	2,205	2,217	2,216	2,215	2,235

counterfactual that considers development guarantees for the 22 tracts selected in the DFC strategic plan. The next three columns present findings for alternative “Best 22” tracts according to citywide business rents, residential rents, and population criteria. The final column presents the outcome of an exercise where all vacant tracts are allowed to switch into an equilibrium with coordination. In these exercises, apart from that in the last column, 22 tracts are always simultaneously allowed to switch from a no-development to a development equilibrium, so that the findings reported in Table 4 reflect any complementarities between those tracts.

In all policy counterfactuals, switching tracts into an equilibrium with coordination increases residential development, which attracts more residents to the city. Naturally, the proposal where tracts are selected according to the implied increases in population yields the largest increase in residents among the policies considering

22 tracts. This proposal increases the number of residents in Detroit proper by 8,882 residents, or about 7 percent. Allowing all 52 tracts to coordinate in the equilibrium with development yields an increase of 10 percent in the number of residents. Given that the supply of new residents to the city is perfectly elastic at  $\bar{u}$ , none of these scenarios changes residential mean rents per square foot significantly; they decrease slightly within Detroit proper because rents in the newly developed tracts tend to be lower than the existing tract average and the city has relatively few fully developed tracts. Only in the case where we coordinate all 52 tracts do residential rents per square foot fall slightly. The influx of workers into the city lowers wages, although the changes are small in all cases.

Table 4 also presents total yearly residential and business rents in millions of dollars. Total residential rents amount to about \$1.2 billion while total business rents amount to about \$2.2 billion per year. Allowing for a coordination equilibrium in the best 22 tracts according to largest residential rent gains increases residential rents by \$81 million per year, or 6.6 percent. In contrast, the DFC strategic proposal increases rents by \$47 million per year, or 3.8 percent. Therefore, selecting the “Best 22” tracts according to where residential investment is largest in a counterfactual yields 72 percent additional investment relative to the DFC proposal.

The findings are somewhat less pronounced when examining business rents. Consider the “Best 22” plan according to the tracts that generate the largest individual increases in business rents. This policy raises business rents by about \$35 million per year, or 1.6 percent. The DFC proposal increases business rents by \$24 million per year. Therefore, in terms of business rents, the model-selected policy yields an increase in gains of 46 percent relative to the DFC strategic plan. Note that, as mentioned above, all of the “Best 22” policies in Table 4 yield very similar outcomes given that the set of selected tracts overlap significantly. If all 52 tracts are allowed to switch to an equilibrium with coordination, gains can amount up to \$54 million per year, or 2.5 percent relative to the benchmark equilibrium.

Results similar to those in Table 4 for the case where variations in residential amenities,  $B(R_j; j) = B_j R_j^\sigma$ , partly reflect local tract characteristics,  $B_j$ , as described in Section IIIB are shown in online Appendix B. The main difference between the two tables is that the response in the number of residents is now slightly less pronounced, owing to the fact that not all amenities derive from residential externalities. In turn, wages are slightly higher under some of the policy experiments. However, within Detroit proper, as summarized in those tables, results are generally very similar.

Table 5 presents the whole set of changes in residential and business rents, as well as changes in population, resulting from these different policy counterfactuals. The table further separates the outcomes into those that are experienced directly in the treated tracts versus those that are experienced in the remaining tracts of Detroit proper. Table 5 also shows the effect of these policies for the whole sample of tracts in greater Detroit, which includes the counties of Wayne, Macomb, and Oakland. Finally, the first row of the table gives the required development guarantee needed to induce a switch to the equilibrium with coordination, calculated as  $\sum_{\Omega^P} (F_j + Vh_j^\nu)(n_j - 1)$ , where  $\Omega^P$  corresponds to the set of tracts in which the policies are implemented.

