

**United We Stand, Divided We Drive—How Highways Served as a Racist Mechanism in
20th Century American Life**

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In March 2024, United States President Joe Biden announced that his administration would invest \$3.3 billion in communities throughout the nation that had been separated, displaced, or destroyed by highway construction.¹ He invested in “17,000 homes and 1,000 businesses [that] were destroyed in the 1960s to make way for an interstate highway system.” This is not the first time his administration has attempted to address the impacts of highways on racial communities. In June of 2022, Secretary of Transportation Pete Buttigieg invested over 1 billion dollars into rebuilding new highway systems and would also appropriate funds to reconnect African American communities and all communities that were harmed by the construction of highways.²

Around 90 percent of Americans use cars in their everyday lives.³ However, the implications of their use, notably highways as critical infrastructure have gotten substantially less attention than others. The long history of racial tensions in the United States is not a new concern. However, the means by which it manifested throughout the nation's centuries-old existence has taken several shapes. By the 20th century, structural forms of racism took root in several ways, one of the largest being ‘Jim Crow’ Laws in the Southern states. The point of this essay is to address the ways that energy infrastructure contributed to the discrimination and racial tensions during this time.

¹ David J. Lynch and Cleve R. Wootson Jr., “Biden Aims to Repair Places Left Broken by Previous Economic Strategies,” News Organization, The Washington Post, March 13, 2024, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/2024/03/13/biden-economy-milwaukee/>.

² The Associated Press, “Pete Buttigieg Launches \$1B Pilot to Build Racial Equity in America’s Roads,” Public News Organization, National Public Radio, June 30, 2022, <https://www.npr.org/2022/06/30/1108852884/pete-buttigieg-launches-1b-pilot-to-build-racial-equity-in-americas-roads>.

³ “National Household Travel Survey Daily Travel Quick Facts,” Government, Bureau of Transportation Statistics, May 31, 2017, <https://www.bts.gov/statistical-products/surveys/national-household-travel-survey-daily-travel-quick-facts>.

This paper will argue that the construction of highways in the United States during the 20th century contributed to the establishment of a segregationist framework even in states that did not have Jim Crow Laws, and also contributed to the displacement and destruction of African American communities. It will start with the contextualization in which highways were built, as well as how segregation resulted from their construction. Specifically, it will look at two major social phenomena that were undergoing during the 20th century: the Great Migration and White Flight. By understanding social and racial mobility throughout the century, we understand the influence on the construction of energy infrastructure, such as highways. Following this, our attention will be turned to how highways have harmed African American communities. This will examine a variety of cases, mostly in Northern states. An overview of these factors will allow us to conclude with a discussion of the political ramifications. As highways became more widespread throughout the Union, so did the Civil Rights Movement, which was largely critical of many different institutions in America. While African American communities often lacked the political power to contest their governments when highways were having negative impacts on their communities, the Civil Rights Movement itself did manage to utilize the racial divide of transportation infrastructure to push their political goals.

Part I: Setting the Stage

The racist consequences of the construction of highways did not occur in a vacuum. The end of the American Civil War and the subsequent collapse of the

Confederacy alongside slavery did not end racial discrimination, rather it required new forms to be taken. Upon the end of reconstruction in 1877 and the pullout of federal troops from the Southern States, new social, economic, and political structures were built to construct new forms of power along racial lines.⁴ Social norms were developed that resulted in African Americans being treated as second-class citizens. These norms were ratified into what would later be broadly referred to as “Jim Crow” laws, occurring in three large waves of legislation that dominated Southern racial dynamics. However, as legislation during the mid-1910s segregated factories,⁵ Black Americans had started to immigrate to the Northern States in search of a better life.

