

LIVING AND LOSING IN THE CITY



Courtesy of the Library of Congress

WORDS TO KNOW

White flight

gentrified

razed

investment

public housing

urban renewal

eminent domain

blight

**Federal Highway Act
of 1956**

THINK BEFORE YOU READ

What makes people want to leave a neighborhood they've always lived in?

Should old buildings be **razed to make way for new ones?
Which homes should be the first to go?**

Can good intentions sometimes create bad outcomes?

Cover: Approximately 15,000 people lived in Cabrini-Green (the Frances Cabrini Rowhouses and Extension and William Green Homes) at its peak. Cabrini-Green became synonymous with the failures of public housing. From 1995-2011, the Chicago Housing Authority tore down the mid- and high-rise buildings. Only the rowhouses remain.
Courtesy of the Library of Congress

LEAVING THE CITY

The boom of new suburbs also affected America's cities. After a century of growth, cities began losing people to the suburbs. In a major migration known as **White flight**, White people used growing wealth, greater earnings, and their new access to federally backed home loans to move out of cities. In some places, Black people also joined in the move to the suburbs, though in smaller numbers. The number of Black professionals was growing, and more of them were now able to afford houses in formerly White neighborhoods. When they left the cities, middle-class White and Black families took with them higher incomes, tax contributions, and power to invest in their communities. Cities were left poorer and less diverse. The overall population of city centers decreased by 25%.

Fifth-grader Joe Debbs moved to Sacramento with his family in 1955. In an oral history for the *City of Sacramento Community Development African American History Project*, he reflected:

We were still race conscious, but not to the point of open discrimination...White kids, black kids, Asian kids, Mexican kids, we all played together. We were a melting pot of friends... We were all for one and one for all. I'm not saying there wasn't prejudice, there wasn't discrimination. I'm saying the kids are the ones who kind of taught the old folks. Because even when you went home, some of the parents didn't like the kids hanging out with some of the other kids. You could tell when they got in the car and you'd say "Bye, so and so." And they would look and the parents would ask, "Who is that?" You could almost read their lips, but it never prevented them from being our friends and we were their friends.

Things changed for Joe's family in the next few years. He saw some older Black and Latino residents work hard to move away to better homes. "They didn't leave because it was a bad community. They just wanted better living conditions because the houses were old," Joe recalled. At the same time, many of the White people in the neighborhoods moved out, and Blacks began buying the homes they left behind. Joe explained, "Our parents owned their houses. They knew that owning property in America made you a player in the game. My mother bought our house, our neighbor's parents all bought their houses." But after a few years, Joe noticed something was different. Blacks couldn't seem to buy homes as they did before.

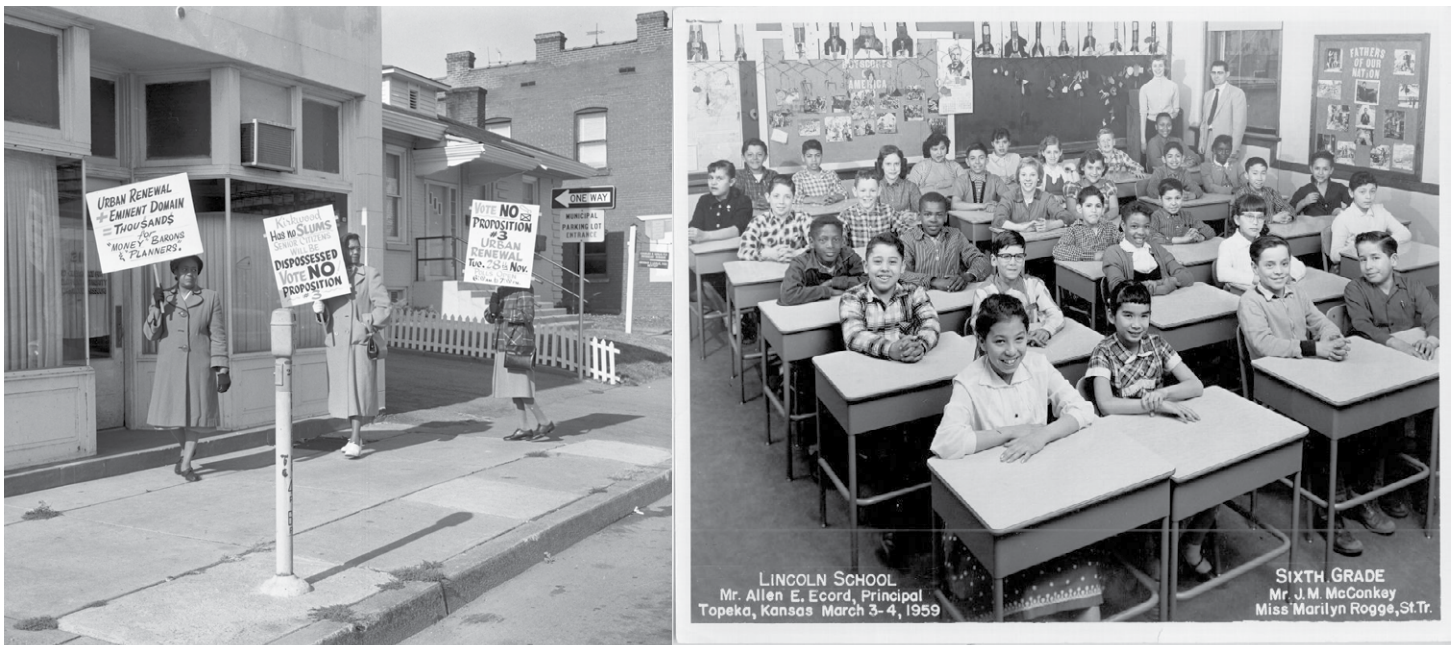
The houses were always rented. We still had redlining, but it only applied to people of color. Redlining used to be your address, now redlining started to change by looking at what color you were in addition to your address. Even if you stayed on Eighth Avenue, which is where black folks lived, white people started buying houses on Eighth Avenue. When they looked at the residency, that you're white, and see how much money you made, you got a loan. Many people [of color] could not get loans based on the redlining practices. When you couldn't get a loan, you had to sell your house.