TABLE 5—DEVELOPMENT GUARANTEES AND POLICY OUTCOMES IN DETROIT PROPER AND GREATER DETROIT

	DFC	Best 22 bus.	Best 22 res.	Best 22. pop.	All 52
Dev. guarantee, mill. \$	41.057	70,367	73,243	72,805	106,001
Detroit proper:					
$\Delta$ in res. rent, mill. \$					
Total	47,451	77,828	80,758	80,502	120,346
Treated tracts	45,796	75,158	77,443	77,064	115,893
Other tracts	1,656	2,670	3,315	3,438	4,453
$\Delta$ in bis. rent, mill. \$					
Total	23,502	35,921	34,525	33,792	54,253
Treated tracts	9,857	8,656	4,469	4,505	22,370
Other tracts	13,645	27,265	30,056	29,287	31,884
$\Delta$ in population					
Total	5,036	8,354	8,856	8,882	13,025
Treated tracts	4,746	7,893	8,347	8,369	12,296
Other tracts	290	461	510	514	730
Greater Detroit:					
$\Delta$ in res. rent, mill. \$	58,675	96,348	102,751	103,142	150,846
$\Delta$ in bis. rent, mill. \$	61,111	100,355	107,024	107,432	157,123
$\Delta$ in population	7,043	11,663	12,540	12,617	18,301

Table 5 underscores some key implications shared by all of the policy proposals. First, in all cases, the plans are worth pursuing; that is, all plans yield increases in aggregate residential and business rents combined that exceed the needed development guarantees. Therefore, even if the development guarantees were implemented in a way that ultimately required the guarantors to develop the targeted areas themselves, the policies result in a gain for the city, particularly given the implied increase in business rents (the gains in residential rents in nontreated tracts are generally small). It is important to keep in mind that development guarantees would hopefully not to be used in equilibrium since, if fully credible, they would be provided only to coordinate private investors and residents. Table 5 shows that the benefits from this policy, once we sum all of their implications for greater Detroit, can be quite large. Second, most of the gains in residential land rents accrue to the treated tracts while most of the gains in business land rents accrue outside of the treated tracts. In fact, about two-thirds of increases in business land rents emerge outside of Detroit proper, where all of the treated tracts are located. In contrast, only about one-fifth of the increases in residential land rents appear outside of Detroit proper. Increases in commercial land rents stem primarily from commuting links and general equilibrium effects because wages change everywhere in the broader city, so that these findings highlight the perils of using partial equilibrium logic to carry out this type of policy assessment. Third, increases in population are quite concentrated in treated tracts, which imply that the newly developed areas provide workers not only to downtown firms but also to the suburbs. In that sense, the policy revitalizes the core of the city as a residential center.

Comparing the different policies presented in the columns of Table 5 again emphasizes that the particular criterion according to which “Best 22” policy is

selected is somewhat immaterial. Out of the set of policies that move 22 tracts into an equilibrium with residential development, the best policy for Detroit as a whole is one in which tract selection is guided by the largest effects on population. Making Detroit proper an attractive place to live with enough residential amenities is the key objective of the policy.

Net gains to the greater Detroit area become much larger when treating all 52 vacant tracts, which then emerges as the best option. This more ambitious policy generates \$157 million a year in additional business rents, and \$150 million a year in additional residential land rents. The corresponding development guarantees that would be required totals \$106 million. The rate of return for greater Detroit on such a policy, even if one takes the guarantees in their entirety as a pure resource cost (and one should not), is substantial: at least a 50 percent return on investment with an extra 18,301 residents. Put another way, the returns to a well-designed policy are potentially quite large. Observe also that the “Best 22” plans capture about two-thirds of these gains while coordinating fewer than half of the tracts.

Policy outcomes analogous to those in Table 5 are shown in online Appendix B for the case where amenities partly reflect local tract attributes unrelated to density. As mentioned above, aggregate changes within Detroit proper tend to be similar across specifications, although they are less pronounced within treated tracts when amenities also reflect local tract characteristics. In the greater Detroit area, the effects of the policies are slightly more marked than in the benchmark case because the parameter governing the strength of residential externalities is on average slightly smaller in the suburbs. Overall, however, outcomes under the various policies under consideration generally remain within 5 percent of our benchmark results.

#### *D. In Detail: Coordination in All 52 Tracts*

The aggregate city statistics presented above do not illustrate, by design, the heterogeneous responses of particular neighborhoods to the different policies considered in the analysis thus far. In this section, we make use of the plan that treats all 52 vacant neighborhoods to illustrate and discuss some of these effects across tracts.

