

Opinion | It's Time to Dismantle America's Residential Caste System

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In his repeated calls for “law and order” and his characterizations of places such as Baltimore as rat-infested havens for criminals, Donald Trump did more than any politician in recent memory to perpetuate myths about inner cities, pitting urban dwellers against suburbanites. “Our inner cities are a disaster. You get shot walking to the store. They have no education. They have no jobs,” Trump declared in 2016.

Four years later, in announcing that the federal government would no longer require localities to analyze their housing patterns and redress segregation, Trump tweeted: “I am happy to inform all of the people living their Suburban Lifestyle Dream that you will no longer be bothered or financially hurt by having low income housing built in your neighborhood.”

While his style was more blatant, Trump was only the latest among presidents and presidential aspirants across five decades to weaponize racialized “ghetto” stereotypes, beginning with the dog whistling George Wallace and Richard Nixon used in the wake of urban uprisings in the 1960s. The perennial message: High-opportunity suburban living is earned, and 'hood living is the deserved result of individual behavior.

The physical lines that divide America into racialized spaces of high and low opportunity are real. But what Trump and many others have long ignored is the role that federal and state actors have played for decades in creating and perpetuating those divides, through past and present forms of racial segregation, and through the distribution of resources away from those who most need public goods and toward people and communities with more than enough.

These divides can literally be mapped, revealing the geography of racial inequality in America. While we don't always think about it in this way, geography is key to understanding where and why inequality persists — and key to redressing it.

Maps can illuminate both the origins and the persistence of neighborhood inequality. Rates of poverty in America are highest in segregated communities of color and lowest in segregated white neighborhoods. Only about 30 percent of Black and Latino families reside in middle-class neighborhoods where less than half the people are poor. But more than 60 percent of white and Asian families live in environs where most of their neighbors are not poor.

Neighborhoods with high rates of poverty, limited employment, underperforming schools, distressed housing and violent crime depress life outcomes. Meanwhile, residents of exclusionary affluent spaces rise on the benefits of concentrated advantages, from excellent schools and infrastructure to job-rich social networks to easily accessible healthy food. Less understood is the fact that the government-created Black 'hood *facilitates* poverty-free affluent white space, by concentrating poverty elsewhere.

Majority-Black neighborhoods set apart from bastions of white affluence have a long and enduring history. They were constructed in the first half of the 20th century to contain millions of Great Migrants who moved North and West to escape Jim Crow. Black Americans in the first great wave of migration to Chicago, for instance, were largely confined to an 8-square-mile area referred to as the Black Belt. Later generations called it the South Side, future home to Michelle Obama. Wherever migrants landed in large numbers they were intentionally, sometimes violently,

contained. Their neighborhoods were redlined, cut off from public and private investment and preyed on by speculators for profit.

Anti-Black habits of disinvestment and plunder continue to this day. Government at all levels overinvests in affluent white space and disinvests in Black neighborhoods, with the exception of excessive spending on policing and incarceration. Many current public policies and processes encourage rather than discourage racial segregation. And competition between communities of abundance and communities of need sets up a budgetary politics in which affluent spaces and people usually win out. The end result is more residential sorting: A recent comprehensive analysis by the Othering and Belonging Institute found that 81 percent of metropolitan regions with a population above 200,000 were *more* segregated in 2019 than they were in 1990.

These mean realities should be called what they are — a system of residential caste that harms those who cannot buy their way into bastions of affluence, which is most Americans. Residential caste also contributes to the broken politics from which we all suffer: Racial segregation makes it easier for cynics to draw political boundaries that create ideological extremes, and for dog-whistling politicians to stoke fear and division.

At the same time, acknowledging and understanding the central role of geography in creating and maintaining American caste opens up new avenues for transformation, offering an inherently organized, spatial mechanism for identifying communities that most deserve new investment from the government and private sector, and those that need less — a necessary process of abolition and repair.

America's system of residential caste is ingenious in its ability to hide the truth of how and why we subordinate some and lift up others. But I have identified three primary processes through which the 'hood and affluent white space persist: boundary maintenance, opportunity hoarding and stereotype-driven surveillance.

