

# Exploring Vacant Spaces in Ybor Heights and V.M. Ybor

## Executive Summary

### Introduction

Historical racial discrimination has resulted in a concentration of vacant, abandoned, and deteriorating properties in low-income Black neighborhoods in Tampa, significantly exacerbating safety and quality of life. This descriptive exploratory work aims to identify patterns in municipal and property ownership records associated with these properties.

### Methods

The study examined vacant, abandoned, and deteriorating properties in Ybor Heights and V.M. Ybor from 2014 to 2024. Properties were selected based on visible neglect, lack of habitation, and other signs of deterioration. Data was collected from municipal and property ownership records, plotted using Google MyMaps, and organized to generate tables and charts. Data was sourced from the Neighborhood Enhancement Division on proactive and total cases, Accela, the Hillsborough County Property Appraiser, and the Florida Department of State Division of Corporations.

### Results

**1. Municipal Records:** The sample of 60 locations generated 897 municipal records over the ten-year period, with a high proportion of complaints (43%) and code and civil cases (37%). The records suggest proactive enforcement is not sufficient to completely negate vacant spaces' negative impact on neighborhood quality of life.

**2. Ownership Patterns:** The analysis revealed a variety of ownership types, with LLCs being the most common (38%), followed by individual owners (25%) and trusts (12%). Contrary to the assumption that heirs' properties are the most problematic ownership type, LLCs and single owners were more frequently in possession of problematic properties. Trusts were found to act primarily as strategic ownership tools rather than indicate heirs' property.

**3. Public Nuisance and Demolition:** Public nuisance structure cases occur infrequently and demolition cases are exceedingly rare. Given the City's standards and practice, the number of hazardous and at-risk buildings may be difficult to determine.

**4. Unavailable Information:** Certain requested records were unavailable, such as repeat violations and detailed data on the nature of complaints. Additionally, a comparative analysis with occupied properties was not included, which limits the scope of the findings.

#### **Recommendations for City Council**

**1. Leverage Expertise:** Make a motion that City staff explore effective policies from other cities and consider outside technical assistance to address the issue of vacant and deteriorating property more effectively in the code.

**2. Hold Owners Accountable:** Make a motion to implement measures to hold property owners accountable for their multiple properties, treating violations across their portfolio as repeat offenses.

**3. Fix Delay Tactics:** Make a motion for staff to explore revisions to prevent wealthy owners from using permits as a delay tactic.

**4. Be Strategic:** Make a motion for staff to report how they strategically approach vacant and deteriorated property acquisition to prevent gentrification and stabilize neighborhoods, ensuring properties are preserved for affordable housing.

**5. Promote Education:** Make a motion for staff to report to what extent education about estate planning for passing property to heirs is included in housing and rehabilitation grants and programs. Make a motion for staff to include this or partner with community organizations to mitigate loss of property.

**\*\*\*Please review the full report for more information, particularly the Results, Recommendations, and Appendix\*\*\***

## Introduction

Decades of historical racial discrimination have barred Black, low-income residents from access to legal and financial routes to preserving familial wealth, producing concentrations of neglected vacant lots and boarded buildings in Tampa's communities of color. These spaces frequently act as vectors for destabilizing forces that have immediate effects on the safety and quality of life of already disadvantaged residents. From anecdotal reports, residents often associate these problem properties with trespassing, loitering, graffiti, illegal dumping, prostitution, squatting, encampments of the unsheltered, drugs, illegal fires, and crime in general. These spaces also have a direct relationship with surrounding property values and affect perceptions of neighborhood quality.

Different approaches have been taken to address this issue. Several of Tampa's peer cities have adopted ordinances to manage vacant problem properties. Similar regulatory language is absent from Tampa's municipal code. A niche has formed in the non-profit space with organizations such as the Center for Community Progress specializing in technical assistance and support for cities that request direction on transforming problem properties into places that add value to neighborhoods. Legal land ownership structures such as land banks and community land trusts have also emerged in response to barriers to housing and home ownership in communities where vacant spaces abound.

This descriptive exploratory work was conducted to determine what patterns might emerge from an examination of these types of properties in the Ybor Heights and V.M. Ybor neighborhoods of Tampa over a period of ten years from 2014-2024 through an analysis of municipal and property ownership records. The results may be useful in informing policy decisions for management of problem properties or for others to perform their own research into the issue. This work also furthers advocacy on behalf of the residents of the included neighborhoods with the goal of continuing a public conversation on the issue and advancing solutions.

## Methods

**Location and Period** - The sample area roughly covered the neighborhood along the Nebraska Avenue corridor in Ybor Heights and V.M. Ybor, although parcels east of 12th Street were also included per inclusion criteria. The period covered the last decade, from January 2014 to June 2024.

**Sample and Plotting** - A sample consisting of vacant commercial and residential lots as well as structures boarded with plywood was gathered by traveling through the neighborhood by vehicle and visually inspecting the condition of the property. Parcels were included in the sample if the condition of the property showed vacancy, visibly overt signs of neglect, no apparent evidence of habitation, no vehicles parked at address, structural damage, overgrown lot, rubbish/debris accumulations, graffiti, dilapidated fencing, etc. Several locations with adjacent parcels were clustered as one location given the convolution of ownership and municipal records. These parcels formed a collection of 60 locations based on the inclusion criteria during field observation in June 2024. An address for each location was entered into a spreadsheet and exported as a .csv file. The addresses were plotted by importing the data from the .csv file to Google MyMaps. Additional addresses for vacant lots were downloaded from the Hillsborough County Property Appraiser website advanced search option results [<https://gis.hcpafl.org/propertysearch/#/nav/Advanced%20Search>] using the “Ybor Area N of I-4” neighborhood variable and “Vacant Land Residential” and “Vacant Land Commercial/Industrial” property type variables. These addresses were plotted in Google MyMaps as described above to show additional vacant lots in the neighborhood. Parcels outside of Ybor Heights and V.M. Ybor were then manually removed from the map.

**Municipal Records** - City of Tampa municipal records were downloaded from the Accela website [<https://aca-prod.accela.com/TAMPA/Default.aspx>] for each address included in the sample. Duplicate records, anomalous records (e.g, address in record did not match address from sample), and records prior to 2014 were removed for each parcel prior to analysis.

**Property and Corporation Records** - Changes in property ownership were noted across the period by address search on the Hillsborough County Property Appraiser website [<https://gis.hcpafl.org/propertysearch/#/nav/Basic%20Search>]. If the ownership was unclear, the corresponding municipal record was searched for property owner. If a parcel was owned by a company or organization, officers and registered agents were identified by searching the Florida Department of State Division of Corporations website, “Sunbiz” [<https://search.sunbiz.org/Inquiry/CorporationSearch/ByName>] and viewing annual filings.

**Neighborhood Enhancement Division Proactive Case Records** - The Neighborhood Enhancement Division provided a dataset of proactive cases and total cases from February 2020 - June 2024. February 2020 was selected as the start date of the record request as this is when the current Director of the Neighborhood Enhancement Division began in that role, and this start date excluded only one month from the otherwise 3.5 year period. Proactive case

data were sorted by year and pivot tables were created for each year. Pie charts were generated from the pivot tables to demonstrate the percentage of proactive cases per violation. Proactive case data tables were made by calculation.

**Heir Property Concentration** - The Hillsborough County Property Appraiser office was contacted and reported that their office uses the term “estate of” to indicate properties left to an heir or heirs. A map search was conducted on the Hillsborough County Property Appraiser website [<https://gis.hcpafl.org/gissearch/>] with the term “estate of” to locate potential heir properties. The results of this search were snipped and saved as an image file. A map was generated from the Longitudinal Tract Dataset (LTDS) with category set to “Race, Age by Race” and the variable set to “% Black, non-Hispanic” [<https://s4.ad.brown.edu/WebGISnew/webgisLTDB/>]. This map was snipped and sized to match the “estate of” map image from the Hillsborough County Property Appraiser website. The images’ opacities were adjusted to visualize the concentration of “estate of” parcels overlaid onto race demographic data from the LTDS. The Hillsborough County Clerk of Court website [<https://www.hillsclerk.com/court-services/probate-guardianship-and-trust>] hosts datasets for probate cases for the past 30 days. Probate case datasets from 6/19/24 - 7/18/24 were downloaded from the Hillsborough County Clerk of Court website. Data for decedents were assembled in a single dataset and exported to a .csv file. The addresses listed for the decedent were plotted by importing the .csv file to Google MyMaps. This map was not included in the work.