In Figure 13, we present the fraction of residential land that is developed in each tract after the policy is implemented.<sup>46</sup> The figure shows that, even after implementation, most of Detroit proper is still only partially developed, that is  $T_j^r < \bar{T}_j^r$ . In many of the areas now in a new equilibrium with coordination, residential development uses less than 15 percent of the potentially available residential land.<sup>47</sup> In no sense, therefore, does this policy lead to a booming residential area that becomes congested. Only in a few of the new tracts with residential development does

<sup>46</sup>Tracts marked in black represent tracts for which data are not available or include obvious errors.

<sup>47</sup>A potential limitation of our analysis is that exogenous tract characteristics are held constant in counterfactual exercises. An implicit assumption is that fundamentals in the vacant tracts are not dramatically different than those of their immediate surrounding tracts. However, there could be circumstances unique to a vacant tract, and challenging to detect without a closer on-the-ground examination, that would allow that tract to be significantly more productive than its neighboring tracts once developed. To the extent that this is the case, our findings would need to be adjusted to include this tract-specific information.

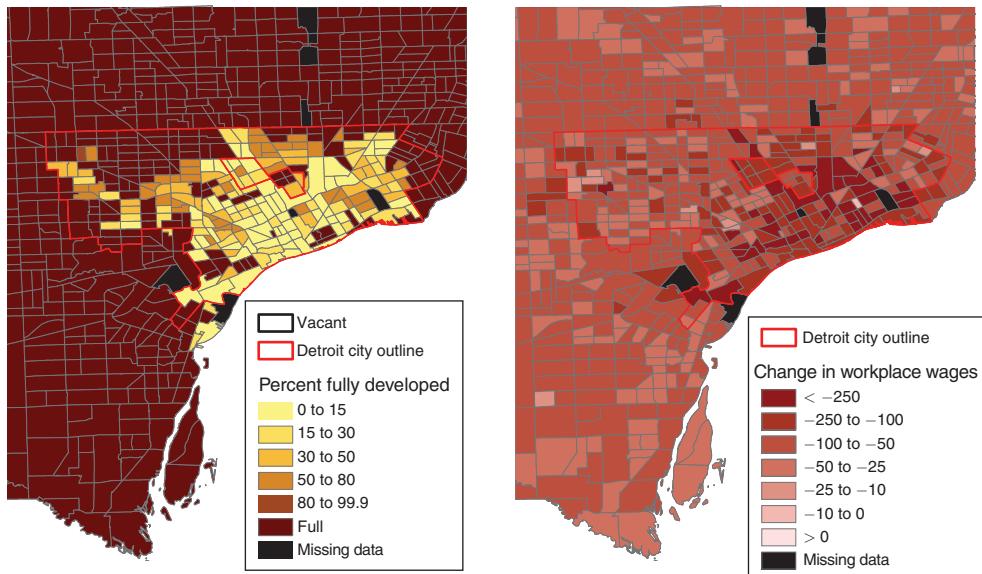


FIGURE 13. COORDINATING ALL 52 VACANT TRACTS, PERCENT OF DEVELOPED RESIDENTIAL LAND AND CHANGE IN WORKPLACE WAGES

residential land usage exceed 50 percent of the available land, and none of these tracts become fully developed.

The fact that all 52 areas become only partially developed after the policy is implemented remains consistent with the idea that these were initially trapped in the equilibrium without development. As we argued above, because developers operate at zero profits when neighborhoods are only partially developed, the coordination problem would not be solved privately by a single developer or a combination of developers.

Figure 13 also illustrates the change in workplace wages in each tract. Virtually all tracts experience declines in workplace wages. As agents migrate to the city following a policy aimed at revitalizing Detroit, labor supply naturally increases, which tends to depress wages. We discussed this effect earlier in the context of the description of the model and its main mechanisms. As expected, the fall in wages is somewhat more pronounced close to the affected areas, but the general decline in wages is fairly uniform across the city. This general equilibrium effect, which extends well outside Detroit proper, is primarily responsible for the increase in business land rents, through equation (6), described in the previous section.

