Southern Regional Asset Building Coalition:

GIS Final Project

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Background of Asset Building and SRABC

The Center for Social Development (CSD) is a renowned research center at Washington University in St. Louis that "conducts research that informs how individuals, families, and communities increase capacity, formulate and reach life goals, and contribute to the economy and society" (CSD website). One of the core areas of research is asset building and the CSD is a global leader in informing and affecting policy surrounding this concept. Assets are essentially the conceptual ownership of property that can be expected to have or produce value for the owner (Nam, Huang, Sherraden, 2008). According to Sherraden (1991), asset building can be characterized as an accumulation of owned goods. Sherraden introduced the concept of asset-building as a method for sustainable poverty alleviation. The relative distribution of poverty in a region is significantly different and often worse from an asset perspective as opposed to an income perspective (Nam, Huang, Sherraden, 2008). Also there is evidence that suggests that the rate of asset poverty exceeds the rate of income poverty (Haveman & Wolff, 2005). Thus, in a contrast to income based methods to welfare, asset building is aimed at helping people develop a future orientation and escape the cycle of poverty. This is done by assisting people to invest in productive assets such as financial wealth, property, human capital, social capital, political participation and influence, cultural capital and natural resources (Sherraden, 1991).

Currently CSD is working on a project in partnership with the Southern Regional Asset Building Coalition (SRABC), which is "an initiative of state-level asset-building coalitions in Alabama, Florida, Louisiana and Mississippi. SRABC seeks to provide asset development guidance, disseminate relevant information that supports policy development and initiate programs for a higher quality of life for communities and families across this region" (SRABC Project Strategic Process, 2010). An asset-building coalition can be defined as a "diverse alliance of organizations who cooperate in joint action to institute a broad

agenda of asset-building policies and programs that support low-income individuals, families, and communities" (presentation, G. Gunn, 2011). For SRABC, their specific goal is to "establish a network in the Southern Black Belt that mobilizes and supports organizations and coalitions focused on asset building for people of all income levels" (Strategic Assessment Report of the SRABC, 2010).

Through a self-assessment process developed by the CSD and SRABC, 70 non-profit organizations and coalitions in the target region were surveyed. The research sought to find out what asset-building work is currently being done in the area, to establish baseline data on organizations and coalitions, and assess what services are being provided. The project spanned a course of two years, from 2008 to 2010, and the final report was made available in the winter of 2010. According to the report, "the findings suggest that a coordinated network of existing coalitions could be of tremendous benefit to the region. Such a network could facilitate partnerships between coalitions with common goals, and unite all of the coalitions behind a single policy agenda at the regional level" (Strategic Assessment Report of the SRABC, 2010).

Project Goals

For the purposes of this class, we were approached by Gena Gunn, Project Director and Director of Asset Building in States and Coalitions for the CSD, to develop a visual representation of the data collected through this research study. Gunn was one of the lead researchers for this project and has an intimate knowledge of the research collected. For this reason, she was our advisor for this project as it progressed over the course of the semester. Our meeting with her helped us understand the project expectations and her vision for the final GIS deliverable. Using the data from the surveys, we were asked to design a map, or set of maps, to visually display the relationship between the organizations, coalitions, and the populations they serve.

Because this project is a supplement to an existing research study, our GIS research goals overlapped with that of the SRABC study goals. Therefore, the goal of our project was to visually display the importance of asset-building programs, organizations, and coalitions with the hope that it can lend itself to an increase in asset-based policies. With these goals in mind, our research question was: what is the relationship between existing organizations, their regional distribution, and the potential for large-scale coalition building?

