

# The Integrated City Sustainability Database

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## Abstract

This article describes the construction of the Integrated City Sustainability Database (ICSD) that is the first truly comprehensive data set of U.S. municipal government sustainability programs and policies. Taking advantage of a unique opportunity to combine seven independent data collection efforts, it will provide a valuable resource for scholars in multiple disciplines investigating local environmental and energy sustainability. It also adds missing elements to the research infrastructure for the study of local government and urban policy. This nationwide database will provide a comprehensive assessment of municipal sustainability programs that can contribute to a more rigorous and theoretically informed understanding of city government and governance.

## Keywords

municipal data, urban policy, data harmonization, energy efficiency, sustainability, local climate protection

The majority of governance in the United States occurs at the local level. It is where the greatest number of elections take place, political decisions are made, and policies are developed and implemented. The large number of

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governmental entities, their variety, and the relatively quick pace at which change can occur allows the local level to provide a particularly valuable setting for the study of political decision making, policy innovation, and organizational functioning generally.

However, the data challenges associated with collecting information from a large number of cities often prevents these potential benefits from being realized. There is a notable lack of centralized databases containing relevant, comparable, intercity data. This limits the ability to test and expand upon generalizable theories or explain variation in policy outcome at the local level (Sapotichne, Jones, and Wolfe 2007; Trounstone 2009). Thus, despite the fact that local government provides a great laboratory for studying governance, the development of locally-focused theory and empirical research in political science, economics, policy studies, planning, and public administration has lagged behind that of other subfields.

The urban politics field has a rich theoretical tradition built primarily on case studies and qualitative research as illustrated in the work of Banfield (1970), Dahl (1961), and Stone (1989). The quantitative work in the field has been important, but its theoretical contribution to the discipline is more modest. The lack of systematic databases in the study of local governments has meant that case and variable limitations constrain the ability of quantitative scholars to capture the richness of urban theory. Much of the existing work is based on simple linear models that often are underspecified or do not address complex interactive or mediating relationships.

This article outlines a strategy to mitigate these shortcomings by constructing an Integrated City Sustainability Database (ICSD) that will be the first truly comprehensive data set of U.S. municipal government sustainability programs and policies. Taking advantage of a unique opportunity to combine seven independent data collection efforts, it will not only provide a valuable resource for scholars in multiple disciplines investigating local environmental and energy sustainability but will also add missing elements to the research infrastructure for the study of local government policy in general.

## **Local Government Sustainability Policy**

Achieving environmental sustainability is one of the great challenges of the twenty-first century and is an effort to which cities are inherently tied. Indeed, cities have been characterized as the key “battleground for sustainability” (Clark 2003). An estimated 50% of the global population (Mills 2007) and 84% of the U.S. population (U.S. Census Bureau 2011) live in urban areas, which are conservatively estimated as emitting between 30% and 40% of global anthropogenic greenhouse gas emissions (Intergovernmental Panel on

Climate Change [IPCC] 2007; Satterthwaite 2008). Moreover, cities have authority over many decisions that have a direct impact on sustainability, including land use, transportation, urban forestry, and waste disposal, making them a particularly important unit of analysis for the study of sustainability policy (Bai 2007; Coenen and Menkveld 2003; Portney 2003).

Local governments have emerged as some of the leaders and innovators of climate and sustainability policy (Rosenzweig et al. 2010). This is despite operating in an environment that theoretically disincentivizes the pursuit of policy innovations by making it more advantageous to let others take policy risks and free ride on the knowledge generated (Rose-Ackerman 1980). The free-rider incentive for local governments is particularly strong for actions that yield nonexclusive benefits such as sustainability policy (Olson 1965). The centrality of cities to achieving global sustainability as well as their seeming ability to overcome the problem of collective action defies simple rational choice explanations or parsimonious linear models. City sustainability has attracted significant academic and practitioner attention to several essential questions: What factors motivate and inhibit local action on sustainability? What types of policies are local governments implementing to advance sustainability? What determines the prioritization of particular actions? What are the outcomes of implemented actions in terms of increased environmental well-being and quality of life? What effect does sustainability policy have on economic development and public financial health?

