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An Analysis of the Relationship Between Housing Foreclosures, Lending Practices, and Neighborhood Ecology: Evidence from a Distressed County

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In the United States, the number of new foreclosures rose continuously beginning in early 2000; by mid-2008 these numbers were greater than had ever before been tracked (Joint Center for Housing Studies 2007; Mortgage Bankers Association 2008). Several factors underlie this increase. Foreclosures are generally related to macroeconomic conditions and the changing fortunes of households and housing markets. Transformations in the landscape of mortgage lending, especially the phenomenal rise and the potential abuses of subprime lending, have been implicated in increasing the number of foreclosures, particularly among some segments of the home-buying population. Finally, we know that although foreclosures occur everywhere, they tend to be concentrated in specific geographical areas. These foreclosures, and some of the conditions leading to foreclosures, are tied into neighborhood ecology and neighborhood change.

The relationship of rising foreclosures to macroeconomic conditions is significant but will not be examined in detail here. Because foreclosures occur when householders are unable to meet their housing payments, regional economic dynamics play a critical role. High initial housing costs may compel prospective homeowners to seek financing with little or no money down and to stretch their monthly spending well beyond the recommended budget ([O'Sullivan 2003](#)). A weak or unstable employment situation increases unemployment, promotes personal bankruptcies, and eats into cash reserves.

This compromises the ability of borrowers to meet their monthly payments. Borrowers unable to pay their mortgages may lose their homes, and the loss of equity, by the time the mortgage is paid off, may have been the only equity they had. Some researchers have found that the loss of a home can lead to a decline in net-worth, and that divorce can lead to a decline in net-worth. [Kazarian, et al. 2008](#) and [The](#)

Until recently, the mortgage industry was a market of choice. Lenders offered a variety of mortgage products, including fifteen-year, thirty-year, and adjustable rate mortgages. The industry was not considered a high-risk industry, and it was not until the late 1990s that the industry began to consider about the risks of subprime lending. The industry abuses began in the late 1990s and early 2000s.



Basically, subprime lending extends mortgage credit to less financially stable households, precisely those borrowers who have fewer resources to ride out economic misfortune. The cooccurrence between subprime lending and foreclosure may be an aspect of the additional risk incurred, as subprime borrowers tend to be less creditworthy and more likely to default. Although many subprime loans provide a legitimate service to borrowers who would not otherwise be able to obtain a mortgage, there is a great deal of evidence that a substantial number of these subprime loans exploit borrowers—these are termed predatory loans. [Li and Ernst \(2007\)](#) summarize these practices as (1) equity stripping, which comprises overly high interest rates and extra fees that are often packed into the loan itself; (2) flipping of the loan so that it automatically refinances, generating additional fees for the lender; (3) steering qualified borrowers away from prime loans toward loans with higher fees; (4) prepayment penalties that prevent borrowers from seeking out a better loan when their credit improves; (5) fraud, misrepresentation of all loan terms, and incorrect evaluation of the property value of the borrower's income. Fishbein and Bunce (2001, 276) state that “one consequence of predatory lending is that borrowers are stripped of the equity in their homes, which places them at an increased risk of foreclosure.” Quercia, Stegman, and Davis (2007) found that refinance loans containing predatory terms such as prepayment penalties and balloon payments were much more likely to experience foreclosure.

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homeownership patterns, housing vacancy rates, and changes in the racial composition of urban neighborhoods.” In their analysis, foreclosure rates were higher in black neighborhoods and in neighborhoods undergoing extensive racial change.

Like foreclosures, subprime lending is itself spatially uneven. Subprime loans are three times more likely to occur in low-income compared to high-income neighborhoods and five times more likely to occur in African American neighborhoods than in white neighborhoods (HUD 2000). Even with income controlled for, high-income black neighborhoods reported twice as many subprime loans as low-income white neighborhoods (HUD 2000). Calem, Gillen, and Wachter (2004) also find a concentration of subprime lending in low-income and high-minority neighborhoods within Chicago and Philadelphia. [Wylly et al. \(2006\)](#) compare the supply-side characteristics of lending niches, market share, and type of institution with demand-side characteristics such as type of loan, creditworthiness, income, and race. In neighborhoods where there is more subprime activity than predicted by supply-side characteristics, they conclude that “bad money chases good borrowers” (119) and the level of subprime activity is unfairly inflated. In addition, there is the prospect that certain households—especially those living within certain neighborhoods—may end up with a subprime loan even when they qualify for a prime loan. Studies conducted by Freddie Mac and Standard & Poor indicated that about one-half of the A-borrowers would qualify for a conventional, prime loan (Center for Responsible Lending 2003).

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Although several studies have looked into some of these aspects, this study benefits by our access to the precise location, lender, origination data, foreclosure data, and terms of nearly all foreclosures within one of the most housing-distressed counties in one of the most housing-distressed states in the United States.

Attributes of Foreclosed Properties

Foreclosures have had negative effects throughout the United States, but the impacts are particularly bad in Ohio. According to the U.S. Census, Ohio tends to fall in the middle of states in regard to several economic and demographic characteristics, although it has a much smaller percentage of Latinos and Asians. However, Ohio in the 1990s began to diverge from many other states in regard to the health of its housing market. [Bond \(2005\)](#) reports that in 1995, Ohio's mortgage default rate (the percentage of mortgages in foreclosure) was a little lower than the U.S. rate (0.67 percent compared to 0.87 percent, respectively). By 2004, however, the U.S. default rate had climbed to 1.5 percent, and Ohio's rate was 3.5 percent. Bond sees this as primarily a function of Ohio's relatively weak economy—the state has undergone significant industrial restructuring—and lower levels of housing appreciation, but other factors may also play a role.

