



**Making Invisible Histories Visible**

## **Omaha Public Schools**

Activity Title: Urban Geography and Large Scale White Migration or White Flight

Prepared by Mr. Pierson, Bryan High School

Intended Audience: Geography students

Background: This activity was designed in conjunction with student history projects exploring the impact of redlining on African American and working class and working poor immigrant neighborhoods in eastern Omaha. Their projects can be found here: <http://invisiblehistory.ops.org/StudentProjects/RedlininginOmaha/tabid/1335/Default.aspx>

### ***Urban Geography and Large Scale White Migration or White Flight***

***Introduction: This lesson will look at the relationship between White Flight and Urban Geography. This lesson will particularly look at the role of highways in White Flight and Urban Geography. Highways were once seen as a new and exciting way to get around a city. As time goes on, highways not only started to destroy parts of cities with their construction, but they also aided in the process of suburbanization and white flight from certain areas of a city. In this lesson you are going to see Omaha's White Flight which was aided by the highways and also how highways can destroy communities.***

***Lesson Duration: 90 Minutes***

***Lesson Placement in OPS Geography: Urban Geography Unit***

***Additional Steps: You will need to download from the MIHV website, "Documents for Urban Geography and White Flight Lesson" from the MIHV website. The document can be found right below this lesson, "Urban Geography and White Flight."***

*Step 1: Student's will be given copies of the 1935, 1950, 1980, and Present map overlaid on the redlining map from the HOLC.*

*Step 2: Teacher will give the students time to look at the maps and analyze them with a partner. They need to write on a post-it note or small piece of paper three takeaways from the maps.*

*Step 3: Teacher will ask students to give one of their takeaways. This discussion can go on for 5-10 minutes.*

*Step 4: Ask the students to look at the map from a city planner's perspective. What issues might be caused IN CITIES by this movement? Have them use another post it and work with their partner. Make sure to guide them towards transportation and housing.*

Urban Geography Article: "The Role of Highways in American Poverty" from The Atlantic

APA Citation: Semuels, A. (2016, March 18). The Role of Highways in American Poverty. Retrieved December 7, 2019, from <https://www.theatlantic.com/business/archive/2016/03/role-of-highways-in-american-poverty/474282/>.

*Step 5: Have the students read the article from The Atlantic called “The Role of Highways in American Poverty” and answer the questions in the margin. They will also read an article from Citylab called “Here are the Urban Highways that Need to Die”. They should also have a copy of the Visit Omaha map in front of them as they read.*

*Step 6: Have the students look at the MIHV Projects from 2019 named Jefferson Square and Central Park on [invisiblehistory.ops.org](https://invisiblehistory.ops.org) and discuss how these neighborhoods were impacted by the highway system in Omaha.*

*Step 7: Have the students construct a short writing piece that answers the guiding question, “Have highways had a mostly positive or negative impact on Omaha as a city?”. They must use information from the HOLC map, the Atlantic article, the Citylab article (see below), and the MIHV projects in their response.*

APA Citation: Semuels, A. (2016, March 18). The Role of Highways in American Poverty. Retrieved December 7, 2019, from <https://www.theatlantic.com/business/archive/2016/03/role-of-highways-in-american-poverty/474282/>.

## BUSINESS

# The Role of Highways in American Poverty

They seemed like such a good idea in the 1950s.

ALANA SEMUELS MARCH 18, 2016



Sunday traffic from New York City to the Jersey Shore in 1941 (LIBRARY OF CONGRESS)

*Editor's Note: This article is adapted from remarks delivered by the author on March 16 at the University of Arkansas's Clinton School of Public Service, in Little Rock.*

Little Rock is a fascinating city. With its river and renovated warehouses and bustling River Market district, it reminds me a little bit of Pittsburgh, where I lived a decade ago when I was starting my journalism career. At that time, Pittsburgh was still the butt of many jokes, though determined city planners were starting to drive the transformation that's made it so popular. Today, there's a growing population downtown and tech companies are locating in the city once known for steel.

It's a funny thing about cities: They're all unique, but they sometimes experience busts and booms in the same way. Just look at all the cities across the country that are experiencing a craft-beer renaissance and have condos in renovated warehouses downtown.

Perhaps that's why policymakers in the 1940s and 1950s thought of cities as human bodies, bodies that had sicknesses and required cures. Bodies that got sick from the same diseases and would improve from the same medicine.

1. Do you see cities as a living thing? What kind of sicknesses could a city have? What kind of cures could people provide for cities?

The postwar years were a time of unprecedented prosperity, when Americans were buying refrigerators and televisions and homes, and wanted to leave the crowded heart of city centers for space to put all their new belongings. The rise of the automobile helped them do this. In 1940, 60 percent of Americans owned cars. In 1960, 80 percent did. Today, 95 percent of Americans own cars.