## Results

### *Composition of Municipal Records*

The parcels comprising the 60 sample locations yielded 897 municipal records from approximately 89 sets of owners over the ten-year span (2014-2024). Analysis shows these vacant spaces have a negative impact on quality of life. Approximately 43% of these records were complaints and 37% were code and civil cases. Comparatively, from 2020-2024, city-wide complaints made up about 52% of records and code and civil cases about 36%. Due to differences in record types, timeframe, occupancy status of properties, structural conditions, and area boundaries between datasets, direct comparison is limited.

Proactive enforcement is heavily weighted towards accumulations and overgrowth. These are also likely common complaints with vacant lots and boarded structures due to their visibility. The substantial percentage of complaints and cases in the sample municipal records coupled with frequent verbal complaints from residents in the community indicate that proactive monitoring by code enforcement may be insufficient to fully address the disruptive impact of vacant spaces in neighborhoods. Municipal records from the sample likely include both proactive and citizen-generated cases. Whatever the origin of the record, the high proportion of complaints and code and civil cases in the sample supports the argument that these vacant spaces diminish resident satisfaction with neighborhood conditions.

### *Heirs' Property*

Analysis of ownership types challenges the assumption that problematic vacant spaces are most likely heir properties in probate. The City's foreclosure records showed 9,849 foreclosed properties at the all-time high in 2013. That number has plummeted to just 95 presently. With foreclosed property going to auction through the Hillsborough County Clerk of Court or otherwise targeted by proactive buyers, trends in ownership types likely reflect investment activity in the sample area. Interestingly, none of the "estate of" properties met inclusion criteria during sample collection. A Google Street View inspection that included almost all the "estate of" properties revealed essentially all appeared occupied, and the vast majority were well-maintained when the image was taken in November 2023. A single boarded and vacant "estate of" property was identified in Google Street View that was not included in the sample. Furthermore, LLCs and single owners together accounted for about 60% of the municipal records over the ten-year period. With complaints and code or civil cases being the most common records, this data suggests that LLCs and single owners, whether local or investors, are more likely than other ownership types in Ybor Heights and V.M. Ybor to have properties that exhibit signs of blight.

Another challenge to the assumption that heirs' property is the most likely ownership type to exhibit vacancy and deterioration arises from trust activity in the sample. Trusts appeared to function mostly as a strategic ownership tool rather than a method for transferring land to heirs within the ten-year period. Ownership records suggest the most common transfer of property went from trusts to LLCs. Of the 11 trusts identified, five were named after the trustee, three were used temporarily before property reverted to the original owner, and one had an LLC named as trustee. However, other ownership types may suggest heir or probate involvement, with seven out of 89 owners having mixed ownership involving individuals with the same surname and concurrent trust or company ownership. It is not possible to rule out

single owners as deceased with property in transition to heirs without contacting families directly, which clouds interpretation.

### *Ownership Types*

Various ownership types emerged from the ten-year ownership span, including LLCs, single owners, multiple owners with the same surname, and mixed types with concurrent company and private ownership. Among the various ownership types, single LLCs (e.g., “Company Name, LLC”) were most numerous at 34 companies, accounting for over 38% of the ownership types over the ten-year period. Single owners followed at 22 private individuals (25% of ownership types) and then trusts at 11 (12% of ownership types).

### *Property Owners and Locational Trends*

Some owners had outsized impacts. One church represented more than 15% of municipal records and owned over 13% of the sample parcels. One private owner generated just over 5% of municipal records on a single parcel. Aligning with trends in representation of ownership types, LLCs contributed 30% of municipal records and single owners 28.5%. Municipal records from trusts were underrepresented compared to their share of ownership, producing just over 5% of records. Analysis also showed once a property became problematic, it tended to remain problematic. The top six record-generating locations accounted for about one-third of the total municipal records. Five out of six had three or more owners during the ten-year period.

### *Public Nuisance Structures and Demolition*

The over 500 proactive cases for public nuisance structures from 2020-2024 city-wide comprised just 0.8% of the total cases in that timeframe. 227 demolition cases were filed from 2020-2024, which accounted for only 0.2% of code enforcement records city-wide in that period. It is unlikely all these cases actually resulted in demolition. Additional records will be required to determine how frequently the City demolishes buildings and if there is any geographic pattern to that data. The Neighborhood Enhancement Division website listed 54 properties under demolition review as of July 9th, 2024. The City considers a structure worthy of demolition when repair costs exceed 75% of the property’s assessed value, compared to Hillsborough County’s 50% threshold. Given the City’s comparative leeway for deterioration and extenuating circumstances associated with public nuisance and demolition cases, the number of hazardous and at-risk buildings may be difficult to determine.

### *Unavailable Information*

Some records the City could not provide. No records were available for cases of repeat/chronic violations because this variable is not stored as a value in a single searchable dataset and could not be produced without expense. Per discussions with Neighborhood Enhancement Division staff, the responsibility for managing repeat/chronic violations falls to the attention of the code enforcement officer on a case. The division does not specifically keep track of vacant and boarded structures, although a list of such properties was created by the Tampa Police Department to support an anti-arson operation in the V.M. Ybor neighborhood around 2010, per staff.

### **Limitations**

A relatively small sample was included in light of the abundance of vacant lots revealed by the Hillsborough County Property Appraiser search. It is possible these lots appeared well-maintained during sample collection, but at other times appear unmanaged. The sample did not include several clusters of vacant lots in the south and east parts of Ybor Heights and V.M. Ybor that may represent ownership types or records that were not captured or could have shifted the results. In one case, records assigned to parcels and ownership status were mixed to the degree that three parcels were collapsed into one location to facilitate analysis. This location is included in the top six record generating locations, which may be interpreted as a limitation.

The absence of a comparative sample of occupied spaces within the same boundaries rendered between-group analysis impossible, reducing the power of the work. Additionally, due to the unique ownership context along the Nebraska Avenue corridor, the “church” ownership type held an outsized representation in the results, which limits the generalizability of the findings across different neighborhoods.

Further analysis will be required to determine if the data may reveal temporal trends in problematic properties or among owners with frequent violations. For example, this work does not answer the question of whether or not the frequency of complaints or types of record have shifted over the course of the ten-year period. The data provided by the City included a case number for complaints, but did not specify the nature of the complaint as a consistent or standardized value in the data. Further investigation is required to determine the composition of the complaints on the sample parcels.



Records from other agencies or City departments may have also been useful. Code enforcement data is helpful in determining how these properties have impacted quality of life in Ybor Heights and V.M. Ybor. However, police and fire department records could shed light on the threat to safety these parcels may pose. Other sources of housing and demographic data could also be useful in understanding additional variables that may be associated with neighborhoods where problem properties are more prevalent in Tampa.

A methodologically sound investigation of heir properties in Tampa was outside the intended scope of this work, though that would be valuable and should be performed as part of future research. As such, the use of the search term “estate of” to estimate the concentration of heir properties may also include parcels that are not problematic heir properties, but rather properties in transition or temporarily in estate. Additionally, several ownership statuses were identified which may also represent heir properties, including “two owners - same surname,” “three owners - same surname,” “trust,” and parcels with mixed ownership types (e.g., “single owner/trust”). Therefore, while the map generated to approximate the concentration of heir properties in Tampa aligns with past research into demographic and economic conditions from other locations associated with heir properties, the information included in this work likely underrepresents heir properties in the city. Additionally, limited records of probate cases were obtained from the Hillsborough County Clerk of Court, and that paucity may result in an insufficient volume of data for meaningful patterns to emerge. Therefore, this map was excluded from the work.

## **Recommendations**

- 1. Let the Policy Experts Decide** - Have registration, timelines, inspection schedules, boarding materials, and other policies been effective elsewhere? Can staff show examples of their existing strategic approach to this specific issue? What may determine if outside technical assistance should be considered?
- 2. Hold Property Owners Accountable** - Presently, each property in an owner’s portfolio is treated as unrelated and managed on an address by address basis. Because of this, property owners have leeway to cause significant destabilization in neighborhoods without facing proportionate consequences. For example, an unsecured structure violation at two separate addresses within a given timeframe should be a repeat/chronic violation by the owner.