Achieving generalizable answers to these and related questions has been difficult to accomplish because of the previously described lack of local-level data. Scholars interested in developing a generalizable understanding of issues related to local sustainability have had to rely on data collected through government association surveys with low response rates that are limited in the scope of information they collect and are sometimes not publicly available. Alternatively, several scholars have independently collected data through surveys of city government officials. As a result of these individual efforts, an initial generalizable knowledge of urban sustainability has been developed, but it remains fragmented and incomplete.

Survey administration is a challenging and resource-consuming process and one in which less than ideal response rates and the threat of selection bias are the norm. The lack of comprehensive public data on local sustainability policy has led researchers to undertake redundant survey-based efforts that remain unable to optimize existing work. To more efficiently and accurately facilitate the expansion of knowledge on this issue, the project described here assembles an ICSD. This nationwide database will describe municipal sustainability programs and policies and be publically available for use by researchers and practitioners aiming to understand the city sustainability

dynamic. The information contained in this data set will additionally benefit scholars of local government interested in increasing general knowledge of local political theory, planning, and decision making.

## **Data Description**

The proposed project is a response to a unique opportunity afforded by the separate and independent implementation of seven surveys of city sustainability programs conducted within an 18-month period in 2010–2011. All of the sample frames include U.S. cities with populations greater than 50,000 residents. In addition, four of the surveys include smaller population cities.

The first survey instrument, referred to as the International City/County Management Association's (ICMA) Local Government Sustainability Policies and Programs survey, was conducted in 2010 as a collaboration between the ICMA's Center for Sustainable Communities, the Center for Urban Innovation at Arizona State University (ASU), ASU's Global Institute of Sustainability (ASU GIOS), and the Alliance for Innovation. Its sample frame includes the 8,569 local governments in the United States with a population of 10,000 or more residents. The survey was provided to city representatives in both print and electronic formats. A response rate of 25.4% was attained with 2,176 responses to the survey. This survey solicits information on 110 specific sustainability practices that governments might have adopted as well as the steps that may have been taken to plan and organize their sustainability efforts (Svara, Watt, and Jang 2013).

The National League of Cities (NLC) Sustainability survey was conducted during the summer and fall of 2010. It was sent via email to 1,708 mayors and achieved a response rate of 26.6%, with responses from 442 cities. The NLC survey contains 28 items with 171 subquestions and features a list of fact-based questions to solicit information on cities' sustainability efforts in land use, transportation, workforce development, climate change-related activities, water programs, energy efficiency and conservation, and recycling.

The Energy Efficiency and Conservation Block Grant (EECBG) Grantee Implementation Survey was developed and implemented by the Askew School of Public Administration at Florida State University (principal investigator [PI]: Richard C. Feiock) and was designed to collect information on local governments' energy policies and experiences with the U.S. Department of Energy's EECBG program. These formula-based grant awards were a component of the 2009 American Recovery and Reinvestment Act stimulus package and were intended to support local governments' energy and climate policy actions and innovations. The survey's sample frame is the universe of 970 municipal governments receiving EECBG awards. The survey was

conducted during the winter of 2010 and spring 2011 and consisted of an initial web-based survey and three waves of follow-up mailed surveys. A 77% response rate was obtained with 747 returned surveys.

A second national survey conducted by Florida State University investigated local government actions on energy and climate protection issues and was supported by IBM Endowment for the Business of Government (Francis and Feiock 2011). Its sample frame of 1,180 municipalities included all cities with populations over 50,000 and a random sample of 500 cities with populations between 20,000 and 50,000 residents. The survey was conducted in fall of 2010 with an initial web-based survey and three waves of follow-up mailed surveys. City managers and CAOs were the initial contacts for the survey. A 57.5% response rate was obtained with 679 returned surveys.