Figure 14 shows the resulting change in the number of workers and residents at the census tract level. Clearly, a development-guarantee policy that is provided in each of the 52 vacant tracts raises the number of residents in essentially all tracts, although increases are naturally larger in the treated neighborhoods. The areas immediately surrounding the treated tracts sees the smallest gains in residents, while gains in the suburbs are more substantial. This localized pattern makes sense. The newly developed residential areas now house downtown

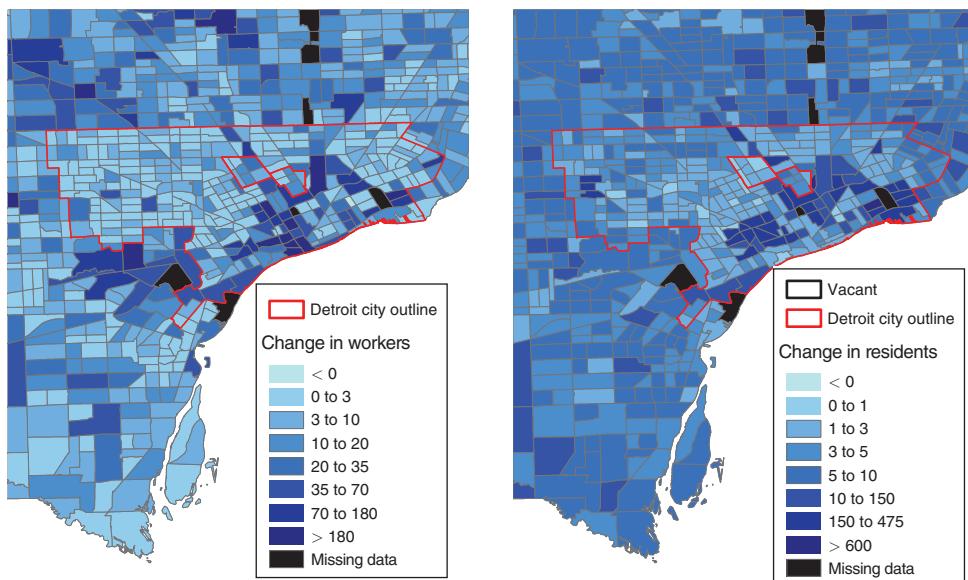


FIGURE 14. COORDINATING ALL 52 VACANT TRACTS, CHANGE IN WORKERS AND RESIDENTS

workers who substitute away from housing in other areas of Detroit proper. The change in workers and their locations also show some clear patterns. Employment in downtown Detroit increases substantially, but so does employment in many of the suburbs, including Dearborn. The newly developed residential tracts increase labor supply nearby, which depresses wages and encourages firms to employ more workers. Furthermore, workers are not worse off since they enjoy additional residential amenities and the shorter commutes to work.

The final maps, presented in Figure 15, show the changes in business and residential rents by tract. The results follow closely with those discussed in Figure 14. Tracts that gain the most workers are those where business rents increase most, and tracts that gain the most residents are those where residential rents increase most. These findings are natural given our specification of technology and preferences with Cobb-Douglas functions that feature constant factor and consumption shares respectively. Perhaps more interesting in this case are the heterogeneity in the magnitudes of the implied changes. While some of the tracts in downtown Detroit, Dearborn, and other suburbs can see increases of more than a million dollars in yearly business rents, other tracts near the boarder of Detroit see business rents increase by less than \$25,000. Most tracts experience modest increases in residential land rents, between \$15,000 and \$60,000. Only the residential tracts that have switched from being vacant to an equilibrium with residential development show increases in residential rents of more than \$100,000. Areas where rents tend to increase the least, either business or residential, are located in the outer ring of the city close to the boundary of Detroit proper.

