



What Happened to Illinois' Open Data Movement?



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INTRODUCTION

Under Governor Pat Quinn, Illinois passed the Open Operating Standards Act (Public Act 98-627) which established policy for the state government's open data portal. Effective in 2014, the act states: "Public data sets that are made available on the Internet by agencies shall be accessible through a single web portal that is linked to data.illinois.gov or any

successor website."¹ Illinois thereby formally prioritized open data as a state policy. The main web portal, data.illinois.gov, was established to make accessible state government agencies' numerous datasets in a single location. Several other states in the country have also initiated open-data efforts in recent years. The importance of open data and reproducible research has been described in past IGPA reports² but this report focuses on Illinois specifically: What is the current state of Illinois' open data portal? How does Illinois compare to other states? What can be done to improve the data portal?

Hereafter, we assess the current state of open data in Illinois and then make brief recommendations for improving the data portal.

CURRENT STATE OF IL PUBLICLY AVAILABLE DATA

Early in the open-data movement, Illinois' open-data efforts ranked highly, alongside those in states such as New York, Hawaii, Maryland, Oklahoma, and Utah.³ In a 2014 report by the Center for Data Innovation, the state governments' high quality open-data policies and open-data portal were lauded

with high scores.⁴ However, while most of these other states have continued to improve the public-facing interface and documentation available on their websites, little has changed on the Illinois website.

As of March 2023, the data portal houses 611 datasets across

an array of state and local agencies. Illinois Department of Innovation and Technology (DoIT) references the open data portal (ODP) in a document

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from 2018.⁵ One of the main points of success of the data portal was that 20 state agencies housed data under the ODP with the intention of adding more. The goal was to become a “one stop shop” for data resources, safety initiatives, environmental concerns, transportation issues, and more. Based on the current status of the portal, that vision has not come to fruition.

As of March 2023, the image of the nine categories, or “groups” as they are called in the filtering options of the data portal, have not changed at all since the 2018 DoIT report (See **Figure 1**). The categories remain ambiguous while multiple categories have zero datasets within them. For example, “Government” is a standalone category,

but other categories such as “Human Services” or “Natural Resources” may fit under the general category of Government unless it is specified more clearly. Clearer and more purposeful categories with descriptions would assist users, particularly novices not accustomed to chasing down data.

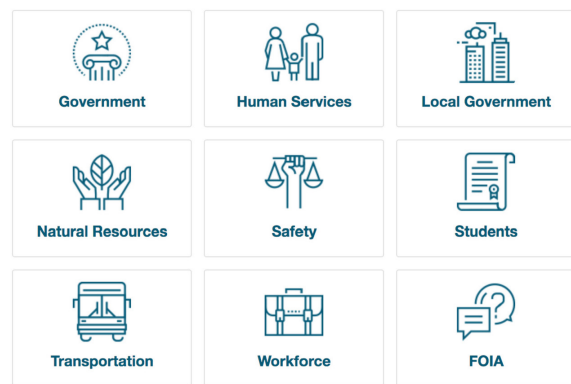
As fiscal specialists we specifically draw attention to the fact that **there are no budget datasets for years after 2015 on the state’s data portal; there are a total of only 6 budgetary datasets (entirely from local governments’) available from 2013 to 2015.**⁶ The website for Illinois’ Office of the Comptroller provides a good example of user-friendly fiscal data. The site allows for filtering and interacting with most recent years of the state government’s budget data. Unfortunately, it is not possible to download all expenditures or all revenues at once. While the data are publicly available, users have to know what they are looking for: specific funds, revenue sources, and other details must be known and used in the filter options and it is not possible to view multiple years of data at once. Illinois does have some of this information available on the Comptroller’s website, but users would benefit if the data behind the interface were more accessible and downloadable on the data.illinois.gov ODP. One of the hidden gems on the Comptroller’s website