The signing into law of segregation was occurring largely among the Southern States, and formal Jim Crow Laws were either not present or forbidden [Figure 1.1]. As a result of this, roughly six million African Americans had moved from the South to the North throughout the following sixty years.⁶ As African Americans moved northbound, racial tensions grew in the non-

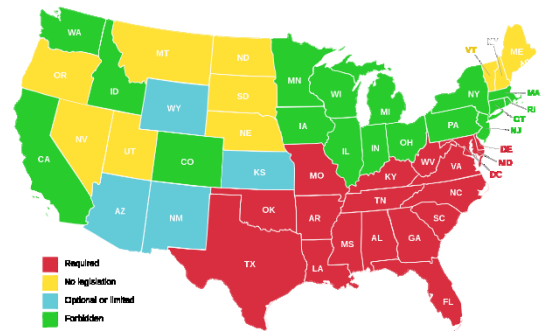


Figure 1.1: Teach Democracy, Educational Segregation in the United States Prior to Brown v. Board of Education

segregated states. White newspapers cried about the migrants bringing “PERIL TO HEALTH,” as they were demonized as practising a culture that needed to be contained or adjusted.⁷ Despite racial tensions growing as Black migration to the north increased, formal Jim Crow laws were not passed. But over the next several decades, a new social

⁴ Elizabeth Abel, *Signs of the Times: The Visual Politics of Jim Crow* (University of California Press, 2010), 4.

⁵ Elizabeth Abel, *Signs of the Times: The Visual Politics of Jim Crow*, 5.

⁶ Isabel Wilkerson, *The Warmth of Other Suns : The Epic Story of America’s Great Migration* (Random House, 2011), 22.

⁷ Davarian L. Baldwin, *Chicago’s New Negroes: Modernity, the Great Migration, and Black Urban Life* (University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 25–26.

phenomenon would emerge alongside the Great Migration, one that would not only protect but promote a culture of racial segregation.

Throughout the 20th century, racial mobility also occurred outside of just the Great Migration. As African Americans started to pour into Northern cities, White Americans who lived in them began fleeing in large numbers to richer, less dense suburban areas.⁸ This phenomenon which would later be referred to as “White Flight” completely shifted American culture. While suburbanization had occurred before the end of the Second World War, the following Cold War resulted in suburban culture being a part of capitalism and American culture.⁹ This resulted in the federal government getting involved on a number of occasions to promote suburban culture.

Mass suburbanization had started before the Cold War, but carried throughout it. Throughout the 1930s and 40s, massive initiatives were put into play to build and promote suburbs. The establishment of the Federal Housing Administration (FHA)

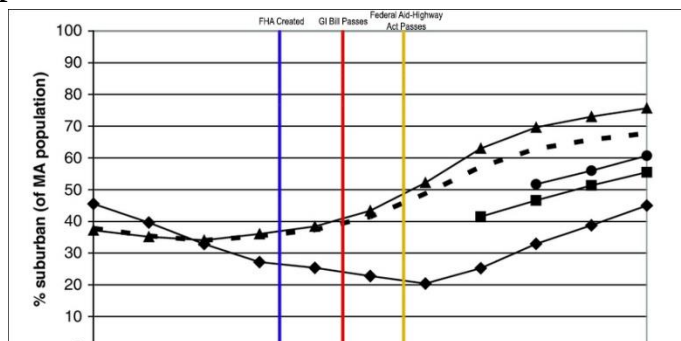


Figure 2: Jeffrey Timberlake, Aaron Howell, *Percentage of U.S. metropolitan area population in suburbs, 1900 to 2000, by racial/ethnic group*, March 2011, *Urban Affairs Review*, https://www.researchgate.net/figure/Percentage-of-US-metropolitan-area-population-in-suburbs-1900-to-2000-by_fig1_258198169

which provided mortgage aid, financial investment and tax breaks for developers who build suburbs and the passing of the GI Bill were just a few strides that the federal government took.¹⁰ One of the largest

⁸ David Card et al., “Tipping and the Dynamics of Segregation,” *The Quarterly Journal of Economics* 123, no. 1 (2008): 200–202.

⁹ Michael P. Marino, “Looking for History in ‘Boring’ Places: Suburban Communities and American Life,” *The History Teacher* 47, no. 4 (2014): 496.