Boundary maintenance consists of intentional state action to create and maintain a racialized physical order. Over a century, it has included racially restrictive covenants, exclusionary zoning that limits where multi-family buildings can be built, urban “renewal” projects that removed Black residents, intentionally segregated public housing, an interstate highway program laid to create racial barriers, endemic redlining, as well as disinvestment in basic services such as schools and sewage in Black neighborhoods.

While not all of these practices continue now, the federal government still invests in segregation. To date, George Romney, Sen. Mitt Romney's father, is the only HUD secretary to have pressured and penalized communities for exclusionary zoning laws and for refusing to build affordable, nonsegregated housing. For his egalitarian deeds, President Nixon forced Romney to resign. Over ensuing decades, both HUD and local governments regularly violated the Fair Housing Act of 1968 requirement that communities “affirmatively further” fair housing. For decades, HUD has distributed about \$5.5 billion annually in grants for community development, parceled among more than 1,000 local jurisdictions nationwide, with no meaningful accountability for promoting integration.

The federal government also funnels about \$10 billion annually through the Low-Income Housing Tax Credit program for affordable housing construction. But it mostly results in construction in poor communities that already have more than their fair share of affordable housing. Nationally, only about 17 percent of LIHTC projects are built in high-opportunity neighborhoods with high-performing schools, low crime and easy access to jobs. That keeps those Americans who need affordable housing concentrated in the same low-opportunity areas.

Another program, HUD's Housing Choice Vouchers, provides rental assistance to low-income tenants, but the program does not disrupt entrenched racial and economic segregation. Most Black and brown voucher holders land in low-opportunity areas, where more than 20 percent of residents are poor, while white voucher holders tend to find rentals in lower-poverty areas.

Thankfully, the Biden administration recently restored the Affirmatively Furthering Fair Housing rule that Trump tweeted about suspending. A few conservatives or libertarians criticize the AFFH rule for not pressuring localities to deregulate exclusionary zoning codes that insulate single-family housing from more dense residences such as apartments. But vocal opposition to inclusive housing can be found in both Republican and Democratic territory. In blue California, the state legislature failed to pass a critical bill that would have suspended local single-family zoning to help solve the state's massive affordable housing crisis, though California recently passed legislation to force localities to open single-family 'hoods to duplexes.

While the vast majority of white Americans reject segregation in public opinion surveys, in practice their willingness to enter or remain in a neighborhood declines sharply as the percentage of Black neighbors increases, studies have found. The average white person lives in a neighborhood that is 76 percent white. Although most Black Americans no longer live in high-poverty Black neighborhoods, those 'hoods persist, as does the architecture of segregation. About half of all Black metropolitan residents live in highly segregated neighborhoods.

In a comprehensive study of neighborhood change between 1990 and 2010 in America's 50 largest cities, geographer Elizabeth Delmelle found that neighborhoods of concentrated Black poverty remained the most persistent type, followed by those of concentrated white and Asian affluence. The boundaries of these neighborhoods at polar extremes hardened, while more moderate-income, multiethnic neighborhoods became more fragmented, showing more possibilities for racial and economic mixture.

Still, intentional segregation of Black people in the 20th century shaped development and living patterns *for everyone* and put in place an infrastructure for promoting and maintaining segregation that lives on. Racial steering by realtors who nudge homebuyers into segregated spaces, discrimination in mortgage lending, exclusionary zoning, a government-subsidized affordable housing industrial complex that concentrates poverty, local school boundaries that encourage segregation, plus continued resistance to integration by many but not all white Americans — all are forms of racial boundary maintenance today.

The segregation of affluence facilitates opportunity hoarding, whereby wealthy neighborhoods enjoy the best public services, environmental quality and private, public and natural amenities, while other communities are left with fewer, poorer-quality resources. Worse, suburban-favored quarters are subsidized by the people they exclude: Through income and other taxes, people of all racial and class backgrounds who live elsewhere help pay for the roads, sewers and other infrastructure that make these low-poverty, resource-rich places possible.

