Housing Supply as a Social Process

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The topic of housing supply in the United States has traditionally attracted more scholarly attention from urban planners, economists, and political scientists than from sociologists. Nevertheless, sociologists have much to contribute to knowledge on the social dynamics underlying new housing construction; indeed, what gets built where in cities has historically been a central concern of urban sociologists. The preeminent sociological theory on the determinants of land use—the growth machine theory of Harvey Molotch (1976) and John Logan (2007)—highlights the power of business interests, land owners, and developers to push through desired residential development. However, residents who live nearby proposed housing construction are also powerful social actors who often have the motivation and resources to oppose new housing. In many cities, the political process through which new housing is approved gives these residents ample opportunities to push back on new housing. Ultimately, the housing that is--or is not--built in neighborhoods reflects social conflict and debate about not just what neighborhoods should look like but also who should be able to live in them.

Housing supply is also a distinctly sociological topic because it has important consequences for several dimensions of inequality and segregation. It is thus concerning that that housing supply in the United States is failing to keep up with demand. In the wake of the Great Recession, the rate of new housing construction markedly slowed down in the United States. From 1968 to 2007, an average of 6.3 housing units were built per thousand residents; from 2008 to 2020, this number dropped to just under 3 units per thousand residents (author's calculations from Census data). While rates of new housing construction increased during the COVID-19 pandemic, demand for housing has also spiked, as measured both by large increases in national house prices (U.S. FHFA 2022) and large decreases in the amount of time homes are on the market (Realtor.com 2021). Though housing supply is constrained to an extent by the amount of available land, it is generally possible to use land more intensively to build more housing (Been et al. 2019). As such, insufficient housing supply in the United States is ultimately a *social* problem, and solving this problem requires attention to the institutions that govern housing supply as well as the actors who struggle over whether or not housing is built.

In this chapter, I first cover the consequences of insufficient housing supply for various measures of inequality and segregation. I then expand on sociological approaches to understanding battles over land use, including a growing interdisciplinary literature that highlights and grapples with existing residents' opposition to new housing supply. Next, I outline regulations that govern not just the type and amount of housing that can be built, but also the process through which new housing may be approved by cities. Here, I highlight a growing

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interdisciplinary literature that demonstrates how these regulations contribute to inequality and segregation in the United States. Before concluding, I highlight my own research on the origins of residential growth controls in California, where I find evidence that these controls were used to enforce racial residential segregation in the post-Civil Rights era. I close by proposing some potentially fruitful directions for sociological research on the causes and consequences of housing supply.

Housing Supply and Inequality

Perhaps the foremost reason that sociologists are concerned about issues of constrained housing supply is its effect on affordability. Over the same time period that new housing supply has slowed down, the United States has experienced a growing crisis of housing affordability. National house prices have risen by about 50% since 2012 in real terms (U.S. FHFA 2022). This has made the 'American dream' of homeownership increasingly unattainable, especially for Black, younger, and lower-income households (Kneebone and Trainer 2019). The affordability crisis is also felt by renters. In 2018, half of renter households spent over 30% of their household income on rent, with a quarter of renters spending over half of their household income (Salviati 2018). Low-income households, which disproportionately experience severe rent burden (Desmond 2016), have been priced out of rental markets across the nation: a minimum wage earner cannot afford an average two-bedroom rental in any county in the United States (National Low Income Housing Coalition 2017). These trends may then imply greater income-based inequality in the amount of resources households can use to consume non-housing goods.

While the housing affordability crisis has several causes, there is a growing academic consensus that the slowdown in new housing supply has contributed to higher housing prices within metropolitan areas (Been et al. 2019). New housing supply lowers rents in the neighborhoods where it is built (Asquith et al. 2020; Pennington 2021; Li 2019, though see Damiano and Frenier 2020) and lowers house prices at the lower end of the housing market by allowing higher-income residents to "filter up" into more expensive, newly-constructed housing (e.g., Mast 2019). Importantly, though, increased housing supply is unlikely to completely solve affordability issues for lowest-income households (Pattillo 2013; Zuk and Chapple 2016; Been et al. 2019; Damiano and Frenier 2020; Phillips et al. 2021), pointing towards the need for policies like housing subsidies and rent control that can help with housing affordability for low-income households.