**3. Close the Permit-Delay Loophole** - Wealthy property owners can apply for permits as a delay tactic to continue mothballing property they do not intend to repair. The roof may need replacing, but the window permits are good enough for show. As it stands, the permit functionally serves as a document owners can buy to waive in the face of neighbors and City officials that question the status of their property. Can this be improved?

**4. Approach vacant and deteriorated property as a distinct public policy domain** - When property is irreversibly damaged or irreparable, it is important that the City approach vacant and deteriorated property acquisition as a strategic goal to prevent the risk of gentrification and neighborhood destabilization through absentee investment, and to preserve that property for affordable housing. The City has many programs for home ownership and maintenance. What about when these homes fall through the cracks?

**5. Promote education about estate planning for property** - City staff reported that this is not a part of any CRA or City grant or program. By including this kind of education, or by partnering with community organizations that can assist property owners with estate planning, the City and CRA can assist in mitigation loss of generational wealth through heirs' property issues.

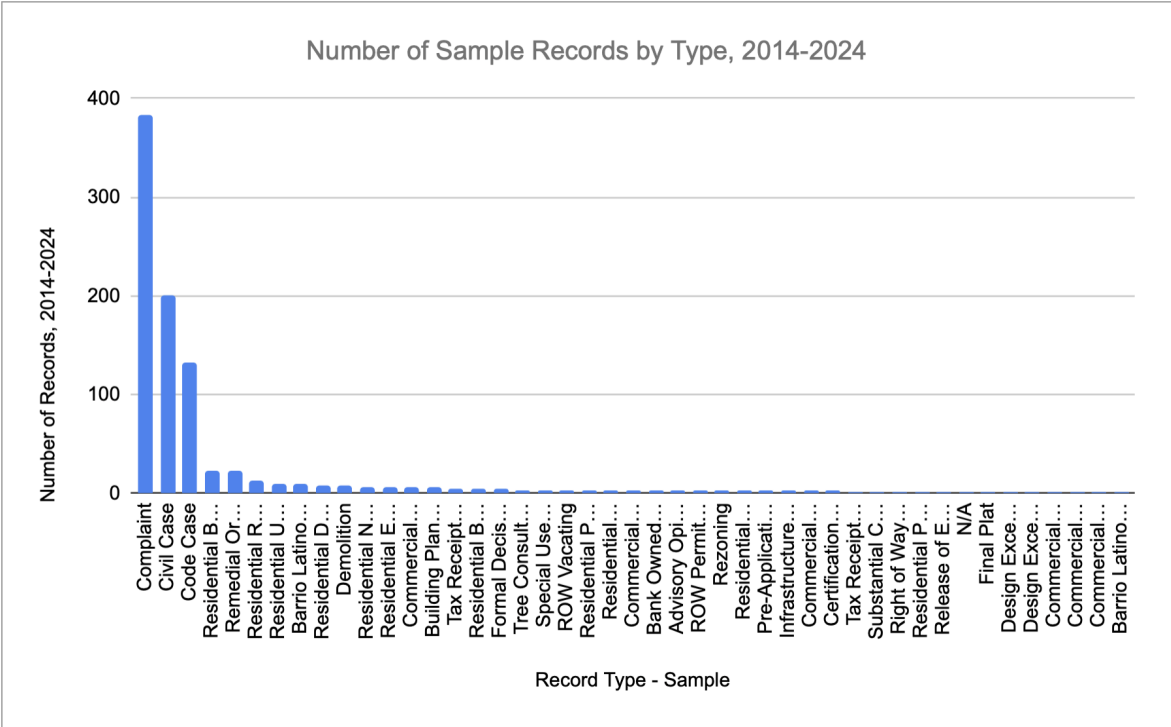
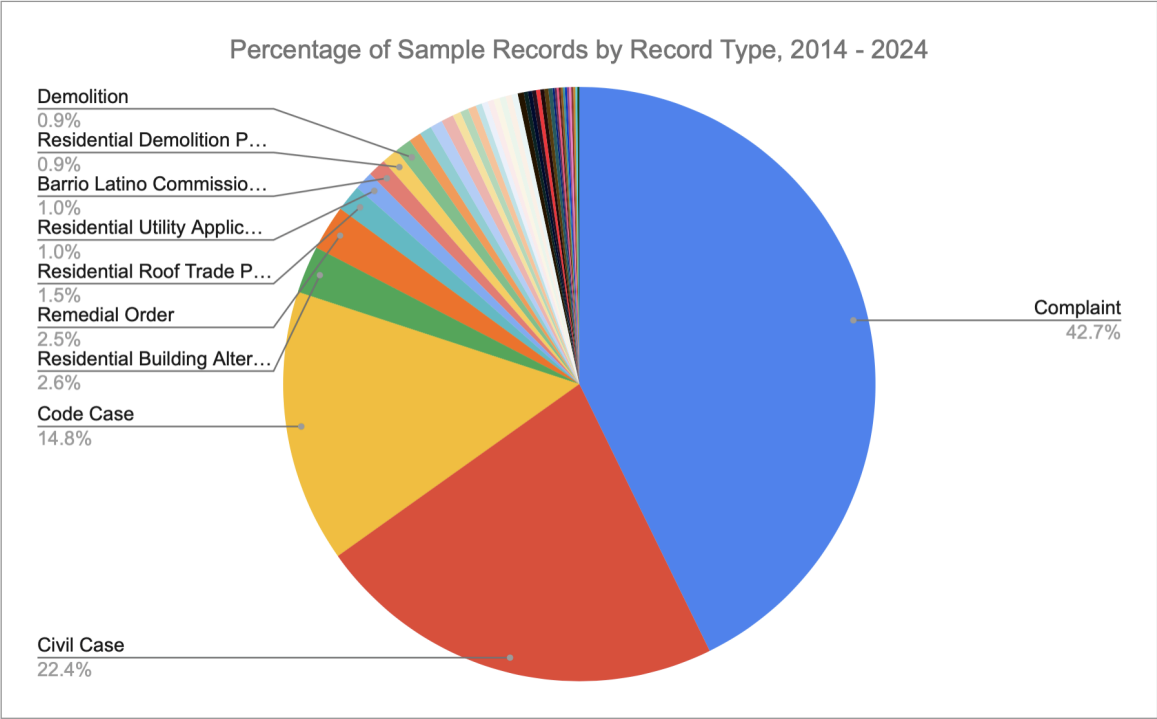
## **Acknowledgements**