Our analysis of individual foreclosures in Summit County, Ohio, shows an explosive increase in the value of Ohio's housing market. County-level data (Schmidt et al., 2001) shows an excellent example of the 2001 and 2002 information on loan amounts and data to indicate we were

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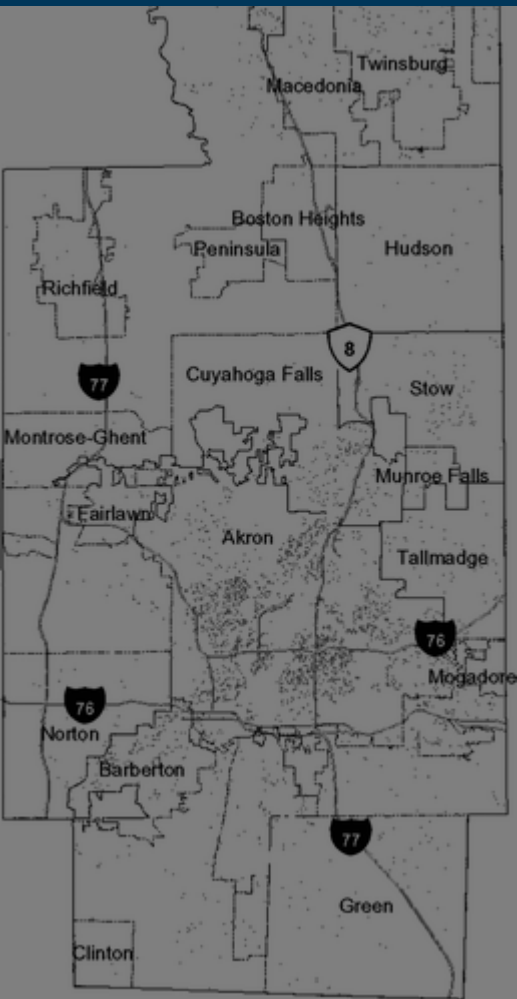
lenders and 995 by subprime lenders.³ Most of these foreclosures also contained information on interest rates (2,891) or loan amount (2,929).

Most of the Summit County foreclosures occur within the city of Akron. Whereas the city contains 40 percent of the county's housing units, and 35 percent of all owner-occupied units, it accounts for 70 percent of all foreclosures. Moreover, the bulk of foreclosures are accounted for by just a few neighborhoods, with one-fifth of all block groups in Summit County accounting for half of all foreclosures. This does not mean that foreclosures are not found in suburban areas—in fact there are indicators of stress in some of the wealthiest suburban districts—but the incidence is far higher in urban neighborhoods.

The attributes of properties that eventually undergo foreclosure are distinct from those of other properties. They are concentrated in particular locations, as [Figure 1](#) indicates. They also tend to be focused on a few lenders, a disproportionate number of which are subprime. Just forty lenders in our foreclosure database accounted for over half the properties that were foreclosed. These high-foreclosure lenders carried at least twenty or more foreclosures with the most foreclosures (119) recorded for Equicredit. Equicredit is determined by HUD to be a subprime lender, meaning that more than one-half of its loans are subprime loans. In this regard, it represented many of the high-foreclosure lenders. Fully nineteen of the forty high-foreclosure lenders could be identified in our database as originating more than one foreclosure between 2007 and 2012. The remaining twenty-one high-foreclosure lenders originated only one foreclosure out of the total of 119 foreclosures.

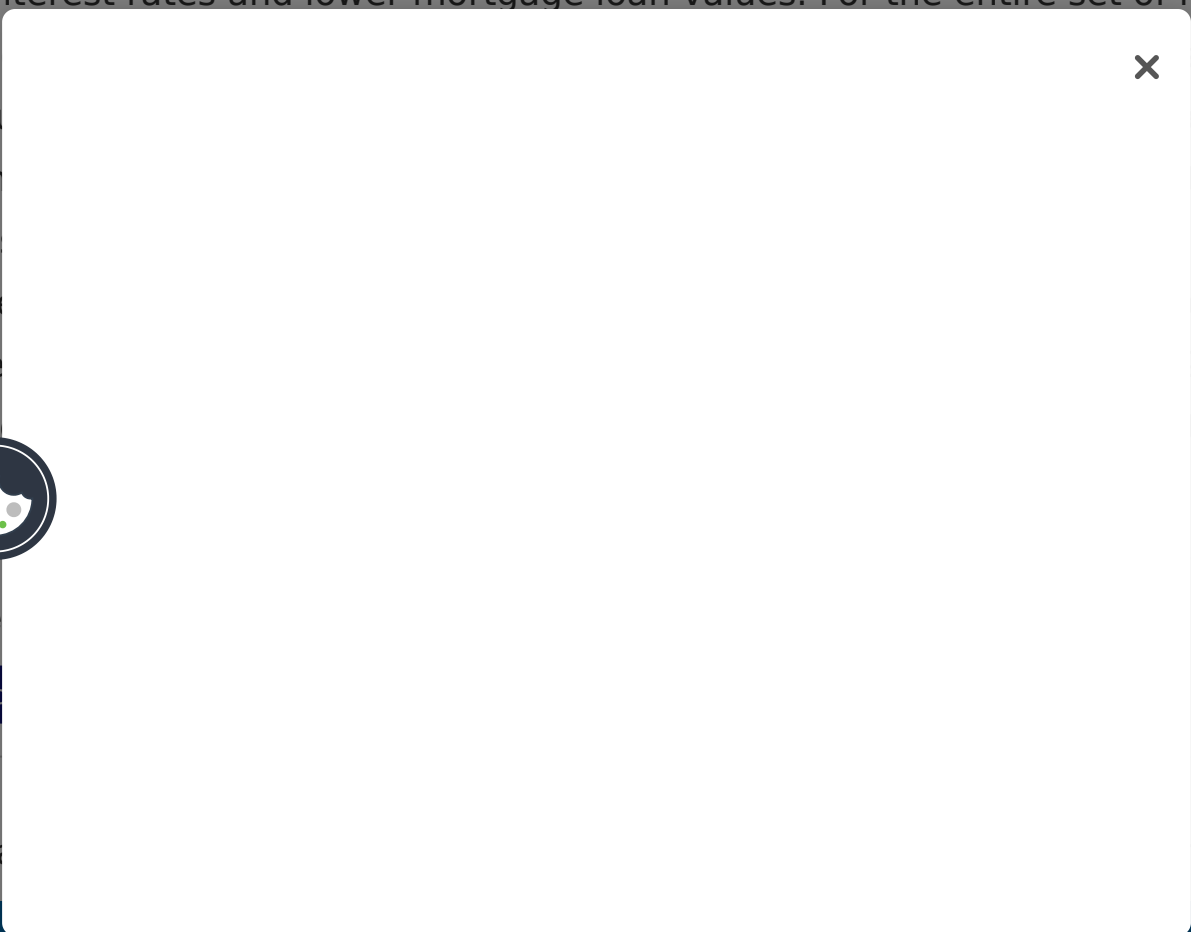
Figure 1





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As can be seen in Table 1, properties that experience foreclosure tend to carry much higher interest rates and lower mortgage loan values. For the entire set of foreclosures that we analyzed, the average mortgage loan value was \$100,000, compared to \$120,000 for non-foreclosed properties. The average interest rate for the American mortgage market in 2001 (only about 10% of the sample) was 6.5% (only about 10% of the sample).