¹⁰ John F. Bauman, *From Tenements to the Taylor Homes: In Search of an Urban Housing Policy in Twentieth-Century America*, with Roger Biles and Kristin M. Szylvian (Penn State University Press, 2000), 404–5.

pieces of legislation that cemented suburban culture was the passing of the Federal Aid Highway Act. This was due to suburban reliance on cars, and notably highways, which were needed to move people between their suburban regions and move in and out of cities.¹¹ As **Figure 2** demonstrates, the number of people living in suburbs grew massively throughout the century following the 1930s, especially among White Americans. Several factors went into the racial disparity between emerging suburbs and urban centers, such as the GI Bill disproportionately benefiting White veterans and federal agencies engaging in discriminatory practices such as redlining, local control, and sometimes overt discrimination to prevent African American veterans from moving into suburban regions.¹² As such, suburbs were made up largely of ethnically white Americans while urban centers became increasingly populated by African Americans.¹³

White Flight-- which was promoted via the federal government's high involvement in its development--was a way for White Americans to racially segregate themselves from African Americans who had migrated North, where there were no formal Jim Crow laws. Cars and highways were needed to upkeep the suburban lifestyle, ergo being a form of energy infrastructure that maintained segregation. Not only this, but when the highways were constructed, the segregation it produced had cultural consequences on African American communities.

¹¹ Marino, "Looking for History in 'Boring' Places," 497–99.

¹² Ira Katznelson, *When Affirmative Action Was White: An Untold History of Racial Inequality in Twentieth-Century America* (W.W. Norton, 2005), 310.

¹³ Marino, "Looking for History in 'Boring' Places."

One consequence was the hampering of the American Melting Pot. The idea of the Melting Pot, that anyone is American if they sought to be, was influenced by highways and suburban culture. This is attributable to the fact that a broad American culture during the Cold War had to do with sweeping forms of national identities that made up the “American Dream.” One of the central components of the American Dream was owning a suburban house with a nuclear family. This national culture, as illustrated in **Figure 3**, this goal was largely unachievable for African Americans due to the reasons of push-pull factors listed above. This set up African American



Figure 3: 1950's Nuclear Family Cookout, n.d., <https://www.pinterest.com/pin/430938258070330986/>

communities to be excluded from the general perception of the ‘good’ American culture. During the 1950s, this perception of American culture resulted in the flawed view of the ideal America both globally and domestically as being a white, straight, Christian, comfortable male. This lens was not grounded in reality when taking in different identities.¹⁴ Cultural issues stemming from segregation were not the only problem for African Americans and other communities that could not live in emerging suburbia. The actual construction of highways still had disproportionately negative consequences on these communities.

Part II: Construction

¹⁴ Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000), 20.

While the general framework for Jim Crow and segregation broadly was “separate but equal” (established by the SCOTUS in 1896)¹⁵ highways demonstrate this was not the case. The contrary is true, as the construction of these directly interfered with African American communities, often displacing or damaging them. While the construction of highways through urban areas was already occurring, the process was greatly accelerated during the post-war period. The entrenchment of the Cold War led to the national spirit of capitalist dominance over Soviet Communism, which in turn morphed the highway into a symbolic demonstration of national identity. A demonstration of this came in the passing of the Federal aid-highway Act, which permitted the Federal Government to directly intervene in the construction of interstate highways, which had larger impacts on urban areas.¹⁶ The construction of the interstate system played a key role in creating many of the economic conditions that modern American cities face today, and it was mainly African American communities that felt this burden.¹⁷ The importance of this is to understand how African American communities are the target of deliberate decisions made by architects and urban planners, backed by legislation and involvement from the federal government. I will briefly use a few examples to demonstrate this point, starting with Hamtramck, Michigan, a Northern state that did not have Jim Crow Laws.

The construction of highways which were done through black neighbourhoods had resulted in generational economic and cultural destruction, which in turn not only

¹⁵ Harry E. Groves, “Separate but Equal--The Doctrine of Plessy v. Ferguson,” *Phylon (1940-1956)* 12, no. 1 (1951): 66, <https://doi.org/10.2307/272323>.

