

ereviews

PolicyMap

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■ *By Cheryl LaGuardia*

CONTENT PolicyMap, a data and mapping resource, combines demographic, health, employment, and socioeconomic data about communities, census tracts, and other regions within the United States with the ability to map that data across the country. The file offers full-screen maps, a zoom search option, data menus, and 15,000 geographic indicators. Report and table functions allow users to create detailed reports on a geographic area and quickly develop three-layer maps to overlay multiple data layers on a single map.

Maps can be customized using on-screen legends, year variables, ranges, and other tools; and can be emailed, saved to a MyPolicyMap account, printed, or embedded onto a website. There is also the option to upload data into PolicyMap using the system's Data Loader. Figures come from a wide variety of agencies and companies, ranging from the Administrative Office of the U.S. Courts to Valassis Lists (the nation's largest direct mail marketing company). Several Premium Subscriber Datasets are available at extra cost. (For a full list of PolicyMap data sources please see the Data Directory at: policymap.com/our-data-directory.html).

USABILITY PolicyMap's homepage features a large map of the United States, with a single search box and drop-down menu for additional options such as location, census tract, block group, Congressional district, Senate, school district, state district, or metro area. Users can also query an address, city, county, state, or zip code.

To the right of the search box are options to email, print, save, embed, and download, the last of which is noted as "coming soon." Below the search box are links to topical sections: MyData, Demographics, Incomes and Spending, Housing, Lending, Quality of Life, Economy, Education, Health, Federal Guidelines, and Analytics. At the top of the screen are links to maps, tables, reports, three-layer maps, and data loader, followed at right by links to My PolicyMap, and more.

Since I am not a power GIS (geo-



graphic information system) user, I expected to be daunted by this file. To get started, I typed the name of my hometown (Sidney, NY) into the search box. The map zoomed to a point labeled "Sidney, NY (County Subdivision, 2010)." Under the Demographics option, I chose "Population, Total," which brought up a data-layer legend showing the date 2012 along with a color-coded data range showing that as of that year, Sidney fell in the range 5,700 to 39,143. But I wanted the actual total population for Sidney and didn't see it.

I selected the area shaded the same color as the legend displayed for Sidney and saw a pop-up balloon that gave the total populations for the United States (309,138,711), New York state (19,398,125), Delaware county (47,851), and Sidney (5,772). It also provided the Census Tract number for 2010, with links to "See Table" and "Get Report."

Requesting the table, I was taken to a Wizard that showed me not only how to make a comparative table (by adding a location in the search box) but also how to view trends over time (by clicking "Across Years" in the legend at left). I admit this was immediately addictive; within seconds I had a table comparing the populations of Sidney and nearby towns and could have gone on adding locations but instead went back to the main map and clicked reports on the top bar.

Upon doing so, I viewed a screen with four report-type choices at left (community profile, rental housing report, HMDA [Home Mortgage Reporting Act] report, and home sale report) while four report locations arrayed to the right: predefined location, radius, custom region, and polygon. I chose to view a community profile report for Sidney, NY (by clicking and typing Sidney in a location Search box). That brought up a zoomed-in map of the town, but I didn't immediately see any further action being prompted for me to take. After scanning the entire screen I found, at the far right side of the page, a "Generate Report" button.

Selecting this option led to a detailed, four-screen "Community Profile Report of

City: Sidney," including: school district(s), Congressional district(s), Senators, State Senate district(s), State House district(s), population trends, racial characteristics, age distribution, incomes, immigration, families and households, housing type, tenure, vacancy, employment (six months' worth of data), crime, and endnotes explaining values and calculations.

The three-layer maps button caught my eye as soon as I took a look at this resource, and I attempted to try one (feeling a bit less daunted based on my experience thus far, but nervous nonetheless). Upon clicking the pertinent button, I was transitioned to a Wizard that told me how to make such a map in four steps. I followed the instructions by entering a location and choosing three different data sets: per capita income, robberies, and murders per 100,000 people. The results were several gray-shaded areas on the map, with a note appearing below the legend stating that "Purple areas on the map show locations where all criteria are met." But I didn't see any purple areas. When I clicked the shaded area for Sidney I found the per capita income (\$20,704) and the number of robberies in 2000 (four), but under murders was the note, "Insufficient Data." When I scanned more widely over the map, I noticed a purple area which met all criteria: Binghamton, with an average of seven murders in 2000.

I would change some things here. There should be a prompt that comes up, telling researchers to click on a map location to display data. And the faint gray fonts that display on important function keys and links are hardly discernible, and need to be more prominent—darker, perhaps?

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VERDICT Overall, this resource is excellent and can do a lot more than space permits me to describe. The file is usually intuitive and the Wizards are a bonus. But the system could be made even easier for researchers with explicit, rather than implicit, actions and better use of color. Recommended at the right price.

Cheryl LaGuardia is a Research Librarian for the Widener Library at Harvard University and author of Becoming a Library Teacher (Neal-Schuman, 2000). Readers can contact her at claguard@fas.harvard.edu