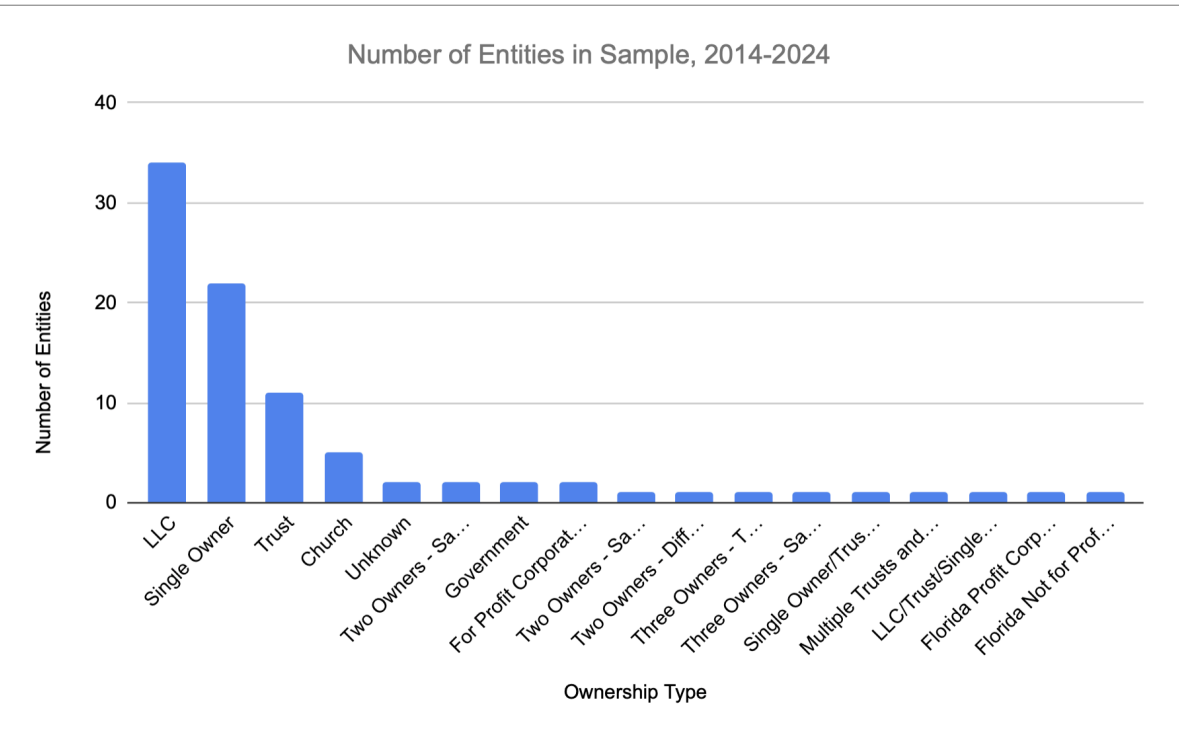
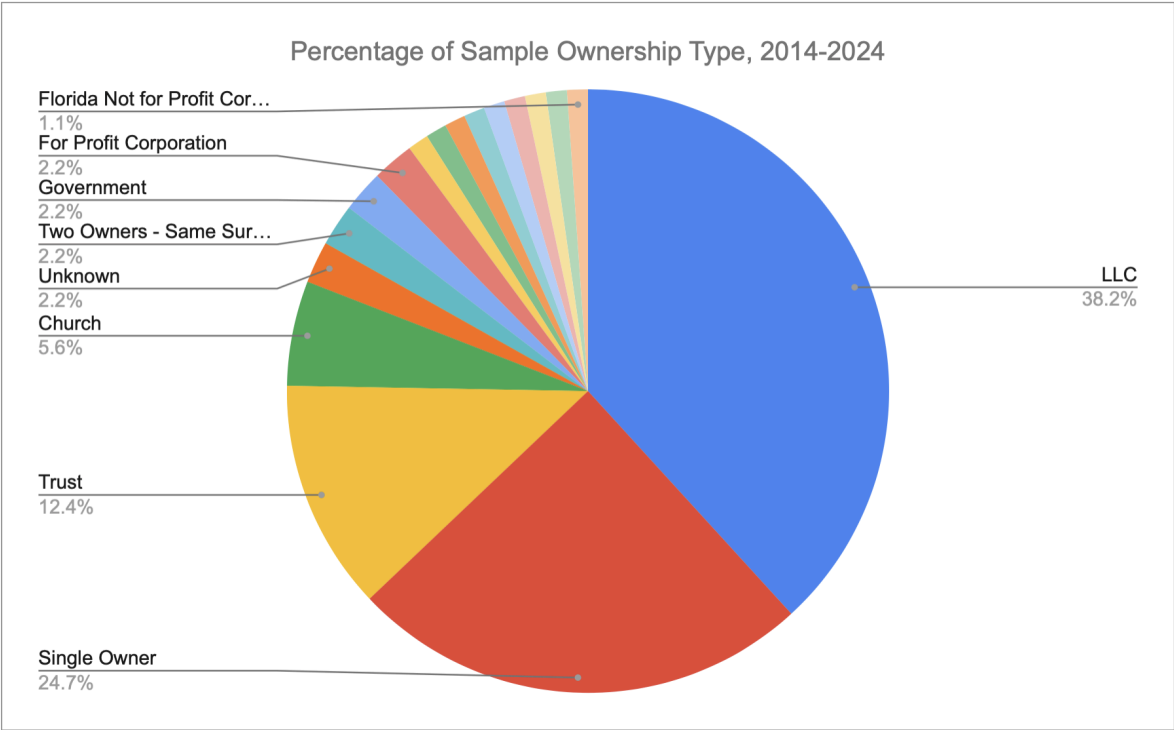
Sincere gratitude must be extended to the Neighborhood Enhancement Division for being open to discussion and providing data critical to exploring the issue of vacant spaces. Thank you to long-suffering residents who support this work and continue to believe in their neighborhood while bearing the brunt of the harm caused by these properties. Thank you to the City of Tampa staff and City Council for your collaboration and commitment to neighborhood improvements.

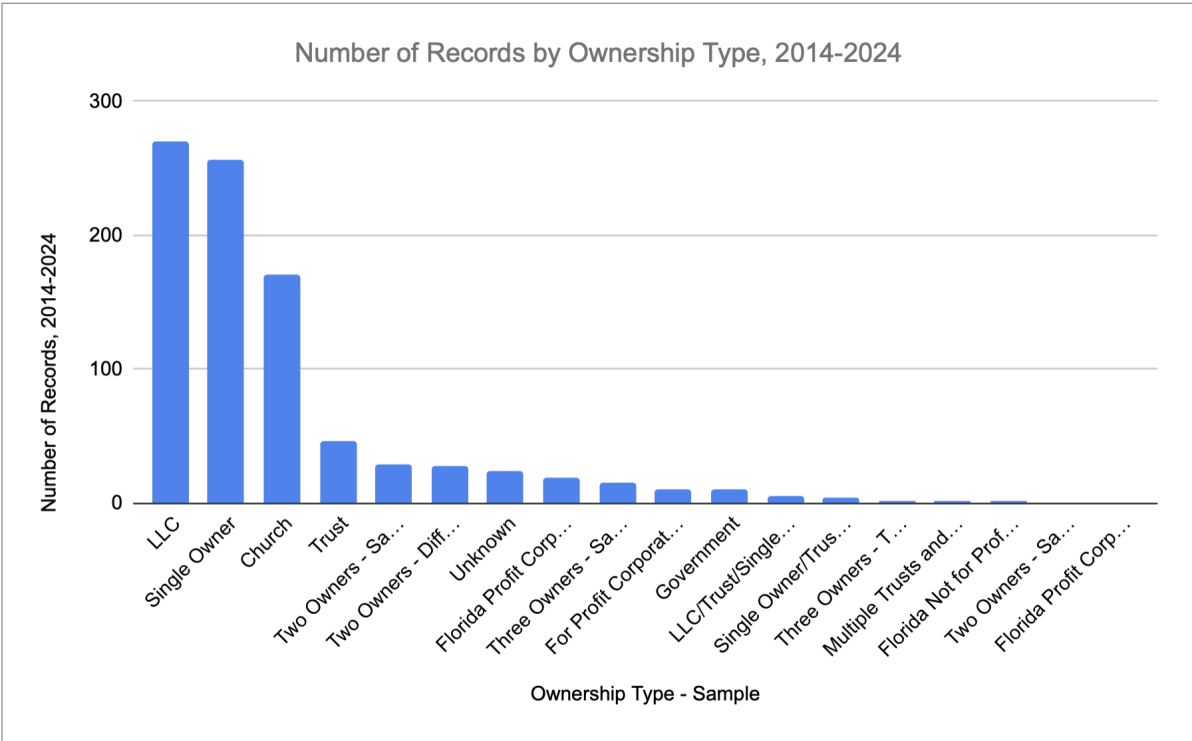
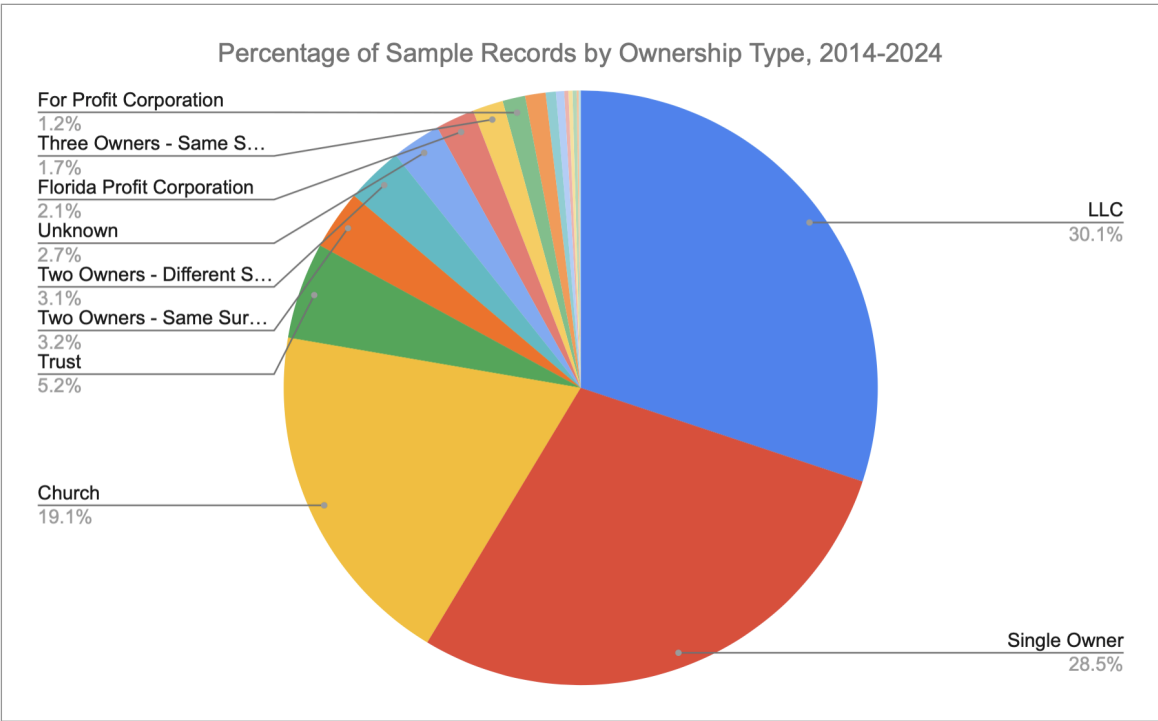
## **Sources/Intellectual Property**