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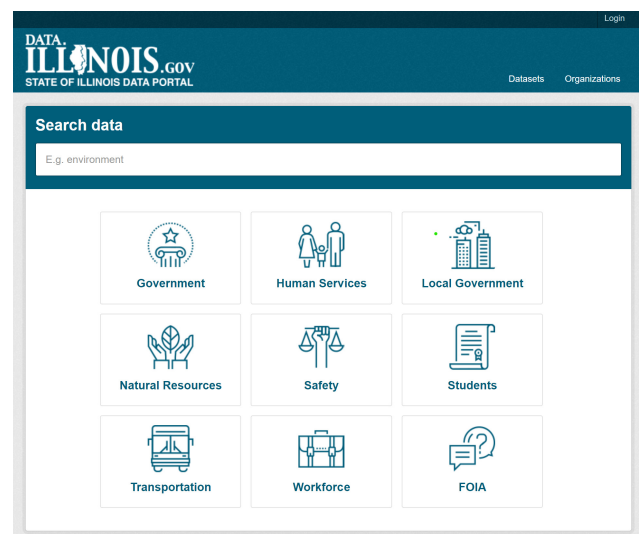
is a Tableau dashboard for COVID spending that allows all items flagged as “COVID expenditures” to be downloaded.⁷ This type of visualization that also allows the data to be downloaded should be expanded to all budget items and also made available through data.illinois.gov.

Currently data.illinois.gov allows viewers to search all organizations included in the data portal, but many of them have zero datasets associated with the organization (See **Figure 2**). For example, the Commission on Government and Forecasting Accountability (CoGFA) is listed as an organization on data.illinois.gov but is associated with zero datasets despite the fact that it frequently publishes detailed reports. The datasets used in CoGFA reports are often not publicly available.

Figure 1. Top: Image of data “groups” included in 2018 DoIT document. Bottom: Landing page of data.illinois.gov as of March 23, 2023



The Nine Categories of the ODP 1



Illinois' Department of Public Health has the most datasets in the data portal, many of which have been updated recently. While this may partially be due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the intense data tracking and reporting that occurred during the pandemic response, we note that other datasets have been maintained that are not directly COVID-19 related. Illinois' application programming interface (API) guide which helps users obtain machine readable public data would be even more valuable if larger datasets were hosted in the data.illinois.gov data portal.⁸

LOOKING TO OTHER OPEN DATA PORTALS

Many states have websites where data from all their agencies can be viewed, filtered, mapped, graphed, or downloaded. New York

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and Maryland both have a clear set of searchable categories with descriptions outlining what types of data are to be expected in each.⁹ California has a separate site for government

expenditures with an obvious link to download all budget data as well as raw data available on the California State Controller's website.¹⁰ Maryland has a Transparency Portal on Operating Budget, grants and loans, and vendor payments. Oklahoma's portal contains featured content or "showcases" which display examples of how the portal's datasets are being used in productive ways. California, Hawaii and

Maryland have separate sites solely for GIS data and maps/visualizations.¹¹ These states were ranked similarly to Illinois in 2014 by the Center for Data Innovation for their open data initiatives but have developed their portals at very different speeds since then, with Illinois lagging behind.

One may also look at the federal government's open data efforts as an ideal example. **Figure 3** shows the Federal Government's version of the ODP, [Data.Gov](https://data.gov), which has thousands of datasets at

Figure 2. Sample of organizations with zero datasets.

