

TRUTH IN LOVE

Racial and Residential Segregation, Redlining, Environmental Injustices Created Conditions for Perfect Storm: Violence

By Parris J. Baker
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Editor's note: Following is the seventh in a series of articles on violence in Erie, Pennsylvania

Most of the world's tornadoes occur in five states in the United States: Texas (155), Kansas (96), Florida (66), Oklahoma (62), and Nebraska (62).[1] This region is sometimes referred to as "Tornado Alley." The three most important variables that contribute to the creation of tornadoes are geography, environmental conditions, and location. The history of violent crime and homicide in black neighborhoods is also linked to geography, environmental conditions, and location of communities in the United States.

Racial and residential segregation have always been part of the geography of America. After the Civil War in 1865, our nation stoutly resisted efforts toward integration and quickly resumed the practice of racial and residential segregation. The institution of Jim Crow Laws, Black Codes, and other state and provincial policies, used primarily in Southern states, were extremely effective in maintaining geographic and social distance between Black and white communities. A key Supreme Court decision, Plessy v. Ferguson in 1896, authorized racial discrimination and segregation regarding public facilities and

accommodations, and other services with the “separate but equal” doctrine (until it was overturned 58 years later in *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas*). According to the *Plessy* majority opinion, written by Supreme Court Justice Henry Brown: “*The separate but equal doctrine reflected American customs & traditional values. Segregation itself did not constitute unlawful discrimination.*”[2]

During the Industrial Revolution and the Progressive Era, there were dramatic increases in immigration and the growth of urban communities. More people immigrating from European countries and migrating from southern states to northern cities were forced to live in overcrowded, unsafe, and unsanitary environments. Competition for scarce resources, such as jobs (with fair wages), adequate and affordable housing, healthcare, and food created social conditions in which cooperation and struggle between and among different ethnic and racial groups were essential and normative. Urban neighborhoods were inhabited by poor, working class and middle class Black and white residents. These residents lived in culturally pluralistic communities, stratified primarily by ethnicity. Cultural pluralism is defined as mixing of diverse cultures in which each culture maintains its uniqueness without being fully assimilated into the dominant culture.

In response to the urban housing shortage, exacerbated by the Great Depression, Franklin D. Roosevelt’s New Deal programs authorized construction of housing projects, initially for the working middle class, Black and white. Soon after the construction began, however, housing projects became racially segregated. After Roosevelt, the 1949 Housing Act was so effective in building high-rise housing across America, where occupancy was obviously directed by race, that eventually entire neighborhoods and communities were racially segregated.

As industry gradually left various communities, so did the better paying jobs and, subsequently, the white tenants. Because Black tenants were paid considerably less, housing projects were subsidized by the government, fell into disrepair, and over time developed into urban slums. As additional housing projects were constructed for African Americans, these communities were established farther from white suburban homes and closer to railroads, industry, and manufacturing areas. Mohai and Saha (2015) assert that one explanation of present-day environmental disparities and injustices in impoverished communities is associated with the practice of locating harmful, toxic waste sites, putting pollution-generating factories and industries, and other locally unwanted land uses (LULU’s) in low-income communities, where people of color reside.[3]

Another racially motivated practice that ensured racially segregated communities was called redlining and protective covenants. Redlining was the discriminatory housing practice in which realtors and mortgage lenders would not sell or provide long-term loans to racial minorities for any properties located in a “redlined”

area. According to the Realtor Code of Ethics, 1924-1950 Article 34: *A Realtor should never be instrumental in introducing into a neighborhood a character of property or occupancy, members of any race or nationality, or any individuals whose presence will clearly be detrimental to property values in that neighborhood.*" [4]

Homer Hoyt, Chief economist for the Federal Housing Administration (FHA) developed a rubric that ranked races and nationalities by desirability in 1934 that was adopted by the FHA in 1944:

1. Northern Europeans most desirable – English, German, Scots, Scandinavians
2. Southern Europeans – Northern Italians, Czechs, Greeks, Russians, Jews
3. Negroes and Mexicans most undesirable

Property covenants were developed to keep white communities “For white only.”



