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Amber Wichowsky
Marquette University, amber.wichowsky@marquette.edu

Paru Shah
University of Wisconsin - Milwaukee

Amanda Heideman
University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee

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Amber Wichowsky
Marquette University, Milwaukee, WI
Paru Shah
University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee, Milwaukee, WI
Amanda Heideman
University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee, Milwaukee, WI

Abstract

Over the past 20 years, many cities across the United States have adopted a range of information and communication technologies (ICTs) to make it easier for residents to get informed, communicate their preferences, and hold public officials accountable. In this paper, we ask two questions. First, are service requests and responses illustrative of existing neighborhood differences across a city? Second, do patterns of request and response differ by the type of complaint made to the city? We leverage data from the city of Milwaukee, Wisconsin, to examine neighborhood variation in service requests and subsequent response times to those complaints. Our analysis makes a number of important contributions to the current literature on ICTs, including providing a more nuanced understanding of

how types of requests vary by neighborhood context, and a more comprehensive picture of how requests and response times reveal social and racial disparities across the city.

Keywords

e-governance, political participation, racial disparities

Over the past 20 years, many cities across the United States have adopted a range of information and communication technologies, such as social media and mobile apps, to make it easier for residents to get informed, communicate their preferences, and hold public officials accountable (see also Dixon 2010). With just a quick click or call to a 311 line, residents can now submit their nonemergency service requests to their local governments, presumably improving service delivery and responsiveness (Wiseman 2014).

Our project examines how these requests and response times vary by neighborhood context. Previous studies of these systems in the United States came to mixed conclusions. Minkoff (2016), for example, finds only modest differences in service requests across neighborhoods in New York City (NYC), once underlying neighborhood conditions are taken into account. Other studies find requests are less likely to emanate from neighborhoods with large shares of immigrants and Latinos despite their relatively higher needs for service (Levine and Gershenson 2014) and that policing practices can deter residents from contacting local government with their concerns (Lerman and Weaver 2013). O'Brien (2015) estimates that homeowners in Boston were about three times more likely to contact the city with public maintenance (e.g., potholes) requests than renters.

Much less is known when it comes to responsiveness to those requests. In a study of fifteen cities with publicly available data on 311 requests, Clark et al. (2020) find no evidence that these cities respond slower to service requests from poorer neighborhoods or those with higher shares of racial and ethnic minorities. To facilitate cross-city comparisons, their study focuses on a subset of complaints about public spaces (e.g., litter, pothole repairs, and tree removal). Analyzing Boston's 311 data, however, O'Brien, Sampson, and Winship (2015) find that requests for city services generally fall within two distinct categories: complaints about *public denigration*, like the requests used in the study by Clark et al., and complaints about *private neglect* of property, such as problems tenants might have with mold or heating in their rental units. No study to our knowledge considers disparities in response to service requests in this latter category, or whether some residents are deterred from making such complaints in the first place. Minkoff (2016), for example, focuses on the quality of public goods provision (e.g., street maintenance, sewage systems, garbage collection) and excludes other complaints from his analysis, but notes that "it is certainly the case that much can be learned from examining these excluded contacting categories" (p. 7).

This research note builds upon this previous scholarship and asks two related questions. First, are service requests and responses illustrative of existing neighborhood differences across a city? Second, do patterns of request and response differ by the type of complaint made to the city? We answer these questions by leveraging data on residents' service requests to Milwaukee's Department of Neighborhood Services (DNS) and Department of Public Works (DPW), the two agencies that respond to nonemergency requests. We focus on the neighborhood, not the individual, as the unit of analysis

because neighborhoods are crucial sites for local civic engagement and collective action, and because local political struggles are often defined by the sociospatial areas of the city. We first consider the geographic variation in service request rates and then assess variation in response times.