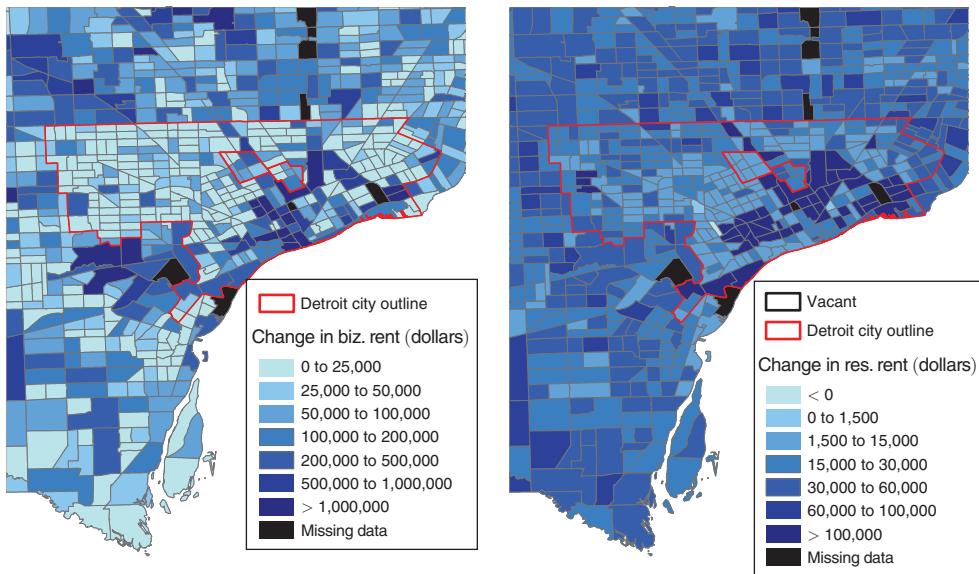


FIGURE 15. COORDINATING ALL 52 VACANT TRACTS, CHANGE IN BUSINESS AND RESIDENTIAL RENTS

## V. Conclusion

Declining cities have become and likely will continue to be a pervasive phenomenon. The fact that cities tend to specialize in certain industries, and that the importance of particular industries and the characteristics of factors they employ vary over time, makes this inevitable. Learning how to cope with urban downturns can lead to improved utilization of past investments and less dissatisfaction by local residents with respect to technological progress and globalization. Cities or regions specialized in declining industries should be able to reinvent themselves to host new thriving industries, albeit perhaps on a smaller scale. So far, this process of urban reinvention has fallen short of expectations in Detroit though it has had more success in cities such as Minneapolis and Pittsburgh.

In this paper, we have argued that inefficiencies associated with urban decline can be related to specific areas of a city, which potentially retain sound underlying fundamentals, but are nevertheless trapped in local neighborhood equilibria in which developers and residents are unable to coordinate their actions. No resident wants to be first to move into a vacant neighborhood; and no developer wants to be first to invest in a vacant neighborhood. In the case of Detroit, we identified 52 census tracts that can be mapped into such an equilibrium. These tracts were originally developed before the 1930s to accommodate a rapidly growing demand for workers in the automobile industry. However, as employment fell in that industry, and some plants moved elsewhere, residential demand and income collapsed. Along with other factors, these changes helped foment the 1967 Detroit Riot that we argue drove these tracts into a no-development equilibrium. The end result is a distorted, impractical, and inefficient city.

It is no surprise that thriving industries do not necessarily wish to locate in such a city. The high-skilled workers required by the high-tech industry would likely not want to start their lives in vacant neighborhoods near Detroit's downtown, even if such locations are cheap relative to the available urban infrastructure. The necessary density is simply not there, so new workers and firms do not enter.

Our analysis quantifies the forces that sustain this outcome as one equilibrium of the city and uses the resulting quantitative framework to assess policies that can help vacant neighborhoods switch back to an equilibrium where developers and residents coordinate into building and living in these neighborhoods. In particular, we consider development guarantees, provided by the government or outside parties that commit to a minimum amount of investment in a targeted vacant area. If fully credible, these guarantees would resolve the coordination problem among private developers and residents, leading to a new equilibrium with positive numbers of active developers and residents. Within our framework, we can quantify the magnitude of the required guarantees in each vacant tract, and identify the tracts in which the policy would be most effective. In addition, we are able to compare and quantify our findings with those of alternative plans that have been advocated by experts and local residents, such as those laid out by the Detroit Future City strategic framework. In all cases, we find that these guarantees can be quite effective. Policies that utilize guarantees in the 22 tracts yielding the largest gains from a switch to an equilibrium with development generate increases in residential and business rents in the hundreds of millions of dollars a year. These can also attract thousands of new residents to the city.