A second reason why housing supply should be of interest to sociologists is that it also affects the likelihood of residential displacement and gentrification (e.g., Zuk et al. 2018). Residential displacement is a negative outcome of concern because it disrupts affected residents' social ties and access to social and economic resources. Theory suggests that greater housing supply may forestall price increases that would otherwise drive displacement, either because existing renters can no longer afford to live in their neighborhood or because landlords would be less likely to evict tenants in order to charge higher rents to new tenants. Recent research finds evidence for this relationship between housing supply and displacement. While subsidized housing appears to be more protective against displacement than market-rate housing, both forms of housing supply effectively combat displacement (Zuk and Chapple 2016; Pennington 2021).

While sociologists debate the extent of gentrification and of the harms gentrification causes (e.g., Brown-Saracino 2017), there is little doubt that gentrification has become more common in urban areas in the United States in the past few decades. Recent sociological research highlights that gentrification-fueled displacement is unequally patterned by race (Hwang and Ding 2020). There are potentially conflicting mechanisms underlying the relationship between housing supply and gentrification. On one hand, because housing is expensive to build, developers will usually price new market-rate housing at the top of the rental market so that their investment will be profitable. This means that, in general, residents of newly-built housing are likely to be more affluent than other neighborhood residents (e.g., Pennington 2021). On the other hand, if new housing is not provided in neighborhoods that are highly desirable, high-income households will bid up the price of existing properties, pushing low- and middle-income households out and thus fueling gentrification (e.g., Hwang and Lin 2016; Phillips et al. 2021). While more research remains to be done, it seems plausible that this latter mechanism has more substantially contributed to gentrification recently, given low rates of new residential construction that would directly drive gentrification via the former mechanism.

Finally, housing supply has important implications for sociologists interested in spatial and environmental inequalities. Insufficient housing supply near dense employment centers causes many workers--typically, those who have less ability to pay--to live far from their work. This, in turn, generates socioeconomic and racial inequalities in access to city resources and in time spent commuting to work (e.g., Kneebone and Holmes 2015; McLafferty and Preston 2019), alongside increases in greenhouse gas emissions associated with greater commuting (e.g., Ewing and Cervero 2017) and suburban or exurban development (e.g., Jacob and Lopez 2009). Additionally, the lack of housing supply in areas with higher wages blocks workers who are living in lower-wage areas from moving to better economic opportunities, in the process slowing income convergence between residents of high- and low-wage areas (e.g., Ganong and Shoag 2017).

Battles over Housing Supply and Land Use

Understanding battles over housing supply and land use in United States cities requires understanding the groups of actors who participate in these battles and what they have at stake. These battles can be usefully framed in terms of Logan and Molotch's growth machine theory, which highlights tensions between the *exchange value* and the *use value* that can be derived from land. On the one hand are those who seek to profit from the development of land for residential use. This includes private housing developers, who build nearly all new housing in the United States (e.g., Andrews 2020) and can be thought of as driven to maximize revenues and minimize costs. These goals largely explain why private developers seek to build housing in areas where housing costs are higher, as well as why many new apartment buildings are so aesthetically similar (e.g., Sisson 2018). Additionally, nearby business and land owners may be motivated to seek greater residential development because it then leads to greater demand for services, higher land values, and ultimately more profits for owners of capital. The growth machine suggests that this coalition of profit-seekers are usually powerful enough to push through desired development, whether residential or commercial (Logan and Molotch 2007).

On the other hand, existing residents of neighborhoods often have reason to believe that new residential development will negatively affect the use value they derive from their home and their neighborhood. As a result, they often organize to fight residential development. These residents express a variety of different concerns about the potential negative effects of new housing development on neighborhood use values. Despite ample evidence of the environmental benefits of denser housing, environmental objections to proposed new housing remain common. In an analysis of community meetings in Massachusetts, Einstein et al. (2019) find that concerns about how new developments will affect the local environment are some of the most frequent objections raised. Residents also commonly voice aesthetic objections to proposed residential structures and claim that it does not fit in with neighboring properties. Nearby neighbors may also complain that the new structure may block the views or light they used to enjoy (e.g., Monkkonen 2016; Dougherty 2017). Another common set of concerns refer to the impact that the new residents will have on neighborhood parking and traffic, as well as on community services and amenities. Finally, residents may also be concerned that new residents will bring crime or a decline in neighborhood character or quality (Dear 1992). In affluent and Whiter neighborhoods, these concerns may be driven by a desire to exclude low-income (e.g., Duke 2010) and/or minority households (e.g., Farley et al. 1994; Bobo and Zubrinsky 1996) from moving in.