This pattern of overinvestment in exclusionary, predominantly white space and disinvestment or neglect elsewhere is replicated within cities across the country. In her book *Segregation by Design*, Jessica Trounstein amasses empirical evidence to support her theory that segregation creates a city politics that reproduces inequality — a racial hierarchy of favored and disfavored residents. After local governments deployed land use, slum clearance and other policies to tightly compact Black Americans beginning in the early 20th century, those residents also were denied adequate sewers, roads, garbage collection and public health services. Segregation institutionalized the preferences of white property owners, protecting their property values and giving them exclusive access to high-quality public amenities — a nefarious pattern that continues.

Today, business elites bend local government to their will, ensuring that the luxury residential and commercial development they want gets built, regardless of competing community and housing needs.

In the first two decades of the new millennium, public and private investment rained down on favored parts of central cities. Black Americans, in contrast, continued to be denied. For example, a 2019 Urban Institute study found that majority-white neighborhoods in Chicago received about three times more public and private investment than majority-Black neighborhoods.

Neighborhoods on an upward trajectory, such as those in what's known as the "White L" in Baltimore, were shaped in part by investors' avoidance of Black and Latino people. In post-industrial cities that "revitalized" since 2000, areas targeted for development — usually downtown, near a university, a hospital or another key institution — became whiter. Yet in these same cities and era, Black neighborhoods, even some middle-class ones, often became poorer.

The city of Chicago demonstrates these stark divides all too well. Chicago's largest and most populous neighborhood, Austin, is overwhelmingly Black. About 40 percent of its residents earn less than \$25,000 annually. It was savaged by foreclosures after the financial crisis of the late 2000s, yet excluded from many of the city's key neighborhood development programs.

I call the Black people trapped in high-poverty neighborhoods "descendants," in recognition of an unbroken continuum from slavery. For descendants on the South and West sides of Chicago, watching booming downtown development while the city shuttered school after school in their neighborhoods added to the insult. Chicago had closed 70 public schools over eight years by 2012. Then, in 2013, Mayor Rahm Emanuel closed 50 additional public elementary schools — the largest one-time mass school closure in the country. The Great Cities Institute at the University of Illinois at Chicago found that schools with large numbers of Black students had a higher probability of closure than other schools with comparable test scores, locations and utilization rates.

As school infrastructure evaporated in Black 'hoods, the city invested in new options elsewhere. An investigative report by a local public radio station in 2016 revealed that new school building expansions after the 2013 closures were "overwhelmingly granted" to specialized schools that serve relatively low percentages of low-income and Black students.

Private actors also favor whiteness and disfavor Blackness. The Center for Investigative Reporting released a study in 2018 that analyzed 31 million records revealed by the Home Mortgage Disclosure Act and found a disturbing pattern of denials by banks of Black and Latino applicants for traditional mortgages where white applicants with similar qualifications would be accepted. This modern-day redlining persisted in 61 metro areas, from Atlanta to Detroit, Philadelphia to San Antonio. The greater the number of Black or Latino people in a neighborhood, the more likely a loan application would be denied.

Borrowers from these neighborhoods are also more likely to be preyed on with subprime credit products. Large financial firms, backed by private equity investors, swarmed like vultures to pick through the carrion of the foreclosure crisis. They could purchase a foreclosed home at auction, say for \$5,000, and sell it immediately with no repairs through a land contract for \$30,000. The land contract is designed to produce failure by the buyer, who believes she is acquiring a home but in fact accumulates no equity unless and until the final installment is made. According to the National Consumer Law Center, Black and Latino people in marginal neighborhoods are disproportionately targeted for this plunder. Their dollars, earned through work we have come to acknowledge as "essential," should gain them equity, but instead are transferred to financial titans.

Cities, too, engage in financial predation. A recent study by the Center for Municipal Finance found that cities are taxing owners of low-valued properties at higher rates than they should relative to actual land values, while taxing owners of high-valued properties at lower rates than they should.

Geography ultimately reifies power and opportunity for the few who live in rich neighborhoods and contributes to powerlessness and permanence of poverty for descendants.

Government does overinvest in Black neighborhoods in one area: punitive practices such as policing, law enforcement and incarceration. In many cities, Black people are disproportionately arrested for a range of offenses, including much non-violent behavior such as driving without a permit that under-policed whites can engage in with impunity.