¹⁶ FEDERAL-AID HIGHWAY ACT OF 1956, Public Law 627, United States Congress 84th United States Congress (1956), <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/STATUTE-70/pdf/STATUTE-70-Pg374.pdf>.

¹⁷ Deborah N Archer, “Transportation Policy and the Underdevelopment of Black Communities,” *NYU School Of Law, Public Law Research Paper*, nos. 21–12 (August 2024): 27.

served as a form of segregation but also concentrated poverty in urban centres.¹⁸ Examples of this were present throughout the North. In 1959, the city began its new urban renewal program, and in 1962 started to demolish neighbourhoods to build both a Chrysler manufacturing plant and later the I-17 interstate highway.¹⁹ Out of the 3,900 families that were reported living in those neighbourhoods, 3,390 were non-white.²⁰ To make matters worse for families who had just been displaced because of the construction of this highway, neither federal nor state governments were obliged to fund the movement fees of these families.²¹ The targeting of African American communities via highway construction and urban renewal broadly was also not an accident. In the case of Hamtramck, federal courts would conclude twelve years later that the United States Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) had known the disproportionate damage that the construction of the I-75 would have on those neighbourhoods. City officials were not concerned with these families, rather they were primarily focused on constructing freeways and not the families who were displaced,²² and as such did not assist in the relocation of the newly displaced families, making the economic situation of these communities drastically worse.²³

¹⁸ Avichal Mahajan, "Highways and Segregation," *Journal of Urban Economics* 141 (June 2023): 4–5, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jue.2023.103574>.

¹⁹ Richard Rothstein, *The Color of Law: A Forgotten History of How Our Government Segregated America*, First edition (Liveright Publishing Corporation, a division of W. W. Norton & Company, 2017), 300–302.

²⁰ United States Commission on Civil Rights, *HOUSING: 1961 United States Commission on Civil Rights Report 4*, Commission Report no. 4, 1961 United States Commission on Civil Rights Report (Washington, DC, 1961), 99–100, <https://www2.law.umaryland.edu/marshall/usccr/documents/cr11961bk4.pdf>.

²¹ United States Commission on Civil Rights, *HOUSING: 1961 United States Commission on Civil Rights Report 4*, 100.

²² Amy Widestrom, *Displacing Democracy: Economic Segregation in America*, 1st ed, American Governance: Politics, Policy, and Public Law (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015), 82.

²³ Rothstein, *The Color of Law*, 298.

It should also be noted that Washington was well aware that the widespread displacement of African Americans was occurring. On top of the growing political momentum that was growing in bringing awareness to what was happening, organizations within Washington also brought light to this. In the case of the I-75, it was the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights. The Kerner Commission, named after the chair of the commission and governor of Illinois Otto Kerner, was made up of several government officials composed of states from all parts of the union. The commission had reported to the government their findings, indicating that Hamtramck was not an isolated incident. Similar cases had been occurring throughout Northern states over several decades and had affected thousands of low-income families. In Newark, New Jersey, 12,000 low-income families had been displaced between 1959 and 1968. In New Haven, Connecticut, approximately 6,500 low-income households were destroyed between 1956 to 1968 for urban renewal. In Detroit, around 1,000 housing units were destroyed every year from 1960 to 1968. These were also largely low-income housing units.²⁴

Part III: Political Backlash

The emergence of the Civil Rights movement occurred around the same time that highways were becoming more widespread. During the decades of growing unrest as a product of the movement, there were a large number of protests that occurred on both a

²⁴ Kerner Commission, *Report of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders*, Commission Report no. 1 (Washington, DC, 1968), 80, https://belonging.berkeley.edu/sites/default/files/kerner_commission_full_report.pdf?file=1&force=1.

grassroots and nationwide level. While the movement itself was a success upon the passing of the Civil Rights Act and the banning of legalized segregation, it was difficult for local communities to stand up against their municipal or state government due to a lack of political power.²⁵ While mass protests did not occur directly because of highways, what the movement considered to be the primary obstacles posed by American white supremacy, such as segregation, systemic racism, and the threats of potential racial violence,²⁶ were obstacles that were put up with the help of highways and suburban culture. One of the largest moments in the Civil Rights movement, and arguably American history, occurred as a product of inner-city infrastructure being boycotted by the communities that lived there. Transportation infrastructure often corresponds to sociological divisions, meaning that in poor neighbourhoods,²⁷ and because of the shift away from public transportation towards car-centric individualism, Black communities were the primary consumers of a rapidly deteriorating subway and bus system.