The National Survey of Sustainability Management was designed and implemented by the Department of Public Administration at the University of Central Florida (PIs: Christopher Hawkins and Xiaohu Wang). The chief elected or appointed official of all cities with populations of at least 50,000 was mailed a questionnaire between September and November 2010. The survey was mailed on three separate occasions during this time. Of the 601 cities in the sampling frame, 263 returned the survey for a 44% response rate. The survey consists of 14 questions with 145 subquestions, which focus on local programs and policies oriented toward environmental, economic, and social sustainability (Wang et al. 2012).

The Municipal Climate Protection survey was designed at Indiana University and supported by an Environmental Protection Agency Science to Achieve Results fellowship (PI: Rachel Krause). The web-based survey was sent directly to the individuals identified as in charge of environmental or sustainability affairs in the 665 cities in the United States with populations over 50,000 per 2005 Census estimates. After follow-up phone calls, 329 usable surveys were received for a response rate of 49.5%. Survey administration occurred in April and May 2010. The survey is broadly framed as about local sustainability and consists of 37, primarily factual, questions regarding the implementation status of programs or policies that reduce greenhouse gas emissions and fall within the authority of U.S. cities, sustainability staffing, and intergovernmental collaboration (Krause 2012).

During September and October 2011, the Municipal Government Questionnaire was administered through the University of Texas at El Paso. The survey was intended for cities that had adopted climate protection as an explicit goal and focuses on their motivations for engaging, the status of their climate planning and clean energy efforts, and the importance of locally accruing co-benefits resulting from their activities. Its sample frame includes the 425 cities in the United States with populations over 50,000 that indicated

**Table 1.** Characteristics of the Surveys Comprising the Integrated City Sustainability Database.

Survey Name	Sampling Frame	Respondents	Response Rate (%)
ICMA Local Government Sustainability Policies and Programs Survey	8,569 local governments with a population of 10,000 or more residents	2,176	25.4
NLC Sustainability Survey	1,708 mayors in cities over 10,000	442	26.6
EECBG Grantee Implementation Survey	970 municipal governments receiving EECBG awards, including all cities over 30,000	747	77.0
Implementation of Energy Efficiency and Sustainability Programs	1,180 cities: all with populations over 50,000 and a random sample of 500 cities with populations between 20,000 and 50,000	679	57.5
National Survey of Sustainability Management in U.S. Cities	601 cities with populations over 50,000	263	44.0
Municipal Climate Protection Survey	664 cities with populations over 50,000	329	49.5
Municipal Government Questionnaire	425 cities with populations over 50,000 that have indicated explicit involvement in climate protection	255	60.0

Note. ICMA = International City/County Management Association; NLC = The National League of Cities; EECBG = Energy Efficiency and Conservation Block Grant.

involvement in climate protection, typically through their signing of the U.S. Conference of Mayors Climate Protection Agreement and/or their participation in ICLEI—Cities for Sustainability (Krause 2013). Surveys were initially distributed via the Internet to the individual in each city government identified as in charge of sustainability issues. Paper copies were mailed as follow-up to nonrespondents. Completed surveys were received from 255 cities for a response rate of 60%. Table 1 summarizes the key features of all seven surveys. Copies of all seven survey instruments are available at <http://localgov.fsu.edu/ICSD>.

**Table 2.** Example of a Tier 1 Question Match.

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Survey: EECBG Grantee Implementation Survey  
 To what extent would you say that the following individuals or groups support or oppose energy conservation and sustainability efforts by your city government?  
 Environmental groups  
 Strongly oppose/moderately oppose/neutral/moderately support/strongly support

Survey: The Implementation of Energy Efficiency and Sustainability  
 To what extent would the following individuals or groups support or oppose energy conservation and climate protection efforts by your government?  
 Environmental groups  
 Strongly oppose/moderately oppose/neutral/moderately support/strongly support

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Note. EECBG = Energy Efficiency and Conservation Block Grant.

