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Title: A Critical Analysis of Map Use in Evidence-Based Policy Development

Research Objective: To critically analyze the role of maps in the development and implementation of public policy. We know maps have power and influence in these contexts (many tools are developed for the purpose of informing decision-making processes), but how does this power work?

Based on this overall research objective, several more specific research questions could be asked.

1. What are the roles of maps as actors in each stage of policy development?
2. How can we better understand the conflicts between the intended use of the map vs. its final role in policy development?
3. What are the specific map types, designs, and components used in policy development? Are they effective as communication tools in this context?
 - a. Related to map layout, map type, classification systems, symbology, data clustering, projections and map scope, etc.
4. What are the differences in influence between the use of “neutral” (scientific) and “non-neutral” (persuasive) maps in policy development?

Topic Description:

When discussing the use of maps in public policy development, there is often a focus on creating maps that could be used to inform decision making processes and/or the use of maps to track the effectiveness of existing policies. Current literature is missing an explanation for the reality of how maps and related cartographic products are used in public policy development and implementation. This is a “black box” issue, where we understand the intention and the result with little research on the power and influence of maps during the process. We know they can be used, but how? What are their specific roles? How do these roles change throughout the policy development process? Where are areas for improvement in these maps?

This thesis will build on existing work on data-driven policy development, maps as non-neutral social constructions, and maps as communication tools to better understand the influence of maps in ‘evidence-based’ policy development. By better understanding specific uses of maps in this process, we can have a guide for how

Proposed Methods:

This project will be based on case studies. For example, either using an existing map and tracing its use through multiple policies OR finding a policy that has utilized maps in its creation process and tracing its use backwards. Qualitative data analysis can take place using thematic analysis and/or interviews. Specific case studies are yet to be defined, but I have specific interest in vulnerability indices.

This thesis will take place at UT-ITC with proposed advisor Fran Meissner.