

# White flight and the endless cycle of poverty for urban people of color in America

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**Abstract:** The United States continues to evolve as a divided collection of states, divided by class and race. Despite public policy, legislation and even social unrest, the cycle continues to roll over those disenfranchised populations. This essay is a reflection of the Los Angeles poverty trap, yet applicable to the perpetual poverty faces by blacks and Hispanics in Houston, Chicago, Cincinnati, Boston, New York and Atlanta, to name a few. Being “caught between the freeways” serves as an unfortunate metaphor of continual poverty. In conclusion, even the escape route through education seems truncated with the most recent considerations that limit access and preparation for America’s most vulnerable population.

Keywords: *poverty, public policy, black Americans*

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## 1. Introduction

Los Angeles, California remains a major destination in the western United States with over 10.1 million people as of July 1, 2016 [43] and with 224 languages spoken [14]. In what Ulysses S. Grant deemed the ‘wicked war’ Mexico lost California to the United States in 1848 through the United States imperialistic strive to gain not only California but Arizona, New Mexico, Nevada, and Utah [25]. Los Angeles is a particularly eclectic city chocked full of extreme wealth, skid row poverty, urban pollutions, sandy beaches, and even Disney Land, and recently deemed as facing a revitalization [8]. The 45.5 million visitors was a tourism record in 2015 for Los Angeles. This popularity in tourism also points to its international allure [28]. In contrast, to the wealth and riches of Los Angeles, the purpose of this essay is to examine the cycle of poverty in Los Angeles, California, which serves as an example for many urban disenfranchised communities across the United States. As these communities have limited resources, diminished tax bases, and higher rates of homicide and incarceration, few citizens transcend these bounds. In the midst of the city’s financially polarized community, the community college could be a lifeline to such communities. However, students coming from weak districts require additional support; support that is under scrutiny in the midst of budget cuts to education. Such trends, which include blocking access to remedial and developmental education, can further solidify the plight of those caught between the freeways.

## 2. White flight and constant poverty

According to the *Sacramento Business Journal* [41], Los Angeles has the fourth largest economy in the United States and 16<sup>th</sup> globally just behind Mexico. Nonetheless, within this wealth and global opulence, the black and brown people of the five county regions continue to struggle in urban centers as resources and supports are drained from those communities. When people with means fled the urban center, they took with them their incomes and resources that supported the infrastructure, school districts, and local commerce.

This same pattern has appeared in other cities. Detroit, now with sections as a veritable ghost town, saw a flight from 1.8 million to .95 million from 1950 to 2000 [23]. Similar patterns occurred in Cincinnati, Cleveland, Houston and the New York/ New Jersey metropolitan area. Simultaneously, the social forces have pushed the middle class whites towards the west side of Houston outside of the interstate loop. In Milwaukee, Wisconsin, African Americans segregated to North side of town and this remained largely unchanged from the 1960s to 2000s. These migration patterns were a national trend; many stated that this was a white flight from urban American. Jego and Roehner [23] offered the perspective that these migration patterns instead are a flight from poverty.

Regarding white flight in Los Angeles, Krysan wrote,

Los Angeles whites also had different perceptions of what a neighborhood would be like if it were integrated with blacks or Latinos versus Asians. Over twice as many perceived that neighborhoods with Latinos and blacks would suffer from high rates of crime, lower property values, and other negative

qualities as those who felt this way about neighborhoods integrated with Asians. The problems with Asian neighborhoods, according to these whites are "cultural differences"-particularly expressed as language concerns [25].

### 3. Consequences of dwindling resources

Given the geography of southern California, there are not obstructive boundaries that would limit expansion. Therefore, this region has grown exponentially having an impact on the United States economy and the Pacific Rim economy. This expansion was an opportunity for blacks that led to an increased black population, upwards to 65% from the 1950s through the 1970s [12]. However, the recession of the 1970s turned the economy boom to poverty stricken and segregated neighborhoods that were sequestered amidst the major inner city highway system throughout Los Angeles. The trend continued as the *Los Angeles Sentinel* [3] reported a 14% black unemployment for blacks, double that of whites. Comparatively, black male unemployment skyrocketed to 50%, similar to New York, South Chicago, and Detroit. Over 13% of blacks in Los Angeles were on public assistance compared to only five percent of Hispanics and two percent of Whites and Asians.

These conditions adversely affect residents. In particular, black males' life expectancy is most affected. Other researchers have [39]calculated the black men lose five years of life expectancy in urban neighborhoods due to gun violence and homicide.

### 4. City of Angels Changes?

Suburban sprawl, contracted tax base, middle class migration, and other geo-political forces asserted by Drier et al [12] illustrate that not only regional and geographic factors influence both sprawl and political agendas, but also the education of its constituents. A school district's ability to educate community members is directly related economics and the tax base. Although many factors have a positive or negative effect on the development of the student in this community, a key insight is that urban and rural school may not ever have the ability to recover from economic hardship thus subjecting the educational institutions (school districts, schools, colleges and universities, community colleges) and those that they serve (students and their families) to a sub-standard education. The cycle of poverty is perpetuating and it is politically intentional [31].

Between 1970 and 1990, Los Angeles along with a number of economic centers experienced economic prosperity; yet in the same time period, the number of poor people living in high-poverty neighborhoods in the United States nearly doubled. While some periods experienced an income boom and diminished economic inequality, in the mid 1970s, black families saw a decline. Iceland [21] looked at the shifting structure of black families that had been well documented by researchers [4],[13], [27], [34]. Married people had a poverty rate of 5.8% in 1999, while 30.4% of female-headed households and 19.1% of those living alone experienced poverty [10].