Those who were able to stay saw their cities decline around them. Their homes and neighborhoods had not had new **investment** in decades. Dilapidated buildings, ancient plumbing, and broken fixtures in rented homes became a way of life in what officials started calling "slum" housing. The federal government developed programs to address these problems, but, in the end, they only made segregation worse. Neighborhoods such as Joe's **gentrified** as White people got loans, bought houses formerly lived in by Blacks at a low price, and invested in upgrades. Locked out of loans, other neighborhoods saw no investment for years.

URBAN RENEWAL

Cities needed help on a large scale. Again, the government tried to address housing problems. The 1949 Housing Act aimed to provide “a decent home and a suitable living environment for every American family.” It promised one billion dollars to improve cities through a series of projects called **urban renewal**. In these plans, the government used a power called **eminent domain**. This allows a government to take over privately owned property to use for a public purpose, as long as they pay the property owner a fair price.

The government used eminent domain to declare sections of land **blighted** and seize it for redevelopment. Then, the government contracted with private developers to build completely new neighborhoods on that land. In the 1950s and 1960s more than one million people in almost one thousand neighborhoods were forced to leave their homes because of urban renewal projects. A majority of them were people of color. Developers and the government promised those families payments and assistance finding new places to live, but they rarely followed through. Often, people were left to find housing on their own, cramming into already overcrowded neighborhoods or leaving the city entirely.



Left: A Protest against urban renewal bond issue in Kirkwood, Missouri, 1961. Right: An integrated sixth grade classroom at Lincoln Elementary School in Topeka, Kansas, 1959. In 1962 their school would be torn down as part of a 20 block urban renewal project that demolished “the Bottoms,” a neighborhood community of Black and Hispanic families with restaurants, stores, schools and homes. Left: Francis Scheidegger Collection, S0809-4624, The State Historical Society of Missouri Right: Courtesy of the Kansas Historical Society

LOST COMMUNITIES

Moves forced by urban renewal were often hard for young people. One study interviewed 75 students at Lincoln School in Topeka, Kansas. The school was scheduled to be torn down in 1961, along with their neighborhood of East Topeka. All of the families had to move to new homes to make way for an urban renewal project called the Keyway, which would replace homes with a new business district and I-70. Building the Keyway meant moving about 2,000 people and destroying a diverse neighborhood known as the Bottoms, where Black Americans, Mexican Americans, Native Americans, and newly arrived German and Russian immigrants had settled.

