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## **SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC EFFECTS OF URBAN RENEWAL IN KANSAS CITY, MO: CENSUS TRACTS 24 AND 33**

*SOCIOLOGY 431:*

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### **ABSTRACT:**

*In an effort to revitalize urban cores, and to maintain competition with rapidly rising suburbs, the federal government equipped cities with new tools in the mid-20th century. But the federal government's redevelopment plans focused primarily on highway development and land clearance and this focus has led to a breakdown of urban districts with vibrant, active neighborhoods and gave rise to concentrated and cyclical poverty, and a concomitant rise in business flight from urban centers. This paper focuses on the outcome of urban renewal projects in Kansas City's census tracts 24 and 33.*

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Slowed growth in urban cores, clamoring property owners, downtown business elites, urban blight and booming suburbs all convinced the federal government that large scale urban renewal was necessary to save the city from obsolescence. The result from urban renewal projects on Kansas City's east side has concentrated poverty, destroyed the urban fabric, reduced density and left a community with less agency than compared to pre-urban renewal.

Communities anchor us to resources and social networks. They provide us the social organization needed to boost individual agency and improve our neighborhoods, lobby for scarce resources, and also empower us to ward off undesirable developments or troublesome vagrants. The residential neighborhoods are where stability, diversity, interaction and healthy living must take place. The city builds a sturdy tax base and houses its educated, marketable workforce in residential neighborhoods. It is because nearly everyone can understand the deep bond we all share with place that makes the local and federal government's urban renewal policies so pernicious. The federal urban renewal policies displaced many, destroyed much and helped few. The government has encouraged

development that is counter beneficial to our urban centers. The federal government's answer to fixing the urban decline, such as dilapidated housing, blight and neglect, was highway development and land clearance, which did little to create a better urban environment and disproportionately affected those who were of a lower socioeconomic class. Furthermore, the government, through its actions, has weakened the resource structure of those in areas affected by urban renewal, thus crippling their social agency to combat damaging urban policy. The end result of urban renewal was the creation of concentrated and perpetual poverty and neighborhoods with little social agency.

This case study will examine census tracts 24 and 33 abutting Kansas City's central business district (CBD), home of several urban renewal projects, to understand how urban renewal policy affected these neighborhoods and residents. Census Tracts 24 and 33 are bound by 9th Street on the north, Prospect Avenue on the west, 23rd Street on the south and Cleveland Avenue on the east. These census tracts have experienced both large and small scale projects that were meant to reverse urban decay and spur reinvestment. The two largest undertakings were the interstate highway (I-70) and the nearby Wayne Minor Court public housing projects. I will provide an overview of federal urban renewal policy and examine the census tracts before, during and after urban renewal programs to understand the influence of federal policies on residents and neighborhoods in census tracts 24 and 33.

### **EFFECTS OF FEDERAL URBAN RENEWAL POLICY**

In response to suburbanization and urban decay, the federal government empowered cities with new tools to combat the dilapidation of housing, spur new development, and appease downtown stakeholders by giving eminent domain powers to municipalities in order to facilitate land clearance and highway building.<sup>1</sup> This was an attempt to level the playing field with suburbia where land clearance and blight were not barriers to development.

The Land Clearance for Redevelopment Authority (LCRA), empowered by the American Housing Act of 1949, was created in 1953 and spearheaded the Kansas City effort to remove blighted properties.<sup>2</sup> Several urban renewal districts around downtown were created and eventually the entire CBD was slated for redevelopment. The city manager advocated using the LCRA in order to speed the construction of highways into downtown and use the urban renewal funds to construct segregated public

housing for the displaced residents.<sup>112</sup> This process would clear large tracts of land and transfer property to new owners for redevelopment. In 1952 Mayor William Kemp proclaimed that the LCRA would create space for parking and city planners saw redevelopment as a way to retrofit the urban core to suburban standards in order to stay competitive.<sup>3</sup> All this was done in the name of financial stabilization with emphasis on the privatization of the urban core.