Consequently, the children and residents, literally and figuratively caught between the freeways, are disenfranchised without stable and reliable education. The

spiral devolves further through this isolation with declining economic opportunities. The social networks and commerce reinforce a cycle of failure and poverty. In the state of California, the National School Lunch Program served 5.25 million children [6]. The seventy-nine school districts in Los Angeles served 140,469,542 meals annually [7]. "Children whose family household income is 130 percent or less of the poverty guidelines qualify for free meals, while children whose household income ranges between 130 and 185 percent qualify for reduce-priced meals" [24].

With declining opportunity, social unrest, and disenfranchised schools, the flight of whites and in fact any race that can climb out of the disenfranchised zone, continues. These migratory resources lead to shifting tax resources, creating gentrification and stratification of social class. The resulting suburbs of Riverside, Palm Desert, San Bernardino, and Palmdale emerged as middle class families fled the inner city. Comparatively, there are few neighborhoods that host poor whites. According to Ratner [38], 66% of black children live in poverty, yet 26% of white children live in poverty. Further, 57% of black children live in poor neighborhoods, while 8% of white children live in poor neighborhood. Close to 50% of black families who are not in poverty also live in disenfranchised neighborhoods; therefore, poverty is a normalized condition for black children engulfed in impoverished situations [38].

### 5. Severed Educational Life Line

Overtime the children of the 1980s have entered into the Developmental Education programs of Southern California Community colleges. However, in the mid-1990s, limitations on remedial education were proposed in the California system. This meant that students who once received remedial courses in the four-year school had to go to the community college, where attrition is much higher [35]. Sixteen years later, the lifeline from the community college is under fire. Bahr [2] examined the broken pipeline for students who enter the remediation cycle in community colleges. Crisp and Delgado [9] claimed that remediation was not a viable option. Such challenges were also reported in Hollis [18]; moreso, Patthey-Chavez, Dillon, and Thomas-Spiegel [37] reported the problem was particularly tricky for English as Second Language Students.

However, even in an academic space where the community college is a last resort, community colleges are capping enrollment due to budget cuts and dwindling resources [1], [11], [16], [32], [40]. Though contemporary education sees an expansion in online education, and such modalities expanding at community colleges [22], 97% of two-year schools are offering online courses [36]. However disenfranchised students, and older students who attend open access institutions, often have difficulty maintaining reliable online access to engage in online learning [18], while both four year and two-year colleges strive to manage the changing online environment [17].

The troubling trend continues as those caught between the freeways have been bounced through a variety of supposed open access educational systems. Over a decade ago, the consternation was regarding sending remedial and developmental classes to two-year community colleges, hence denying access to the more successful four-year environment. Of late, educators are moving again to deny access and question the viability of remedial education at the

two-year level. States like Maryland, Connecticut, and others are reconsidering the viability of remedial education and have reduced funding to these areas, despite the fact that secondary education continues to fail this population. What is ironic, while tax payers continue to squeeze the door shut on students emerging for disenfranchised neighborhoods, public policy has not reached down to the public school level, the root of the problem, where disenfranchised students are funneled to disenfranchised districts, with fewer resources and weaker teachers. In short, the cycle of poverty loops back to the very disenfranchised neighborhood in which it began, with public school and the short-term fix of subsidized lunches.

Remedial education is under scrutiny, perhaps as all of education is facing budget cuts in the wake of the great Recession of 2008. Many states are limiting remedial courses. Instead of offering four levels of remediation, some states are moving to offering only two levels. Connecticut has limited remediation to once semester. Texas was looking to cut remediation [30]. Community College Review notes that taxpayers have paid close to 7 billion dollars to support remedial education and further notes that only 28% of students who take remedial classes earn a degree or certification in 8.5 years [29]. The reasons for such problems are related to “students dropping out... are poverty, minority status, being underprepared by their high schools and being the first generation in their families to attend college” [29]. Of the 2.1 million students who attended the California Community College enrollment, 6.41% were black and 42.48% were Hispanic [5]. With close to 50% of the California Community college system coming from historically disenfranchise minorities, populations that tend to emerge from communities caught between the Los Angeles freeways, these students face less support and assistance in achieving a college degree even if they find their way to the two-year school. This perpetual cycle continues a racist and sometimes sexist dynamic that keeps disenfranchised populations from advancing economically [19].

## 5. Conclusion

In many ways, black men are considered a canary in the mine, a sensitive marker in society about the state of society [16], [12]. Los Angeles, metaphorically, is one such mine in which the black community, specifically black men, continue to die at higher rates, have lower academic achievement and more fractured families.

The cost of education is skyrocketing, with tuition 46% higher than pre recession levels [33]. Nationally, public college education is up 33% than before pre recession levels of 2008. Six states, Alabama, California, Florida, Georgia, Hawaii, and Louisiana, have seen tuition rise 60%. Such costs keep transformative education outreach for many Americans, especially those trying to escape poverty.

Education was once thought as the escape route from poverty; yet with the perpetual cycle of poverty unbroken, and education reaching unreasonable costs, that escape route is closed; equal opportunity and access are a fleeting dream if these obstacles are not removed [15]. Hopefully, policy makers will come to grips with the impact on all of society and instead develop viable solutions to help any youth escape those neighborhoods trapped between the freeways.

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