What explains separate and unequal policing? George Floyd's slow execution last year ushered a new national focus on racist policing. Less clear in that radical moment was the role of segregation. Floyd died in the racially mixed Powderhorn neighborhood of Minneapolis, due south of very poor Black neighborhoods on the south side and not far from a dividing line to affluent white space. Like every other segregated city, Minneapolis' stark segregation was constructed with great intention. According to recent geographically mapped data published by the *New York Times*, since 2015 Minneapolis police used force against Black people at seven times the rate of whites. Police wielded guns, chemical irritants, Tasers, chokeholds, body-pins, fists and other brute force in the very Black 'hoods of the Northwest and the Southside of Minneapolis. The white working-class Northeast quadrant, across the Mississippi River from Black areas, were spared such intense use of force, as was the affluent white Southwest area.

Another function of anti-Black policing is economic plunder. In 2014 alone, New York City received nearly \$32 million from fees, fines and surcharges paid to the criminal courts by people facing misdemeanors, summonses or other low-level violations. Researchers estimated that, over two decades, the city's take from its "zero tolerance" policing exceeded a half billion dollars. They concluded that most of these revenues were "extracted from relatively poor segments of the population, who live in heavily policed neighborhoods."

Although aggressive policing produces some revenues for local governments while harming Black citizens, it also produces liabilities that harm all taxpayers. A UCLA law professor looked at payouts by large cities to victims of police misconduct over five years and found they totaled nearly three-quarters of a trillion dollars. Perhaps the only beneficiaries of systemic anti-Black policing are owners and shareholders of corporations that profit from mass incarceration. In Chicago, there are 851 city blocks in which taxpayers spend more than \$1 million per block to incarcerate residents who live there. Those blocks are concentrated on the West and South sides, in the 'hoods that Chicago built to contain descendants.

Children, too, are swept into the carceral state. As with segregated neighborhoods, segregated schools facilitate an entirely different relationship between police and young citizens. One legal scholar found that a school's percentage of minority students and of poverty is a strong predictor of the use of strict security measures, even after controlling for actual levels of school crime and disorder. In New York City, 5,200 full-time police officers patrolled public schools as of 2017, while the schools employed only about 3,000 guidance counselors.

Then there are the ways in which the state encourages private surveillance of Black Americans by self-appointed citizen patrols. Barbecuing by a lake in Oakland. Entering one's own gourmet lemonade business in San Francisco. A registered guest at a hotel in Portland, Oregon, taking a call from his mama in the lobby. A child mowing lawns for candy money in a Cleveland suburb. These and other acts of "living while Black" resulted in calls to the police. This is what

living in white space can do to some people. Those used to being dominant, or unused to seeing dark bodies around, become suspicious of Black people doing utterly ordinary things.

As with slavery, as with Jim Crow, law and social practice continue to allow non-Blacks to monitor and police Black bodies. The worst of these social practices is violent vigilantism. Ahmaud Arbery. Trayvon Martin. Emmett Till. Arbery's killers were charged and prosecuted. But the state of Georgia enabled their vigilante behavior through permissive laws that make it easy to obtain a gun and encourage, rather than discourage, using it. Georgia, like nearly three-quarters of U.S. states, has a "stand your ground" law that eliminates any duty to retreat and entitles gun owners to use force when they "reasonably believe" it is necessary to defend themselves or others.

Other laws quietly enable surveillance of Black folk to protect white space. An estimated 2,000 localities in 48 states have adopted "crime-free housing" or chronic nuisance ordinances that make landlords responsible for the actions or nonactions of their tenants. Such ordinances often are adopted following an influx of racial diversity. They explode the range of activities that can cause an eviction, and, according to law professor Deborah Archer, they are enforced disproportionately against Black tenants.

When a tenant tries to seek protection from the state, calling 911, say, to control a violent partner, in places with chronic nuisance ordinances, she can be evicted if she calls two or three times. Faribault, Minnesota, for example, adopted one of the harshest ordinances in the country. The ordinance prohibits disorderly conduct by tenants or their guests and gives Faribault police the power to order an eviction without an arrest or conviction of any crime.