## Constructing a Comprehensive Data Set

### *Data Harmonization*

The ICSD merges these separate surveys into one comprehensive national data set. The first step in harmonizing this data is the creation of an identifier for each city that responded to at least one survey. The identifier is used to match each city’s responses across the seven individual databases. Next, specific questions are matched across surveys and categorized as either “tier 1” or “tier 2” matches, based on the extent of their similarity. When questions and response categories are worded essentially the same across the survey instruments, they are labeled “tier 1” variables. An example of a tier 1 match is provided in Table 2.

When questions or response categories were worded differently, yet represent the same theoretical indicator, they are labeled “tier 2” variables. An example of a tier 2 match is shown in Table 3—Three surveys asked about the extent of prioritization cities give to environmental protection, although they use slightly different wording and question structures. Tier 2 variables utilize looser matching criteria, and thus typically contain a larger number of observations than tier 1 variables. Many cities answered what are fundamentally the same questions numerous times with their completion of multiples surveys. Most of the time, their answers are consistent across the surveys. However, when conflicts do occur, they are either resolved via a simple “majority rules” strategy or, in the case of ties, decisions are based on a ranking of the surveys determined by who in the city received them.

**Table 3.** Example of a Tier 2 Question Match.

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Survey: National League of Cities Sustainability Survey

Please rate the level of priority your city places on the following in regard to your sustainability goals/initiatives:

Environmental stewardship

High priority (1)/priority (2)/of interest but not a priority at this time (3)/not a priority (4)/don't know (5)

Survey: ICMA Local Government Sustainability Policies and Programs Survey

To what extent are the following a priority in your jurisdiction?

The environment

Not a priority/somewhat a priority/priority/high priority

Survey: Implementation of Energy Efficiency and Sustainability Programs

To what extent are the following goals a priority in your local government?

Environmental protection

Not a goal/low priority/medium priority/high priority/very high priority

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Note. ICMA = International City/County Management Association.

The ICSD also enables the development of some “umbrella variables” that combine relevant tier 1 and tier 2 variables to operationalize broader concepts. We label these “tier 3” variables.

### *Accounting for Missing Variables*

The surveys that together comprise the ICSD each ask different sets of questions and have different samples and response rates, as shown in Table 1. As such, the numbers of observations in the ICSD vary by variable, depending on which and how many surveys asked about them. For example, all seven surveys include a question asking about the presence of a budget for sustainability, yielding 2,555 usable responses. However, only three—the NLC, Municipal Climate Protection Survey, and Implementation of Energy Efficiency and Sustainability Programs—ask whether cities work with their county governments on sustainability issues. This results in a smaller sample size of 991 responses.

Only a minority of the cities that responded to any one survey responded to all seven of them. Thus, most cities have missing data for at least a few variables in the ICSD. Although the number of observations associated with most individual variables remains large, the problems caused by missing data increase with the development of multivariate empirical models. The number of observations in a model may decrease dramatically as cities are dropped for missing one or more variable. This may also result in biased parameter estimates (Institute for Digital Research and Education [IDRE] 2012). So that

these observations are not lost, the ICSD contains an additional layer of data where missing data have been replaced by values estimated via multiple imputation.

When a city is missing a value for a particular variable, we classify its “missingness” as falling into one of two categories: “Within-survey missingness” is a result of a respondent failing to provide the answer to a question in a survey that it was otherwise answering, either because he or she skipped that particular question or did not complete the survey. “Across-survey missingness” is a result of a city never having received or responded to a survey that contained a question related to a particular variable. We use a two-stage informed multiple imputation technique to control for the conceptual difference in the reasons for the missing data.

We implement the first stage of the imputation process by going through each survey individually and imputing the values for any missing data one variable at a time. We use informed multiple imputation and replace missing values with the average of multiple sets of simulated values. City demographic or economic variables that correlate with the variable in question at a rate higher than .20 are used to help inform the imputed value draw. The multiple sets of simulated values used in generating the average are selected based on their ability to preserve the original data’s standard deviation with as much accuracy as possible. This procedure essentially bounds the imputed data by limiting the amount of variation. We then combine the original and imputed data to construct a set of new variables (one corresponding to each of the identified surveys) that have zero within-survey missingness.