This increase of people heading to the suburbs in their cars caused something else new: lots and lots of traffic. And to city planners, this was making communities unhealthy. By the 1950s, highways were being recommended as “the greatest single element in the cure of city ills,” according to Joseph DiMento, an Irvine professor who has studied highway construction during that era. To keep cities healthy, planners said, regions needed unclogged arteries for a working circulatory system. In short, cities needed highways to carry people out of the heart and to the rest of the body.

Luckily for city planners who wanted to keep their cities healthy, there was federal money available to anyone who wanted to put in modern highways. While the 1944 Federal Highway Act only offered to cover 50 percent of construction costs for highways, by 1956, the federal government had upped that share to 90 percent. So if you’re a city planner in the 1950s, you can put in roads from your city to the fast-growing suburbs for almost no cost at all.

Of course, there were people who couldn’t move to the suburbs. African Americans were denied home loans by the federal government in certain areas, a practice called redlining. Restrictive covenants prevented homeowners from selling to certain types of people, often including African Americans. And they were also denied jobs and other opportunities that would have allowed them to afford to buy a home in the first place. When I was in Syracuse, I met a man named Manny Breland, who received a scholarship to play basketball at Syracuse, graduated with a teaching degree, and was denied job after job because he was black.

In many cities, these restrictions left African Americans crowded into small neighborhoods. They essentially weren’t allowed to move anywhere else.

City planners had a solution for this, too. They saw the crowded African American areas as unhealthy organs that needed to be removed. To keep cities healthy, planners said, these areas needed to be cleared and redeveloped, the clogged hearts replaced with something newer and spiffier. But open-heart surgery on a city is expensive. Highway construction could be federally funded. Why not use those federal highway dollars to also tear down blight and rebuild city centers?

2. What allowed Americans to move out of the city and into the suburbs?
3. Traffic becomes a disease for cities, what is the cure according to city planners?
4. Why couldn’t African Americans join the flight to the suburbs?
5. How do the maps you looked at earlier about redlining and white flight relate to this last paragraph?

This is exactly what happened in Syracuse, New York. The city had big dreams of becoming an East Coast hub, since it was close to New York City, Pittsburgh, Cleveland, and Boston. (In the early days of the car, close was relative.) Use federal funds to build a series of highways, planners thought, and residents could easily get to the suburbs and to other cities in the region. After all, who wouldn't want to live in a Syracuse that you could easily leave by car? And, if they put the highway in just the right place, it would allow the city to use federal funds to eradicate what they called a slum area in the center city.

That neighborhood, called the 15th Ward, was located between Syracuse University and the city's downtown. It was predominantly African American. One man who lived there at the time, Junie Dunham, told me that although the 15th Ward was poor, it was the type of community that you often picture in 1950s America: fathers going off to jobs in the morning; kids playing in the streets; families gathering in the park on the weekends or going on Sunday strolls. He remembers collecting scraps from the streets and bringing them to the junkyard for pennies, which he would use to buy comics.

To outsiders, though, the 15th Ward was the scene of abject poverty close to two of Syracuse's biggest draws—the university and downtown. They worried about race riots because so many people were crowded into the neighborhood and prevented from going anywhere else. They decided that the best plan would be to tear down the 15th Ward and replace it with an elevated freeway.

The completion of the highway, I-81, which ran through the urban center, had the same effect it has had in almost all cities that put interstates through their hearts. It decimated a close-knit African American community. And when the displaced residents from the 15th Ward moved to other city neighborhoods, the white residents fled. It was easy to move. There was a beautiful new highway that helped their escape.

But this dynamic hurt the city's finances, too. As suburbs grew, they broke off from cities, taking with them tax revenues, even though their residents still used city services. Although the Syracuse region was relatively healthy, the city started to get very sick.

Between 1940 and 2000, the population of the city of Syracuse shrank 30 percent, from about 205,000 to 147,000. The population of Onondaga County, where Syracuse is located, grew 55 percent, from 295,000 to 458,000.

5. What areas of Omaha, based on the HOLC map would be most like the 15<sup>th</sup> ward in Syracuse?

6. What are the main interstates of Omaha? Look at the map if you do not know.

Even today, the region is continuing to sprawl. The population of Onondaga County peaked in 1970 and has stayed even since then. But residents are moving farther and farther out. The county has added 7,000 housing units, 147 subdivisions, and 61 miles of new roads since 2000. Developers build 160 units a year in areas that were once rural. That's costing the county money and resources as it adds sewer systems, water pipes, and stormwater drainage to far-flung subdivisions. As the county spends money, the city is struggling to come up with enough revenue for essential things like mass transit and schools.