²⁸However, the fact that several municipalities were dependent on African American usage allowed Civil Rights advocates to push their messaging.

There are a lot of different dates used to determine the first traces of the Civil Rights movement. The first of many major events that occurred that introduced the movement occurred with the March on Washington Movement in 1941.²⁹ Another (and

²⁵ Thomas J. Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit*, First Princeton Classics edition, Princeton Studies in American Politics Historical, International, and Comparative Perspectives (Princeton University Press, 2014), 87.

²⁶ Charles A. Gallagher and Cameron D. Lippard, eds., *Race and Racism in the United States: An Encyclopedia of the American Mosaic* (Greenwood, 2014), 1529.

²⁷ Lilian Knorr, "Divided Landscape: The Visual Culture of Urban Segregation," *Landscape Journal* 35, no. 1 (2016): 114, <https://doi.org/10.3368/lj.35.1.109>.

²⁸ Archer, "Transportation Policy and the Underdevelopment of Black Communities," 2141.

²⁹ Aldon D. Morris, *The Origins of the Civil Rights Movement: Black Communities Organizing for Change*, 1. Free Press paperback ed., 12. print (The Free Press, 1986), x.

arguably the most important) moment in starting the movement occurred in December 1955, when Rosa Parks was arrested on a bus in Montgomery, Alabama for violating the state's segregation policy.³⁰

While this case does not have to do with highways directly, it will still discuss the role that car-centric infrastructure played in being one of the biggest moments in the Civil Rights movement. In the case of Montgomery, around 75 percent of the total users of the transit system were African American.³¹ This was an instance where Civil Rights organizers could use their living conditions to make actual change, as a prolonged boycott of the bus system would collapse it. In a letter to Montgomery's mayor, William Gayle, president of the Women's Political Council Jo Ann Robinson stated her organization's goals. This included an end to segregated bussing, along with other demands. She reminds the mayor in the letter that the boycott would eventually collapse the bus system, and that there is always the possibility of escalation among protestors.³² The boycott was a resounding success, and around a year later, segregation on buses was no longer allowed.³³ The 13-month-long boycott had been a huge propeller for the Civil Rights movement, and while highways themselves were not the main target, it was a moment where the conditions that black communities were left in as a product of white flight and suburbia were utilized to push against oppressive systems such as

³⁰ Robert Jerome Glennon, "The Role of Law in the Civil Rights Movement: The Montgomery Bus Boycott, 1955-1957," *Law and History Review* 9, no. 1 (1991): 62, <https://doi.org/10.2307/743660>.

³¹ Gallagher and Lippard, *Race and Racism in the United States*, 4353-54.

³² "Excerpt from a letter written by Jo Ann Robinson, May 21, 1954. Montgomery, Alabama." In *Daybreak of freedom: the Montgomery bus boycott*, edited by Stewart Burns. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press. 1997

³³ Gallagher and Lippard, *Race and Racism in the United States*, 4359.

segregation. However, while some cases of highway construction were protested, local movements were not always guaranteed to take off, such as in Detroit, Michigan.

Highway planners during Detroit's highway redevelopment projects had gone to great lengths to ensure that the construction of new highways was not largely interfering with middle-class residential areas, however, gave little concern to black neighbourhoods, and the inner-city was viewed as a “handy device for raising slums.” During the 1950s, over 5,669 buildings and lots in black neighbourhoods were destroyed.³⁴ Residents often pointed this out to city and government officials, however, their requests were often shot down and they were ignored due to a lack of political power.³⁵ The opposite was the case, and White, racist Americans were often protesting the revitalization of African American neighbourhoods and any projects that may have resulted in forms of integration.³⁶ While the Montgomery protests are an instance of black communities using their collective capabilities to protest segregation, instances such as Detroit remind us of the extremely low levels of political influence that these communities had when standing against the destruction of their neighbourhoods.