Photo Courtesy of Library of Congress, Siegel, Arthur S., "Detroit, Michigan. Riot at the Sojourner Truth homes..." February 1942. The sign, *We Want White Tenants in our White Community* was posted directly opposite the housing projects.

“No property in said Addition shall at any time be sold, conveyed, rented, or leased in whole or in part to any person or persons not of the White or Caucasian race. No person other than one of the White or Caucasian race shall be permitted to occupy any property in said Addition or portion thereof or building thereon except a domestic servant actually employed by a person of the White or Caucasian race where the latter is an occupant of such property.”

The GI Bill (Servicemen’s Readjustment Act of 1944) has been touted as the single greatest vehicle to the creation of generational wealth. Three major benefits; (1) money for education and training, (2) loan guarantees for homes, farms, and businesses, and (3) unemployment wages. The enormous prosperity of the 1950s, experienced in the United States after World War II was attributed directly to the Servicemen’s Readjustment Act of 1944, changing the life trajectories of many American veterans. However, the two critical methods for creating generational

and intergeneration wealth were denied the majority of African American veterans.

Almost half of the admitted college and university students and one-third of home mortgages for veterans were supported by the GI Bill. In principle, the benefits of the GI Bill of Rights were available to all veterans, regardless of race. There was no overt language that prohibited any veteran from applying for GI benefits. However, House of Representative John Rankin of Mississippi, a key sponsor of the GI Bill and a known racist (fought against interracial marriage, laws that punished or penalized perpetrators of lynchings, and argued for poll taxes) crafted language that ensured African Americans would be excluded from receiving and benefitting from the GI Bill. In 1947 in the state of Mississippi, for example, of the 3,229 Veteran Administration (VA) guaranteed home loans, only two were granted to Black veterans. The Black veteran population at that time was 38.5 percent. That same year, of the 67, 000 home mortgages guaranteed by the VA in New Jersey, less than 100 home loans were issued to non-white veterans.[5]

Given that the socio-economic and political conditions have been established it should not surprise the reader to learn that six of the 10 poorest states in America (Mississippi, Louisiana, New Mexico, Kentucky, Arkansas, West Virginia, Alabama, the District of Columbia, South Carolina, and Georgia) had the highest homicide rates per 100, 000 in 2020[6]: Mississippi (20.5), Louisiana (19.9), New Mexico (10.8), Alabama (14.2), South Carolina (12.7), and Georgia (10.5).

Brookings Senior Fellow Camille Busette asserts, “Poor African American and Native American boys living in segregated communities of concentrated poverty are highly unlikely to experience anything but unemployment or incarceration or both. No other demographic group has fared as badly, so persistently and for so long. The depth of this crisis is appalling, and so too, is our failure to acknowledge and address this crisis.”[7]

Professor Cornel West offers this empathetic appraisal in his book “Race Matters:” Nihilism is to be understood ... it is far more, the lived experience of coping with a life of horrifying meaninglessness, hopelessness, and (most important) lovelessness. The frightening result is a numbing detachment from others and a self-destructive disposition toward the world.[8]

In the next essay, I will continue the discourse of nihilism and malaise described by Dr. Busette and Dr. West and consider some of the potential psychological, emotional, and spiritual short- and long-term effects on Black people who reside or are trapped in oppressive and restrictive environments.

1. <https://www.noaa.gov/education/resource-collections/weather-atmosphere/tornadoes>
2. <https://www.oyez.org/cases/1850-1900/163us537m>
3. Paul Mohai & Robin Saha (2015). *Environmental Research Letter* 10 115008.
4. <https://www.nar.realtor/about-nar/history/1924-code-of-ethics>
5. <https://www.history.com/news/gi-bill-black-wwii-veterans-benefits>

6. https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/pressroom/sosmap/homicide_mortality/homicide.htm
7. <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/fixgov/2018/03/14/a-new-deal-for-poor-african-american-and-native-american-boys/>
8. West, Cornel (2001). Race Matters, 2nd edition. Boston: Beacon Press.

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