In addition to concerns about use values, homeowners may also be concerned about how nearby residential development might affect the exchange value of their homes (e.g., Logan and Molotch 2007; Einstein et al. 2019). Homeowners are motivated to protect their home values because homes constitute the largest portion of most homeowners' wealth in the United States (e.g., Kuhn et al. 2020) and these investments are more difficult to hedge against than other investments. For homeowners, threats to use values are often threats to exchange values as well, since home values are tied not just to the quality of the residential structure and property on which it sits, but also the bundle of amenities provided in the surrounding neighborhood and city (e.g., Fischel 2001). Further, even if nearby residential development did not necessarily affect homeowners' use values, homeowners may still financially benefit from blocking new housing if doing so prevents housing supply from expanding to meet demand, thus leading to an increase in house prices. However, opposition to new housing does not appear to be completely driven by homeowner concerns about exchange values, given that in some circumstances renters may oppose nearby housing at the same rate as homeowners (e.g., Hankinson 2018).

Finally, residents may oppose nearby residential development for ideological reasons that do not neatly fit into the above categories of use and exchange value. One important reason for objection is that new development will simply result in large profits for housing developers that are not shared with the surrounding community (Monkkonen and Manville 2019). Residents may sense that housing developers are bending the rules, getting special treatment, or benefitting unethically from building housing in a time when prices are so high (Roth 2007). Residents also object because they believe that the needs and desires of residents should be prioritized over those of newcomers or outsiders (Wong 2018). Manville and Monkonnen (2021) call this perspective *localism*, and find it to be more common among residents who are White, affluent, conservative, and/or homeowners. Finally, residents who hold less egalitarian ideologies are more likely to oppose nearby housing construction, though experimental evidence suggests that

the negative effects of homeownership on attitudes towards nearby development are stronger than the positive effect of holding a more egalitarian ideology (Marble and Nall 2021).

Regulations and Institutions Governing Housing Supply

Linking attitudes towards proposed new housing and rates of new housing supply are local regulations and institutions that govern the process of approving new housing. While states have the power to regulate land, states have generally given municipal governments leeway to enact land use regulations that control what types of new housing can be built where (e.g., Hirt 2015; Gyourko and Molloy 2015). The local nature of land use regulation sets up a collective action problem in high-demand metropolitan areas that can result in insufficient housing supply in the aggregate (e.g., Fischel 2008). Namely, while city residents might economically benefit from the employment growth that results from an increase in the size of the metropolitan area (e.g., Hsieh and Moretti 2019), they might also prefer that new housing goes elsewhere in the metropolitan area. As such, studying regulations around residential land use provides a lens to examine both how cities incorporate the feedback of residents in setting policy and how areas with fragmented governments do (or do not) coordinate in dealing with policy externalities.

The most central land use regulation is the ability to 'zone' land so that it can only be legally used for specific purposes--typically, residential, commercial, or industrial use. Though there are areas where these codes can overlap, it is common for residential uses to be prohibited in areas zoned for industrial or commercial use (Hirt 2015). Land zoned for residential use often carries additional zoning regulations that further delimit what type of residential structures—from standalone single-family homes to tall apartment buildings--can be built on the land. Because these codes affect density on the underlying land, the relative proportion of residential land zoned as single-family versus land zoned as multi-family has a direct effect on housing supply. In particular, it is difficult to add more housing in areas zoned for single-family housing that are already built out, since there is nowhere for new homes to go. In contrast, additional housing is easier to build in areas that allow for multi-family housing, since denser new housing can take the place of less-dense old housing.

Cities also enact other types of regulations for residential buildings that directly affect the amount of housing on land zoned for residential uses. For instance, cities can specify that residential structures can only be built on lots that exceed a minimum size or that they do not exceed a given height. Less directly, cities may set conditions--like contributing fees towards the provision of public infrastructure like roads, schools, and water supplies--that housing developers must fulfill in order to build new housing. These conditions then may limit housing supply by making building new housing less profitable for developers.