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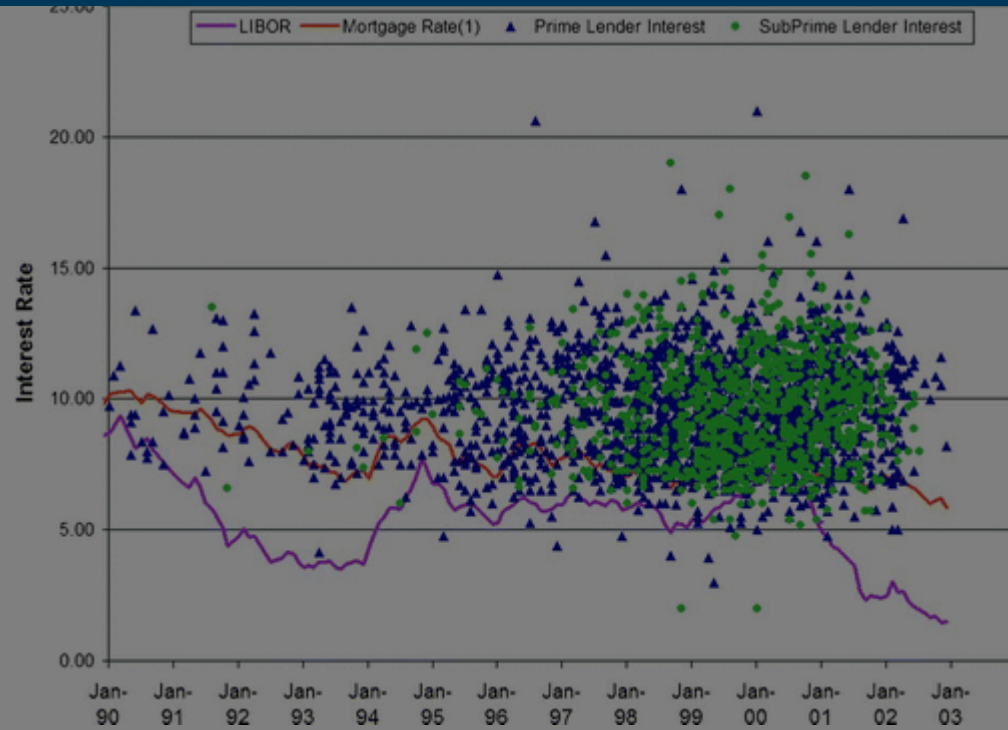
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One final finding of the foreclosure data is the short interval between when the loan originates (as recorded in the foreclosure documents) and the date of foreclosure. Our calculations suggested that the vast majority (83 percent) of loans foreclosed within five years and over one-third (36 percent) foreclosed within just two years of loan origination. The average interval between loan and default was three and one-half years. Why such foreclosures occur is not available in the data. Earlier research

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we calculated and mapped three indicators: housing stress, interest rates, and subprime lending.

Housing fiscal stress has been tied to a higher incidence of foreclosures on one hand ([Phillips and Vanderhoff 2004](#)) and to higher interest rates on the other ([Nothaft and Perry 2002](#)). The evidence shown in [Figure 2](#) also confirms this relationship. Nearly half of all foreclosures in our sample held mortgage loans with interest rates at least three percentage points above the prevailing mortgage rates. One out of six foreclosed properties contained mortgage loans with a spread greater than 5 percent above prevailing rates. One measure of housing stress—the housing finance ratio—indicates when the percentage of the monthly budget devoted to housing is too high. Another useful measure of housing stress is the LTV ratio. In the past, borrowers of conventional mortgage instruments were expected to make a down payment of at least 20 percent of the property value, with the remaining 80 percent financed. These stipulations were relaxed for households that took out a Veterans Administration (VA) or a Federal Housing Administration (FHA) loan. Other lending programs have allowed households to borrow more than 80 percent of the property value, provided they take out additional mortgage insurance. In some instances, borrowers are able to borrow more than the value of their property. These additional amounts absorb costs associated with the mortgage, like points and closing costs, and can also be a vehicle for “packing” additional fees. High-LTV loans have also been offered as a form of home equity,

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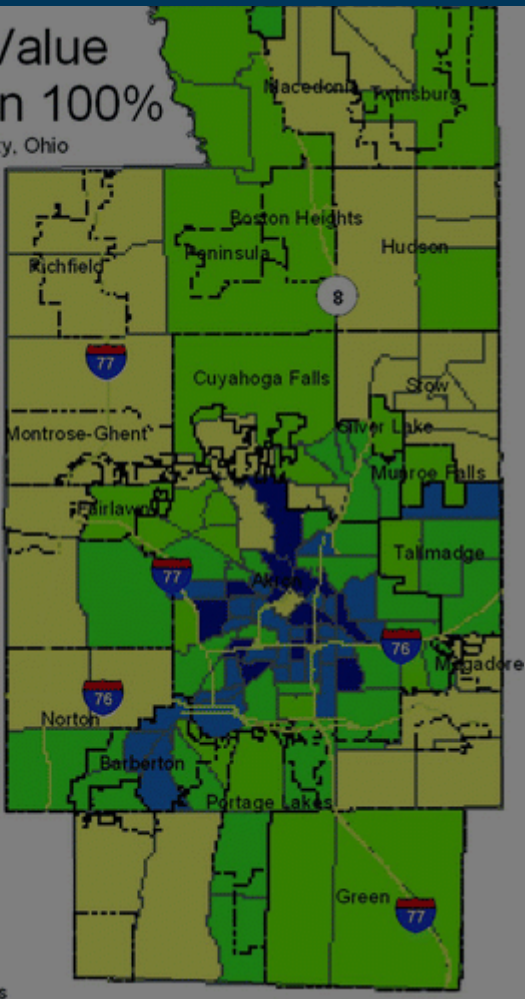
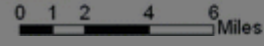
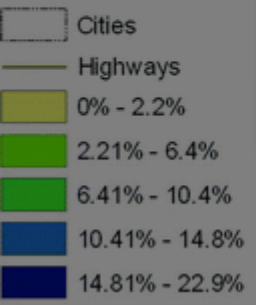


Loan to Value Greater than 100%

In Summit County, Ohio



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Interest rates paid for a mortgage vary by week, loan type, loan term, and lender.