Our analysis contributes to the growing body of research aimed at documenting the socioeconomic inequalities that exist in local service provision in four important ways. First, prior research on service requests in the United States tends to focus on Boston and New York, two cities that provide open data about their 311 systems. Here we extend this literature to consider a more economically distressed, midsize city in the Midwest. Second, we make an important distinction by the type of request. Following O'Brien, Sampson, and Winship (2015), we delineate *public denigration*, which focuses on complaints about the use of public space, from *private neglect*, which captures concerns about specific properties. Given the risk disenfranchised residents might face making a complaint against their landlords, we expect requests to vary both by characteristics of neighborhoods and type of request.

Third, we are able to examine both requests and subsequent government responsiveness to those requests. Together, this provides a more complete picture of the geographic variation in local governmental contacts and service provision, which are important metrics of the ways social and racial disparities are revealed across the city. Finally, our analysis improves upon previous studies by considering whether more civically engaged and connected neighborhoods request services above and beyond what we would expect given underlying neighborhood conditions, and if such neighborhoods receive a timelier response to their service requests. Further, we test whether the racial, ethnic, and/or foreign-born composition of the neighborhood is a significant predictor of service request and response even after we account for these other neighborhood characteristics.

Inequality and Local Service Provision

In the United States and abroad, scholars, community activists, and civically minded organizations have looked to information technologies to reinvigorate the local civic sphere and improve public service provision (Bertot, Jaeger, and Grimes 2010; Cegarra-Navarro, Pachón, and Cegarra 2012; Bolívar 2017; LeRoux, Fusi, and Brown 2020). From e-mail to crowdsourcing mobile apps, these technologies have created new ways for residents to become informed, exercise their political voice, and become more directly engaged in local decision making.

Despite the promise of these new modes of communication, there is also potential peril: rather than creating a more inclusive polity, they may exacerbate existing biases in local civic engagement along common dividing lines, including age, education, poverty, homeownership, and race (see, e.g., Mervyn, Simon, and Allen 2014; Einstein, Palmer, and Glick 2019; Wichowsky 2019). Furthermore, for some of the city's poorest residents, contacting the local government carries significant risk. For example, Milwaukee's Police Department, the District Attorney's office, and the Common Council all use the intelligence gathered through service requests to force corrective action against potentially negligent landlords.[1] In some cases, the city might fine property owners, take them to court, or revoke their business licenses. Like low-income renters in other U.S. cities, the poorest in Milwaukee pay an exceedingly high share of their household incomes on rent (Crowe and Lutheran 2017; Desmond 2018; Levine 2014). When they are unable to make rent, a few will wait for the eviction; others move preemptively. Some, however, will make alternative payment arrangements with their landlords—a seemingly compassionate approach, but one that puts the renter in an extremely vulnerable position, as

the landlord could file for eviction for nonpayment at any point. Consequently, some of the city's most vulnerable renters may be deterred from contacting the city with their complaints out of fear that they will be evicted (Desmond 2016).

Indeed, the existing literature on contacts with local government in the United States offers conflicting evidence as to how neighborhood context influences local participation outside of voting, and many of these studies are now several decades old (for a review see Sharp 1982). There are studies that document the positive correlation between the propensity to contact local government and socioeconomic status (SES) (Eisinger 1972; Vedlitz 1980; Schlozman, Verba, and Brady 2012) as well as those that find a negative association between contact rates and area well-being (Vedlitz, Dyer, and Durand 1980). Other research documents a U-shaped relationship, with populations with a high level of political awareness and a high level of need more likely to contact local government (Jones et al. 1977). Verba and Nie (1972), however, conclude that the propensity to contact local government is unrelated to SES. However, all of these studies rely on survey data, potentially biasing the results; self-reports on contacts with government, for example, might just reflect unobserved differences in political socialization and efficacy, which are correlated with SES. Coulter (1992) finds that recollections of government contacts are often unreliable.

Geographic Variation in Service Requests

Together, then, the picture is unclear of how we might expect context—like affluence and race—to influence the use of service requests. Our first objective, then, is to look descriptively at the request data: where are these requests coming from and what types of complaints are neighborhoods registering with the city?