Conclusion

Highways in the United States have been a large point of discussion when talking about the racial schisms that have occurred in the United States over the last rough century. Today, despite the vast majority of Americans driving on highways on an

³⁴ Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis*, 47–48.

³⁵ Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis*, 47.

³⁶ Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis*, 241.

almost daily occurrence, there is significantly less discussion about the racist effects that highways have had on poor, notably African American communities within its short history. While Jim Crow Laws established legal segregation in the South, Social phenomena such as the Great Migration and White Flight constructed high degrees of racial mobility throughout the entire nation. The promotion of suburban culture, which was only possible due to highways providing a new way of moving from one area to another, was a culture that was not widely accessible to non-whites due to intervention from the federal government and other financial institutions meant that suburbia and inner-cities had seen high levels of segregation even in states where Jim Crow did not exist.

Highways also had damaging impacts on African American communities themselves. They were often built with little consideration for the residents living there, and the building of interstate highways often resulted in hundreds of more neighbourhoods being demolished per city, while Washington was aware of the impacts that “urban renewal” had on these communities, little was done to assist in mitigating damages or assisting in relocating families. Local communities also often had to helplessly watch their communities get torn down, however the high degree of reliance on these communities that city infrastructure had, Civil Rights advocates were able to seize a grand opportunity during the Montgomery bus boycott, snowballing a movement into one of the largest equality protest movements in history.

The Civil Rights movement culminated in the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the Voting Rights Act in 1965, and the Fair Housing Act in 1968, largely cementing the end of

segregation, and legal racial discrimination.³⁷ However, the signing of these bills into law did not end the centuries of racial oppression that African Americans faced. Three years after the passing of the first Civil Rights Act, Dr. King proclaimed that the struggle for racial equality was far from over, and called upon Americans to stand against discriminatory outcomes that were still present. “Let us be dissatisfied until the tragic walls that separate the outer city of wealth and comfort from the inner city of poverty and despair shall be crushed by[...] the forces of justice.”³⁸ His vision has not come to reality, and stark differences between the inner cities and suburban regions are visible. In 2017, the median urban salary was \$49,200, while the median suburban salary was \$71,000.³⁹ This wealth gap is reflected in race as well, with white Americans making substantially more than African Americans.⁴⁰ Racial discrimination is also still a common practice, and African Americans are still subjected to a high degree of it by the state and police.⁴¹ Highways serve as a symbolic and material shift away from its 19th-century form of American racism, towards a new, long-lasting one.

³⁷ Gallagher and Lippard, *Race and Racism in the United States*, 1522.

³⁸ King, Jr., Martin Luther, ed. “Where Do We Go from Here?” The Martin Luther King, Jr. Research and Education Institute, August 16, 1967. <https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/where-do-we-go-here>.

³⁹ Rafter, Dan. “Despite the Hype for Downtowns, United States Remains a Mostly Suburban Country.” REJournals, March 26, 2017. <https://rejournal.com/despite-the-hype-for-downtowns-united-states-remains-a-mostly-suburban-country/#:~:text=The%20median%20household%20income%20in,ages%20of%2025%20to%2034>.

⁴⁰ Wilson, Valerie, and William Darity Jr. “Understanding Black-White Disparities in Labor Market Outcomes Requires Models That Account for Persistent Discrimination and Unequal Bargaining Power.” Economic Policy Institute, March 25, 2022. <https://www.epi.org/unequalpower/publications/understanding-black-white-disparities-in-labor-market-outcomes/#:~:text=Another%20defining%20feature%20of%20racial,%2C%20when%20it%20was%2016.4%25>.

⁴¹ NAACP. “Criminal Justice Fact Sheet.” NAACP, November 4, 2022. <https://naacp.org/resources/criminal-justice-fact-sheet#:~:text=A%20Black%20person%20is%20five,targeted%20because%20of%20their%20race>.

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