



Phillip Montgomery for The New Yorker, "Forced Out", 2016.

ROOT CAUSES OF HOUSING AND LAND JUSTICE: BULLDOZING COMMUNITIES OF COLOR

Throughout the 20th century, government agencies frequently used public infrastructure projects and discriminatory code enforcement to displace communities of color. Serial displacement has severed social support networks and weakened local economies. It has also caused generations of residents long-term stress contributing to racial disparities in rates of chronic disease.¹ These include hypertension, diabetes, and cardiovascular disease, as well as mental health issues - depression and anxiety.²

Using public investment to displace households of color was especially prevalent in the post-World War II era. More than 600 cities and towns used urban renewal policies to involuntarily clear out low-income neighborhoods and replace them with new developments. Urban renewal projects had a disproportionate impact on communities of color who were often targeted for redevelopment. This was due to their lower property values and the perception that these communities were less politically influential than white constituents. These policies resulted in the displacement of over 300,000 households between 1950-1966 (data was not kept for 1967-1974), contributing to the segregation of cities along economic and racial lines.³

The Federal Highway Act of 1956, which funded the construction of the US Interstate Highway System, has a legacy of funding highway construction projects designed to cut through Black neighborhoods, displacing Black residents.⁴ For example, the construction of New York City's Cross-Bronx Expressway, the first large-scale urban freeway built in the United States, destroyed parts of the South Bronx neighborhood, home to a predominantly low-income, Black and Latino/a/x population. The project demolished thousands of apartments in hundreds of buildings in a seven mile swath across the Bronx. This development displaced numerous businesses and more than 60,000 thousand residents, devastating the community's social fabric.⁵

Property maintenance, zoning, and nuisance codes are also used to displace households of color.

enforcement practices in Portland between 2013 and 2018 disproportionately impacted communities of color and neighborhoods vulnerable to gentrification. They found more complaints made and citations given for non-health and safety violations in racially diverse and gentrifying neighborhoods, leading to a higher number of fines and placing of liens on properties. Differences in other demographic factors and housing conditions between predominantly white neighborhoods and racially diverse neighborhoods could not explain the disparity in complaints and violations.⁶ These practices contributed to cycles of household debt, foreclosure, and displacement that have especially harmed Portland's Black community.

Today, communities of color continue to experience vulnerability to displacement as a result of these historic practices.⁷ Housing discrimination, unequal access to healthcare and education, and environmental racism are just a few examples of ongoing systemic issues that have their roots in the displacement practices of government. Acknowledging and addressing these injustices is crucial for creating a more equitable future where communities have the self-determination, power and resources to thrive in place.

1 Fullilove, Mindy Thompson, ["Root Shock"](#), 2016.

2 HUD Office of Policy Development and Research, ["Affordable Housing, Eviction, and Health"](#), 2021.

3 University of Richmond, ["Renewing Inequality: Family Displacements through Urban Renewal, 1950-1966"](#).

4 Rothstein, Richard, ["The Color of Law: A Forgotten History of How Our Government Segregated America"](#), 2017.

5 Caro, Robert A. ["The Power Broker : Robert Moses and the Fall of New York. New York"](#), 1974.

6 City of Portland Office of Ombudsman, ["City's reliance on complaints for property maintenance enforcement disproportionately affects diverse and gentrifying neighborhoods"](#), 2021.

7 U.C. Berkeley Urban Displacement Project, ["Housing Precarity Risk Model"](#), 2024.

ROOT CAUSES AND SYMPTOMS OF HOUSING AND LAND INJUSTICE