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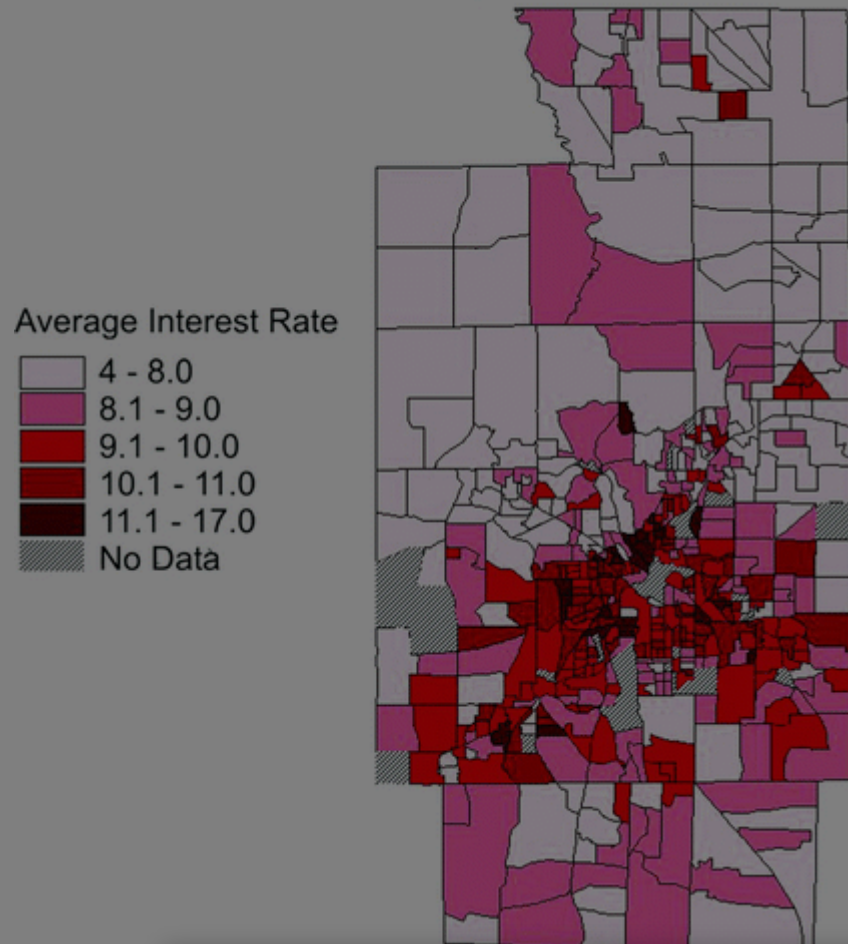
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pattern of average interest rates from a more recent period and shows that average residents of neighborhoods in Akron's inner city paid more for their mortgages.

Figure 4 Average interest rates, Summit County 1999-2001.

Summit County Interest Rates



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The distribution of interest rates at the subprime level. To be sure, all mortgage loans are scrutinized (Immergut et al., 2006). The fact that inner city residents pay higher credit interest rates for their mortgages is a limited policy option. The reliance on subprime

indicator looks at subprime mortgage rates. To be sure, all mortgage loans are scrutinized (Immergut et al., 2006). The fact that inner city residents pay higher credit interest rates for their mortgages is a limited policy option. The reliance on subprime

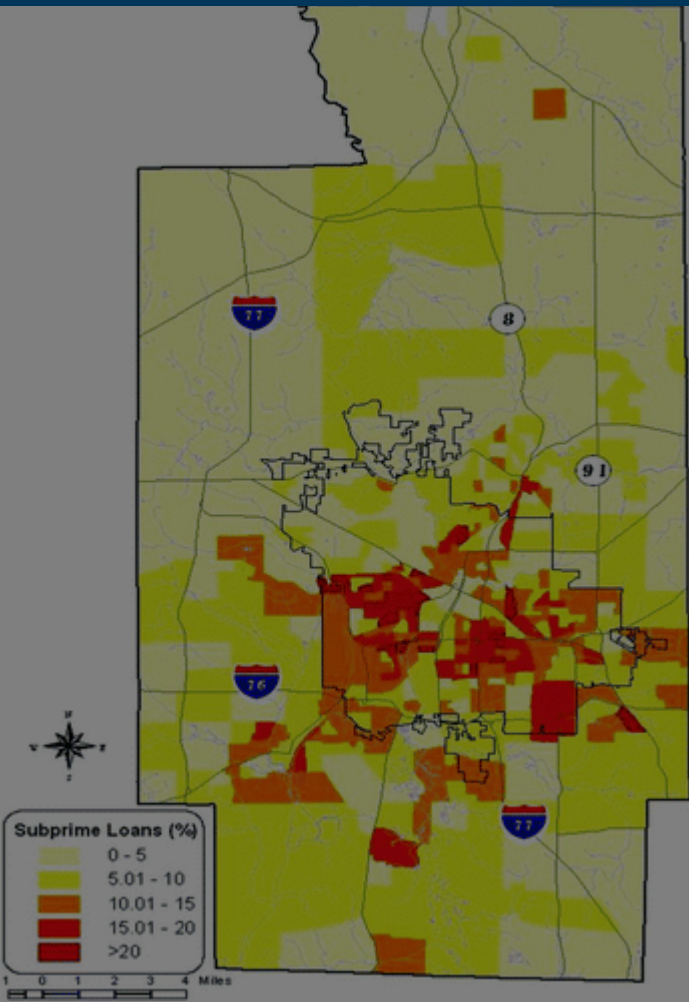


In Summit County, our data indicate that subprime loans are concentrated within a few neighborhoods. Akron itself has just a little more than half of the total number of loans compared to the suburban areas in Summit County, but about two-thirds of all subprime loans. In most of the county, particularly in the suburbs, subprime loans account for less than 10 percent of all loans. Within some neighborhoods in Akron, however, subprime loans account for more than 20 percent of the total. These neighborhoods with a high incidence of subprime loans cover about half of the city of Akron.