Measuring the effect of these land use regulations on national-level housing supply and costs is somewhat complicated by the fact that many state- or national-level surveys that contain city- or county-level data on land use regulations (e.g., Mawhorter and Reid 2018; Lo et al. 2019; Gyourko et al. 2019) cannot fully capture the important within-jurisdiction heterogeneity in regulation. However, studies using these data, as well as more detailed within-city data on land use regulations and data on correlates of regulation, almost all find evidence that land use regulations increase house prices and reduce residential construction (Gyourko and Molloy

2015). Stringent land use regulations are strongly correlated with rates of homelessness (Raphael 2010) and exacerbate residential segregation by household income (Rothwell and Massey 2010; Lens and Monkkonen 2016) and race (Rothwell and Massey 2009).

Cities also affect housing supply by setting the process through which new housing must get approved before it is built. Specifically, land use regulations prescribe that residential projects above a certain size, or that would require waivers to existing zoning codes, receive approval at public zoning and/or planning board meetings (Einstein et al. 2019). Even when a proposed residential project meets all existing zoning codes, vocal enough opposition can convince cities that the project needs to gain board approval at public meetings (e.g., Dougherty 2017). These meetings then provide opportunities for nearby residents to voice their support for or opposition to the proposed project. Though this feature of the approval process ostensibly empowers all community members to participate, these meetings are disproportionately dominated by those who oppose new housing—a group Einstein et al. (2019) call *neighborhood defenders*, and who are often colloquially known as NIMBYs (standing for "Not In My Back Yard").

One reason for this group's dominance in the approval process is structural. While there already exists a constituency of nearby residents who might be concerned about the impact of new housing, the beneficiaries of the new housing do not yet exist as a constituency (Einstein et al. 2019; Dougherty 2020). Participating in these meetings also skews towards more affluent homeowners, who are more likely to have financial and emotional stakes in defending their neighborhood (e.g., McCabe 2013; Einstein et al. 2019; Hall and Yoder 2020). This is consistent with work in political sociology and political science highlighting that better-resourced citizens (in terms of time, money, and civic skills) have greater capacity to participate in local politics (e.g., Brady et al. 1995). It helps to explain the more general sociological paradox that increasing the number of avenues of participation in local decision-making may actually widen inequalities in political influence (e.g., Lee et al. 2015; Levine 2017).

At meetings to discuss the fate of residential projects, neighborhood defenders may bring up a variety of concerns unrelated to the regulatory issues that triggered the meeting in the first place. Board members may then ask the housing developer to conduct further studies to address these concerns. Additionally, neighborhood defenders may also sue the city and the developer to block the proposed project. As Einstein et al. (2019) explain, these tactics may reduce the supply of new housing in several ways. First, these tactics may delay housing construction, since conducting studies to address neighbors' concerns and fighting lawsuits over proposed developments takes time. Second, these tactics may reduce the size of new housing projects, either because the zoning or planning board will request a smaller project, or because developers will proactively create projects with fewer units in order to stave off potential opposition. Finally, these tactics may block housing development altogether. Strong enough opposition from neighborhood defenders may convince zoning or planning boards to vote against proposed housing. In some cities, the costs (in time and money) associated with fighting neighborhood defenders may be high enough to discourage developers from building housing.

Origins of Residential Growth Controls

My own research on this topic focuses on the origins of residential growth controls in the post-World War II United States. While zoning regulations date back to the early 20th century, it was only in the 1960s and 1970s when cities began to implement land use regulations that were designed to control residential growth citywide (Molotch 1976). The spread of residential growth controls across was rapid. In 1971, Petaluma, a small city located about an hour north of San Francisco, passed one of the first limits on new residential construction (Logan and Zhou 1990); four years later, over 300 jurisdictions had enacted their own growth controls (Burrows 1978). However, this spread did not happen evenly. Understanding which cities adopted residential growth restrictions can help us understand the conditions under which communities construct boundaries to limit outsider access to community resources.

