A midnight blue Chevy rolls slowly down a snow-covered street, an emergency strobe light on its roof and a sign on its side that promises this is “official business.” At each house, business, even vacant lot, workers in the car pause to decide whether someone lives there and what shape the place is in before snapping a photo and beaming it to “mission control” miles away.

All over Detroit, scores of these workers — on some days as many as 75 three-person teams — have been wending their way through the streets since December, cataloging on computer tablets one of this bankrupt city’s most devastating ailments: its tens of thousands of abandoned and dilapidated buildings.

Everyone here has long known that Detroit is plagued by emptying neighborhoods, but this expedited, top-to-bottom analysis of all 380,217 parcels of land in the city, which is to be finished in a matter of weeks, will quantify the state of blight here with a level of detail rare for an American city.

While some cities like New Orleans and Cleveland have taken elaborate steps to map neighborhoods with unoccupied and damaged buildings, urban planners around the nation are watching the census of blight now taking place in Detroit for what it might mean for the way the most troubled cities can track empty, decaying structures and decide what to do about them.

And for leaders in Detroit, the database is expected to bring the clearest, if perhaps the gloomiest, picture yet of the city’s hollowed-out neighborhoods, which homes can be saved and where demolition may be the only cure. While earlier studies have aimed to track Detroit’s circumstances and officials have issued their own estimates of the woes (the city’s emergency manager has referred to 78,000 vacant buildings while other city officials say the number may be closer to
90,000), nothing has been as comprehensive.

“We don’t know everything that’s out there,” said Charlie Beckham, whom Detroit’s new mayor, Mike Duggan, has assigned to oversee the city’s neighborhood operations, adding, “Nobody knows everything. So this will be an invaluable tool.” Mr. Beckham describes the emerging database as a first step toward a real, overarching plan for how the city can solve so much decay. “That’s what’s been missing — a solid, systematic blight elimination strategy,” said Mr. Beckham, who has worked in six mayoral administrations, starting in 1974 with Coleman Young’s. “So it’s not haphazard, not about taking down a house here and a house there.”

Still, even this wide-reaching survey, which has cost $1.5 million in foundation and private funds, will hardly serve as a solution to this city’s blight. Leaders here have long set ambitious goals. The previous mayor, Dave Bing, sought to tear down 10,000 dilapidated buildings in his time in office. Kevyn D. Orr, the city’s appointed emergency manager, has called for an end to blight in the coming three years. And even as some officials here have predicted that demolishing the buildings that must go could cost as much as $1 billion, other entities, like a public-private effort called the Detroit Blight Authority have begun their own aggressive demolition campaigns.

But even once officials fully understand how many empty buildings they have and where they are, they face overwhelming challenges — an amalgam of the politically sensitive issues faced by lots of struggling American cities: How can a city of 139 square miles and once built for 1.8 million people comfortably hold its current 700,000 residents, and must it, in essence, shrink to survive? Which buildings are so ramshackle as to require demolition, and which should be restored and sold? How does a city wisely and quickly dispose of empty properties when ownership is tangled? And how does a place act fast enough and in an order that prevents new neighborhoods from slipping under even as worse ones are being saved?

Blight, as Karl Baker, one Detroit resident, has seen, tends to spread. Along his block of Hazelridge Street on the East Side, he is the only remaining tenant. “Everyone went bye-bye,” Mr. Baker said the other day as he walked up the center of the silent street to get to his house since no sidewalks had been shoveled.

Most of the houses nearby are standing but abandoned, and visitors have
clearly passed through — empty liquor bottles lie along debris-covered floors near broken windows and doors, every memory of a metal appliance or gutter seems to be gone from some of the homes, and two old couches that were dumped along a lawn are now blanketed by a thick layer of snow.

The last neighbor left six months ago, he said, and the single streetlight overhead has not worked for months. “I love the quiet, but if something went wrong, the city isn’t going to come,” Mr. Baker said. “They don’t do anything.”

Just two blocks away, most of the brick homes along Hazelridge are still occupied, the sidewalks shoveled, and cars line the driveways. The question that Mr. Baker and others here ask is, “How long before that block slips under, too?”

Around the country, some national experts on urban decline cautioned that the value of a top-to-bottom census of blight in Detroit might depend on whether there will be resources to regularly update the data as it shifts. “Vacancy and blight is such a moving target,” said Michael Schramm, research associate at the Center on Urban Poverty and Community Development at Case Western Reserve University.

But inside the survey’s headquarters here in Detroit’s Midtown neighborhood, experts from Loveland Technologies and Data Driven Detroit are single-mindedly focused on their goal of counting every building, every lot, every business. Experts on computer mapping, planning and data study the survey results even as they are being “blexted” (getting texts about blight) from the “microhoods” the city has been divided into.

Last week, surveyors were nearly done gathering data they needed on the streets, but there is more to be done before the map is finished in the coming month. Technicians hunch over computers looking for errors and inconsistencies. The group will overlay their data with that from records of postal deliveries, fires, deed transfers and more.

There are undeniable complications, particularly since many of the $10-an-hour surveyors in the streets have never done this sort of work before. Some elements of the survey — which include rating a building’s structure as good, fair, poor or “suggest demolition” and determining from the outside whether a place is occupied — require at least a level of subjective judgment. And the survey, which routinely draws questions (“Why are you taking a picture of my house?”), seems certain to stir more debate among residents when the Blight Removal Task
Force issues broad recommendations using its findings, probably in late March, and when the map results become public.

“If you know how to work a cellphone, you could do this,” said Tamera Smith, who described herself as a mother studying to be a medical assistant who does hair and nails on the side. She reached out an open car window to take a picture of a shuttered business, then rode on to the next place.