

*A Research Note on:*

*IDENTIFYING NONMETROPOLITAN COMMUNITIES WITH INNOVATIVE HOUSING*

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*ABSTRACT*

*The purpose of this study is to describe the procedures and results of research to identify nonmetropolitan communities that contain innovative housing. A questionnaire was mailed to housing-related agencies in eight Southern states in the spring of 1985. The housing expert in each agency was instructed to indicate the extent to which the state's nonmetropolitan communities had innovative housing as well as the types of innovations in existence. The results show that the housing experts have limited knowledge of community housing. They fail, therefore, to provide useful information regarding the existence of housing innovations.*

*INTRODUCTION*

To understand why innovative housing alternatives have not been widely adopted in nonmetropolitan communities, it is important to examine housing barriers and incentives. A barrier is any factor that limits the introduction and utilization of housing innovations. An incentive is any factor that facilitates the commercialization of housing innovations (Bezdek and Maycock, 1976). Past research reveals that building codes (Pynoos, Schafer and Hartman, 1980), zoning regulations (Johnson, 1982), restrictive covenants (Ziebarth, 1980), the nature of the building industry (Shoen, 1975), financing (Montgomery and Mandleker, 1979), attitudes of housing intermediaries (McCray and Weber, 1981) fear (Ritzdorf, 1984) and attitudes of the general public (Tremblay and Dillman, 1983) can act as either barriers or incentives to the adoption of innovative housing.

As the first step of the Southern Region Housing Research Project (S-194), "Barriers and Incentives to Affordable Housing," a survey of statewide housing experts was conducted to identify

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nonmetropolitan communities providing innovative housing. Based on the results of the survey, it was hoped that case studies could be conducted of both traditional and innovative nonmetropolitan communities to better understand the specific barriers and incentives influencing the availability of innovative housing alternatives. This paper describes the procedures and results of that survey. The study categorizes nonmetropolitan communities as traditional or innovative in the provision of housing.

### *METHODS*

Directories were compiled of housing-related agencies for eight Southern states: Alabama, Arkansas, Georgia, North Carolina, Oklahoma, South Carolina, Tennessee and Virginia. These directories were based on information obtained from listings of government agencies and professional associations, telephone directories and personal contacts. The identified housing-related agencies included lenders and guarantors, regulators, producers, consumer-information groups, sellers and lessors, appraisers and professional associations. The number of housing-related agencies located ranged from 19 in Oklahoma to 59 in Alabama and Georgia (mean = 49). Telephone calls were then made to the housing-related agencies to identify one expert within each agency considered most knowledgeable about community housing innovations.

During the spring of 1985, a questionnaire was mailed to the housing experts in each state. Respondents were asked to identify a listing of nonmetropolitan communities as being traditional or innovative in the provision of housing. This research strategy was based on the Delphi Technique, a group process used in aggregating the judgements of a number of individuals (Delbe, Van deVen and Gustafson, 1975). The communities listed ranged from 38 in Virginia to 74 in Georgia (mean = 56). In a cover letter, the housing experts were told that a community was considered innovative if, within that community, innovations existed in design, construction or financing techniques that potentially increased the availability of energy-efficient and affordable housing. Innovative design techniques were described as solar homes, earth-sheltered homes, group homes, cluster housing, multifamily housing, zero lot-line housing, retrofitted homes and housing designed for special groups. Innovative construction included manufactured homes, modular homes, kit homes and self-help housing. Innovative financing techniques were specified as alternative mortgages, land leasing and the use of bond and secondary markets.

Respondents were asked to carefully consider each of the listed nonmetropolitan communities and check whether each community was "definitely traditional", "probably traditional", "probably innovative" or "definitely innovative" in the provision of housing. A "don't know" response category was also provided. For each community checked as either probably or definitely innovative, respondents were asked to indicate whether the housing innovations were in design, construction, financing and/or other. A space was provided for comments regarding housing in the communities.

A postcard reminder, followed by a telephone call, was utilized to maximize the response rate. In addition, a copy of the directory of

state housing-related agencies was attached to the questionnaire in the initial mailout to encourage participation. The directory consisted of titles of all housing-related agencies in the state, along with agency addresses, telephone numbers and names of contact persons. Response rates ranged from 47 percent in Virginia to 65 percent in North Carolina (mean = 56 percent), resulting in an N of 194.

### RESULTS

The major finding of the survey is that the designated housing experts are generally uninformed about the housing in nonmetropolitan communities. Approximately one-fifth of those receiving questionnaires commented in a letter or responded in a telephone follow-up that they did not have enough knowledge to evaluate the listed communities in terms of innovative housing. Of those who completed the questionnaire, the majority said "don't know" to the question asking whether the communities were traditional or innovative in the provision of housing. "Don't know" responses range from 45 percent of the total responses in South Carolina to 79 percent of the total responses in North Carolina (mean = 67 percent).

An examination of the regional total of 7,923 responses produced by the traditional/innovative query reveals that 24 percent of the responses are directed at the probably or definitely traditional choices, compared to 8 percent directed at the probably or definitely innovative choices. A majority of respondents consider the nonmetropolitan communities to be traditional in the provision of housing. Of the 448 nonmetropolitan communities listed for the eight southern states, only 36 communities (8 percent) received more innovative responses as opposed to traditional responses. The number of innovative communities as indicated by housing experts range from 0 in Arkansas to 10 in Georgia. No community received consensus in the opinion of the respondents.

For each community checked as probably or definitely innovative, respondents indicated the types of innovations in place. Design (38 percent) is the most frequently mentioned type of housing innovation in a community. Financial innovations (31 percent), construction innovations (28 percent) and other innovations (3 percent) follow. Specific housing innovations include multifamily dwellings, manufactured homes, energy-efficient housing such as solar and earth-sheltered homes, public housing projects, apartment complexes for the elderly, HUD-supported projects, retirement areas and FHA and FmHA financing.

Based on the comments provided by the statewide housing experts, zoning regulations are the major barrier to the provision of innovative housing in nonmetropolitan communities. Building codes, a low rate of construction activity, a lack of state and federal support for housing projects, lending institutions with limited mortgage money and attitudes of housing intermediaries are also frequently mentioned as barriers.

### CONCLUSION

The study reported in this article is not a success. It fails to meet the objective of identifying nonmetropolitan communities with innovative housing. Two important implications emerge from the study, however. First, housing experts at the state level do not have sufficient knowledge to evaluate the housing in specific communities. A survey of individuals involved in a particular housing market (e.g., realtors, builders, zoning commissioners and extension agents) would probably produce more accurate and detailed data. Personal visits to communities of interest would also be desirable, followed by case studies of communities designated as traditional or innovative to allow examination of the barriers and incentives that produced the current housing situation in each community.

Secondly, the study highlights the difficulty of obtaining reliable data regarding community housing. A considerable amount of information about housing for research purposes is inaccessible or nonexistent at the community level. One solution to this problem is the creation of a housing research center within each state. The center could collect, store, evaluate and disseminate housing information. In terms of identifying nonmetropolitan communities with innovative housing, such a research center would be valuable.

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