During the 1940s middle class consumption and social mobility were very high. Growing mobility would continue into the 1950s and 1960s with the government subsidizing sprawl development with FHA loans and municipality-bonded infrastructure on the fringe.<sup>4</sup> As the socially and spatially mobile left the city for suburban living, a cycle was created in which the city and the people who remained in the newly economically drained neighborhoods would be victim. As new roads and highways were created to accommodate the wealthy commuters, even more development would appear on the edge. Soon businesses would follow and previously healthy urban neighborhoods would be in decline without economic capacity to support retail markets or other commercial services. Kansas City, needing to reverse this decline, cleared land for highway construction and built housing projects to relocate the displaced in segregated neighborhoods. This was the fix and it culminated in the development of Wayne Minor Court public housing, Interstate 70 and the South Midtown Expressway (US 71).

### **MAKING OF AN UNDERCLASS: CENSUS TRACTS 24/33**

I start with the 1950 census and gather key economic statistics on residents and the neighborhood. Comparing this data with the 1970 and 2000 census it is obvious that tracts 24 and 33 were not stabilized in the 1950s during urban renewal. In fact the opposite can be said of this area as population, home value, vacancy, unemployment, and income have all fallen in the area when adjusted for inflation to 2011 dollars.

First we examine the loss of population and housing units. This is important for a community, as William Julius Wilson writes, “Lower density makes it harder for a sense of community to develop or for people to feel that they can find safety in numbers.”<sup>5</sup> The area’s increasing joblessness and vacancy have an effect on those residents who remain. Wilson also studied the decline of urban neighborhoods such as tracts 24/33 and found that 71% of residents felt their neighborhood had deteriorated and gotten worse.<sup>6</sup> Wilson also notes the psychological effect joblessness has on a

community and the worry residents have for personal belongings.<sup>7</sup> Joblessness and poverty lead to low levels of social organization. High rates of unemployment lead to community problems that cripple social organization such as crime, gangs, drug trafficking, and broken families.<sup>8</sup> These elements link poverty, the underclass and the culmination of divisive housing policy during urban renewal.

**BY THE NUMBERS:**

Only 31% of 1950 housing units exist today. Since 1950 there has been a 465% decrease in population. Even with fewer housing units, vacancy has soared from 1950 levels to well over the state average of 12%. By comparing the numbers it seems that in 1950, census tracts 24/33 were far more prosperous and stable than in 1970 thru 2000.

The housing vacancy rate of the tracts was very healthy, under one percent, in spite of the fact that the area’s average household income was 66% of the national average. So as time and investment went on, the housing units in the tracts decreased in number and value. This is counter to the belief that the massive slum clearing of the 1960s would elevate the area economically and socially.

| <b>Census Tracts 24/33</b>  | <b>1940</b>  | <b>1950</b>  | <b>1970</b>  | <b>2000</b>  |
|-----------------------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|
| Population                  | 8563         | 9311         | 4550         | 2003         |
| Housing Units               | 2731         | 3051         | 1980         | 948          |
| Owner Occupied              | 28%          | 45%          | 43%          | 38%          |
| Vacant                      | 9% (247)     | 0.8% (26)    | 16% (314)    | 19% (175)    |
| Average Rent: Mean of 24/33 | \$ 264.30    | \$ 236.00    | \$ 240.00    | \$ 344.00    |
| Home Value: Mean of 24/33   | \$ 23,874.00 | \$ 31,725.00 | \$ 31,067.00 | \$ 22,780.00 |
| Unemployment                | 16%          | 4.70%        | 8.70%        | 9.2%         |
| Average Household Income    |              | \$ 16,295.00 | \$ 27,574.00 | \$ 22,142.00 |

*\*All figures adjusted for inflation to year 2000 dollars. (US Census)*

As those with money left the city, it was only a matter of time before the jobs and other resources would follow. When the income levels of neighborhoods plummet it generally starts a downward spiral that is difficult to reverse. First, the commercial services that made central city neighborhoods so convenient left to be in a more desirable demographic. The mean household income of census tracts 24 and 33 is 43% of the average American household income. As the wealthy corporate decision makers invested in suburban edge nodes it became desirable to relocate

larger commercial offices around their homes and increasingly their suburban workforce. This decentralizes the city, making its core less relevant. The heterodox approach to economics suggests that if one's social structure is weakened then it also adversely affects one's power and the distribution of resources. Douglas Massey and Nancy Denton wrote "in a market such as the United States opportunities, resources, and benefits are not distributed evenly across the urban landscape, certain residential areas have more prestige, greater affluence, higher home values, better services, and safer streets than others."<sup>9</sup> It was, in part, government action that was crippling urban neighborhoods and facilitating the spread of wealth to the fringe, which led to segregating the less socially and spatially mobile class of people in urban cores. The segregation that the Housing Authority of Kansas City used to locate and house residents along with their poverty status created an underclass in census tracts 24 and 33.<sup>10</sup>

As wealth and employment opportunities left the city, neighborhoods were left with less powerful representation and influence to obtain much needed assets. Cities need the middle class tax base to be viable. It is the middle class who have the means to purchase homes, support commercial services and sustain large businesses as well as provide the city with a well educated, able-bodied work force in order to be competitive with competing centers.