Descendants cannot win. They are surveilled, overpoliced and under-protected.

Healing a nation that began with, and still suffers from, white supremacy requires abolition of the processes of residential caste and repair in poor Black neighborhoods. The state is obligated to repair what it put in motion and continues to reify.

But understanding and acknowledging the role of geographic lines in structuring racial inequality presents an opportunity — a targeted mechanism for transformation. My theory of repair is that those most traumatized by the processes of residential caste most deserve care, as well as the chance to be agents in their own liberation. That means government can and must prioritize those neighborhoods that are at the center of anti-Black residential caste in America.

To begin, the state should dismantle and reverse *current* anti-Black processes of residential caste — through investment in Black neighborhoods, rather than redlining and economic predation; inclusion, rather than boundary maintenance; equitable public funding, rather than overinvestment and hoarding for high-opportunity places; humanization and care, rather than surveillance and stereotyping.

I suggest three critical pillars to guide government action. First, we must change the relationship of the state with descendants from punitive to caring. Second, the state should see descendants as potential assets and empower them to be change agents. Finally, government must invest resources and transfer assets to support descendants and respected community institutions in Black neighborhoods.

Among the new processes that might be implemented would be a regular neighborhood analysis that looks critically at all the money being spent by a state across neighborhoods, with a constant evaluation of racial equity. Seattle, Minneapolis and a few other cities formally require a racial equity analysis in budgeting. Baltimore recently amended its city charter — by ballot initiative — to establish a permanent fund to advance racial equity in housing, education and capital expenditures.

Applying a humane lens to descendants frees policymakers to innovate and focus on evidence-based strategies that might be cheaper and certainly more effective than punitive strategies borne of racial dogma. Researchers at the University of Chicago Crime Lab and the University of Pennsylvania found that a program that gave Black teens in high-violence neighborhoods a summer job and an adult mentor reduced arrests for violent crime by 43 percent. A peer-reviewed independent study found that a “peacemaker fellowship” to support young men most vulnerable to violence in Richmond, California, was associated with a 55 percent annual reduction in gun-related deaths. The organization Advance Peace is helping other cities replicate the program. Other approaches, such as a universal basic income pilot program in Stockton, California, have had promising results. And several cities are responding to activists’ demands for collective ownership strategies to combat displacement of communities of color and create sustainable affordable housing.

Perhaps follow the lead of Lawrence, Massachusetts, which made bus lines from its poorest neighborhoods free, as have other cities. Invest in well-resourced, culturally competent education, with reduced class sizes, in high-poverty neighborhood schools. And allow descendants to be first in line in any lottery for accessing great, integrated schools and neighborhoods. Invest in parks and neighborhood centers that offer recreation and human services in poor Black neighborhoods — free services for the freedom and liberation of descendants who have been intentionally trapped in hyper-segregated poverty.

These are just a few of the possibilities. Descendants should be asked what they and their communities need to prosper, and they should play a role in charting community transformation. Ascending multiracial coalitions that believe Black Lives Matter should gather power to mandate inclusionary zoning and fight for school integration, racial equity and the transformation of policing from predatory to humane.

The federal government also has a critical role to play, though national policy reforms admittedly come with significant political challenges. Because federal, redlined, mortgage-insurance programs invested hundreds of billions (in present dollars) in pro-white wealth-building, new investments should be allocated now to Black communities. Historically defunded 'hoods should receive priority for any new federal infrastructure funding. Congress also could atone for the federal legacy of promoting segregation by enacting a law that bans exclusionary zoning. And it could eliminate the \$23 billion gap between what America spends on white versus nonwhite school districts by tripling existing funding for the Title I program for high-poverty schools. Whatever proposals for repair win consensus, they could be paid for in part by reallocating funds from punitive strategies that exacerbate racial inequality and repealing recent excessive federal tax breaks for wealthy individuals and corporations.

All levels of government have a moral obligation to stop investing in segregation, to stop doubling down on practices born of a long, sinister, racist past. Paying attention to the role of geographic dividing lines in undermining citizens marks the way forward to a new reconstruction.