Neighborhoods where subprime activity is exceptionally high (over 22 percent) share a number of characteristics. They all have a high minority proportion, primarily African American. Generally, levels of income are lower and poverty rates are higher. These attributes do not always vary in tandem, however. Among our sample, two neighborhoods manifest a slightly lower poverty rate than the countywide average, but these neighborhoods are also marked by high minority percentages.

The maps in [Figure 3](#), [Figure 4](#), and [Figure 5](#) demonstrate that high LTV ratios, higher interest rates, and a high percentage of subprime loans seem to cooccur within similar neighborhoods. The percentage of loans that are subprime is moderately correlated with interest rates ($r = 0.55$). The relationship between subprime lending and LTV ratios over 100 percent is quite a bit weaker ($r = 0.36$), as is the correlation between interest rates and LTV ratios over 100 percent ($r = 0.28$), indicating that a high mortgage interest rate today and a high LTV ratio do not necessarily mean that subprime loans exceed 100 percent. This is in contrast with other measures of LTV risk.





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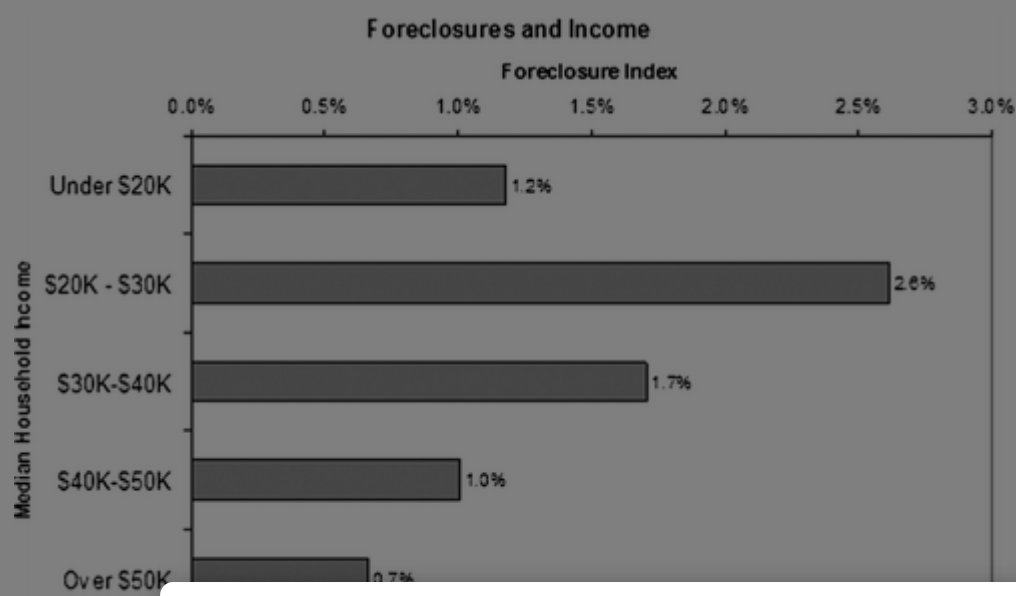
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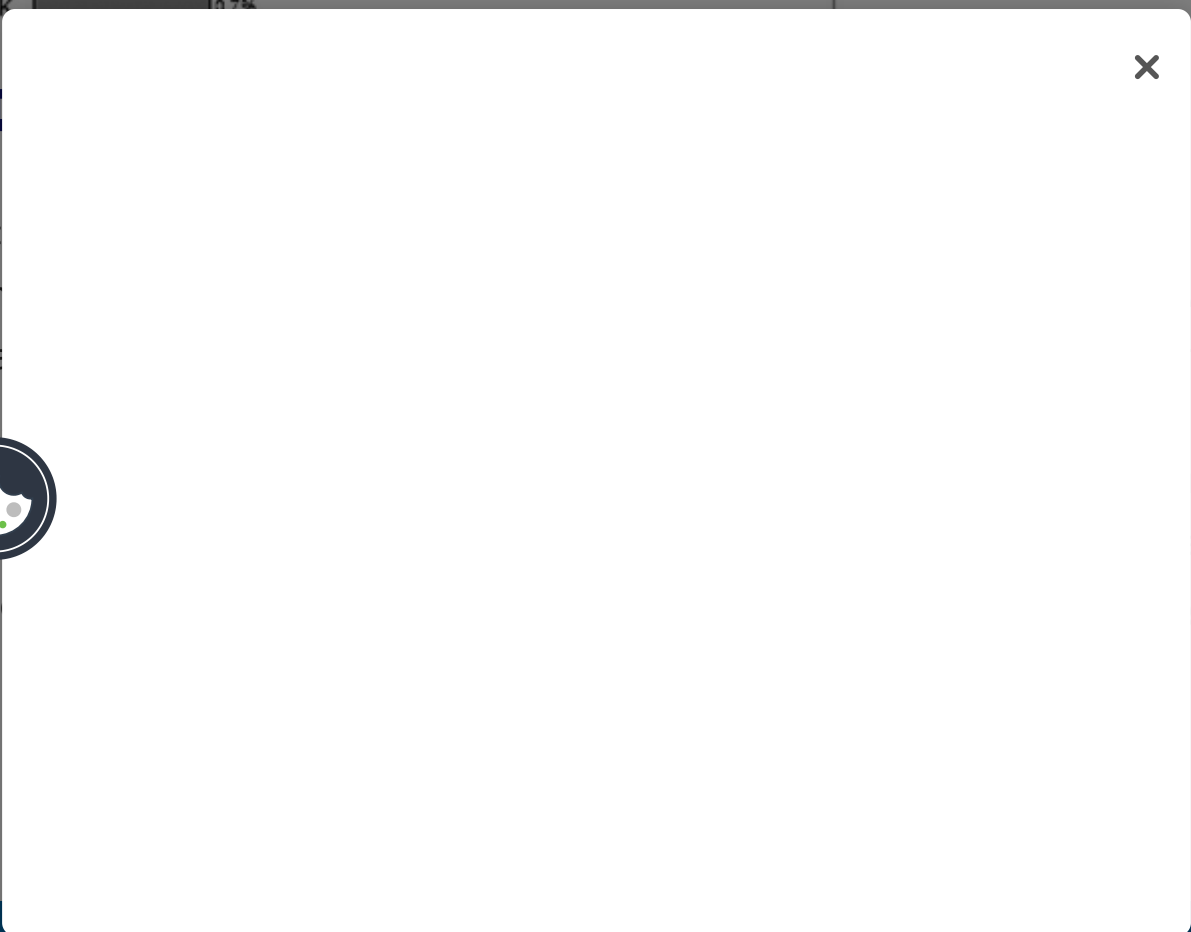
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Analysis of the correlates of neighborhood foreclosure activity suggests that there is a strong relationship with household income and race. The variations by neighborhood type were striking. Looking first at median income rates (Figure 6), foreclosure rates are very high in those block groups where the median income ranges between \$20,000 and \$30,000. Foreclosure rates drop sharply for all higher income neighborhoods. Interestingly, lower income neighborhoods also have lower foreclosure rates. Renting is much more common in these neighborhoods and the proportion of owner-occupied units is low, at under 25 percent in most cases. Because renters cannot be foreclosed on—only evicted—these neighborhoods appear to be at far less risk.