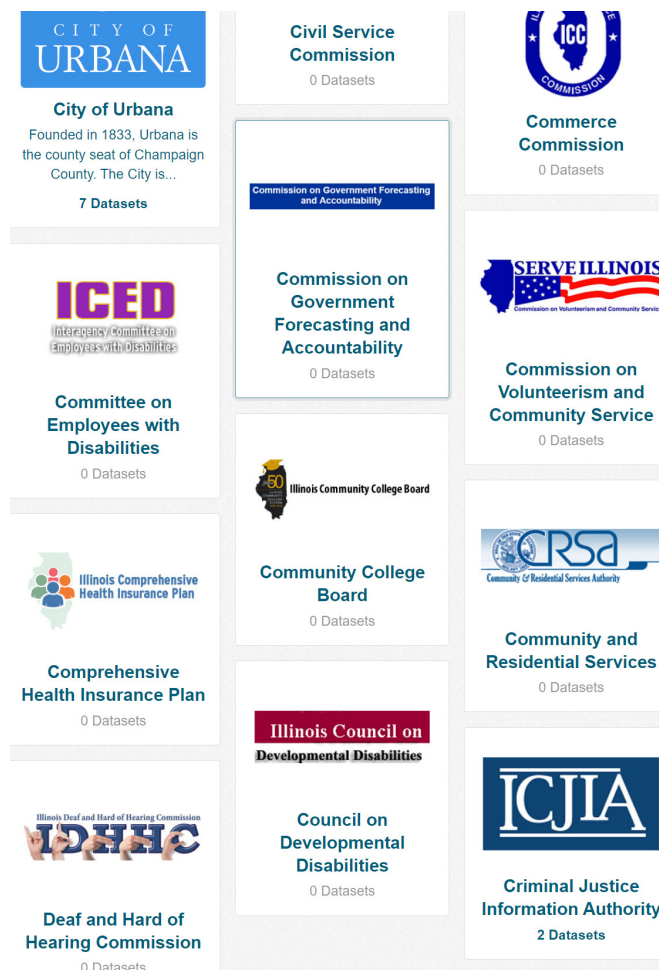
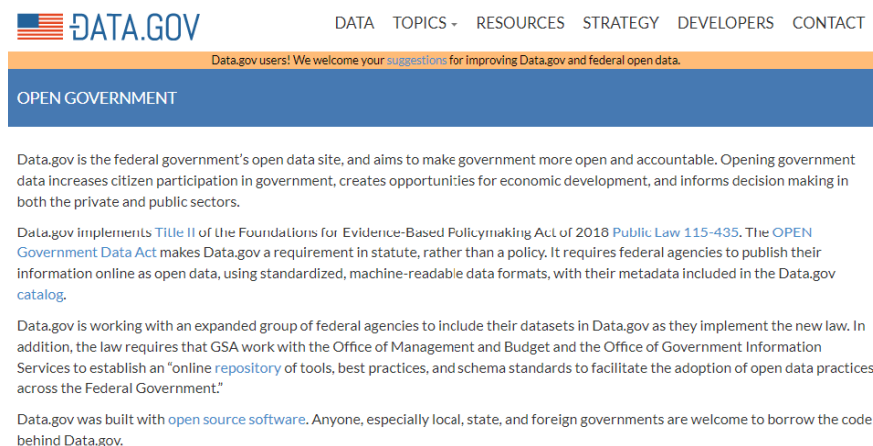


Figure 3. Data.gov page on open government



the federal level and incorporates datasets shared by States. The link for “open data software” opens a giant repository for the federal government hosted on GitHub.¹² The federal site even encourages local and state governments to borrow and modify the code used by the federal government to improve their state-level open data portals.

Illinois’ current DoIT Chief Data Officer (CDO), Dessa Gypalo, was the first Cook County CDO from June 2018 until April 2021. The Cook County data portals have been well developed over the years with updated and quality datasets (including GIS) and user-friendly navigation. As the new CDO has taken charge recently, we are optimistic the state may be in the process of updating the interface and providing documentation and tutorials for data for future researchers.¹³ In sum, our recommendations are as follows.

Illinois’ One Stop Shop - Open Data Portal Needs:

- **Reinitiate the One Stop Shop for data.** Bring in other agencies’ data and update/maintain datasets; provide links and/or visualization of important budgetary or fiscal data, such as the OMB’s Interactive Budget ¹⁴ or Comptroller’s Financial Reports.¹⁵
- **Clearer (and more purposeful) categories.** Current choice of categories is ambiguous. Brief descriptions of each category would be helpful.
- **Archive of deprecated datasets.** Keep past datasets accessible. Indicate that they are no longer being maintained and if there is a new version of data available.
- **Better data filtering interface.** e.g. years of data; agencies listing; types of data; cities and counties filters
- **Comprehensive data inventory** that has each data asset and all variable names and definitions.¹⁶
- **Interactive GIS data with downloadable datasets.** Cook county and Chicago both have interactive data portals with GIS data and downloadable datasets.¹⁷ Other states also have geospatial data publicly available with interactive interfaces.¹¹
- **Above and Beyond: Featured content or Showcases.** Highlight popular or trending datasets or agency data dashboards.¹⁸

ENDNOTES

¹ 20 ILCS 45/5 (2023), <https://perma.cc/FGS3-C4EM>.