Like Boston and New York, Milwaukee has a nonemergency services and information program, which allows residents to receive city notifications and submit service requests. Milwaukee provides a useful extension to the previous work on the East Coast. Milwaukee is a city with persistently higher rates of residential segregation than similarly sized cities, and many of the neighborhoods have yet to recover from the Great Recession. Our study tests the robustness of previous findings to alternative neighborhood contexts. Addresses were provided for each service request made between January 1, 2017, and May 1, 2019, which we then geocoded and aggregated to census tracts. Census tracts on average range from 2,500 and 8,000 in population, and for our purposes, map onto recognizable neighborhoods in Milwaukee. Further, because Milwaukee is highly segregated by race, ethnicity, and income, census tracts are arranged into the sociospatial areas of the city, and thus we are able to use general sociodemographic data from the U.S. Census to predict geographic variation in service requests.

We focus on neighborhoods because they are how public officials and others think about the city: economic development planning is organized by neighborhood, community-based organizations serve particular neighborhoods, and residents themselves tend to identify by neighborhood. Neighborhoods also reveal the tremendous inequalities across the city that structure residents' civic identities and standing (see, e.g., Soss and Jacobs 2009).

We first examine geographic variation in total service requests (per resident). We then consider whether the neighborhood predictors of service requests vary by type of request. We include a number of variables that previous studies have shown predict the number of requests in a neighborhood. Because census tracts are not of equal size, we divide the number of service requests by population. Per capita

service requests across the 209 census tracts in our dataset range from 0.01 to 2.19 (M = 0.98, SD = 0.44).[2]

We include a number of covariates in the model to capture community context. First, we include tract-level poverty rates from the U.S. Census Bureau's American Community Survey (ACS). In addition, we include a tract's homeownership rate as a measure of "awareness," as defined by Jones et al. (1977), which captures political know-how and community connectedness. Homeowners, for example, are more likely to be voters even after taking account of resource differences (Geys 2006), presumably because they have a greater attachment to their community (Schlozman 2002). O'Brien (2015) finds that homeowners in Boston were about three times more likely to contact government about the denigration of public space compared to renters. Last, we include the eviction filing rate in the census tract (averaged over the time period) and hypothesize it to depress the likelihood of service requests, especially complaints categorized as *private neglect*. Eviction filing rates represent the number of evictions filed per 100 rental households per year. Eviction data are taken from the Wisconsin Circuit Court Access (WCCA) Rest Interface.[3]

Given prior findings that racial and ethnic minorities tend to be more dissatisfied with the quality of local services than White residents and more likely to believe they are being underrepresented (DeHoog, Lowery, and Lyons 1990; Marschall and Shah 2007; Hajnal and Trounstine 2014), we also include measures of race and ethnicity, including the share of the population that is African-American, Latino, Asian, and foreign born. Levine and Gershenson (2014) find that African-American neighborhoods in Boston were more likely to request services from the city, which they argue reflects historical experiences with discrimination coupled with high expectations for quality services. Neighborhoods with high concentrations of immigrants, however, were less likely to request services. We consider whether these patterns hold in Milwaukee.

Neighborhood organizational capacity is measured by the per capita number of community-based organizations (CBOs).[4] These data come from the National Center for Charitable Statistics.[5] Previous research has shown that neighborhoods with a richer organizational life tend to be more efficacious and civically engaged (Sampson 2012). In our discussions with CBOs in Milwaukee, we found that many encourage residents to contact DNS and DPW and that some have conducted information sessions on how to use the city's reporting tools to communicate neighborhood concerns. Thus, we expect organizational density to positively correlate with per capita service requests. Finally, we consider whether service requests are an extension of other forms of political voice. Here, we look at whether electoral participation predicts geographic variation in service requests. We construct measures of voter turnout by neighborhood using the individual-level voter files from Wisconsin, which we geocoded, aggregated, and then divided by the census estimate of the tract's voting age population.[6]

Together, this analysis considers political, social, and capacity explanations for the distribution of contacting the city, in addition to poverty. We cannot sort out all of the causal issues that present themselves with these data since we do not have more than the nature and location of the complaint. However, the results provide important and relevant associations by geography, demographic factors, racial inequality, and poverty.