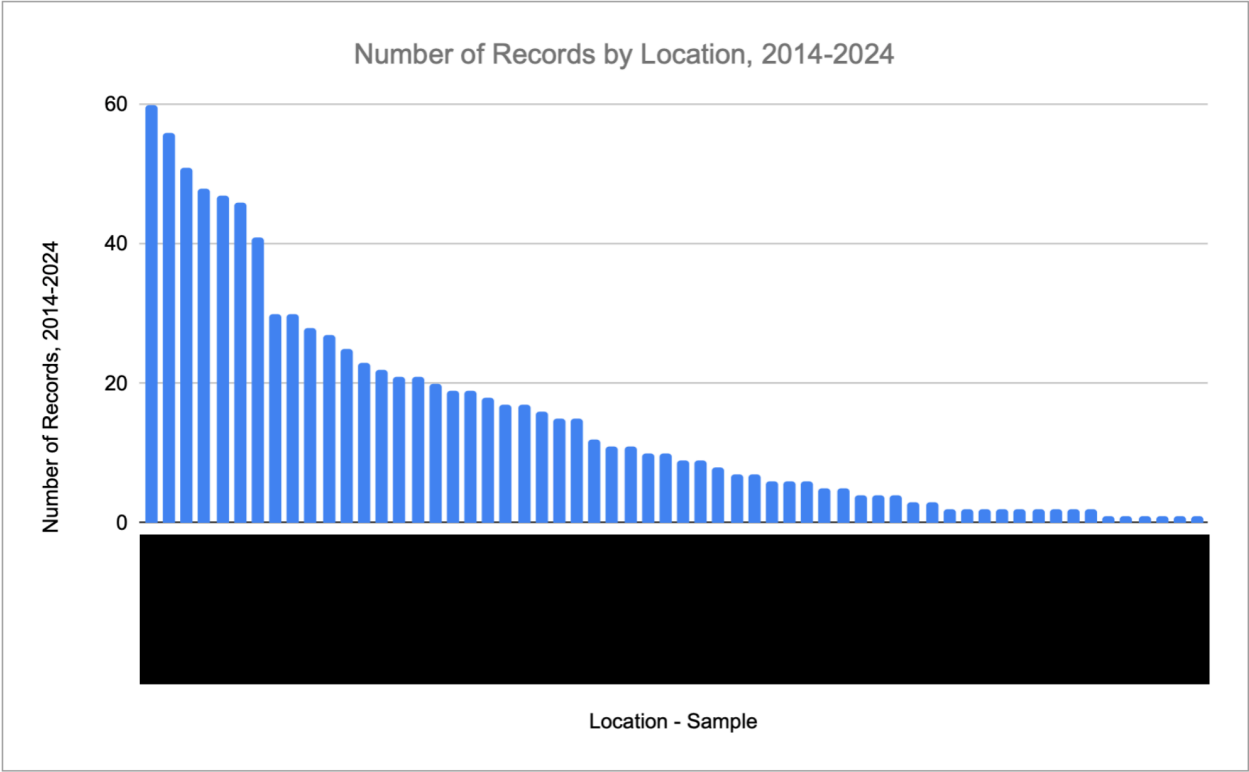
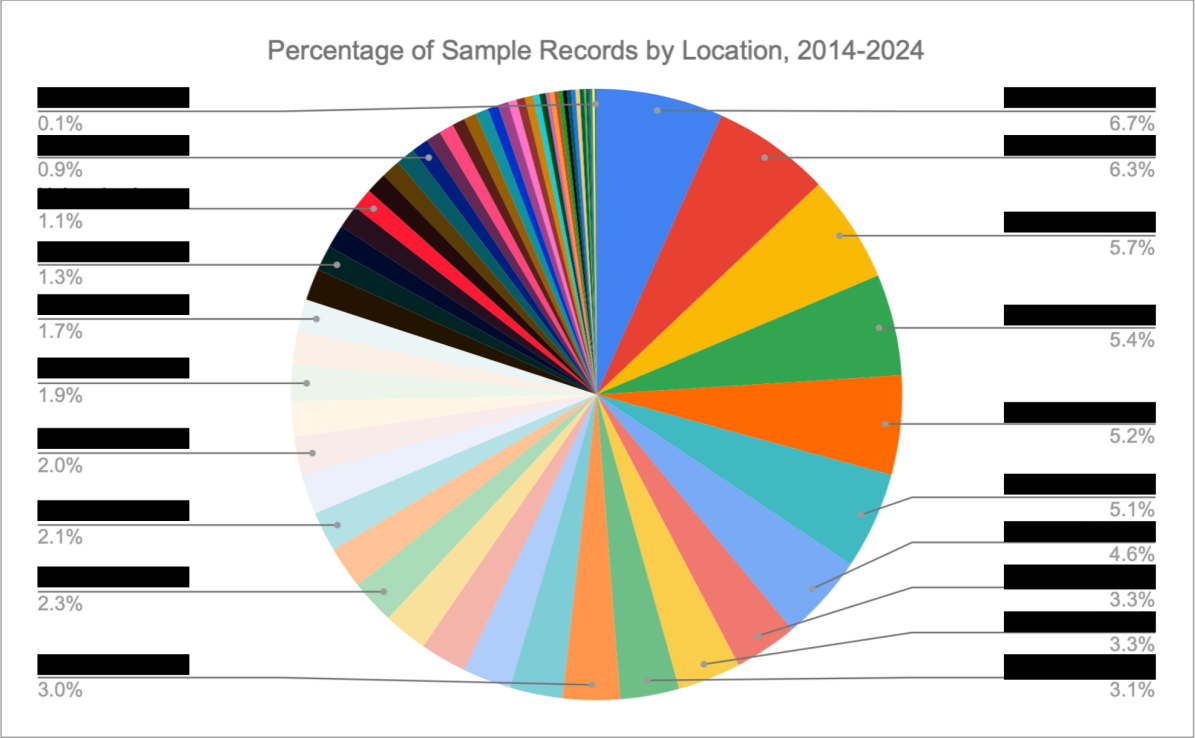
Information provided online by the Center for Community Progress formed the foundation for understanding this issue. Their term "vacant, abandoned, and deteriorating property" is used throughout. The only original research/analysis appearing in this study relates to the sample properties and code records. All other information is research from a variety of sources or the opinion of the author. Please contact the author for citations.