In considering the project expectations as laid out by Gunn, as well as what we would like to explore with this project, some of the layers we would like to include in our map are income poverty, as well as the regional distribution of the SRABC's survey respondents. Income poverty is the standard measure used to determine the federal poverty line and by definition, does not include a person's assets. This would be helpful to include in order to gain a better idea of the prevalence of poverty in the region, which in turn can be a determinant as to what funds and services are available. By visually demonstrating where the highest rates of poverty are, it would be useful to demonstrate the need for asset-building programs and policies. Using demographic data and the survey results, the map could effectively demonstrate the importance of the existing asset-building organizations and coalitions, as well as the potential need for more asset-based programs and services.

Project Process

The SRABC Strategic Assessment survey data provided us with the names, addresses and other details for the participating organizations and coalitions. Our first step was to clean this data and ensure that each of the organizations had a corresponding physical address. Also we had to ensure that the addresses were in a correct and consistent format for ArcGIS to read and geocode. After an initial geocode of the addresses listed in the survey data, we manually checked all the addresses that could not be read by the program. For most of these agencies, we were able to find the correct physical address online. For the ones we could not find online, we called the agencies to get the addresses. Ultimately, our final geocoded result still had 5 unmatched addresses, which had to be left off of the map.
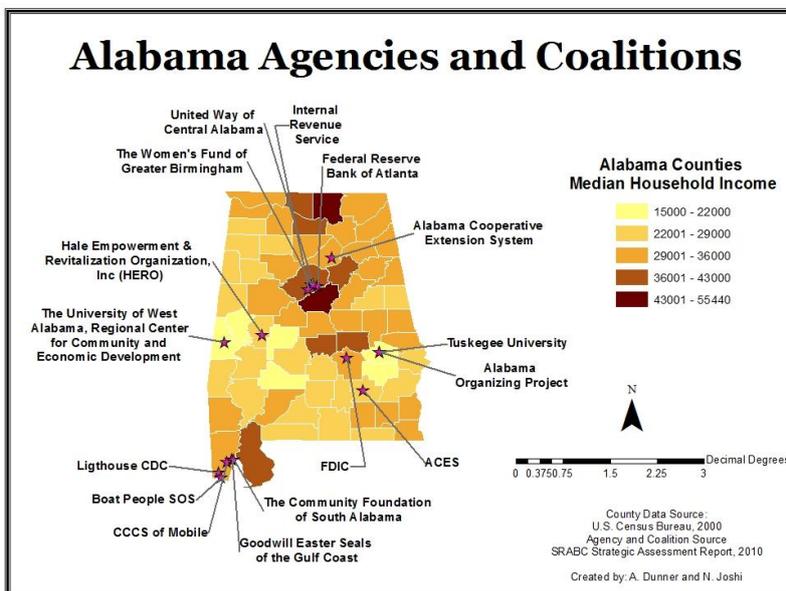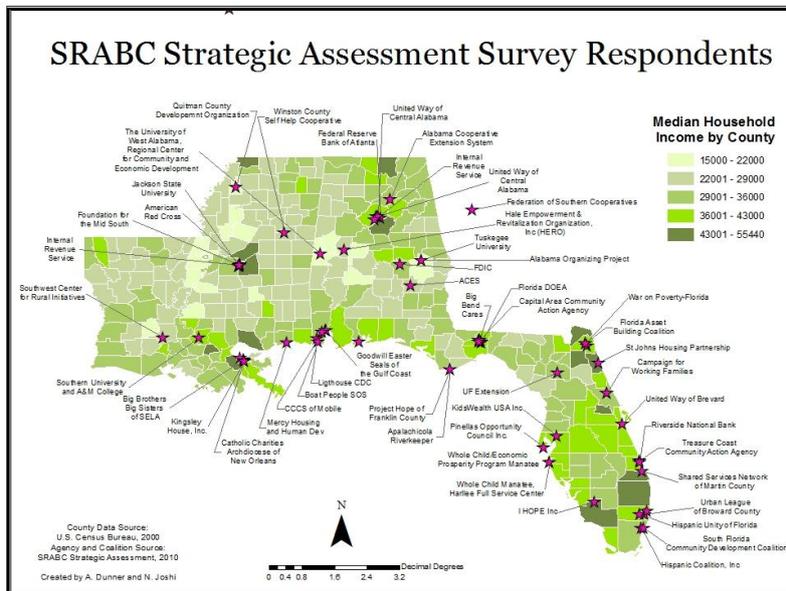
Our next step was to find income data for the four states of the SRABC. We decided to use the U.S. Census Bureau's median household income as our standard variable for each state's income distribution. Household income is a measure commonly used by the United States government as well private institutions. It counts the incomes of all residents over the age of 18 in each household, including not only wages and salaries, but also unemployment insurance, disability payments, child support payments, regular rental receipts, as well as any personal business, investment or other kinds of income received regularly. The residents of the household do not have to be related to the head of the household for their earnings to be considered part of the household's income. One of our goals for this project was to find out if there is a correlation between the distribution of agencies that responded to the SRABC survey and the income levels of the population within the participating states. To determine this, we created a chloropethic map depicting the median household income distribution within the states by counties.
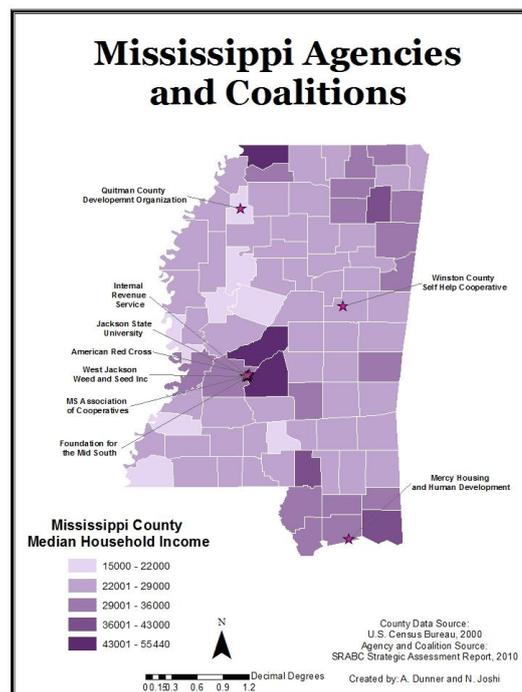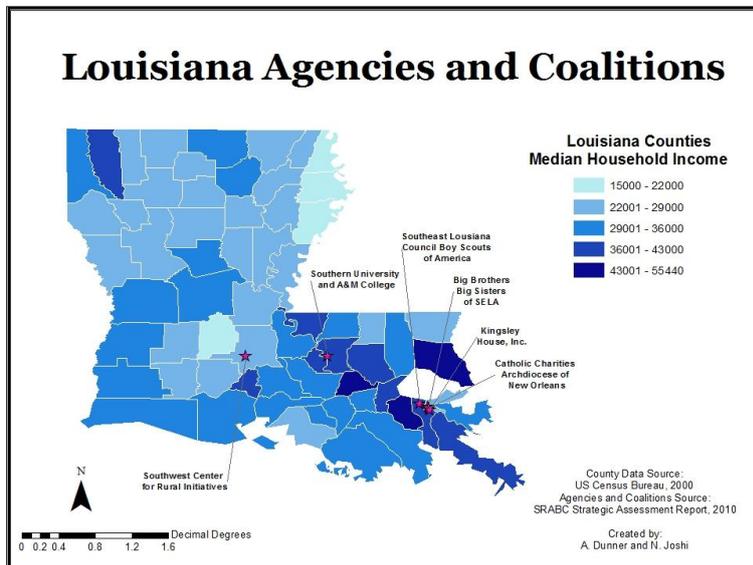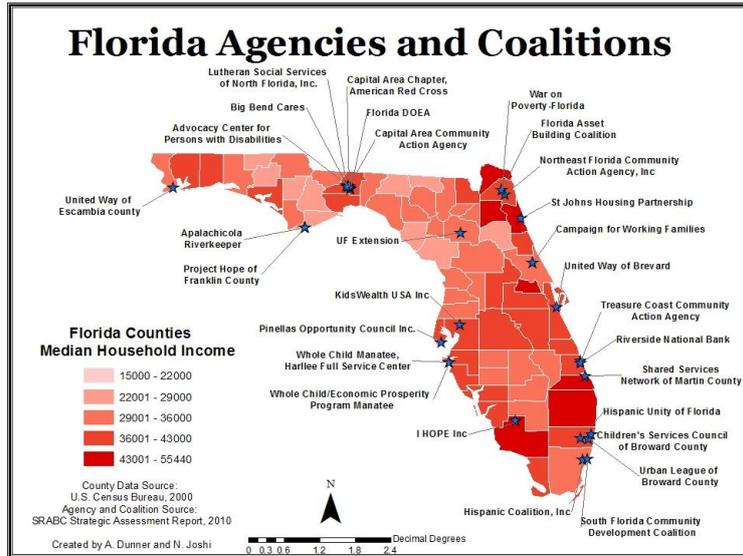
We obtained the median household income for the counties within the four states from the American Fact Finder on the US Census website. We used the Washington