Results

Figure 1, which maps all three of our dependent variables across census tracts, reveals significant spatial clustering in service request rates, which is confirmed by an exploratory test of spatial dependency.[7] Because this spatial autocorrelation could bias our regression estimates, we estimate a spatial error model.[8]

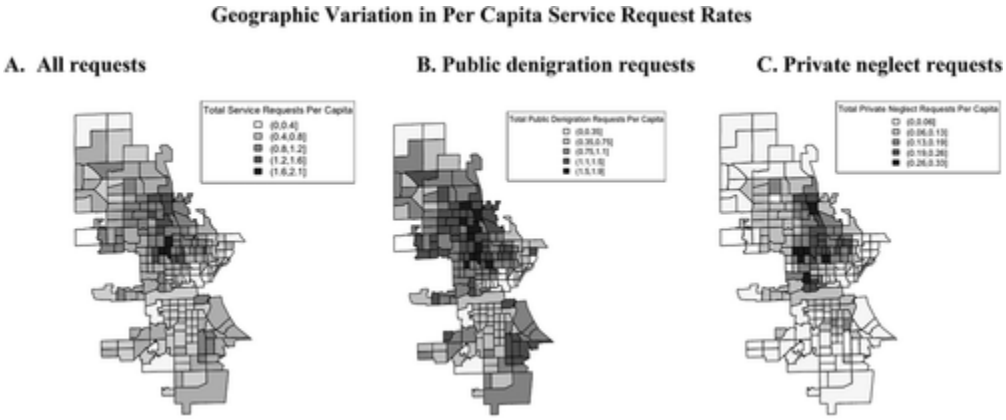

Figure 1. Geographic variation in per capita service request rates: (A) all requests, (B) public denigration requests, and (C) private neglect requests.
Note. Per capital service request rates. Unit of analysis is the census tract (*N* = 209). Significant spatial autocorrelation ($p < .01$) regardless of complaint type.

Table 1 reports our spatial regression results for all service requests and by type of service request. We begin by considering the geographic variation in per capita service requests (model 1). We find no evidence that service requests are more likely to emanate from poorer neighborhoods with presumably greater needs for services (see, e.g., Minkoff 2016). Rather, we find that political voice matters: voter turnout rates explain geographic variation in service requests. Our findings for the higher contact rates in African-American neighborhoods are consistent with Levine and Gershenson's study of Boston.

Table 1. Per Capita Service Request Rates and Neighborhood Characteristics.

	(1)		(2)		(3)	
	All service requests		Public denigration		Private neglect	
Voter turnout	0.570***	(0.152)	0.530***	(0.138)	0.039*	(0.023)
CBOs per capita	24.717	(15.902)	21.209	(14.355)	3.485	(2.413)
% Below poverty	0.142	(0.212)	0.110	(0.192)	0.039	(0.032)
% Homeowner	0.659	(0.156)	0.662	(0.141)	0.006***	(0.024)
% Hispanic	−0.051	(0.250)	−0.088	(0.222)	0.038	(0.039)
% Black	0.430***	(0.145)	0.350***	(0.129)	0.093***	(0.023)

% Asian	0.808*	(0.426)	0.635*	(0.385)	0.167**	(0.065)
% Foreign born	−0.043	(0.436)	−0.028	(0.394)	−0.021	(0.066)
Eviction filing rate	−0.383	(0.004)	0.188	(0.340)	0.206***	(0.057)
Constant	0.083	(0.156)	0.081	(0.138)	−0.007	(0.025)
Lambda	0.786***	(0.048)	0.767***	(0.051)	0.819***	(0.043)
N	209		209		209	

Note. Spatial error regression model. The dependent variable is the number of requests made per capita for the 209 neighborhood areas in the city.
*$p < .10$; **$p < .05$; ***$p < .001$.