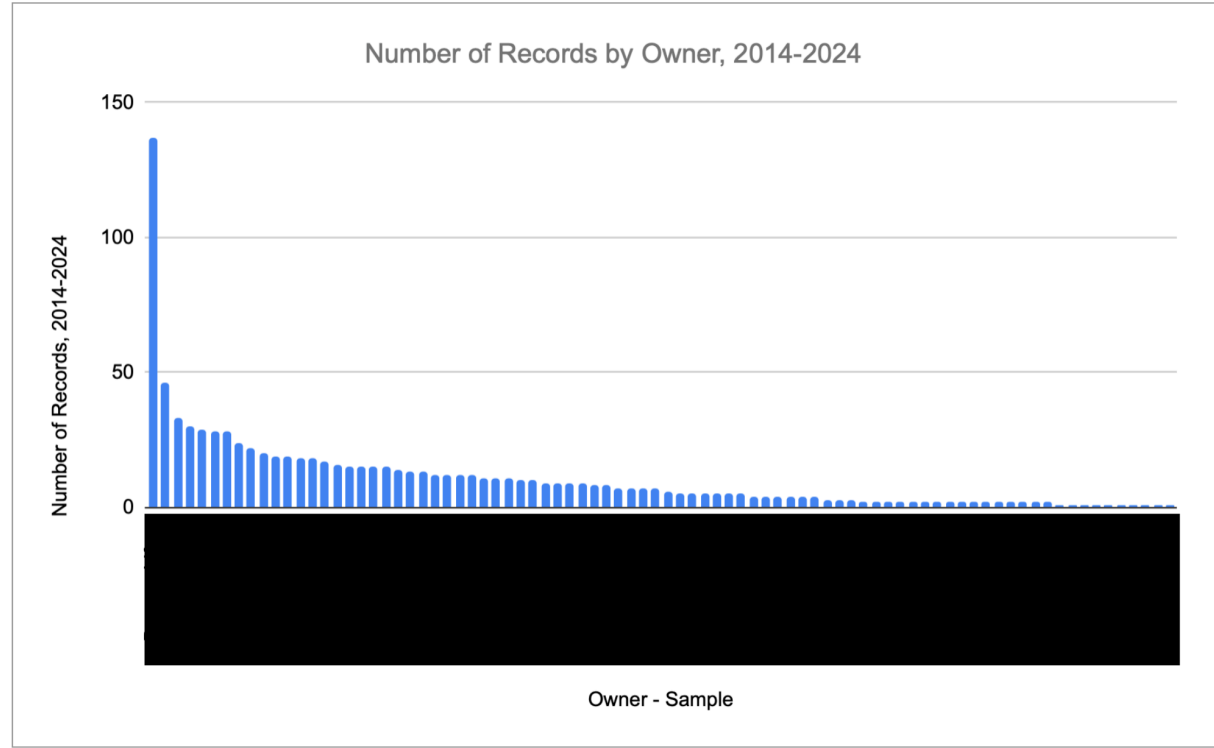
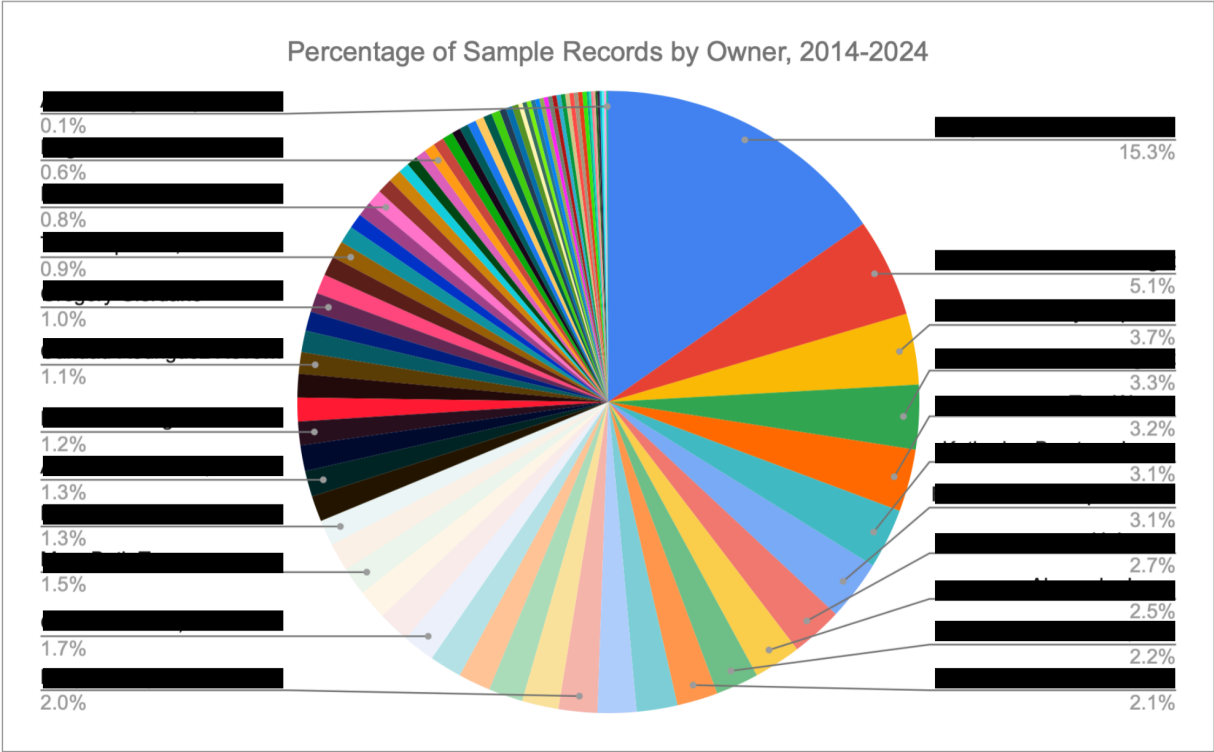
Appendix



