

## LOCAL / REGIONAL

# Removing urban highways can improve neighborhoods blighted by decades of racist policies

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single-family or exclusionary zoning, which restricted residents by socioeconomic class – a proxy for race in the U.S.

Next came redlining, a classification process that started in 1933 when the federal government rated neighborhoods for its loan programs. Working with real estate agents, the federal Home Owners Loan Corp. created color-coded neighborhood maps to inform decisions by mortgage lenders at the Federal Housing Administration.

Any neighborhood with substantial numbers of Black residents was colored red, for “hazardous” – the riskiest category. Other New Deal programs, such as the Federal Housing Authority and Fannie Mae, built on redlining by requiring racially restrictive covenants before approving mortgages.

Beginning with the first federal highway law in 1956, transportation planners used highways to isolate or destroy Black neighborhoods by cutting them off from adjoining areas. Once the highways were built, the social and economic fabric of these neighborhoods began to deteriorate. Distinguished environmental justice scholar Robert Bullard calls this transportation racism, alluding to the way in which isolation limited employment and other opportunities. The lasting impacts of highway construction

Today low-income and minority neighborhoods in many U.S. cities have much higher levels of fine particulate air pollution than adjoining areas. Across the U.S., Black and Latino communities are exposed to 56% and 63% more particulate matter, respectively, from cars, trucks and buses than white residents.

Decades of work by environmental justice activists and academics have shown these neighborhoods also are much more likely to be chosen as sites for polluting industrial facilities like incinerators and power plants.

Formerly redlined neighborhoods

also have less tree cover and green space today than white neighborhoods. This makes them hotter during heat waves. One outcome is that life expectancy in the nation’s cities is compromised, varying considerably between the lowest- and highest-income ZIP codes. The worst cities have gaps as high as 30 years.

As one example, Delmar Boulevard in St. Louis is a socioeconomic and racial dividing line. North of Delmar, 99% of residents are Black. South of Delmar, 73% are white. Only 10% of residents to the north have a bachelor’s degree, and people who live in this zone are more likely to have heart disease or cancer. In 2014, these disparities led Harvard University researchers, based on their work on the “Delmar Divide,” to conclude that ZIP code is a better predictor of health than genetic code.

Transportation investments in the U.S. have historically focused on highways at the expense of public transportation. This disparity reduces opportunities for Black, Hispanic and low-income city residents, who are three to six times more likely to use public transit than white residents. Only 31% of federal transit capital funds are spent on bus transit, even though buses represent around 48% of trips.

Reconnecting neighborhoods

Many highways built in the 1950s are now deteriorating. At least 28 cities have begun or are planning to partly or fully remove highways that have isolated Black neighborhoods rather than rebuilding them.

Cities began removing expressways, particularly elevated ones, in the 1970s. While these teardowns were mostly to promote downtown development, more recent projects aimed to reconnect isolated neighborhoods to the rest of the city.

For example, in 2014 Rochester, New York, buried nearly a mile of the Inner Loop East, which served as a moat isolating the city’s downtown.

Since then, the city has reconnected streets that were divided by the highway, making the neighborhood whole again.

Walking and biking in the neighborhood have increased by 50% and 60%, respectively. Now developers are building commercial space and 534 new housing units, more than half of which will be considered affordable. The \$22 million in public funds that supported the project generated \$229 million in economic development.

Other cities that have removed or are removing highways dividing Black neighborhoods include Cincinnati, Chattanooga, Detroit, Houston, Miami, New Orleans and St. Paul. There are only a few well-documented case studies of freeway removal, so it is too early to identify factors leading to success. However, the trend is growing.

In our view, combining highway removal with significant investments to improve bus networks that serve these neighborhoods would significantly improve access to jobs, housing and healthy food. Removing highways would also open up land for new green spaces that can improve air quality and provide cooling. However, we are also mindful that green amenities can cause environmental gentrification in these communities if they are not accompanied by robust support for affordable housing.

Simply removing highways won’t transform historically disadvantaged neighborhoods. But it can be a key element of equitable urban planning, along with housing stabilization and affordability, carefully planned new green spaces and transit improvements. For an administration that has pledged to prioritize racial and environmental justice, removing divisive highways is a good place to start. NOTE: This article has been updated to reflect passage of the infrastructure bill. (The CONVERSATION, December 2021)

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### OUR CEO

DeVan Curry is the founder and current director of ANCUR, Inc. He graduated from the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga earning dual Bachelor of Science degrees in both Biology and Psychology. DeVan then advanced to Georgia State University earning his M.S. in Urban Policy Studies – Policy Analysis and Evaluation from the Andrew Young School of Policy Studies in Atlanta, GA. Some of his accomplishments include:



- Developing Disaster Preparedness training, policy, and exercises for U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and U.S. Environmental Protection Agency.
- Through ANCUR INC, DeVan gained nearly six figures in Payroll Protection Program loans for his clients from the SBA, with a 100% approval rate, during the COVID-19 Crisis in 2020
- He has assisted over 200 small businesses and startups throughout the Southeast to become successful and profitable, helping others to achieve their vision.

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