We next model the per capita service requests by type of request (models 2 and 3). The results for public denigration are in line with the results for our full sample. The results for private neglect mirror these, but we find that residents living in census tracts with higher eviction rates are also more likely to request services from the city for the private neglect of housing. Moreover, homeownership is similarly related to greater numbers of service requests.

At first blush, this seems at odds with the expectation about evictions. However, our analysis does not allow us to say anything about whether residents facing eviction are more likely to submit service requests, and indeed the causal arrow could work the other way. It is entirely possible that *within* neighborhoods, it is the relatively advantaged who are more likely to seek action against negligent landlords. We thus risk committing an ecological fallacy if we interpret these aggregate patterns as explaining individual behavior. We return to these questions and the possible opportunities to leverage service request data to examine individual-level correlates in the conclusion.

In sum, our results suggest that service requests are an extension of political voice, reflecting differences in neighborhood awareness and connectedness rather than poverty. That neighborhoods with high concentrations of African-Americans request services at a higher rate even after conditioning on other neighborhood characteristics is somewhat surprising and deserves further inquiry. Given extreme levels of racial segregation in Milwaukee, we can make the ecological inference that greater service requests in Black neighborhoods mean Black residents are contacting the city. Levine and Gershenson (2014) argue that local government contacts reflect the quality of services residents *expect* to receive and hypothesize that African-Americans contact local government at higher rates relative to poverty rates because of their historical struggles for public goods provision and deep experiences with local institutional racism. However, while these results could indicate differences in expectations and efficacy, it could also be that the racial context of the neighborhood is picking up qualitative differences in neighborhood conditions not captured by our other control variables.

Disparities in Response Times

We find substantial variation in neighborhood-level requests—what do we see when we examine neighborhood-level response? We examine this question by modeling response time to individual

requests, measured in minutes (logged), as a function of request type, responsible agency (DNS/DPW), and the same tract-level variables as above. Whereas our earlier analyses aggregated requests to the tract level, here our unit of analysis is the service request itself (*N* = 516,376). We estimate a multilevel regression, which allows us to account for the clustered structure to our data (Table 2).[9]

Table 2. Response Times and Neighborhood Characteristics.

	(1)		(2)		(3)	
	All service requests		Public denigration		Private neglect	
DNS	0.942***	(0.008)	0.924***	(0.011)	−0.998***	(0.016)
Voter turnout	−0.043	(0.114)	−0.069	(0.115)	0.096	(0.286)
CBOs per capita	−3.074	(10.917)	1.086	(11.012)	−53.149*	(28.093)
% Below poverty	0.379***	(0.130)	0.493***	(0.131)	−0.676**	(0.334)
% Homeowners	−0.143	(0.094)	−0.053	(0.095)	0.659***	(0.240)
% Hispanic	0.245*	(0.127)	0.104	(0.128)	0.357	(0.322)
% Black	0.228***	(0.066)	0.184***	(0.066)	0.527***	(0.167)
% Asian	0.163	(0.269)	0.135	(0.272)	−0.843	(0.678)
% Foreign born	−0.313	(0.309)	−0.284	(0.312)	1.019	(0.783)
Eviction filing rate	0.387	(0.241)	0.173	(0.243)	0.685	(0.606)
Constant	8.204***	(0.082)	8.119***	(0.082)	9.972***	(0.210)
N	516,376		471,288		45,088	

Note. Multilevel regression coefficient and standard error estimates. The dependent variable is the response time in minutes (logged).
*$p < .10$; **$p < .05$; ***$p < .001$.

When we examine all requests together, we find response times to be longer in neighborhoods with higher poverty rates and with greater shares of African-American and Latino residents. Holding all other variables at their means, we estimate that a one-standard-deviation increase in the share of the Black population within a census tract is associated with a 7-h increase in response time (mean is 80 h, standard deviation 6 h).