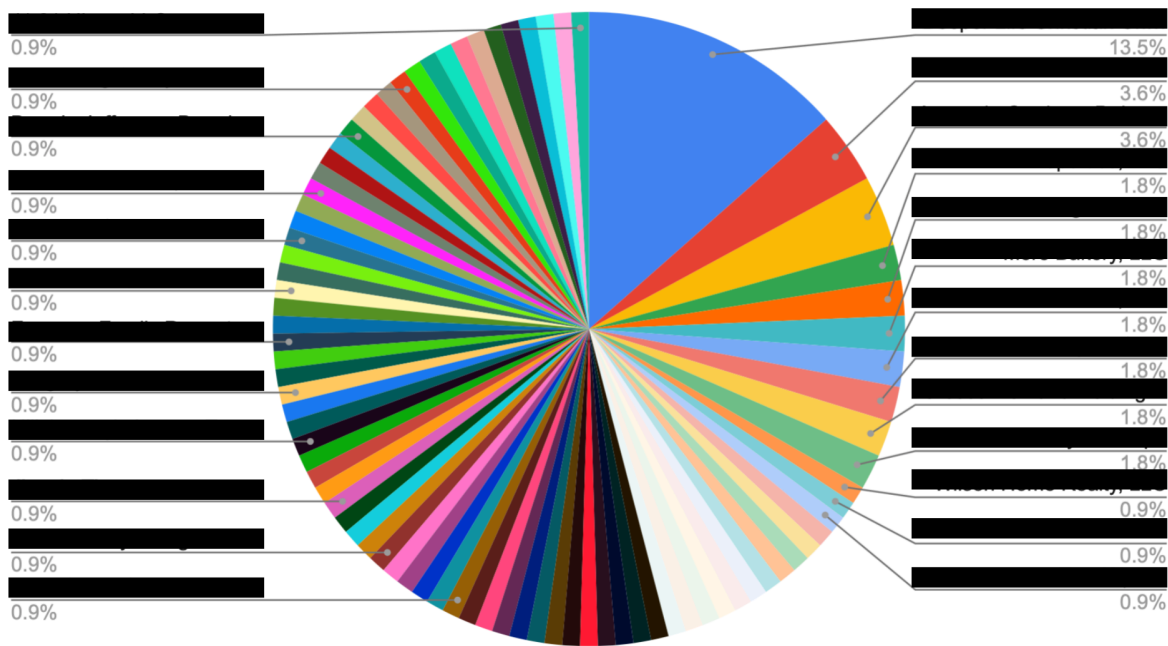




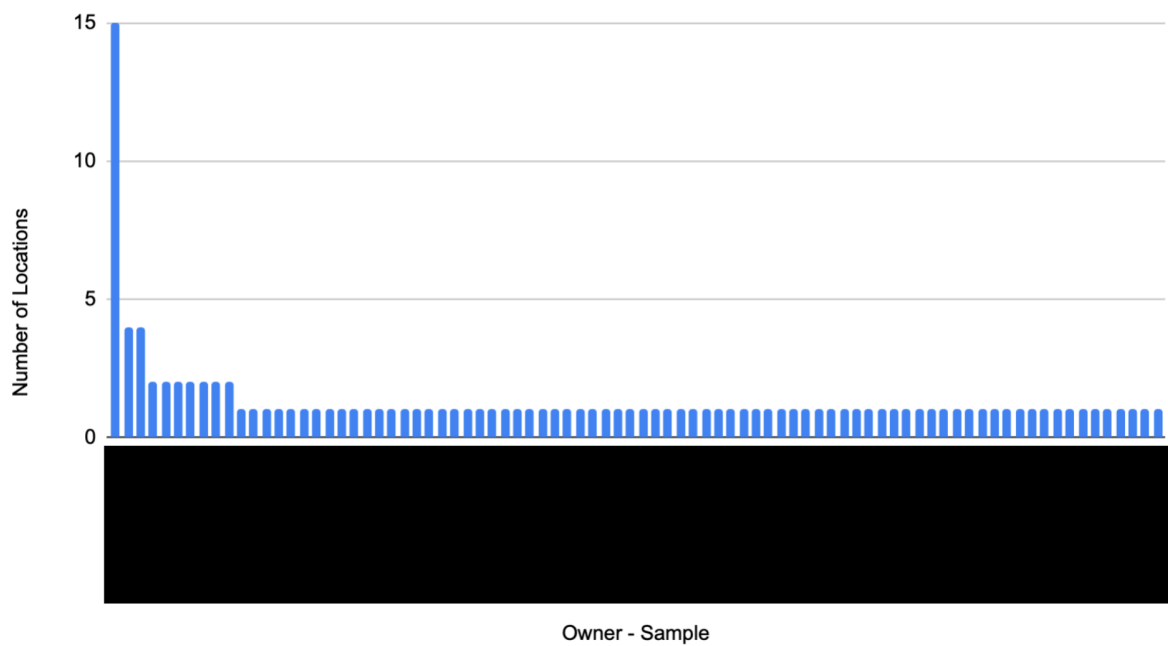




Percentage of Sample Locations per Owner, 2014-2024



Number of Locations per Owner, 2014-2024





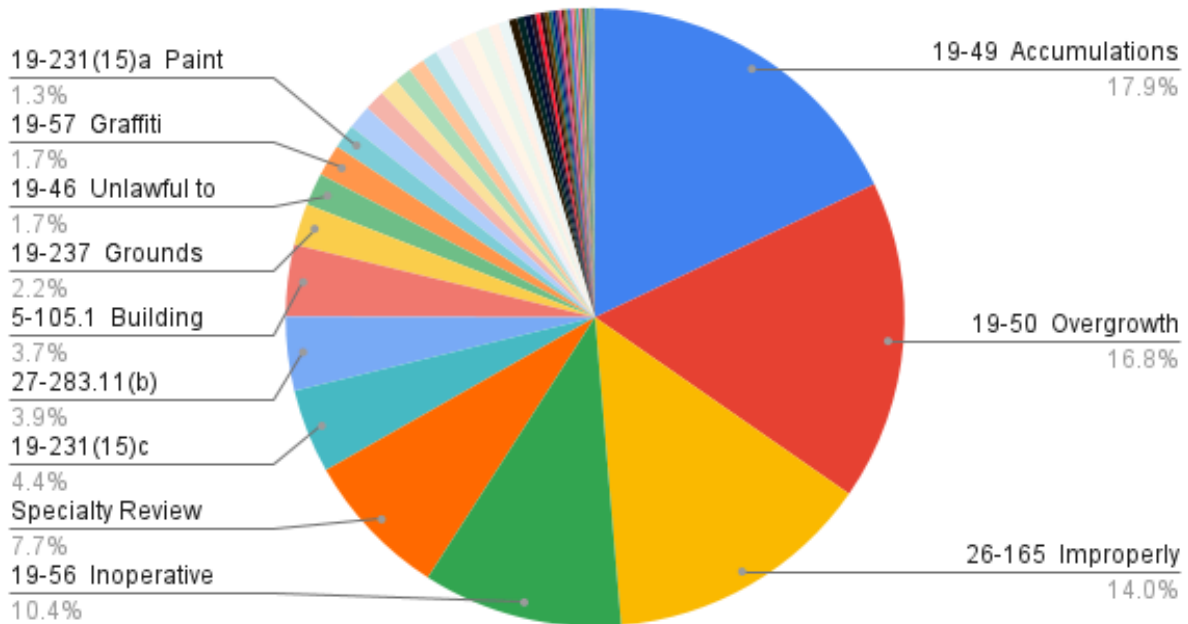
Record Type	Total Records, 2020-2024
Complaint	79621
Civil Case	33871
Code Case	21466
RCR - No Results	9837
Remedial Order	5685
RCA - No Results	2348
Bank Owned Foreclosure	364
Demolition	227
Signs	11
Diversion	3
Notice to Appear	2
<b>Grand Total</b>	<b>153435</b>

#### Top Proactive Case Violations and Proactive Cases Associated with Vacant Structures

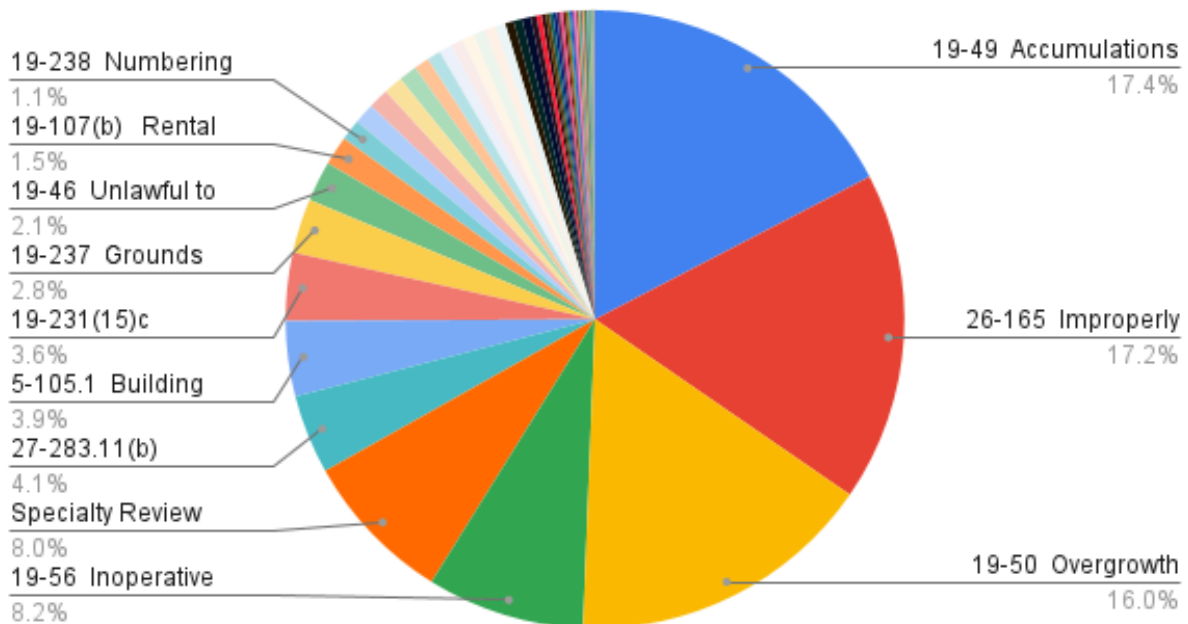
Proactive Cases 2020-2023	Median% [Range%] (Low-High)
#1) 19-49 Accumulations	17.7% [+1.2; -0.8] (1,735-4,149)
#2) 19-50 Overgrowth	16.3% [+0.5; -0.8] (1,623-3,623)
#3) 26-165 Improperly prepared curbside accumulations of solid waste	15.7% [+1.7; -1.5] (1,354-3,503)
#4) 19-56 Inoperative Vehicles	8.1% [+2.3, -1.0] (1,010-1,744)
19-233(a), Standards for Vacant Structures (unsecured structure)	0.8% [+0.2, -0.2] (95-185)
19-48, Certain Structures Declared a Public Nuisance	0.8% [+0.1, -0.1] (86-158)
19-234 Responsibility of Owner of Vacant Structures	0.5% [+0.3, -0.1] (63-90)

