

Student Exemplar

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The Rooted Racism of Urban Planning

There is no such thing as environmental racism or economic inequality! Some insist on this although the evidence shows otherwise. The wealth gap refers to the unequal distribution of money among the residents of the United States. Some indicators of the wealth gap include homeownership, investments, business ownership, and savings capital. *The 1619 Project* published by *The New York Times* in 2019 shines a light on the wealth gap which has its origins in slavery, but the wealth gap that exists between Blacks and Whites was fueled by the homeownership policies created during the Gilded Age and during World War II. Redlining practices,¹ in which certain neighborhoods, were labeled in different colors, only perpetuated the practice of segregation. Red neighborhoods were identified as “hazardous” and therefore undesirable to live; most of the residents in these neighborhoods were black. *The 1619 Project* maintains that: “Today’s racial wealth gap is perhaps the most glaring legacy of American slavery.”² While redlining practices are legally prohibited, urban planning continues to be responsible for the great financial chasm between Black and White communities.

By origin, redlining was systematically invented with the intent to deny services to Black communities. To relegate Black communities into “hazardous” neighborhoods which would

¹ <https://www.investopedia.com/terms/r/redlining.asp>

² <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2019/08/14/magazine/racial-wealth-gap.html>

result in lower levels of investment and reduced chances of homeownership for Blacks as opposed to White communities living in suburbs. The critical moment of the great financial gap between Black and White community was when neighborhood classifications were later used by the Veterans Administration and the Federal Housing Administration to decide who was worthy of home loans at a time when homeownership was rapidly expanding in postwar America.³ Although redlining was banned 50 years ago, ethnic minorities are still struggling to thrive economically in American society. Some effects redlining has caused for the minorities are, student loans, mortgages, credit cards and insurance.

Urban renewal was designed as a treatment for addressing the severe poverty in African-American communities. The original intent of urban renewal was for the federal government to give cities billions of dollars to tear down blighted areas and replace them with affordable housing.⁴ However, city leaders decided instead to build offices or shopping malls, or to expand hospitals and universities. Urban renewal projects displaced more than 300,000 people between 1955 and 1966, and the burden fell disproportionately on people of color.⁵ This inevitably had the same effect as redlining endured by Black communities because areas in cities that were redlined in the 1930s almost directly lined up with later urban renewal projects.

Some may argue that urban planning positively impacts urban economy by touching on a broad range of topics, such as housing, transportation, land use, the cost and benefit of cities and urbanization, or the provision of local public goods like education,⁶ but they forget to point out that these benefits did not apply to everyone. Blacks did not have access to conventional home

³ <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/08/24/upshot/how-redlinings-racist-effects-lasting-for-decades.html>

⁴ <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/news/2017/12/urban-renewal-projects-maps-united-states/#close>

⁵ <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/news/2017/12/urban-renewal-projects-maps-united-states/#close>

⁶ <https://kwhs.wharton.upenn.edu/term/urban-economics/>

loans, therefore, they had to turn to schemes including contract sales with steep interest rates (the practice is returning today in many of these same communities). Their homes could be frequently repossessed by predatory lenders, which would result in more population instability.⁷

The 1619 Project published by *The New York Times* in 2019 expresses that American society mostly benefits non-minorities. This has been a pressing issue ever since the arrival of slaves to this country and continues to be an issue over 400 years later. Urban planning is just one of the several areas that has been impacted by slavery. Not only is urban planning responsible for the enlargement of the financial gap between the Black and White community, but, it has also created many divisions that might take just as long to overcome.

⁷ <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/08/24/upshot/how-redlinings-racist-effects-lasting-for-decades.html>