What's more, as the suburbs grow, they're continuing to make sure that only wealthy people can live there. They pass zoning laws that restrict multifamily units. They require minimum lot sizes so that their only residents are people who can afford to live in big houses. It's a different kind of discrimination than half a century ago, but discrimination nonetheless.

Today, the city of Syracuse has the highest concentration of poverty in America. What that means is that large proportions of its population live below the federal poverty line, and that they're surrounded by other poor people, too. Nearly two-thirds of the black poor live in high-poverty neighborhoods in Syracuse. Around 62 percent of the Hispanic poor live in high-poverty neighborhoods.

Of course, the highway isn't the only reason there's so much concentrated poverty in Syracuse. The economy has changed, and big employers such as the Carrier Corporation and other manufacturing companies have left for overseas. Wages in Syracuse and across America have remained stagnant, so even those people who are employed are finding it is much harder to make ends meet than it used to be.

Ironically, the people who are left in Syracuse now live in more concentrated poverty than the people of the 15th Ward, which city leaders saw as so blighted decades ago.

7. How have the suburbs made it so that only wealthy people can live in them?

This is bad for the health of the region. We know that people who live in concentrated poverty have a much harder time succeeding because they're surrounded by other poor people. The economist Raj Chetty made this very clear in a series of papers he's published in the last two years through the Equality of Opportunity project. He found that neighborhoods matter, and that a low-income child who is born in certain low-income neighborhoods has a much smaller shot of achieving upward mobility than a low-income child born in a better neighborhood.

Now, there are programs that move poor families from areas of concentrated poverty to wealthy suburbs. I've written about some of them. Children thrive when they're taken out of housing projects and moved to condos where there are trees, parks, places to ride their bikes, and good schools nearby. But it's not realistic to move every family to a different neighborhood, and besides, many people don't want to move.

What does work, though, is bringing cities together so that poverty isn't so concentrated, so that the rich can't just leave or wall themselves off from the poor, so that the poor aren't trapped in areas of concentrated poverty—what people used to call slums.

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In the last decade, Americans' ideas of where they want to live have been changing. Young professionals and Baby Boomers are moving back to inner cities, fueled by the desire to live somewhere walkable, near restaurants, bars, and offices, where they don't need to have cars. A freeway passing through the heart of a city does not jibe very well with an urban renaissance.

After all, walkable cities where people want to live probably don't also have noisy highways that create physical and psychological rifts that are extremely difficult to bridge.

In some cities, planners have decided to help that urban renaissance and tear down the freeways that seemed like a good idea in the 1950s.

8. Do you agree with the statements in this first paragraph? Why or why not?

9. What benefits are there to people moving back into the inner cities? Are there any drawbacks to this?

10. Do you think Omaha could tear down any highways?

Boston tore down its Central Artery in its famous Big Dig, turning a waterfront area of the city that had long been clogged with traffic into a popular park and walking area. Milwaukee demolished the Park East freeway in 1999 and urban development has blossomed in the neighborhoods created by the highway's removal. Manpower Corporation moved its headquarters to the area, and the average assessed land value there grew 45 percent. The economically depressed town of New Haven is in the midst of a project called Downtown Crossing, which has removed parts of Route 34 and is creating a business district in an area of town bisected by the freeways.

Even some people in Syracuse want to tear down I-81. Like many highways built by idealistic planners in the 1950s, I-81 is reaching the end of its useful life, according to engineers. It isn't wide enough to meet current highway standards, and parts of it are literally falling apart. Some urban planners want to tear it down to create an urban boulevard. For more than half a century, the road has divided the city, they say, and it's time to knit it together back again.

Some cities are taking the opposite approach. Alabama's highway department is seeking to widen parts of a highway that bisect Birmingham, Alabama, though the proposal faces opposition from business leaders. Florida's highway department declined to tear down a highway in Miami called the Overton Expressway.

In the 1950s, when so many highways were built, planners across the country wanted to help citizens access the prosperity that seemed accessible to everyone in the postwar years. But starting with the exodus to the suburbs around that time, and continuing to this day, prosperity has been out of reach for many Americans.

If part of a body is sick, the whole body can't be healthy, and many cities across America have parts that aren't doing very well. But there are regions that are trying to become healthier by coming together, rather than pulling apart. Tearing down a highway can be one way to do this. But it's not the only way. My colleague Derek Thompson has written about the miracle of Minneapolis, where high-income communities share tax revenues and real estate with lower-income communities to spread prosperity. A year ago, I visited Louisville, where a court ordered the county and city to combine their school districts in order to integrate their schools. Today, Louisville is still trying to keep its county and city schools integrated, even after the Supreme Court told the city it no longer had to do so. In Chicago, a regional housing authority that covers eight counties,

11. The idea here is that communities will be knit back together if you get rid of highways. Do you think this is true? If we got rid of the freeways in North Omaha and South Omaha would it bring the community back? Explain in detail.