By the 1940s the federal government was finally involved in developing public, low-income housing. The government's intentions were to stabilize cities and reverse blight and population loss. However, with the passage of the 1949 Federal Housing Act, the government set new requirements and standards for building.<sup>11</sup> The new housing act mandated that towers be uniform in stories and set generic plans with cost-cutting initiatives. Moreover, the financial management rules imposed by the government stated that rents must cover maintenance and staked the success of these projects on the shoulders of the low-income tenants and their ability to generate income.<sup>12</sup> The government did little to increase the resources available to the lower-class residents and for residents of these large superblock complexes life became challenging. In Kansas City the only high rise development under urban renewal was the Wayne Minor Court housing projects. It was made up of five 10-story towers located between 9th and 11th Streets and Woodland and Brooklyn Avenues. Wayne Minor was built to house the displaced black residents affected by land clearance and highway building. The projects developed a poor reputation of inadequate maintenance, mismanagement, financial difficulties and

neglect.<sup>15</sup> Wayne Minor's reputation was not helped when two buildings were condemned and the other three buildings' top floors were shuttered due to low occupancy.<sup>14</sup> Vandalism and security in the area became a concern and eventually the poor refused to live in them. Occupancy rates in the projects never surpassed 60% and the housing development was destroyed less than 30 years after it was built.<sup>15</sup> The development was created to rid the area of blight but ended up creating new problems. The demolition erased 650 residential units that were never replaced. Instead, the former residents were forced to utilize the Section 8 housing program or fend for themselves in the open market. Today Wayne Minor public housing is a series of townhomes along 11th Street. After the demolition, the Housing Authority of Kansas City conceded that high-rise residential units cannot work for low-income, Kansas City families. Even when faced with the evidence of poor management and inadequate maintenance, the housing agency could not admit to doing the community an injustice by allowing and concentrating substandard housing in the community. Today the Kansas City Housing Authority is in receivership after a federal judge noted that the agency was the worst run in the nation.<sup>16</sup>

Today tract 33 is 92% black and tract 24 is 50% black and the mean income of both tracts is 34% below the national average. The concrete and steel erected through the urban renewal process did little to address the social and economic complexities that hinder the success of black and mixed-race urban communities. Instead of equity and advocacy planning, the government pursued the interests of property owners over those of everyday residents, both black and white. The result is a homogenous concentration of the underclass with little agency for change and without true advocacy. Without investing in social causes and human capital the redevelopment of buildings will never address the root of inequity and basic human civil rights.

### **HIGHWAY POLICY**

When it comes to the government attempting to fix urban issues, one Band-Aid commonly applied was the highway. The highway became a two-pronged answer for urban issues; it permitted the further consumption of houses and land by the middle class as well as a way to destroy perceived blight in cities. Today, one can go to any major American city and see the result of our Interstate system on our cities. Most downtowns are choked off or disconnected by the presence of highways. Neighborhoods have become less pedestrian friendly, marked with dead ends or polluted by their noise

or unsightliness; this is especially true in census tracts 24 and 55. Highways divide communities; they also have become political dividers in that they allow residents to quickly pass through urban communities without any engagement. High priority was given to highway construction in the past to create middle-class jobs and to facilitate the middle-class lifestyle.<sup>17</sup>