Proactive Cases 2024 Jan-June	Percentage% (Number of Cases)
#1) 19-49, Accumulations	27.1% (2,791)
#2) 19-50, Overgrowth	12.0% (1,237)
#3) 26-165, Improperly prepared curbside accumulations of solid waste	9.6% (983)
#4) 19-56, Inoperative Vehicles	9.7% (997)
19-233(a), Standards for Vacant Structures (unsecured structure)	1% (101)
19-48, Certain Structures Declared a Public Nuisance	0.7% (67)
19-234 Responsibility of Owner of Vacant Structures	0.4% (43)

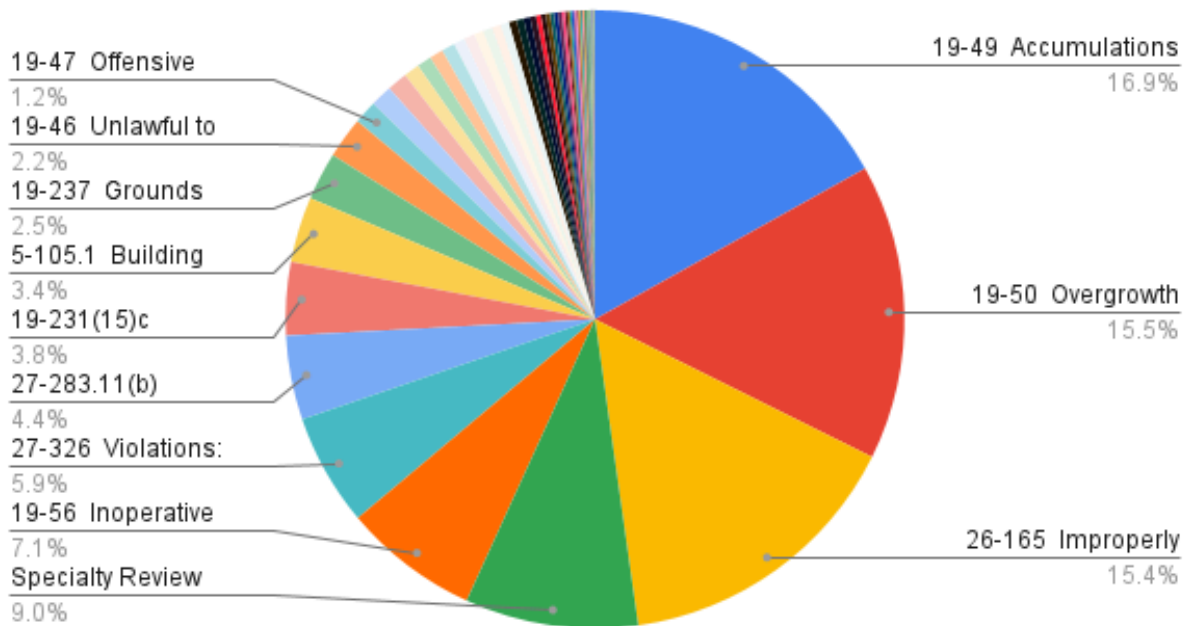
## Proactive Cases - 2020



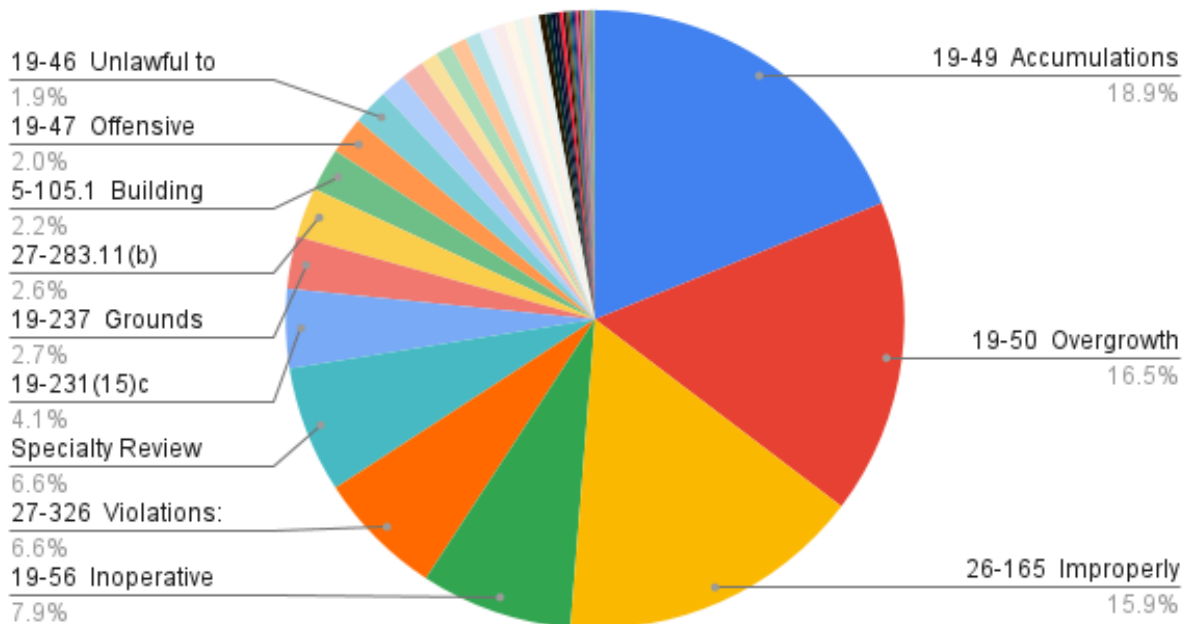
## Proactive Cases - 2021



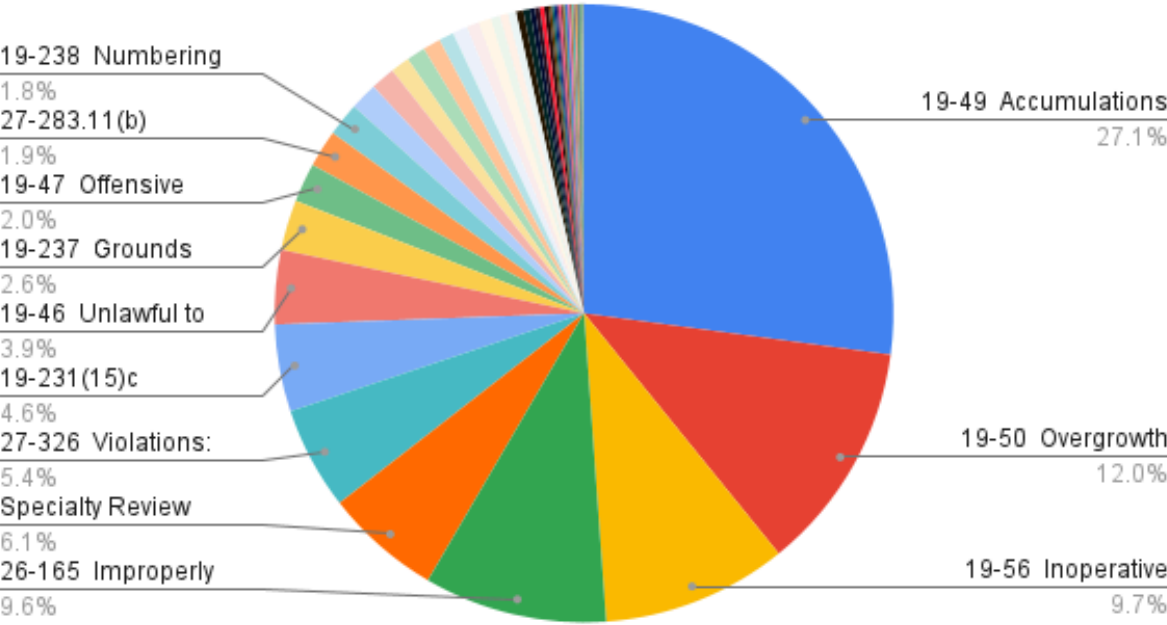
## Proactive Cases - 2022



## Proactive Cases - 2023



# Proactive Cases - 2024



"Estate of" Parcels Overlaid on 2008-2012 American Community Survey Data for Race