In models 2 and 3, we disaggregate the response times by type of request, similar to our analysis of per capita requests presented above. The models illustrate that government responsiveness is conditional on type of request and support our argument that previous research may have masked important differences. For example, the findings for public denigration (model 2) mirror the findings of the full

dataset. Response times to complaints about the denigration of public space tend to be longer in high-poverty neighborhoods, and neighborhoods with greater percentages of African-American residents.

However, the relationship between poverty and response time is the opposite for private neglect complaints; in communities plagued with higher poverty, response times for private neglect went down. Moreover, in our model that only examines requests that most often happen inside the home (model 3), response times are shorter in communities with a greater number of CBOs, our proxy for neighborhood organizational capacity. Indeed, the inclusion of this measure in our analysis was originally informed by our ongoing ethnographic studies of community organizations in the city. In one case, we observed a meeting between DNS and a community-based organization in which department staff explained the agency's resource constraints and encouraged the organization to follow-up on service requests. Our results suggest that community organizations play an important intermediary role in government responsiveness to neighborhood concerns. We estimate that a one-standard-deviation increase in organizational density is associated with a nearly 15-h decrease in response times.

Contrary to expectations, we find longer response times for private neglect in neighborhoods with larger proportions of homeowners. This could mean that the city prioritizes more distressed neighborhoods for these kinds of requests (in contrast to requests about public spaces in which more advantaged neighborhoods appear to receive timelier responses). Nevertheless, we find that even after conditioning on a host of covariates, including poverty and homeownership rates, predominantly Black neighborhoods continue to have longer response times regardless of request type.

Conclusions

Reviewing the literature on urban politics and political representation, Jessica Trounstine (2010) notes: “We do not yet have a firm sense of how well local democracy functions, the conditions under which it functions well, or what ‘well’ means” (2010, p. 419). At a minimum, democracy requires that those affected by collective decisions have an ability to influence decision makers. In this paper, we leveraged objective measures of local government contacts to examine political voice outside of electoral institutions. Our research builds upon previous studies of 311 systems to consider whether the correlates identified in studies of Boston and NYC also extend to a less advantaged, more resource-poor city.

The patterns of requests and responses do look similar in some respects, but this research note also uncovers new relationships between neighborhood characteristics and service requests. First, we find that regardless of the type of request, neighborhoods with more homeowners are more likely to request services from the city. These results are consistent with Fischel’s (2009) “Homevoter Hypothesis” that homeowners are particularly attuned to neighborhood conditions and thus motivated to participate in local politics (see also O’Brien 2015; Minkoff 2016; Einstein, Palmer, and Glick 2019). Contrary to the study by White and Trump (2018) of NYC's 311 data, however, we find that service requests in Milwaukee also positively correlate with voter turnout. Together, these findings suggest that service requests are an extension of more traditional forms of political voice, such as voting and participation in community meetings.

Further, we find mixed evidence that requests reflect underlying neighborhood poverty. On the one hand, high-poverty neighborhoods were not more likely to request services or make complaints about the maintenance of public spaces. On the other hand, requests related to building code violations

(private neglect) were more likely to come, all else equal, from neighborhoods with higher eviction rates.

Nevertheless, residents in these neighborhoods do appear to reach out to the city with their concerns. Whether landlords, in turn, retaliate against renters who report building code violations is unclear in our data. The city of Milwaukee has recently partnered with researchers and legal groups to track eviction records with building code violations issued within 90 days.[10] The positive correlation between evictions and service requests we observe in our data suggest this is an important area for future inquiry. Likewise, researchers could survey residents to investigate the null findings in our data, specifically why poverty and eviction rates are *unrelated* to service requests about public spaces.

