

Testimony for the December 7, 2021 meeting of the A.B. 3121 Task Force
to Study and Develop Reparations Proposals for African Americans

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Thank you for the opportunity to address this task force. My name is Isaac Martin. I am a professor at the University of California, San Diego, where I also chair the Department of Urban Studies and Planning. My testimony here is my own.

My testimony will concern just some of the enduring effects of twentieth-century urban renewal on African American communities in California.

“Urban renewal” is a name for several related policies that provided federal funding to state and local governments for the purpose of remaking cities in partnership with private businesses. Those policies included, among others, the Federal Housing Acts of 1937, 1949, and 1954; the Federal-Aid Highway Act of 1956; various state laws, such as California’s Community Redevelopment Law of 1951, that authorized the creation of redevelopment agencies; and the local implementing actions that created redevelopment agencies and made use of them to condemn and redevelop property.¹

In the mid-20th century, the policymakers and planners who led urban renewal efforts explicitly aimed to reduce density and to separate land uses from each other. Urban renewal was used to clear the land for the development of both privately owned structures and public infrastructure, especially but by no means only freeways. Clearing the way for major infrastructure investments meant displacing existing land uses, including residential communities. By 1969, according to the estimates of the urban planning scholar Emily Talen, at least 910,000 units were demolished with financing from federal urban renewal programs, 330,000 of them specifically to make way for highways.² Often plans for urban renewal called for replacement housing, but housing was not replaced on a one-for-one basis, and it often was not affordable to previous residents of a redeveloped area. The communities targeted for urban renewal were predominantly low-income.

Many of them also were disproportionately Black. One particularly well-known example in California is the Fillmore District in San Francisco. This diverse neighborhood was home to a large African American community when the San Francisco City Planning Commission declared it blighted and announced a plan for its redevelopment in 1947. The plan included new schools, parks, recreation facilities, a freeway extension, and thousands of new apartments for middle- and upper-income families.³ Not all the development happened as planned, but the demolition did. The city planning scholar Clement Lai has reported that redevelopment of the area displaced 8,000 residents over the next two decades, many of them Black. It also displaced a small but

¹ Jon C. Teaford, in “Urban Renewal and Its Aftermath” (*Housing Policy Debate*, vol. 11, no. 2, 2000), reserves the term “urban renewal” for federal matching funds provided under Title I of the Housing Act of 1949, but most recent scholarship, uses the term “urban renewal” more generally to refer to a constellation of policies rather than “one singular policy” (Eric Avila and Mark H. Rose, “Race, Culture, Politics, and Urban Renewal,” *Journal of Urban History*, vol. 35, no. 3, p. 335).

² Emily Talen, “Housing Demolition during Urban Renewal,” *City and Community*, vol. 13, no. 3, p. 238.

³ San Francisco City Planning Commission, *New City: San Francisco Redeveloped*, 1947.

important enclave of Black-owned businesses and community institutions that served the broader African American community of San Francisco and beyond.⁴

Another especially well-documented example from California is West Oakland. State and local government agencies demolished thousands of homes in this once-thriving, majority-Black neighborhood in order to make way for new highways and light rail that would funnel commuters from the suburbs into San Francisco. The historian Robert Self has estimated that West Oakland “lost between 6,600 and 9,700 housing units in the first six years of the 1960s,” displacing “more than 10,000 people.”⁵ Landon Williams, who grew up in West Oakland in the 1950s, recalled it as a Black community with a “vibrant” commercial strip running through it, where his paper route took him past dozens of retail businesses that would later disappear when the Nimitz Freeway and Bay Area Rapid Transit carved through the neighborhood. “I can remember little cleaners, you know, meat markets, grocery stores, liquor stores, furniture stores, you name it, you know, pharmacies.... I can remember people walking down the street laughing and, you know, feeling good,” he said in an interview with the West Oakland Oral History Project: “Then I can remember redevelopment and the wiping out of where I used to live around Linden Street, they wiped it out and the ground lay fallow for like ten years.”⁶