Previous work has offered several hypotheses as to why residential growth controls spread at this particular point in time. One explanation centers on a growing recognition of negative environmental externalities of residential sprawl, like loss of the natural environment and increased pollution (e.g., Brueckner 2000). A second prominent explanation focuses on the increasing suburbanization and metropolitan fragmentation of the United States (Fischel 2001). Because suburban homeowners generally worked in different cities than where they lived, their political interests shifted away from promoting commercial and industrial health in their city towards protecting their financial and psychic investments in their home, which could be threatened by an influx of new housing and new residents. A third explanation suggests that affluent communities passed growth restrictions in order to exclude poorer households, who might harm nearby property values and receive more in government transfers than they paid in taxes (e.g., Fischel 2004).

In my research (LaBriola 2022), I put forth an alternative explanation that makes central the role of race in the advent of residential growth controls around this time (see also related work by, e.g., Rothstein 2017; Trounstine 2020; Sahn 2022). By the end of the 1960s, many of the mechanisms that had been used to legally enforce racial residential segregation, like redlining, racial covenants, and blockbusting, had been outlawed by legislative and judicial action (e.g., Rothstein 2017). White households thus faced the threat of racial integration at the same time that they began to lose their monopoly on political power in cities (e.g., Self 2005). I posit that these forces, which drove many White households to racially homogeneous suburban cities (Boustan 2010), also drove the passage of residential growth controls in these cities as a way to enforce de facto racial segregation when de jure segregation was no longer possible. Using data on the passage of residential land use regulations in California cities from 1970-1992, I show that cities that were Whiter than their surrounding metropolitan area were significantly more likely to pass explicit controls on residential growth, even after controlling for environmental attitudes, suburban status, and economic factors. To reiterate some of the earlier discussion on the consequences of constrained housing supply, these restrictions have inflated the house values of predominantly White homeowners, monopolized city resources for White residents, and made it more difficult for non-White households in the metropolitan area to transition to homeownership.

Directions for Future Research

Sociologists are well-positioned to contribute to this burgeoning literature on housing supply, given our discipline's long history in researching the connections between institutions, laws, and power; the social origins of belief formation; the social embeddedness of economic institutions; and the roots of economic, social, and racial inequalities. Below, I suggest a few potentially fruitful research agendas for interested sociologists.

First, social movement scholars may do well to consider the rise in the last decade of pro-housing development movements whose members often self-identify as `YIMBYs' (standing for Yes In My Back Yard). These movements have organized to speak at zoning meetings on behalf of proposed housing developments, to overturn laws that restrict housing production in more affluent neighborhoods, and to mobilize consciousness about insufficient housing supply as a key social and political problem (e.g., Dougherty 2020). While YIMBY movements are young, they appear to have been influential in securing some important political victories, including resolutions to eliminate single-family zoning in Portland, Minneapolis, Sacramento, and Berkeley (Mervosh 2018; Bailey Jr. 2020; Clift 2021; Yelimeli 2021). There appears to be much to learn about what makes YIMBY movements more successful in some cities than in others, whether YIMBY movements can successfully join forces with existing anti-displacement, housing affordability, and tenants' rights movements (e.g., Dougherty 2020), and what types of messages might be most effective in persuading residents to support more inclusionary zoning (for recent work on this topic, see Demsas 2021a).

Second, urban sociologists might wish to reconcile growth machine theory with research that highlights the power of homeowners and residents to block nearby residential development. A new synthesis that combines the strengths of growth machine theory with the strengths of the literature summarized in this chapter may be better able to explain the power of homeowners in determining land use in urban as well as suburban cities (e.g., Been et al. 2014), and perhaps better recognize how “always treat(ing) [the status quo] as possibly better than the growth alternative” (Logan and Molotch 2007) may bring about undesirable inequalities.

Finally, to that end, much work remains to be done by sociologists interested in stratification and inequality to more fully understand how insufficient housing supply and rising housing costs over the last decade have widened economic and racial inequalities between households and neighborhoods. For example, in my own recent work (LaBriola 2022), I show how rising house prices have accounted for most of the growth in the median White-Black wealth gap between 2013 and 2019. White households have benefitted more from rising house prices than Black households, both because White households are more likely to own homes and because White households own more expensive homes. These trends are likely to have been exacerbated during the COVID-19 pandemic, as low mortgage rates and the desire for more space in one's home have driven up demand for housing, while rates of new housing supply remained flat (Demsas 2021b). More optimistically, sociologists might usefully document how the end of exclusionary zoning within cities may foster greater income and racial segregation in the years to come.

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