However, we also find evidence of heightened responsiveness in more distressed communities when residents are reporting concerns about building code violations (private neglect). Furthermore, our results suggest that CBOs play a key intermediary role, helping neighborhoods receive timelier responses to these kinds of complaints. Further research is needed to examine how we can better understand what types of requests are made by different populations, and how those are responded to by the various government agencies.

We are discouraged by the persistent racial inequality in both requests and responses. Our conclusions suggest that even after correcting for differences in engagement and need, neighborhoods with larger shares of non-White residents request more services from the city. We argue these differential rates of contact speak to the enduringly high levels of racial residential segregation and neighborhood inequality in Milwaukee. Concerns about racial inequality persist when we examine response times, with minoritized and more distressed neighborhoods receiving less timely responses to their complaints, all else equal.[11] Further research is required to fully uncover how racial bias limits residents' access to government services.

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ORCID iDs
Amber Wichowsky https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9590-9457

Paru Shah https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3382-7405

Supplemental Material
Supplemental material for this article is available online.

Notes

1. Milwaukee's 80–10 nuisance ordinance includes over thirty eligible activities. Properties with a minimum of three calls for service in a 30-day period or two vices, violence or gang complaints in 1 year qualify a property as a nuisance. According to the city: "If a property qualifies as a nuisance, a file is opened, and a letter is sent to its owner, detailing the nature of the nuisance

and requesting a plan of action (also known as an abatement plan) within 10 days to address the problems." Owners who do not respond or fail to carry out the plan have their fines added to their property taxes by the city's DNS.

2. We exclude one downtown census tract, which our robustness checks revealed was a significant outlier in our analysis. Although the signs and significance of covariates do not change, the magnitudes of coefficients were sensitive to the inclusion of this influential observation.
3. These data are available at https://mke-evict.com. Despite the heightened focus on eviction in Milwaukee, policymakers, researchers, and community partners lack access to eviction data to inform prevention strategies, identify and monitor trends, or conduct eviction-related research. To that end, researchers at the Medical College of Wisconsin Institute for Health Equity's Division of Epidemiology partnered with Legal Action of Wisconsin, the Milwaukee City Attorney's Office, and the Milwaukee Department of Neighborhood Services to collect these data and make them publicly available.
4. We define a CBO as a church or a nonprofit organization that provides housing or community development services.
5. We use PolicyMap, an online tool to extract these data for Milwaukee's census tracts.
6. Because our voter files are from 2012, we measure turnout in that year's presidential election between Barack Obama and Mitt Romney.
7. The type and strength of spatial autocorrelation are commonly visualized in a Moran scatterplot where the slope of the regression line corresponds to the Moran's I value. In this case, it is the extent to which service request rates in one census tract correspond to service request rates in a neighboring tract (Moran's $I = 0.70$, $p < .01$ for all service requests; Moran's $I = 0.68$, $p < .01$ for public denigration requests; Moran's $I = 0.75$, $p < .01$ for private neglect requests).
8. We created a spatial weight matrix using queen contiguity weights, which weight all neighboring tracts (i.e., those that share a common boundary). With an irregularly shaped area, the choice of spatial weights should result in minimal difference, and indeed our results remain the same whether we use queen, rook, or distance weighting.
9. We note that the data provided by the city include a few clerical errors, with 157 observations incorrectly dating the time the request was submitted or when the case was closed. We know this because these observations are coded as being complete *before* the request was submitted. Further, ~4% of service requests were missing timestamp data. Missing data were more likely for service requests submitted to DNS and in census tracts with larger shares of African-American residents. We exclude both types of cases—incorrect or missing timestamp—from our analysis, noting that missingness is not assigned at random across census tracts.
10. See https://mke-evict.com (last accessed January 18, 2021).
11. It is possible that White neighborhoods communicate their concerns more directly to city officials—perhaps at town hall meetings or through direct phone calls to their councilors, and that there are fewer of them, thus reducing the time spent in any particular tract. We conducted a robustness check on this relationship and find racial differences are generally not a function of how many service requests are made by neighborhoods (see Supplemental Table A3 in the Appendix).

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