These examples both come from the San Francisco Bay Area, but they are not unique to the Bay Area. Many other Black communities were disrupted by major transportation infrastructure investments. The economists Jeffrey Brinkman and Jeffrey Lin have documented in a sample of 50 U.S. cities that “the predicted probability of freeway selection in 1966 was more than 6 percentage points higher for an all-black neighborhood compared with an all-white neighborhood,” holding constant other neighborhood characteristics.⁷ Although these urban renewal projects did bring major infrastructure investments into neighborhoods with many Black residents, they also displaced many of those Black residents, and most of the people who enjoyed the benefits of the infrastructure investment were not the Black people who had previously resided in those neighborhoods. The costs of these infrastructure investments were shared by all taxpayers insofar as these investments were paid for, in part, by state and federal tax revenues. They also, however, had other kinds of costs that were borne most especially by the previous residents who stayed in, or were displaced from, those neighborhoods. The costs to those who were displaced included the expense of moving and, in some unknown number of cases, an increase in their rent. The costs to those who remained included such disamenities as obstacles to travel within the neighborhood, and new exposure to air pollution from nearby freeways. These disamenities, in turn, imposed economic harms: for example, it could become much harder to

⁴ Clement Lai, “The Racial Triangulation of Space: The Case of Urban Renewal in the Fillmore District,” *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, vol. 102, no. 1, p. 158; Destin Jenkins, *The Bonds of Inequality: Debt and the Making of the American City*, University of Chicago Press, 2021, pp. 105-106; Christina Jackson and Nikki Jones, “Remember the Fillmore: The Lingering History of Urban Renewal in Black San Francisco,” in *Black California Dreamin’: The Crises of California’s African American Communities*, UC Santa Barbara Center for Black Studies Research, 2012, pp. 57-73.

⁵ Robert O. Self, *American Babylon: Race and the Struggle for Postwar Oakland*, University of California Press, 2003, p. 155.

⁶ Landon Williams with Marjorie Dobkin and Bill Jersey, *West Oakland Oral History Interview: Landon Williams Interview*, California Department of Transportation, 1994, at 35:58. Retrieved from <https://californiarevealed.org/islandora/object/cavpp%3A21472>

⁷ Jeffrey Brinkman and Jeffrey Lin, “Freeway Revolts!”, Federal Reserve Bank of Philadelphia Working Paper 19-29, July 2019, p. 16.

sustain a small retail business when a new freeway condemned the houses of your customer base and cut you off from foot traffic. The particular costs to the neighbors in an urban renewal area also included non-economic harms that are difficult to quantify. There is something priceless about having a community of friends and neighbors, and there is something lost when that community is cut off by a freeway.

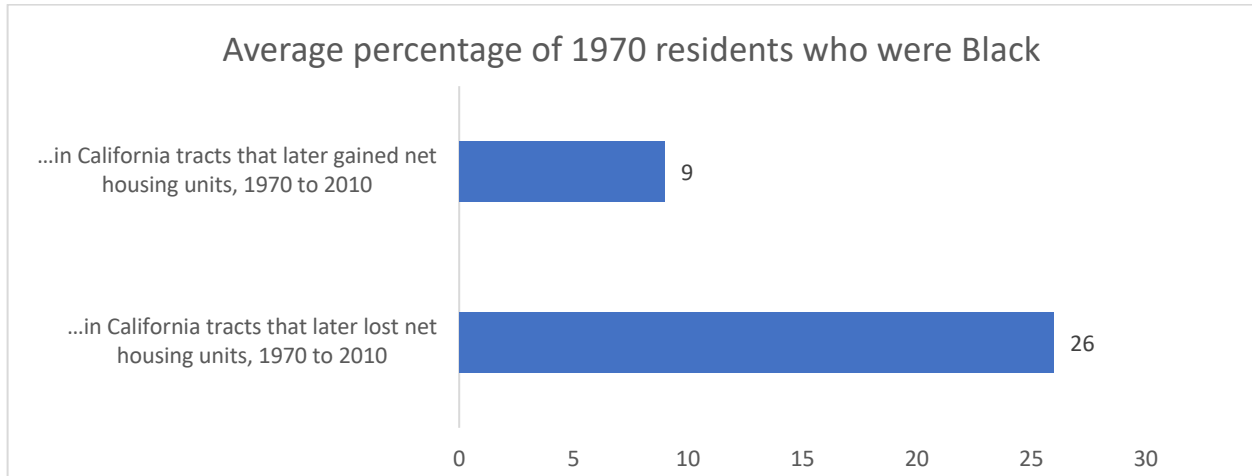
The flows of federal money for urban redevelopment and highway construction contracted in the 1970s, but urban freeway construction and state-led redevelopment of the urban core continued. One way to document the ongoing legacy of redevelopment in Black communities is to compare the changing availability of housing in Census tracts that were predominantly Black and Census tracts that were predominantly non-Black. I report here the results of an analysis of net housing units lost, by Census tract, in California, from 1970 to 2010. This comparison makes use of the decennial Census to take quantitative snapshots of the number of housing units at two different points in time. It thereby allows us to identify the characteristics of neighborhoods that lost more housing units than they gained over a 40-year period.⁸ This 40-year period came after the period conventionally regarded as the era of urban renewal, but it included the heyday of the California redevelopment agencies, the construction of hundreds of miles of freeways, and ongoing struggles over the location of urban infrastructure.⁹ It also included many other events such as fires and earthquakes that may have reduced the number of housing units. What the comparison can tell us is whether lost housing units were replaced.