² David Molitor & Julian Reif, “Transparency in an Era of Data-Driven Policy: The Importance of Reproducible Research,” Institute of Government and Public Affairs, University of Illinois System (October 14, 2021), <https://perma.cc/H94E-C9LH>.

³ Authors’ observations compared to the report written by the Center for Data Innovation, Laura Dees and Daniel Castro, “State Open Data Policies and Portals” (August 18, 2014), <https://perma.cc/6QYF-RZQY>.

⁴ Ibid

⁵ DoIT, “Opening Data and Opportunities for Illinois Residents” (2018), <https://perma.cc/F4EU-FQSQ>.

⁶ The “Government” group of datasets does not contain any up to date budget information besides the State Employee Pay dataset. In contrast, many states have downloadable budget data. Key areas for openness and transparency typically include election results and government spending data.

⁷ Illinois Comptroller, “COVID-19 Information” (2023), <https://perma.cc/TZ8B-H7S5>.

⁸ Illinois Open Data Portal API Guide for Users. <https://perma.cc/LRH2-NQRL>.

⁹ NYC Open Data (<https://perma.cc/9AP4-2W49>) and Maryland’s Open Data Portal (<https://perma.cc/L7F3-GTRE>) provide good examples of categories and descriptions.

¹⁰ California Expenditure data are on Open Fi\$Cal (<https://perma.cc/KMW9-KZNM>) and raw data downloads are available on California State

Controller site (<https://perma.cc/H5HD-HF4X>). Open Fi\$Cal also has a intuitive and interactive page for graphing expenditure summaries, individual spending transactions, vendor transactions, COVID-19 transactions, etc.

¹¹ For examples of spatial publicly available data please see: Hawaii's website: <https://perma.cc/2M6G-S2GJ>; Maryland's website: <https://perma.cc/9NC3-25JN>; California's website: <https://perma.cc/J6M3-ML5Y>.

¹² Federal Data.gov Github link, <https://perma.cc/BL5T-LMKX>. Federal site encourages local and state governments to borrow and modify the code used by the federal government.

¹³ Julia Edinger, "Dessa Gypalo - Chief Data Officer, Illinois," *Government Technology* (April/May 2022), <https://perma.cc/4P7D-7SAM>. Opinions on Cook County and Chicago Data Portal are the authors'.

¹⁴ Illinois Office of Management and Budget Interactive Budget, <https://perma.cc/26XW-CHZG>

¹⁵ Illinois Comptroller, *Statewide Financial Reports*, <https://perma.cc/RT56-YN3U>.

¹⁶ Meghan M. Stuessy, "The OPEN Government Data Act: A Primer," *Congressional Research Service* (December 29, 2022), <https://perma.cc/S9BG-86GS>; Meghan M. Stuessy, "Access to Government Information: An Overview," *Congressional Research Service* (March 31, 2022), <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/R/R47058>.

¹⁷ Chicago Data Portal allows you to view all datasets that can be mapped. Also provides shapefiles for the region necessary for creating maps in statistical programs. Please explore the Chicago Data Portal for an excellent example of what Illinois' Open Data Portal could resemble <https://perma.cc/C5HC-AMB8>.

¹⁸ Please see Oklahoma's open data portal showcasing different ways their data has been used and visualized: <https://perma.cc/9WML-P554>.

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Mast Photographs

Chicago cityscape - Elena Sivitskaia, stock.adobe.com
Illinois State Capitol Dome - Frame from video at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=F2wPy7DfXfQ>
Capitol Dome at Dusk - Frame from Adobe Stock video file 187821651, by VIA Films