12. Do you believe that if one part of a city isn't healthy then the whole city suffers?



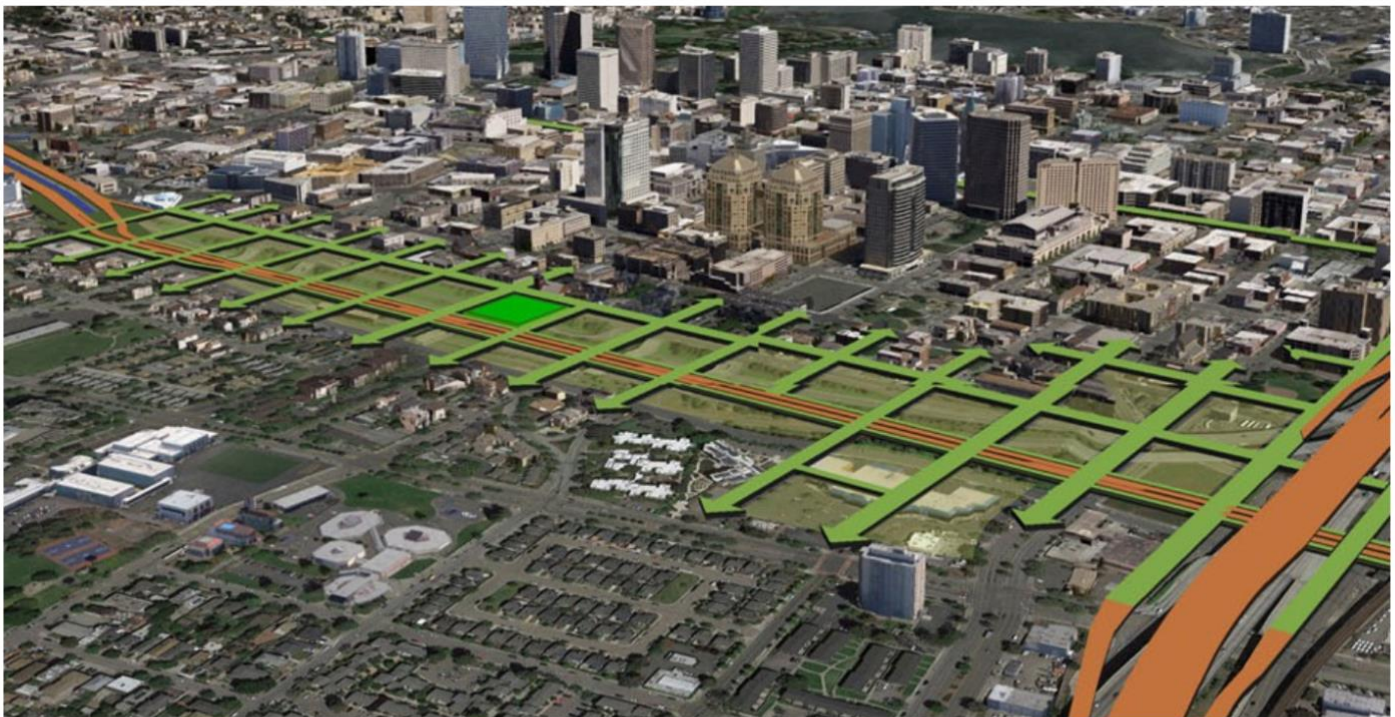
including Cook County, is working to move families from the inner city to higher-opportunity neighborhoods. Some cities use inclusive zoning, in which all new construction must include a certain percentage of housing for low-income residents, which means that the wealthy can't separate themselves from the poor.

These cities have tried to tear down barriers that prevent all of their residents from reaching their full opportunity. Sometimes those barriers are highways. Sometimes they're something else entirely. Tearing down a highway isn't the only way to make a city healthy again. But building a new one—or expanding an existing one—seems a surefire way to make a city sick.

13. What do you think cities could do to make sure all residents reach full opportunity?

Now you need to read the article from Citylab about highways. You will use both of these articles on your final assessment for this lesson.

Tran, C., Tran, C., & CityLab. (2019, April 5). Here Are the Urban Highways That Deserve to Die. Retrieved from <https://www.citylab.com/transportation/2019/04/urban-worst-freeway-without-future-teardown-demolition-list/584707/>.



Replacing I-980 with a surface boulevard could bridge the gap between Oakland's neighborhoods. // ConnectOAKLAND, for the Congress for New Urbanism

## Here Are the Urban Highways That Deserve to Die