The resulting new interstate system, funded 90 percent by federal money, had devastating effects on American cities. The new highways enabled industry and commercial activities to leave the city and build in the suburbs following people and further deepening the problems of the city with abandonment and a declining tax base.<sup>18</sup> The new highway system was developed by supporters of the decentralization of people and jobs. They wanted a way to bypass the urban areas and to create a car-dependent culture. Urban planners of the day such as Robert Moses and others advocated that highways should penetrate the heart of the city and remove blight and improve accessibility to and from the suburbs.<sup>19</sup> The same attitude was present in Kansas City. A large portion of the 1947 Kansas City Master Plan is devoted to highway and arterial street building with seemingly little concern for the area but with great concern for those who needed to bypass it.<sup>20</sup> A 1946 traffic study showed planners that 40% of the traffic in the central business district was passing through the district with a destination beyond downtown. Combined with increasing investment in suburban areas and increasing auto ownership, Kansas City was hedging its bets and positioning itself for federal highway funds.<sup>21</sup> Planners and governments seemed to be disinterested in the effects of the highway system on those remaining in the city.<sup>22</sup>

Suburbanization aided by urban renewal has economically and racially segregated us. Today 86 percent of whites live in a neighborhood where minorities make up less than 1 percent of the population.<sup>23</sup> The federal policies have led to a decline in our cities and less options for those of a lesser economic class.

It is not solely the presence of highways and suburbs that have further disadvantaged urban residents; wealth was been pulled out of urban neighborhoods. Those with strong resource and cultural structures have powerful agency to cause change and influence. And those with weaker resource and cultural structures have little agency to improve things. So it is reasonable to acknowledge that the actions that have weakened the central city have also weakened the agency of those living there. Those of lesser economic status were not aided by the policies or subsidies of the federal government's urban renewal. The government catered to those with

the power of consumption and was not concerned with the effects on the lower class and what future was developing for them or our major cities. The federal government's policies tried to fix major urban issues with massive demolition and highway construction during urban renewal, which has led to creating new and complex problems in the city. These policies contributed to the development of sprawling suburbs and concentrated poverty. It is important that the government strengthen its focus and position on reversing decline in the urban core while moving to strengthen our cities with not just investment in infrastructure but in people as well.

## ENDNOTES

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- <sup>1</sup>Gotham, Kevin. *Constructing the Segregated City*. Lawrence, KS: University of Kansas, 1990. Pg 269.
- <sup>2</sup>Gotham, Kevin. Pg 156.
- <sup>3</sup>Gotham, Kevin. Pg 158.
- <sup>4</sup>Gotham, Kevin. Pg 157-9.
- <sup>5</sup>Gans, Herbert. *The Levittowners: Ways of Life and Politics in a New Suburban Community*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1967. Pg 14.
- <sup>6</sup>Wilson, William Julius. "From Institutional To Jobless Ghettos." 1996: 126-135. Pg 131.
- <sup>7</sup>Wilson, William Julius. Pg 129.
- <sup>8</sup>Wilson, William Julius. Pg 129.
- <sup>9</sup>Wilson, William Julius. Pg 133.
- <sup>10</sup>Massey, Douglas, and Nancy Denton. "Segregation and the Underclass." In *The Urban Sociology Reader*, by Jan Lin and Christopher Mele, 134-143. New York: Routledge, 2005. Pg 139.
- <sup>11</sup>Massey, Douglas & Denton, Nancy. Pg 138.
- <sup>12</sup>Hall, Peter. *Cities of Tomorrow*. Third. Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1988. Pg 257.
- <sup>13</sup>Hall, Peter. Pg 259.
- <sup>14</sup>Gotham, Kevin. Pg 138.
- <sup>15</sup>Mincer, Jilian. *National Notebook*. March 8, 1987. <http://www.nytimes.com/1987/03/08/realestate/national-notebook-kansas-city-mo-failed-project-is-demolished.html> (accessed April 7, 2011).
- <sup>16</sup>Mincer, Jilian.
- <sup>17</sup>Gotham, Kevin. Pg 317.
- <sup>18</sup>—. "Growth Machine Up-links: Urban Renewal and the Rise and Fall of a Pro-Growth Coalition In a U.S. City." n.d.



<sup>19</sup>Phillips, E. Barbara. *City Lights: Urban-Suburban Life in the Global Society*. New York: Oxford, 2010. Pg 451.

<sup>20</sup>Hall, Peter. Pg 317.

<sup>21</sup>City, City of Kansas. 1947 Master Plan. Planning Document, Kansas City: Unknown, 1947.

<sup>22</sup>City of Kansas City.

<sup>25</sup>Hayden, Dolores. *Building Suburbia: Green Fields and Urban Growth 1820-2000*. New York: Vintage Books, 2003.

<sup>24</sup>Phillips, Barbara. Pg 554.