

Timothy Slaper



Director of Economic Analysis, IBRC

Dr. Slaper {slay-per} leads a research team engaged in industry and workforce analysis, economic impact studies, regional economic analyses, demographic estimates and projections, trade and foreign investment analysis, measuring innovation, measuring educational performance and researching economic growth.

The research team is putting the final touches on Innovation 2.0. National in scope, Innovation 2.0 is a county-based data set and web tool for economic development practitioners, as well as policymakers and researchers, to assess a region's innovative capacity and economic performance.

All the work that Timothy oversees puts analytical tools and practical research into the hands of economic development practitioners to help them address the challenges of economic development in today's rapidly changing world.

Before joining the IBRC, Timothy served as Senior Economist on the Joint Economic Committee of Congress researching topics such as the effect of high energy prices on economic output and the effectiveness of investment incentives in encouraging economic growth. He cut his teeth as an economist at the U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis.

Timothy earned his doctorate in economics at The American University in Washington DC. He is also an alumnus of Miami University in Oxford Ohio.



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Abstract:

We at the IBRC support the Evidence-based Policymaking initiative. We strive to disseminate actionable, geographically relevant data to the public at no cost to the user to facilitate research and decision making at the local, regional, state and federal levels.

Place is primary in such work. The goals and objectives of the initiative and the Commission will be undermined if insufficient attention and effort are made to ensure that the spatial dimension of data, and the activities and agents those data represent, are not a primary focus for data collection, data identification, data integration and data application.

Place determines one's experience and often who one is and how one has developed. Any discussion about developing evidence for effective actions needs to have a common geographic language and precise definitions. As many have already testified or alluded to, integrating data from multiple agencies is critical for making an argument for which policies are effective and which are not. To this end, a national data clearinghouse has been proposed to provide one stop shopping for researchers and policy makers. Before any one-stop data shop can be implemented, all agencies within the national statistical infrastructure as well as all data collection and reporting agencies across all states must use a common and consistent set of geographic definitions and identifiers.

Written Statement:

Chairman Abraham, Co-Chair Haskins, and commissioners: I applaud the work you are doing to realize the vision of evidence-base policymaking. Thank you for the opportunity to address the Commission.

I am Timothy Slaper, the research director at the Indiana Business Research Center at Indiana University. Our center, over 90 years, is attached to the Kelley School of Business and was initially a data, analysis and research resource for businesses in the state. Over time, our mission has broadened to include public policy-related research and analysis in workforce development, occupational analysis, educational performance, demographic projections, local government finance, economic development and innovation, to name a few. It has also broadened in terms of geography as well. We now provide economic and demographic statistics for the entire nation and conduct research on regional development relevant to all areas in the United States.

Under the auspices of the State Library, the IBRC serves as the state data center. Our chief information officer has served as an advisory to many BLS and Census projects, including the Data Quality Initiative. The State Demographer works in our center and participates in Census collaborative programs. We know data. In fact, our databases currently have over 6 billion data items from every major statistical

agency in the federal statistical infrastructure as well as Indiana state-specific data from multiple state agencies.

If you were to google “U.S statistics,” our website StatsAmerica.org would be listed in the top ten websites. This website is sponsored by the Economic Development Administration as a portal for several of their tools and resources and as a one-stop shop for many of the data reported by federal statistical agencies, primarily BEA, BLS and Census. The website also hosts the Innovation Index, a data resource for economic development practitioners to assess their county or region’s strengths and weaknesses and make interregional comparisons. The Innovation Index 2.0 uses county-level data from BEA, BLS, Census, FCC, NCES, and NSF, among others.

Capturing and aligning the data for use in the index should have been mildly challenging, but it was not. It was massively challenging because there is no consistent or common geographic definition for a county over time, or, for that matter, for a single year. Having to deal with a shifting landscape of geographic definitions delayed the Innovation Index project nearly 18 months. Putting the county-seat holes back in the surrounding Virginia county doughnuts, as one must do with Census data to make it conceptually consistent with counties elsewhere, is one thing – not that hard – but having agencies like NCES with legacy issues in terms of geographic definitions that are not aligned with current Census definitions is exasperating.

I mentioned my frustration to a colleague who at one time sat as an advisor to Census. When he served in that capacity, people would mention the need to harmonize geographic definitions across statistical agencies and there would be universal nodding and agreement that it would be good to do so. Trouble is, phones would ring in Congressional offices. Data vendors, those who make money aggregating federal data and selling it to local and state governments, businesses and advocacy groups would complain to members that such a thing would hurt their business, and the idea would die.

Considering the importance of location in understanding the impact of policies, and considering the primacy of having consistent geographic definitions in order to integrate the data – the latter being something the IBRC knows plenty about – you need to tell members of Congress to expect a few phone calls in opposition to an integrated national data clearinghouse.

Many others who have already testified have done an excellent job explaining their support and making suggestions about how to implement the changes needed to actualize evidence-based policymaking. My contribution would pale in comparison.

I do want to emphasize the importance of place, of location. Everything happens in space and only rarely are two spaces alike. National goals for, say, graduation rates for at-risk youth are fine, but Baltimore is not Houston. Baltimore has its unique history and set of challenges relative to Houston. A 5 percent increase in graduation rates in Baltimore can’t be compared to the same percentage point gain in Houston based on one policy intervention.

Many of you work and reside in Washington DC, or travel there extensively. Please don’t allow a federal or national perspective to give short shrift to the primacy of place.

If I may close with a quick story. On December 21, my son asked me if “today” is the longest day of the year. Another son corrected him, “No, it’s the shortest.” “Not in Australia!” the first son corrected. Place matters.