Figure 6 Foreclosures and median household income, Summit County.



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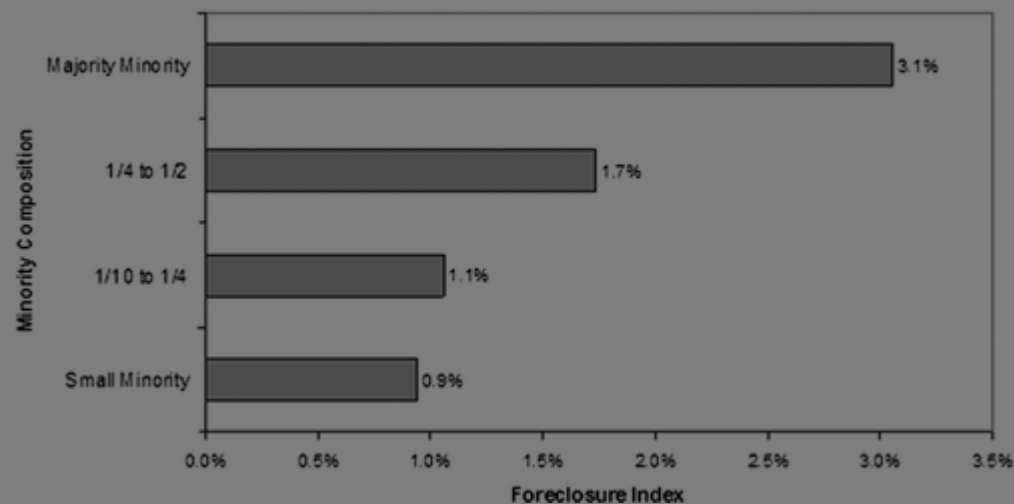
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Figure 7

Foreclosures and Minority Status



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Minority percentage is partially a function of income, as poorer neighborhoods tend to have a higher minority percentage. The evidence suggests, however, that this occurs in a manner partly independent of income. One way to test this is to divide block groups into income and minority ranges. The resulting figures indicate that at each income range, foreclosure rates step up with increased minority percentage, often dramatically. The only partial exceptions are those block groups with median incomes between \$40,000 and \$50,000. In this case the foreclosure rates among majority minority neighborhoods are slightly lower than rates among those neighborhoods with between a one-quarter and one-half minority population. In both of these cases the number of block groups

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experience foreclosures, creating a vicious circle in that foreclosures so often lead to vacancies. [Baxter and Lauria \(2000\)](#) did not find a direct relationship between foreclosures and vacancy rates, but they did find that there were some indirect effects. We likewise did not witness any linear relationship between the two variables; neighborhoods that experienced a rise in vacancies were not any more or less likely to see greater foreclosure activity.

Table 2 Correlates of neighborhood foreclosure

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Some of the literature on predatory lending has indicated that elderly women are especially susceptible to foreclosures ([Immergluck and Smith 2005](#)). Our analysis indicated, however, that this was not the case for Summit County. In fact, many of the neighborhoods with a higher proportion of elderly women were less likely to experience foreclosures.

One set of variables that were significant included three measures of economic stress. We have already discussed the importance of LTV ratios, and an LTV ratio over 100 percent is clearly more related to foreclosure rates than an LTV ratio over 80 percent. Another way to measure fiscal stress, gathered from the U.S. Census, was through the

