

HOUSING RESTRICTIONS AND POVERTY FOR AFRICAN  
AMERICANS DUE TO RACISM

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It is part of the American Dream for many people to have a nice white-picket fenced house in the suburbs with a perfectly manicured green lawn, well-funded schools for their children, and well-maintained sanitation systems in their neighborhoods. Many Americans work hard at their jobs to have enough money to afford one of those dream suburban homes but not all of them are able to buy one no matter how much they try. African Americans, in particular, have a difficult time because of the social boundaries that are held against them. When various waves of African Americans migrated from the South to the North, blacks escaped the tortures of lynching and sharecropping and entered into a new world that wasn't as accepting of them as they thought. The white's racially driven fear of blacks motivated restrictions for African Americans to live in specific neighborhoods, usually in the less funded inner city, while whites moved out to the suburbs. These restrictions encouraged segregation and impoverished blacks because they usually received less federal funding to improve their homes and could not afford to live in better off neighborhoods.

The first notable wave of African Americans migrating to the North happened during World War I when northern war factories called for black labor because most of their workers were sent off to battle. The colored population in many major cities in the North soared due to the availability of factory jobs to blacks. Detroit's colored population grew from 5,741 to 41,000 and Gary's from 383 to 5,300 in 1910.<sup>1</sup> As more and more African Americans came up North in the four decades after the end of World War I, the white citizens who have lived there before started to become afraid. Whenever an African American family moved into an all-white neighborhood, “[b]ombings, shootings, riots, or threats greeted” them with the white neighbors

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<sup>1</sup> Isabel Wilkerson, *The Warmth of Other Suns: The Epic Story of America's Great Migration* (New York: Vintage Books, 2011), 244.

“literally willing to fight to the death to keep the other [race] out.”<sup>2</sup> The racial tension that the blacks thought they have left behind in the South was prevalent in the North as well. Racism prompted white real estate agents to confine African Americans to specific areas in the city to keep blacks away from whites.

Real estate agents mainly used two methods to segregate blacks from white, blockbusting and racial steering. Blockbusting created unstable housing markets by spreading rumors that a colored family is moving into an all-white neighborhood. The white residents, out of fear of the new neighbors, sold their houses at low prices and the real estate agents bought and sold those houses to colored families at a much higher price.<sup>3</sup> Some previously all-white areas of a city became all-black within a couple of years as whites moved out at an extremely fast rate. With racial steering, real estate agents and brokers labeled certain neighborhoods as black or white and took families to communities that were racially appropriate for them.<sup>4</sup> This confinement of African Americans to only specific parts of a city isolated them from whites which only increased racial hostility even further.

Private real estate agents weren't the only ones who were promoting this form of segregation. The governments of the cities that were receiving a lot of African American migrants and even federal programs also encouraged limits on where colored people can live. Chicago's city aldermen and housing officials in 1950 suggested “restricting 13,000 new housing units to people who had lived in Chicago for two years,” meaning that the third wave of black migrants who were entering Chicago would not be allowed to live in those units.<sup>5</sup> The

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<sup>2</sup> Isabel Wilkerson, *The Warmth of Other Suns: The Epic Story of America's Great Migration* (New York: Vintage Books, 2011), 377.

<sup>3</sup> Rosalyn Baxandall and Elizabeth Ewen, “Suburban Segregation,” p. 579; accessed at [www.historian.cc](http://www.historian.cc).

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 581.

<sup>5</sup> Isabel Wilkerson, *The Warmth of Other Suns: The Epic Story of America's Great Migration* (New York: Vintage Books, 2011), 372.

proposition did not pass but the racist sentiment of it was clear to most African Americans. The Federal Housing Authority did not allow black people to get mortgages and actually gave mortgages to white families that choose to live in the suburbs to create protective covenants against colored people.<sup>6</sup> Whites were afraid of the increasing African American population in their cities encroaching on their communities. When restricting where blacks settled in the city was not enough, whites started to move away from the city to the suburbs in hope be as far as they can from blacks.

The white flight from the city not only intensified racism in the North but also changed where federal funding for housing was mainly going to. Federal funding for housing and infrastructure shifted from the cities to the suburbs as whites were leaving the inner city. The lack of funding for those who live in the city mean that many of them live in slums where “people crowded six and eight and ten to a room without sanitation, without electricity, [and] some without even adequate ventilation.”<sup>7</sup> Little resources going into housing for the inner city also meant few resources were going into schools and public services in the area. As some all-white neighborhoods in Detroit changed to all-black ones, federal money coming in those neighborhoods decreased and African Americans struggled to deal with the “resegregated schools, dwindling tax bases and decaying public services” that they thought they would not have to face.<sup>8</sup> Many inner city African Americans could not get out of their impoverished neighborhoods because they did not have enough income to afford a house in the suburbs where there was more funding.

Most blacks were limited to the kinds of jobs they were allowed to do and most of those jobs did not provide much. Colored migrants who came up North mainly worked in the iron and

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<sup>6</sup> The Editorial Board, “How Segregation Destroys Black Wealth,” *New York Times*, September 15, 2015.

<sup>7</sup> Rosalyn Baxandall and Elizabeth Ewen, “Suburban Segregation,” p. 572; accessed at [www.historian.cc](http://www.historian.cc).

<sup>8</sup> Thomas J. Sugrue, “A Dream Still Deferred,” *New York Times*, March 26, 2011, 1.

steel foundries, slaughtering, and meatpacking once they were no longer needed to work at the war factories during peacetime.<sup>9</sup> They have to work in hard labor with little reward for their work, not much different from the cotton picking that they had to do as sharecroppers in the South. With the little amount of money they earned, African Americans could not think about buying a house in the suburbs which was more expensive for them than their white counterparts since colored people were given higher prices for those houses. They were more likely try to survive the next day because when “you [they] get a welfare check and you [they] have a certain amount of money for A, B, C, and D... they just think about survival.”<sup>10</sup> The lack of substantial income for many African American families meant that they were less likely to be able to buy a house. Even if a black family mustered up enough money to buy one, they would be steered into declining black suburbs by real estate agents or, if they move into a predominately white suburb, met with backlash by their neighbors.

The limits to where African Americans could live in the northern cities and the outcry from whites when colored people were getting too close were due to the racism that blacks thought they got away from when they left the South. The white flight that happened in response to the growing colored population made most blacks who lived in the inner city get into poverty as federal money for housing moved to the white suburbs. African Americans are still denied to this day the ability to buy a home because of the racially charged boundaries that existed since the start of slavery in the United States. All Americans should be allowed to be able to fulfill an aspect of the American Dream, purchasing that suburban house with the white-picket fence and fresh, green lawn.

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<sup>9</sup> Isabel Wilkerson, *The Warmth of Other Suns: The Epic Story of America's Great Migration* (New York: Vintage Books, 2011), 245.

<sup>10</sup> Rosalyn Baxandall and Elizabeth Ewen, “Suburban Segregation,” p. 581; accessed at [www.historian.cc](http://www.historian.cc).

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