We estimate that a large fraction of the gains stemming from any policy that develops the currently vacant residential areas would accrue to business rents outside Detroit's city boundary by way of general equilibrium effects. Therefore, incorporating the appropriate stakeholders in policy design and initial investments appears to be important. In particular, our analysis underscores the existence and magnitude of mutual gains to different parties, including developers, landowners, and new residents.

Of course, our conclusions depend on our stand that coordination problems are responsible for vacant neighborhoods, the specific structural model we put forward, and the specific quantification of the model. While the fundamentals and parameter values we use derive from the data and literature, we recognize that other tract-specific characteristics and more recent data could suggest other sets of census tracts for consideration in calculating the gains from coordination, and affect the policy gains we compute. We have performed a number of robustness tests, but practical policy implementation in Detroit, or any other city, would require combining our computations with local, practical, and specific knowledge of the characteristics of these neighborhoods.

Additionally, in any quantitative analysis, one inevitably confronts the need to abstract from some aspects of reality that might be pertinent. One such dimension is the presence of citywide or region-wide agglomeration effects. In our analysis, we consider local agglomeration effects in production and amenities that are at the heart of the coordination problem we study. However, these effects operate only within and not across census tracts. To the degree that agglomeration effects across tracts

also matter quantitatively, adding this feature to our analysis would only serve to increase the gains from the advocated policies. In such a case, the gains we measure then become a conservative lower bound.

