How is inequality visible or invisible through different lenses? No one statistic or map can capture every aspect of what makes an area equal or unequal in economic terms. Rather, by comparing various metrics side-by-side, a more nuanced narrative emerges. While still very incomplete relative to the multidimensional burdens that lower-income communities face, this series of maps seeks to provide multiple perspectives on inequality to balance out some of the inadequacies of each individual measure. On each map, the darkest colors indicate the most economically-burdened or unequal tracts.

Discussion Notes

As Monmonier (1996) notes, all maps inherently involve distortions. Here are the two most distorting choices I made that I would like to highlight:

Resolution: Mapping at the tract level might reveal contrasts not visible at the county level, but it also obscures detail that would appear at the block-group and block level.

Scale Breaks: Experimenting with different scale values produced very different maps. While the ones I chose are intentional in regards to certain economic benchmarks or the overall data distribution, they are also a narrative choice.

Lastly, in regards to Foucault’s (1991) critique of governmentality, when citizens start reproducing the state lens of looking at people and society, I would like to acknowledge that the federal census data these maps are based on are reflective of the politics and methodology of its source.

Methods

All maps were constructed with data from the American Community Survey (ACS) 5-Year Estimates for 2021 at the census tract level of “1,200 to 8,000 people with an optimum size of 4,000 people” using Kyle Walker’s tidycensus R package. Highway and city spatial data was queried from OpenStreetMap and combined with the ACS data through Martijn Tennekes’s tmap R package. I chose to focus my map area on the area of King County west of 121.7°W in order to retain the spatial resolution necessary to distinguish the smallest tracts with the ACS data through Martijn Tennekes’s tmap R package.

Data Sources

Howell, K. (2014) Working Overtime: Long Commutes and Rent-burden in the Washington Metropolitan Region. George Mason University School of Public Policy Center for Regional Analysis Development, rent burden is defined as spending more than 30% of income on housing. This map shows what percentage of households spend in each tract spend at least 30% of income on housing.

According to the Department of Housing and Urban Development, rent burden is defined as spending more than 30% of income on housing. This map shows what percentage of households spend in each tract spend at least 30% of income on housing.

Notable here is how some of the wealthiest and poorest areas from the map to the left are revealed to both have “severe income disparity.”

These distortions were eliminated by narrowing the map area, but only their far western portions are visible in the map.