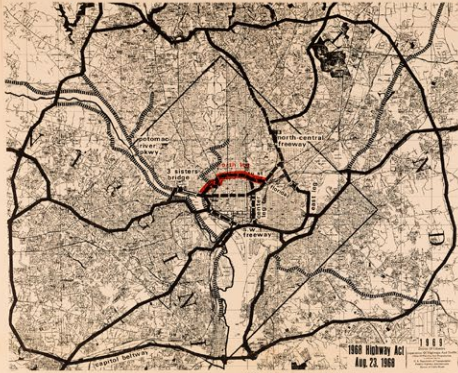


The Pruitt-Igoe houses in St. Louis, Missouri, built in 1954 as an urban renewal project, were demolished in 1972 because of deteriorating conditions and massive vacancies. Courtesy of the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development's Office of Policy Development and Research

Before the move, the students said they worried about relocating, especially knowing that they would “lose their friends” and “have to change schools.” The students’ families ended up moving to 28 different locations. Only about half the children in the study were asked their opinion about where to live or were offered a chance to see the house that they would be moving to. One year after the move, fewer than one quarter of the students said that moving to a new home had made a positive change in their lives. The biggest negative for most children was moving too far from relatives. Many of the Mexican American teenagers said that they missed the Midsummer Fiesta and the active social life of the Mexican American community that was broken up by the moves. According to the study, “Most children have more negative than positive feelings toward the moving process in forced resettlement.”

FROM HOMES TO HIGHWAYS

Highways also shattered city neighborhoods or wiped them off the map. Suburbs depended on fast roads for commuting to the city. The **Federal Highway Act of 1956** funded 41,000 miles of new interstate highways to connect the nation. Highway planners sent roads through the middle of cities with only select concern for what was in the way. Highways routed around White-majority neighborhoods, while less desirable communities, such as Black and Hispanic ones were demolished or cut in half by high-speed roads. In Detroit, Michigan the thriving Black business district of Paradise Valley, was bulldozed to make way for I-75 and I-375. In Columbus, Ohio, construction for I-70 destroyed the Black Near East Side while leaving Bexley, the White neighborhood just to the north, untouched. In Pittsburgh, the Hill District lost more than 400 businesses and 40,000 residents to make way for I-579. On Chicago, Illinois’ west side, the I-290, locally known as the Eisenhower Expressway, decimated “Little Italy.”



WARNING! THIS BLACK COMMUNITY'S BUSINESS' AND HOMES IN PATH OF FREEWAY BULL-DOZERS !

On Aug. 9, 1969, without the required public hearings, the City Council by a 6-2 vote joined with cracker Congressmen Natcher and Broyhill against D.C. citizens.

Justifying their sell-out vote, Councilmen Hahn, Tucker, Yeldell, J. Moore, Daugherty & Haywood lied in saying that the 3-Sisters Bridge would displace only 3 families.

The bitter truth is that the bridge is a link in the 30-mile freeway system which would displace over 25,000 people, mostly Black.

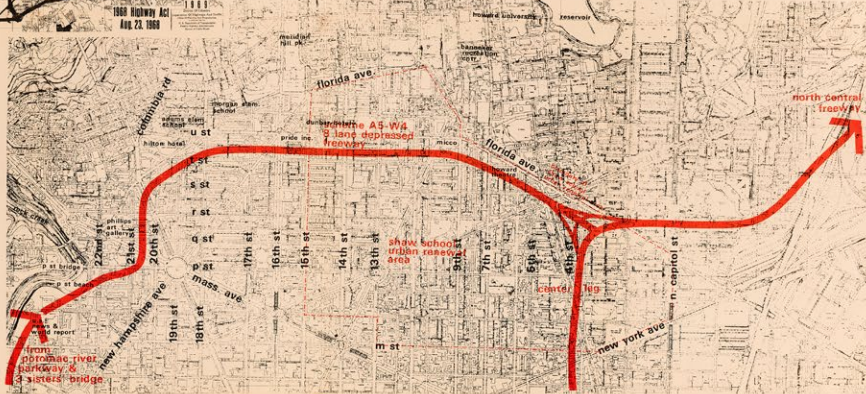
One of the connector roads off the 3-Sisters Bridge is the NORTH LEG of the Inner Loop.

Besides destroying the Black business district and splitting the community by this 8-lane ditch, the DC Highway Dept. in 1966 estimated that the NORTH LEG would

- Destroy 2393 family housing units
- Bulldoze 8376 persons out of homes (includes 3000 persons per family unit)
- Wipe out 2110 jobs
- Remove 40 acres of taxable land