Most California Census tracts added more housing units than they lost after 1970. Some, however, lost housing units overall. Of the 1,064 California Census tracts in the sample analyzed here, 117, or 11%, lost more housing units than they gained. The tracts that lost net housing were disproportionately home to Black people. At the start of the 40-year period, in the Census tracts that would subsequently gain housing units, on average, 9% of tract residents were Black. In Census tracts that would lose housing units, on average, 26% of tract residents were Black.

⁸ My method here was inspired by the approach of the planning scholar Emily Talen (“Housing Demolition and Urban Renewal”), who compared Census tracts in 1940, 1950, 1960 and 1970 in order to evaluate the effects of urban renewal on housing demolition. Talen’s sample included 5,974 Census tracts from major U.S. cities. She found no statistical association between the percentage of tract residents who were “nonwhite” and the percentage of housing units lost to demolition in the following decade. The analysis I report here differs from hers in a few respects: my sample is limited to California, my comparison is limited to the beginning and ending of the 40-year period from 1970 to 2010, and I focus on the net loss of housing units in absolute terms, rather than as a percentage of prior housing units in the tract. Because Census tract boundaries have changed, estimates of change over time are subject to error. In order to compare over time, I relied on 1970 Census data imputed to tracts as defined by 2010 boundaries, and I limited the analysis to 1,064 tracts that either had not undergone boundary changes, or had been formed from the union of multiple, whole 1970 Census tracts. The data were aggregated and matched to 2010 Census tract boundaries by *Social Explorer* (New York, 2021) (retrieved from <http://www.socialexplorer.com/pub/reportdata/HtmlResults.aspx?reportid=R12974410> and <http://www.socialexplorer.com/pub/reportdata/HtmlResults.aspx?reportid=R12974411>).

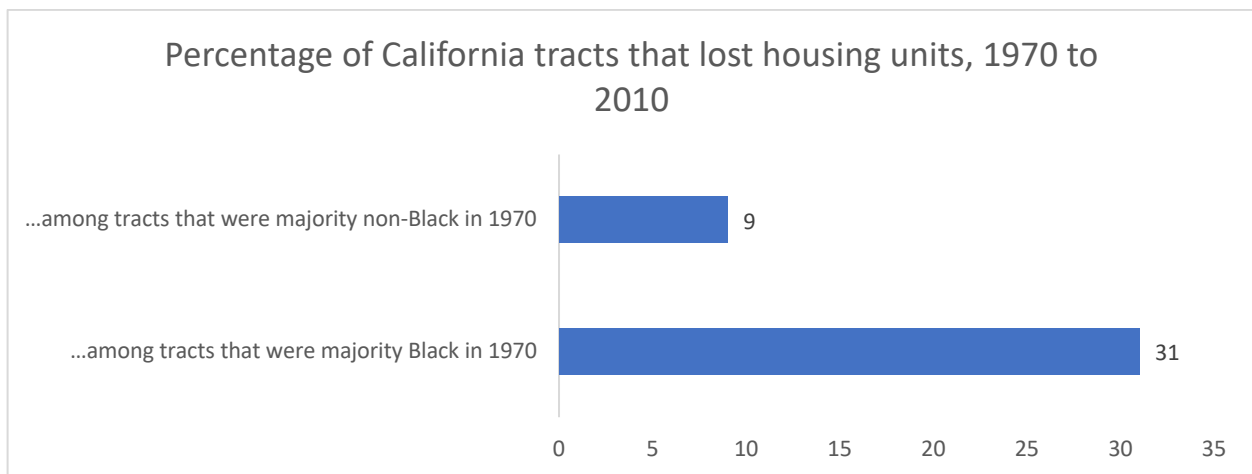
⁹ On the slowing pace of freeway construction, see Brian D. Taylor, “When Finance Leads Planning: Urban Planning, Highway Planning, and Metropolitan Freeways in California,” *Journal of Planning Education and Research*, vol. 20, no. 1, 2000; on the state’s redevelopment agencies, see Michael Dardia, *Subsidizing Redevelopment in California*, Public Policy Institute of California, 1998.