The missing values that remain in the data set are all a result of “across-survey” missingness and are addressed through a second stage of imputation. The number of missing observations varies considerably across variables and we apply the second-stage imputation only to the variables that, after the previous step, have values for at least 80% of the total number of cities in the seven survey sample. The “across-survey” method of multiple imputation that we employ here is slightly different from traditional applications. Normally, multiple imputations create a distribution of imputed values and give the highest probability to the value drawn most frequently. Essentially, in the Bayesian context, this yields a number of chains that are used to compile a standard error for the missing data. However, because we are unable to perform the second-stage across-survey imputation with varying values for the original data, the chain that maintains the standard deviation closest to the original data as well as has a similar mean is selected as the value of the data that is to be used in the second stage of imputation. The second stage of informed multiple imputation is otherwise performed in the same manner as the initial imputation.

We recognize that imputing up to 20% of the data is considered high, even given informed multiple imputation techniques. Particularly as we do not use traditional techniques to generate the imputed data, it is important to consider the potential impact that the imputation may have on a regression analysis. Thus, we created an indicator variable to adjust for the influence of the imputations in an empirical analysis. The indicator variable takes the value of 1 when the value for that variable was imputed. This variable can be interacted with each of its imputed variable counterparts, which can correct for the potential bias of the imputation in an analysis. This step allows us to separate the effect of the true data from that of the imputed data. Future analyses can therefore include indicators of the imputed variables to decrease the randomness from the imputation and retrieve a more appropriate measure of both the coefficient values and the standard error corrections. To date, 11 variables have been harmonized and imputed using the method described. Upon completion, the ICSD is expected to contain approximately 100 variables and serve as a large multitiered database on city sustainability where researchers can select variables based on their individualized needs for comprehensiveness, sample size, and variable directness.

## **Expected Outcomes and Dissemination**

Given the current absence of centralized databases containing relevant, comparable, intercity data, the construction of the ICSD is anticipated to enhance and improve a wide range of individual and collective research efforts and local government sustainability decisions. As the database is constructed over the next two years, input will be solicited from urban scholars to maximize its relevance and usability to scholars in multiple disciplines. This data will be archived for public release after completion and be made widely known and available to interested scholars, local government managers, and elected officials.

Given the absence of any comparable public database, we anticipate its heavy use by urban sustainability researchers, resulting in a notable uptick in the quantitative research on this subject. Testing hypotheses using the ICSD provides an opportunity to validate and extend previous findings, in the context of urban sustainability, on the impact of local institutions and city form, local political decision making, and policy innovation (Francis and Feiock 2011; Hawkins and Wang 2012; Krause 2012; Bae and Feiock 2013). However, the database's benefit and use will not be limited to understanding sustainability, as much of the information it will contain is relevant to general questions of local policy, implementation, and governance. Scholars working to advance general knowledge in these areas will find it valuable to mine this database for variables relevant to their particular interests.

Urban politics has a rich legacy of case study-based research such as Robert Dahl's (1961) study of *Who Governs* in New Haven and Clarence Stone's (1989) account of *Regime Politics* in Atlanta. But the richness of the theory developed in these accounts has been left out of much of the quantitative study of local politics. Although this is sometimes a product of the theories underlying this work, it is also a product of data limitations. Poor measures are linked to imprecise concepts; limited observations are linked to simple additive models. The ultimate goal of this project is more rigorous and theoretically informed understanding of city government and governance. Finally, this database will benefit future research by establishing a solid baseline for the included variables from which change can be measured over time. It will facilitate the development of panel data by future researchers and has the potential to provide pretreatment measures for a host of different policy or programmatic evaluations. In addition, the authors will standardize a subset of key questions and, as part of the dissemination process, encourage researchers who are developing their own city surveys to include them in the format specified and update the database with new data as they become available.

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