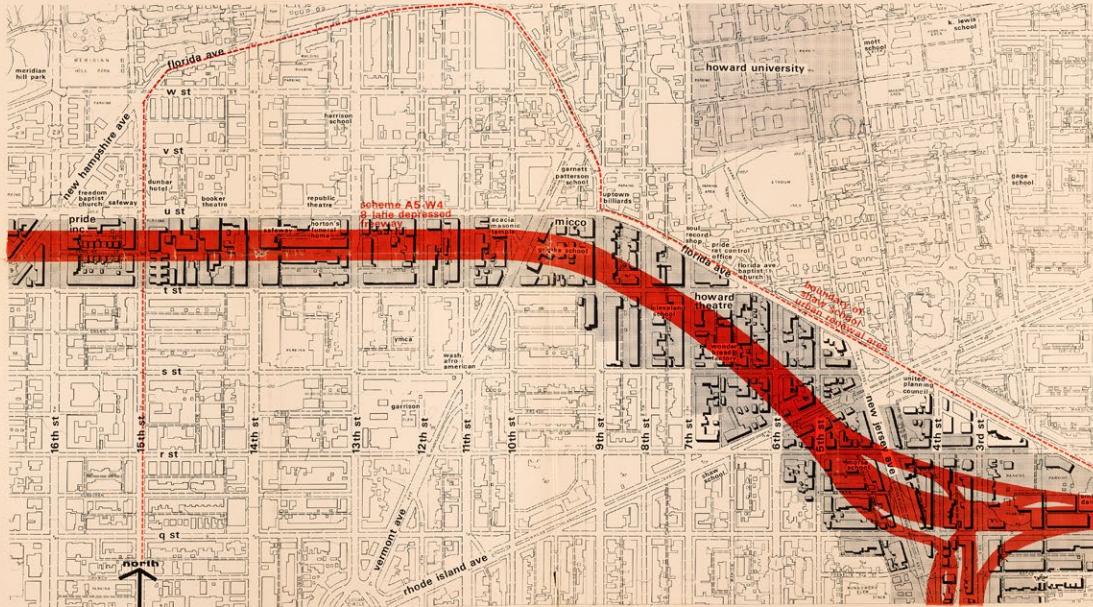
Institutionalized racism thru Urban Renewal and Freeway destroyed Black communities in DR Washington, Nashville, Tenn., Seattle, Wash., Charleston, W. Va., Danzing, N.Y., Newark, N.J.

Organize to Defend Your Community from . . .



White Men's Roads thru Black Men's Homes!

ECTC Emergency Committee on the Transportation Crisis
 ECTC



This 1969 poster was created by the grassroots Emergency Committee on the Transportation Crisis. They rallied Washington DC residents to oppose a proposed highway construction project that would displace Black families. The resistance caused the project to be cancelled in 1977.
 Courtesy of the DC History Center

PUBLIC HOUSING

With older and more affordable areas being destroyed, people needed new places to live. Using public money, the government paid cities to demolish old housing and rebuild new, publicly owned housing for lower-income renters. The Housing Act of 1937 provided \$800 million for 587 of these developments. To avoid competing with local investors, the government enforced rules that required cities to maintain the existing racial balance and not to build on empty land that might become valuable. Instead, they made space by tearing down existing homes and businesses.



Women work in the Robert Taylor Homes vegetable garden along the State Street corridor in Bronzeville, a Chicago, Illinois neighborhood. Courtesy of the Chicago Housing Authority



Altgeld Gardens was built in 1945 on the far south side of Chicago, Illinois as a home for Black American war industry workers during the Second World War. Courtesy of the Chicago Housing Authority



A poster advertising the parade celebrating the opening of the Ida B. Wells Public Housing Project in Chicago, Illinois. Courtesy of the Chicago Housing Authority

A DIVIDED NATION

Urban renewal, highway construction, and public housing pushed America's people farther apart. Suburban housing, mainly available to White people, boasted new construction, open space, and convenient roads. Cities were a messy mix of older buildings, public housing, expensive new luxury apartments, and redlined neighborhoods where residents of color were concentrated. In 1966, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. made a speech that connected prosperity in the suburbs to poverty in the city. Unless housing discrimination came to an end, he said,

There can be no lasting escape for those of you who have fled behind the suburban curtain, for your Black brother yet languishes in the slums, crying out to you. Your lot is inextricably interwoven with his, since he retains the capability of ringing down the curtain on the American Dream. A minority that is sick with despair can poison the wellsprings from which the majority, too, must drink.

Despite King's urging, the flow of investment from city to suburb remained largely accepted by most White Americans.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

- Should children have a say in where their families live?
- What were some of the reasons a family who could afford to might have wanted to move from city to suburb? What were some reasons people might have wanted to stay in the city? Imagine you are part of a family making this decision. What are some reasons you might argue for moving or staying? Make a list of your pros and cons.
- What are some differences between choosing to move and being forced to move?
- Do you agree with Dr. King that Americans' lives are "inextricably interwoven" even if we live in different places? Why or why not?
- How could we modernize cities and improve housing without large-scale projects that destroy older homes? What would you recommend?

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