How Fair Is Our Tax?:
Considering How Historical Policies and Contemporary Practices Impact Property Assessments

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Junia Howell, Ph.D.

Overview

For as long as U.S. communities have collected property taxes, public officials, scholars, and citizens have debated how the assess the value of the property being taxed. Property tax is one of the oldest, most ubiquitous, and most essential revenue streams for local jurisdictions in the United States. As such, it is easy to take for granted how it is designed and administered. Yet, a blind acceptance of the standard practices can create unintentional inequalities. In this talk, we will explore the evolution of U.S. property tax approaches and to what extent they are able to produce predictable, equitable, efficient, and transparent taxation.

Introduction | 5 minutes

Participants will discuss how they conceptualize fairness as well as the Illinois Compiled Statute's Property Tax Code's definition of fair cash value (35 ILCS 200/1-50).

References:

Property Tax Code. Chapter 35 of the Illinois Compiled Statutes, Section 200.

What Is Fair Cash Value? | 20 minutes

This section will provide a quick overview of the sales comparison approach, the empirical research outlining the shortcomings of the sales comparison approach, the historical origins of the approach, and its ongoing implications on contemporary inequality.

References:

Faber, Jacob W. 2020. "We Built This: Consequences of New Deal Era Intervention in America's Racial Geography." *American Sociological Review*. 85(5): 739–775.

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Federal Housing Finance Agency. "FHFA Uniform Appraisal Dataset Aggregate Statistics."

Freddie Mac. 2021. "Racial and Ethnic Valuation Gaps in Home Purchase Appraisals."
Howell, Junia and Elizabeth Korver-Glenn. 2018. "Neighborhoods, Race, and the Twenty-First-Century Housing Appraisal Industry." *Sociology of Race and Ethnicity.* 4(4): 473-90.
Howell, Junia and Elizabeth Korver-Glenn. 2021. "The Increasing Effect of Neighborhood Racial Composition on Housing Values, 1980–2015." *Social Problems.* 68(4): 1051–71.
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Jackson, Kenneth. 1985. *Crabgrass Frontier: The Suburbanization of the United States*. Oxford University Press.
Kamin, Debra. 2022. "Widespread Racial Bias Found in Home Appraisals." *New York Times*. 2 November.
Korver-Glenn, Elizabeth. 2021. *Race Brokers: Housing Markets and Segregation in 21st Century Urban America*. Oxford University Press.
Marchiel, Rebecca K. 2020. *After Redlining: The Urban Reinvestment Movement in the Era of Financial Deregulation*. The University of Chicago Press.
Mock, Brentin. 2020. "A Neighborhood's Race Affects Home Values More Now Than in 1980." *Bloomberg CityLab*, September 21.
Moore, Natalie. 2021. "Racial Gap in Appraisals Devalues Homes Owned by People of Color." *Marketplace*, June 8.
Michney, Todd M. 2021. "How the City Survey's Redlining Maps Were Made: A Closer Look at HOLC's Mortgagee Rehabilitation Division." *Journal of Planning History*.
Rice, Roger L. 1968. "Residential Segregation by Law, 1910-1917." *The Journal of Southern History*. 34(2): 179-199.
Stuart, Guy. 2003. *Discriminating Risk: The US Mortgage Lending Industry in the Twentieth Century*. Cornell University Press.
Winling, LaDale C. and Todd M. Michney. 2021. "The Roots of Redlining: Academic, Governmental, and Professional Networks in the Making of the New Deal Lending Regime." *Journal of American History*. 108(1): 42–69.

What Is Fair Assessed Value? | 10 minutes

This section will discuss the origins of property taxes, how the methods for deriving assessments have changes over time, and the ways in which assessment methods have contributed to unequal tax bills.

References:

Atuahene, Bernadette and Christopher Berry. 2018. "Taxed Out: Illegal Property Tax Assessments and The Epidemic of Tax Foreclosures in Detroit." UC Irvine Law Review. 9: 847.

Avenancio-León, Carlos F. and Troup Howard. 2022. "The Assessment Gap: Racial Inequalities in Property Taxation." *The Quarterly Journal of Economics*. 137 (3): 1383–1434.
Berry, Christopher R. 2021. "Reassessing the Property Tax."
Flippen, Chenoa. 2004. "Unequal Returns to Housing Investments? A Study of Real Housing Appreciation among Black, White, and Hispanic Households." Social Forces 82(4):1523–1551.
Hale, Dennis, 1985. "The Evolution of The Property Tax: A Study of The Relation Between Public Finance and Political Theory." The Journal of Politics. 47(2): 382-404.
Howell, Junia. 2024. "Levied: Rectifying Hamilton County's Racial and Economic Unjust Property Taxes." eruka.
Kahrl, Andrew W. 2024. The Black Tax: 150 Years of Theft, Exploitation, and Dispossession in America. Chicago, Illinois: University of Chicago Press.

What Is Fair Tax? | 8 minutes

This section will compare property taxes to residents' resources to explore to what extent the tax burden is evenly distributed across homeowners.

References:

Bradley, Stephanie L. 2018. "Tax and Inequality in the United States." Sociology Compass. 12(2): e12559
Ihlanfeldt, Keith and Luke Rodgers. 2022. "Beyond Assessment: Racial and Gender Disparities in Property Taxation." Lincoln Institute of Land Policy.
Levinson, Arik. 2020. "America's Regressive Wealth Tax: State and Local Property Taxes." Applied Economics Letters. 28(14): 1234–1238.
Martin, Isaac William and Kevin Beck. 2017. "Property Tax Limitation and Racial Inequality in Effective Tax Rates." Critical Sociology. 43(2): 221–236.
Newman, Katherine and Rourke O'Brien. 2011. Taxing the Poor: Doing Damage to the Truly Disadvantaged. University of California Press.

Conclusion | 2 minutes

The presentation will conclude by reengaging in question of what fairness is and should be under Illinois property tax statues.