Figure 1. Percentages of residents who were Black circa 1970 in Census tracts that respectively gained and lost net housing units after 1970



Of the 1,064 California Census tracts in the sample analyzed here, 968, or 91%, had residents a majority of whom were non-Black, and 96, or 9%, had residents a majority of whom were Black. Among Census tracts the majority of whose residents were non-Black in 1970, 9% lost more housing units than they gained by 2010. Among Census tracts the majority of whose residents were Black in 1970, 31% lost more housing than they gained.

Figure 2. Percentage of Census tracts that lost housing units, by the percentage of tract residents circa 1970 who were Black



Neighborhoods that lost housing also lost Black residents. The Census tracts in this sample that lost net housing units, on average, also lost an average of 229 Black residents over this 40-year period, compared to the Census tracts that gained net housing units, which gained an average of 30 Black residents in the same period.

In short, many of the African American residential communities that existed in California in 1970 would eventually lose more housing units to the bulldozer and the wrecking ball than they would gain from new investment over the next 40 years. Some maps will provide a visual illustration of the association between the location of African American residential communities and the location of subsequent housing demolition. This simple descriptive comparison does not tell us what caused the destruction of housing units in any particular neighborhood. It does reveal where redevelopment failed to replace housing that was destroyed during this period.

Figure 3. Black population share, 1970, and net housing loss, 1970 to 2010, for selected Census tracts in Alameda County

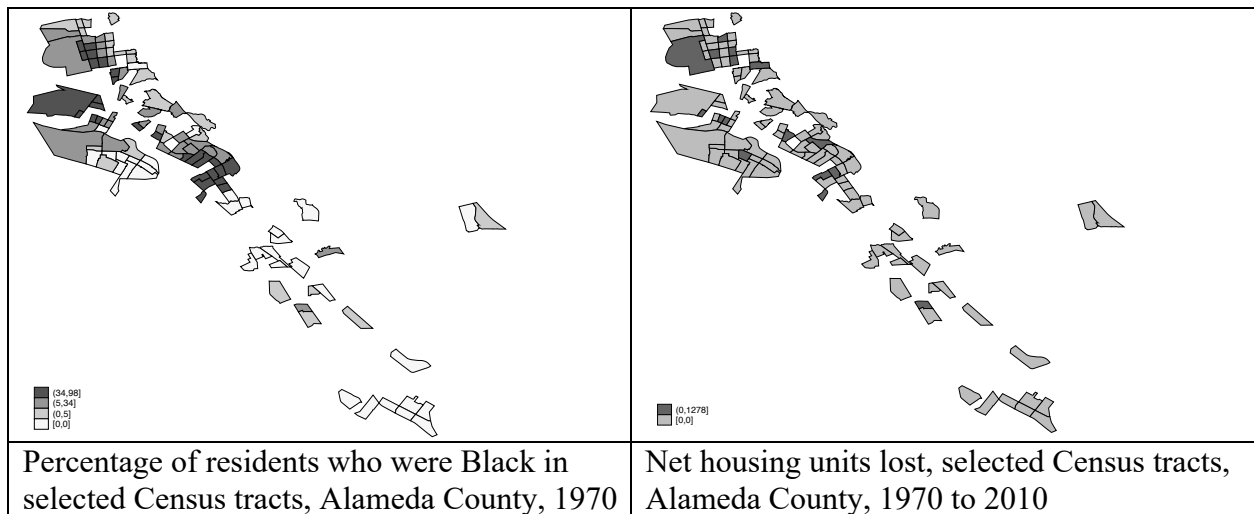
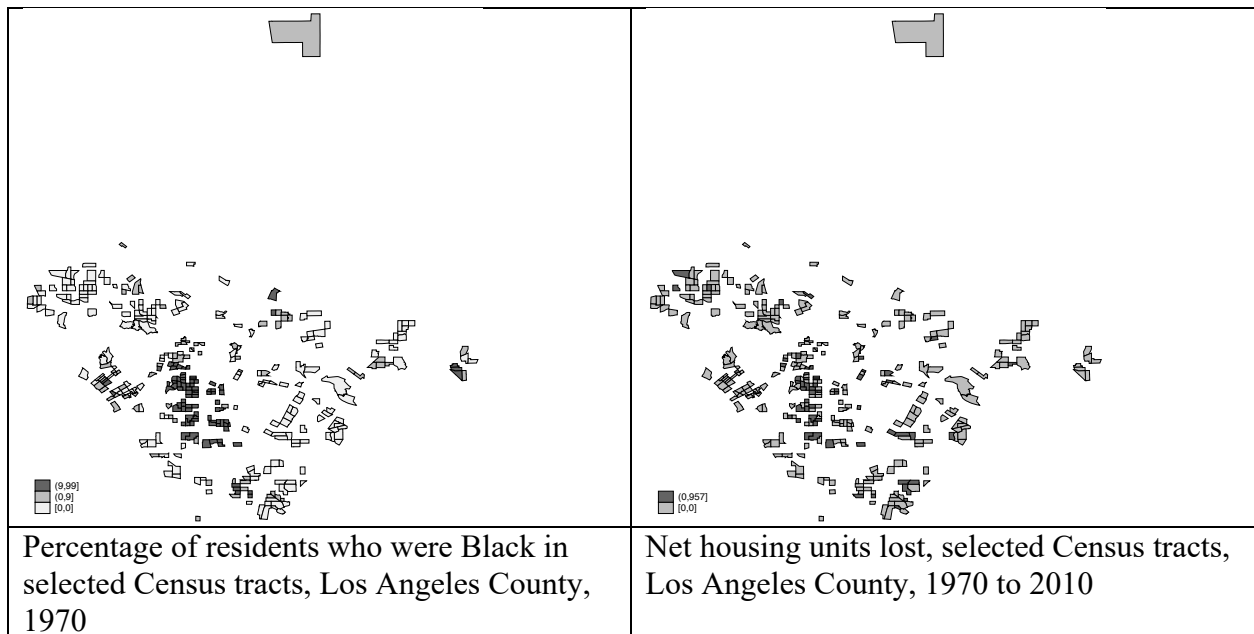