## REFERENCES

- Abowd, John M., Bryce E. Stephens, Lars Vilhuber, Fredrik Andersson, Kevin L. McKinney, Marc Roemer, and Simon Woodcock.** 2005. "The LEHD Infrastructure Files and the Creation of the Quarterly Workforce Indicators." US Census Bureau, LEHD Program Technical Paper TP-2006-01.
- Ahlfeldt, Gabriel M., and Daniel P. McMillen.** 2015. "The Vertical City: The Price of Land and the Height of Buildings in Chicago 1870–2010." Spatial Economics Research Centre (SERC) Discussion Paper 0180.
- Ahlfeldt, Gabriel M., Stephen J. Redding, Daniel M. Sturm, and Nikolaus Wolf.** 2015. "The Economics of Density: Evidence from the Berlin Wall." *Econometrica* 83 (6): 2127–89.
- Allen, Treb, Costas Arkolakis, and Xiangliang Li.** 2015. "Optimal City Structure." <http://www.econ.yale.edu/~ka265/research/OptimalCity/AAL%20-%20City%20Structure.pdf>.
- Bing, D.** 2012. "Detroit Mayor Dave Bing: STATE OF THE CITY 2012," *CBS Detroit*. <https://detroit.cbslocal.com/2012/03/07/detroit-mayor-dave-bing-state-of-the-city-2012/>.
- Bogue, Donald.** 2006. "Census Tract Data, 1950: Elizabeth Mullen Bogue File (ICPSR 2931)." Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research (ICPSR), Ann Arbor, MI. ICPSR02931-v1. doi:10.3886/ICPSR02931.v1 (accessed December 14, 2016).
- Ciccone, Antonio, and Robert E. Hall.** 1996. "Productivity and the Density of Economic Activity." *American Economic Review* 86 (1): 54–70.
- Couture, Victor, and Jessie Handbury.** 2015. "Urban Revival in America, 2000 to 2010." [http://faculty.haas.berkeley.edu/couture/download/Couture\\_Handbury\\_Revival.pdf](http://faculty.haas.berkeley.edu/couture/download/Couture_Handbury_Revival.pdf).
- Davis, Morris A., and François Ortalo-Magné.** 2011. "Household Expenditures, Wages, Rents." *Review of Economic Dynamics* 14 (2): 248–61.
- Detroit Blight Removal Task Force.** 2014. *Detroit Blight Removal Task Force Plan—May 2014*. Detroit: Detroit Blight Removal Task Force.
- Detroit Future City.** 2012. *Detroit Future City: Detroit Strategic Framework Plan—December 2012*. Detroit: Detroit Future City.
- Detroit Future City.** 2017. *139 Square Miles*. Detroit: Inland Press.
- Diamond, Douglas W., and Philip H. Dybvig.** 1983. "Bank Runs, Deposit Insurance, and Liquidity." *Journal of Political Economy* 91 (3): 401–19.
- Fu, Chao, and Jesse Gregory.** 2019. "Estimation of an Equilibrium Model with Externalities: Post-Disaster Neighborhood Rebuilding." *Econometrica* 87 (2): 387–421.
- Glaeser, Edward L., and Joseph Gyourko.** 2005. "Urban Decline and Durable Housing." *Journal of Political Economy* 113 (2): 345–75.
- Graham, Matthew R., Mark J. Kutzbach, and Brian McKenzie.** 2014. "Design Comparison of LODES and ACS Commuting Data Products." Center for Economic Studies Working Papers 14–38.
- Guerrieri, Veronica, Daniel Hartley, and Erik Hurst.** 2012. "Within-City Variation in Urban Decline: The Case of Detroit." *American Economic Review* 102 (3): 120–26.
- Head, Keith, and John Ries.** 2001. "Increasing Returns versus National Product Differentiation as an Explanation for the Pattern of U.S.-Canada Trade." *American Economic Review* 91 (4): 858–76.
- Kusisto, Laura.** 2017. "The Urban Condo Boom Has Reached Its Final Frontier: Detroit." *Wall Street Journal*, March 1. <https://www.wsj.com/articles/the-urban-condo-boom-has-reached-its-final-frontier-detroit-1488382101>.
- Manson, Steven, Jonathan Schroeder, David Van Riper, and Steven Ruggles.** 2017. "IPUMS National Historical Geographic Information System: Version 12.0." University of Minnesota, Minneapolis. <https://ipums.org/projects/ipums-nhgis/d050.v12.0> (accessed January 12, 2017).
- Minnesota Population Center.** 2013. "IPUMS Restricted Complete Count Data: Version 1.0 [Machine-readable database]." University of Minnesota, Minneapolis. [https://usa.ipums.org/usa/complete\\_count.shtml](https://usa.ipums.org/usa/complete_count.shtml) (accessed February 27, 2017).
- Minnesota Population Center.** 2016. "National Historic Geographic Information System: Version 11.0 [Database]." University of Minnesota, Minneapolis. <http://doi.org/10.18128/D050.V11.0> (accessed January 120, 2017).
- Monte, Ferdinando, Stephen J. Redding, and Esteban Rossi-Hansberg.** 2018. "Commuting, Migration, and Local Employment Elasticities." *American Economic Review* 108 (12): 3855–90.

- Owens, Raymond, III, Esteban Rossi-Hansberg, and Pierre-Daniel Sarte.** Forthcoming. "Rethinking Detroit: Dataset." *American Economic Journal: Economic Policy*. <https://doi.org/10.1257/pol.20180651>.
- Redding, Stephen J., and Esteban Rossi-Hansberg.** 2017. "Quantitative Spatial Economics." *Annual Review of Economics* 9: 21–58.
- Rossi-Hansberg, Esteban, Pierre-Daniel Sarte, and Raymond Owens, III.** 2010. "Housing Externalities." *Journal of Political Economy* 118 (3): 485–535.
- Scorsone, Eric A.** 2013. "Depopulation Cities and Chronic Fiscal Stress: The Detroit Story." *Journal of Law and Society* 14: 207–34.
- Sugrue, Thomas J.** 1996. *The Origins of the Urban Crisis—Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Sugrue, Thomas J.** 2007. "Motor City: The Story of Detroit." Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History. <https://fdocuments.in/document/motor-city-the-story-of-detroit-mrs-motor-city-the-story-of-detroit-dearborn.html>.
- Sugrue, Thomas J.** 2015. "From Motor City to Motor Metropolis: How the Automobile Industry Reshaped Urban America." *Automobile in American Life and Society*. [http://www.autolife.umd.umich.edu/Race/R\\_Overview/R\\_Overview1.htm](http://www.autolife.umd.umich.edu/Race/R_Overview/R_Overview1.htm).