percentage of household income, with the

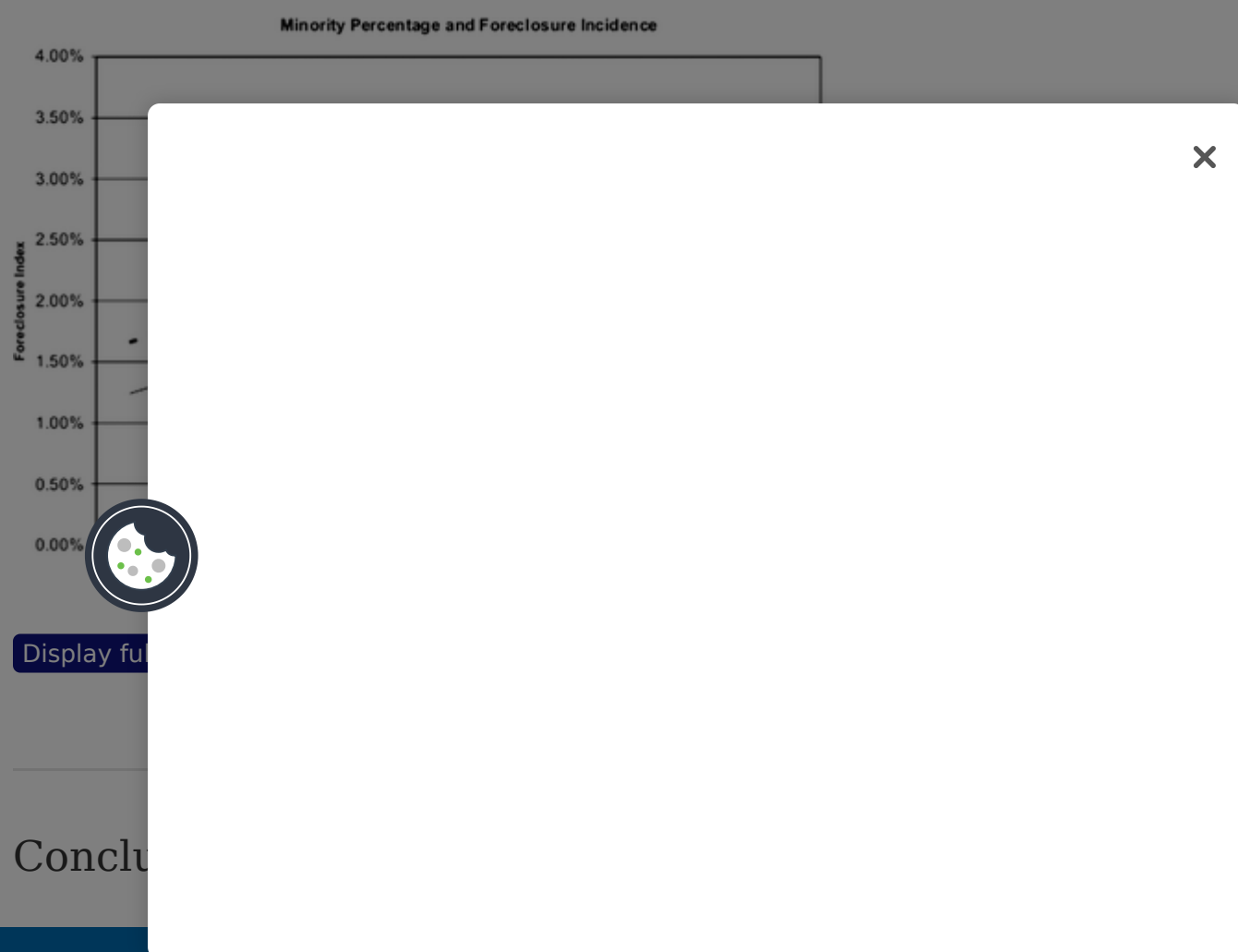
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movers, and the percentage of elderly women are all negative, as with Model 1. Three of the new fiscal variables are also significant. The proportion of subprime loans exerts a powerful effect, second only to racial composition. Two measures of household budgetary stress—the proportion with mortgage payments over 30 percent of income and the proportion of mortgage loan amounts greater than the value of the property—are also significant. Vacancy rates and the change from 1990 to 2000 are not significant within this larger model.

These relationships could probably be teased out further, but the important aspects of these findings would likely not vary. The rate of foreclosure is primarily related to race, central city location, and financing and budgetary stress. The racial aspect is more alarming, as it continues to exert such a strong independent effect. [Figure 8](#) shows just how important the effect of minority composition is, even with all of the other variables in the completed model held constant. Akron exhibits a higher foreclosure incidence than the suburbs, but the likelihood doubles with increasing minority presence. This is also true of the suburbs. An interaction variable that combined minority percentage and city or suburban location did not add any meaningful information to the model.

Figure 8 Minority percentage and foreclosure incidence, Summit County.



During the last decade, residential foreclosures affected some neighborhoods particularly hard. Each foreclosure represents a household tragedy but also contributes to neighborhood instability through greater vacancies, lost revenues, and greater levels of crime ([Boylan 2001](#); HUD 2001; [Stein 2001](#)). Foreclosures have been shown to depress property values as well. Simons, Quercia, and Maric (1998) demonstrated that average sale prices for neighboring properties fell by \$788 for every percentage increase in tax delinquencies. [Immergluck and Smith \(2006\)](#) estimated that each foreclosure resulted in a decline of 0.9 percent in the property value of single-family homes within an eighth of a mile and that the effect was greater in moderate- and low-income neighborhoods. More anecdotal evidence indicates that foreclosures can submerge afflicted communities ([Schwartz 2007](#)).

Current research has focused on some of the causes underlying foreclosures. To be sure, the regional economy and housing markets play a role. In the past year, foreclosures and delinquencies affected an astonishing one out of ten households nationally (Mortgage Bankers Association 2008). This wave of foreclosures has been partly driven by adverse economic conditions and declining property values, forcing many households to go under. The housing market was far more robust, even in northeast Ohio, during the period of this study (2001–2003). At the same time, foreclosures continued to increase, particularly in some neighborhoods. The reasons for this seem to lie in the changing nature of lending and the tendency for subprime and

