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# Understanding the Causes and Consequences of Local Growth Control

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## Issue

In California, there has been a growing concern about rising housing cost burdens. Declining housing affordability, particularly in job-rich areas, can lead to lengthy commutes and pose significant challenges to achieving sustainable transportation and development patterns. It may also cause disproportionate impacts on vulnerable population groups by pushing members of these groups to areas where jobs and other amenities are limited.

Although no single factor can fully explain the rise of this critical issue, local growth control measures (e.g., growth moratoriums, density restrictions, and public facilities requirements) and other strict land use regulations have been criticized for constraining the housing supply and adding to jobs-housing imbalances. It is important to understand what motivates local growth control actions, as well as how these controls may affect land use, housing, and transportation.

## Key Research Findings

Researchers at UC Irvine synthesized a sample of 62 studies published over the last four decades on the causes and consequences of local growth control regulations with an emphasis on the relationship between growth control measures and transportation. Key findings from this work are as follows:

**Transportation projects can trigger a growth control response in some contexts.** While local growth control measures often target housing development, transportation investment projects can trigger growth control reactions in some circumstances, as shown in Marin County, California.<sup>1</sup> The literature also suggests that the rise of local growth control might be closely associated with residents' concerns about traffic congestion, but it is less clear to what extent traffic congestion leads to the adoption of (or political support for) growth control measures.

**Voters favoring environmental conservation tend to support growth control measures, but the motivations behind growth control may change over time.** One of the most consistently reported findings in the literature is greater support for growth control by those who are more concerned with environmental protection. The research findings, however, are mixed with respect to the relationship between the support for growth control and other indicators, such as age, gender, and income. Furthermore, there is evidence that the relationships may change over time. For instance, a study investigating the attitudes toward growth among residents in Orange County, California reported a declining trend of the importance of household income.<sup>2</sup>

**Evidence linking city-level growth pressures or income with anti-growth attitudes is mixed.** While some studies have found population growth rates to be an important

predictor of local growth control, other studies have detected no (or limited) evidence of such effects. The literature is similarly equivocal on how the economic status of municipalities is related to their growth or non-growth orientation.

**Local governments act strategically.** Cities may be more likely to adopt growth control measures if surrounding cities are, with all other things being equal.<sup>3</sup> This may be an attempt to remain competitive with other jurisdictions and guard against unwanted spillovers from neighboring places. Studies have consistently found evidence of such strategic interaction among local governments.

**Impacts of growth control measures on housing market dynamics vary based on the type of regulation.** Although local growth controls can generate significant impacts on local housing supply and growth patterns, the impacts vary substantially by type of regulation. Empirical studies suggest that zoning restrictions tend to limit housing development more severely than other types of regulation, such as requiring adequate public facilities before a building

permit can be issued, or residential moratoria or urban growth boundaries (i.e., limiting where urban development can and cannot occur).<sup>4</sup>

**Local growth controls may induce displacement and exclusionary outcomes.** Studies examining changes in the sociodemographic composition of municipalities adopting growth controls find that such municipalities disproportionately exclude people of color, which can significantly increase the commuting burden of these population groups.<sup>5</sup>

### More Information

This policy brief is drawn from the report “The Causes and Consequences of Local Growth Control: A Transportation Perspective” prepared by Jae Hong Kim, Nicholas J. Marantz, and Nene Osutei with the University of California, Irvine. The report can be found at [www.ucits.org/research-project/2020-54](http://www.ucits.org/research-project/2020-54). For more information about findings presented in this brief, please contact Jae Hong Kim at [jaehk6@uci.edu](mailto:jaehk6@uci.edu).

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<sup>1</sup> Dyble, L. N. (2007). Revolt against sprawl: Transportation and the origins of the Marin County growth-control regime. *Journal of Urban History*, 34(1), 38-66.

<sup>2</sup> Baldassare, M., & Wilson, G. (1996). Changing sources of suburban support for local growth controls. *Urban Studies*, 33(3), 459-471.

<sup>3</sup> Brueckner, J. K. (1998). Testing for strategic interaction among local governments: The case of growth controls. *Journal of Urban Economics*, 44(3), 438-467.; Nguyen, M. T. (2009). Why do communities mobilize against growth: Growth pressures, community status, metropolitan hierarchy, or strategic interaction? *Journal of Urban Affairs*, 31(1), 25-43.

<sup>4</sup> Pendall, R. (2000). Local land use regulation and the chain of exclusion. *Journal of the American Planning Association*, 66(2), 125-142.; Byun, P., Waldorf, B. S., & Esparza, A. X. (2005). Spillovers and local growth controls: An alternative perspective on suburbanization. *Growth and Change*, 36(2), 196-219.; Jackson, K. (2016). Do land use regulations stifle residential development? Evidence from California cities. *Journal of Urban Economics*, 91, 45-56.

<sup>5</sup> Donovan, T., & Neiman, M. (1995). Local growth control policy and changes in community characteristics. *Social Science Quarterly*, 780-793.; Levine, N. (1999). The effects of local growth controls on regional housing production and population redistribution in California. *Urban Studies*, 36(12), 2047-2068.; Pendall, R. (2000). Local land use regulation and the chain of exclusion. *Journal of the American Planning Association*, 66(2), 125-142.; Nguyen, M. T. (2007). Local growth control at the ballot box: Real effects or symbolic politics? *Journal of Urban Affairs*, 29(2), 129-147.

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