University GIS holdings to get the shape files containing county-level data for each state.

These files included Census data such as, but not limited to, population, age, size of

household and race. By combining the two data sets using the "joins and relates" function in

ArcMap we were able to create the chloropethic map of median household income for each

state.

Results

Using the ArcMap software, we were able to create a total of five different maps; four

of the maps were of each individual state, and the last was a comprehensive map of all states.

Below are images of the five maps we created.

Florida Agencies and Coalitions

Louisiana Agencies and Coalitions

Mississippi Agencies and Coalitions

By looking at the distribution of agencies/coalitions in relation to the median household income, we were able to observe a few trends. First, it seems that many of the responding agencies/coalitions are clustered together in the same or neighboring counties. For example, six of the respondents in Florida could all be found in the same area of Leon County. Further, six of the Mississippi respondents were all from the Hinds County area. This could suggest the potential for strong agency networking, which could be extended to the rest of the state. In addition, few of the responding agencies/coalition were found in counties with lower median household incomes. This was found to be consistent across all four states. Lastly, several states showed a heavy distribution of respondents located along the outskirts/coasts, with limited agencies/coalitions towards the center of the states. For example, almost all of Florida's respondents can be found along the coastline. While it is hard to draw any definite conclusions from this limited data, our findings present a series of patterns that are worth further exploration and analysis.

Limitations

This project posed several challenges and limitations. First, we were forced to exclude agencies that could not be geocoded in the ArcMap software, so the findings cannot be considered totally representative of all survey respondents. Second, the data used for the project was from the 2000 Census as more recent data was not available for all states. Also, we used county level data for the individual state maps; it is important to recognize that county data does not account for income disparity within the county and may be misleading of the actual income levels. While block-level data was available, it was not in a useable format for this project. Third, because we had limited knowledge of the software, we could not develop the best method to display the survey results on the map, something that we had aimed to include. Lastly, we are unable to draw any real conclusions from the maps we created. In order to do so, more variables and data layers would have to be added to give

depth to the analysis. It was in our original plan to do this, but due to time constraints, we were unable to go any further than income distribution.

<div align="center">Future research</div>

This project shows many areas of potentially valuable future research. Below are some of the variables we included in the initial proposal that we had wanted to incorporate into the final project:

- White to non-white net worth

- Services offered

- Populations served

- Asset-building public policy/advocacy involvement

- Interest in a regional asset-building coalition (SRABC)

- Other survey results SRABC found desirable

We believe that with the addition of these and other layers, it would be possible to start drawing more meaningful conclusions about the potential for a stronger asset-building coalition within the SRABC's-identified Black Belt.

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