Figure 4. Black population share, 1970, and net housing loss, 1970 to 2010, for selected Census tracts in Los Angeles County



Many caveats are in order about this comparison: it does not tell us whether destruction of housing units in one neighborhood was later made up by the construction of new housing units elsewhere in the same city, nor does it tell us what happened to the residents who were displaced, nor how many of those residents were worse off than they would have been in the absence of redevelopment. At a minimum, however, it shows that 40 years of redevelopment after 1970 yielded different amounts of housing in predominantly Black and predominantly non-Black neighborhoods. That descriptive comparison should suffice to show that the legacy of urban renewal differed across neighborhoods. It should also tell us that the stories of loss passed down to us from residents of the Fillmore and West Oakland are not unique. Historians have recorded many of the stories of residents from these particular places, but the former residents of many other African American communities in California could tell similar stories.

I would like to conclude with a few general remarks that may be relevant to the deliberations of this task force.

First, the legacy of urban renewal in California includes negative consequences that were sometimes felt by Californians of all races and ethnicities, but that were disproportionately felt by African American people who lived in predominantly African American communities. The net impact of urban renewal on wealth creation for African American people has not yet, to my knowledge, been measured. That impact may have been negative in many cities, and the negative economic impacts of urban renewal on many Black individuals and families may be assumed to have compounded other, well-documented harms associated with intergenerational dispossession and ongoing racial discrimination in housing and credit markets.

Second, both public and private investments in infrastructure sometimes contributed to displacing Black people, Black-owned businesses, and Black community institutions. Many neighborhoods that were targeted for urban renewal badly needed new infrastructure. But in many cases, that infrastructure was provided in a way that did not benefit residents of those neighborhoods. Investment in a place does not always benefit the particular people who live there. This point may be particularly true of transportation investments that serve people who are only passing through.

Third, I would also note that the effects of urban renewal on community institutions in some predominantly African American neighborhoods might be regarded as a collective injury. To the extent that the opportunity for Black people to live in the same urban neighborhood with other Black people created new opportunities for Black people's economic and political empowerment in the second half of the twentieth century, we might regard the disruption caused by urban renewal as a collective harm, affecting even Black people who lived outside of the most directly affected neighborhoods.

Fourth, urban renewal took place within living memory, and the legacies of urban renewal include physical structures such as freeways that still divide neighborhoods, organizations such as redevelopment agencies that persisted into the twenty-first century, and processes of neighborhood transformation that have continued to take place long after the heyday of urban

renewal was past. If urban renewal caused harms that could be addressed by reparations, those harms are not in the distant past. Our elders remember them.