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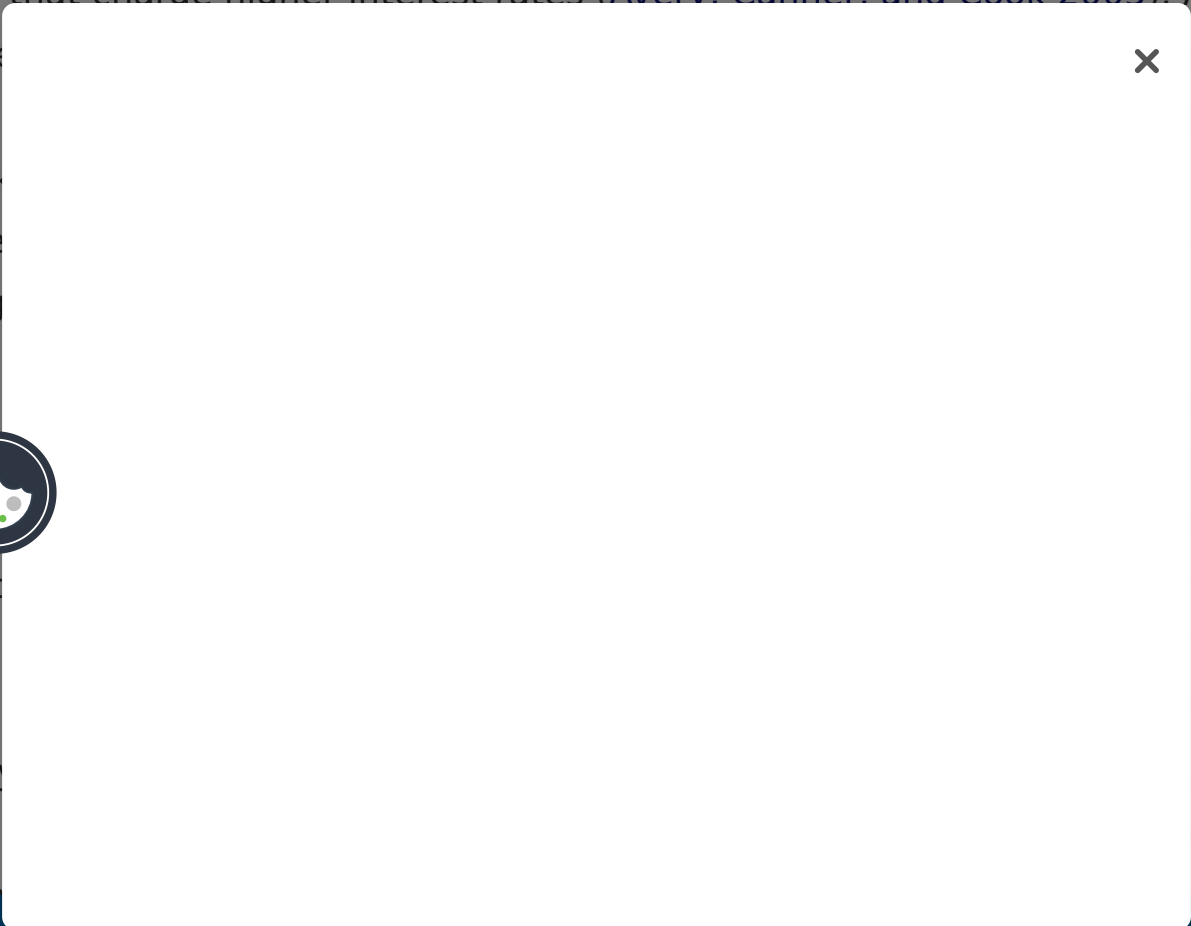


neighborhoods. This pattern is also equated with neighborhoods that experience a great deal of housing stress, and with neighborhoods that experience a significant amount of subprime lending. Maps and correlation coefficients suggest that LTV ratios, interest rates, and the percentage of subprime loans covary within similar neighborhoods and these, not coincidentally, are the neighborhoods that also experience a high number of foreclosures. Beyond these factors, what also stands out is the fact that the percentage of minority residents within a neighborhood has a significant independent effect on the rate of foreclosure, even when the percentage of subprime lending is held constant. Ironically, these were precisely the types of neighborhoods that suffered from low mortgage originations and high denial rates before the advent of subprime lending in the mid-1990s.

One item that is much harder to tease out from this analysis is the actual impact of predatory lending. Certainly some studies have examined subprime lending as a surrogate for predatory lending. At least as conventionally undertaken, this is problematic because the available data sets only flag lenders that have a majority of their loans in the subprime market. As our analysis of foreclosed property interest rates indicates, both prime and subprime lenders can make high-interest loans, adjustable rate loans, or balloon loans. However, the newest Home Mortgage Disclosure Act (HMDA) data may help solve this conundrum because it flags those loans, from all lenders, that charge higher interest rates (Avery, Canner, and Cook 2005). At the same

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comparisons, but we believe that the value of comparing the two data sets outweighs the drawbacks.

2. Most recently, foreclosures have cast a broader shadow. The combination of a soft housing market, job losses, and a climb in adjustable rates has increased the risk of foreclosures among holders of prime loans ([Bajas and Story 2008](#); [Schwartz 2008](#)). Moreover, foreclosure incidences in the suburbs have increased more rapidly than within the inner city, although the inner city continues to be disproportionately affected (“Predatory lending fallout spreads” 2002; Housing Research and Advocacy Center 2008).

3. The definition of a subprime lender is based on information provided by HUD. Each year HUD puts out a list of subprime lenders and its methodology counts a lender as subprime if more than 50 percent of all its loans are subprime. This method might understate the size of the subprime market because lenders who specialize in prime loans, like most of the major banks, can also make subprime loans. These do not show up in subprime databases based on HUD information.

4. This comes from historical data by Freddie Mac for conventional, conforming thirty-year fixed rate mortgages. These data also incorporate the effects of points, which varied by about 1.0 points during this period.

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Grover, Smith, and Todd (2008) find credit scores to be the most significant variable in determining the neighborhood distribution of foreclosures, but credit scores are not generally available in the public domain and are often acquired from PCI Corporation at considerable cost. It would be helpful to all housing researchers to have greater access to this crucial piece of information. Interestingly, our model, without credit score information, explained a lot more of the variance in foreclosure rates ($R^2 = 0.546$) than did their model, which was able to use credit score information ($R^2 = 0.373$).

Related Research Data

What is Measured in Measuring the Mortgage Market

Source: Informa UK Limited

Evidence from Chicago

Source: SAGE Publications

Governmentality as Epistemology

Source: Informa UK Limited

The external costs of foreclosure: The impact of single-family mortgage

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Residential mortgage foreclosure and neighborhood change

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FINANCING COMMUNITY: Methods for Assessing Residential Credit Disparities, Market Barriers, and Institutional Reinvestment Performance in the Metropolis

Source: Informa UK Limited

Can Local Policies Hold Back National Tides?

Source: SAGE Publications

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Source: Elsevier BV

“We’re just existing, not living!” Mortgage stress and the concealed costs of coping with crisis

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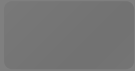
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