

HOUSING JUSTICE LA SUMMIT
Level Setting: Racism & Criminalization

Thursday, January 9, 2020

9:50 AM – 10:10 AM

United Way of Greater Los Angeles

1150 S. Olive Street, 30th Floor, Los Angeles, CA 90015

- One of my favorite quotes is by George Santayana and it says that “those who do not learn from history are doomed to repeat it.”
- This morning I want to take you on a journey. Or rather a ride through history from the vantage point of African Americans in this country. I need you to take this ride with me, because without a good understanding of the history of structural racism and the criminalization of black people, we cannot develop effective interventions and solutions around the complex and intersectional issues of race, class, poverty, housing and homelessness.
- Without this understanding and more importantly, acknowledgment and acceptance of this linkage as fact.....there can be no housing justice. Frankly, there can simply be no housing justice without reparations. But we will get there in a minute.
- So, let’s take that journey.
- America was built by enslaved black people. My ancestors built the US Capitol. They built Wall Street. They built the White House. Slavery wasn’t just some kind of unfortunate regional quirk, e.g., a southern thing, it was an economic engine for the entire country.
- For more than two centuries, White Americans profited from forced Black labor.
- So when slavery officially came to an end in 1865, efforts to subject Black lives and communities to state control did not. Jim Crow laws which emerged a decade or so after the Civil War, effectively legalized segregation in all aspects of American life for the next 100 years.
- But Jim Crow was even more brutal than that. Jim Crow was a century of state-sponsored terror against Black people intended to maintain the pre-war racial hierarchy.
- It wasn’t until the 1960’s that the Jim Crow era officially ended. But then racism got more elegant.
- In an article last month in the NY Times entitled, *Black, Homeless and Burdened by L.A.’s Legacy of Racism*, the authors asserted that “there is a straight line from the history of redlining to today’s homelessness crisis,” that explain why black residents are dramatically overrepresented among those living on L.A.’s streets.
- Redlining refers to the practice of denying loans or services to an area based all or in part on its racial and ethnic composition. Starting in the early 1930’s, the Federal Housing Administration (FHA) – the FHA **not** the private banking industry – incentivized lenders to reject home mortgages in neighborhoods with black residents because they considered mortgages in those neighborhoods to be “riskier” based solely on racial and ethnic makeup.
- Residential maps were created to show appraisers which neighborhoods the FHA would favor. The maps were color-coded based on the racial make-up of the neighborhood and the likelihood of getting

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a mortgage. Red areas were predominately black neighborhoods and the least likely to get mortgages. And this practice was eventually dubbed “redlining.”

- These maps would become the basis for informing housing and land use policies and programs – at multiple levels of government – for decades.
- Redlining, and other racist housing policies that preceded it – think sharecropping for example – continued legally into the 1970’s – segregated and isolated whole communities based on race and ensured that those communities would receive little to no economic investment.
- The important thing to remember here is that redlining was an **official government policy** – it was the law of the land. In the housing boom of the 1950’s, as White America began building wealth in the suburbs, Black people, **by law**, were deliberately and systematically shut out.
- As Ta-Nehisi Coates noted in the *Case for Reparations* in the Atlantic, “From the 1930s through the 1960s, black people across the country were largely cut out of the legitimate home-mortgage market.”
- Neighborhoods where black people lived were rated “D” and were considered ineligible for FHA backing. In those redlined areas, the percentage of black people living there, nor their social class mattered. Black people were viewed as a contagion.
- And redlining went beyond FHA-backed loans and spread to the entire mortgage industry, which was already rife with racism, excluding black people from most legitimate means of obtaining a mortgage.
- Oliver and Shapiro in their 1995 book, *Black Wealth/White Wealth*, said it best:
- Locked out of the greatest mass-based opportunity for wealth accumulation in American history, African Americans who desired and were able to afford home ownership found themselves consigned to central-city communities where their investments were affected by the “self-fulfilling prophecies” of the FHA appraisers: cut off from sources of new investment[,] their homes and communities deteriorated and lost value in comparison to those homes and communities that FHA appraisers deemed desirable.
- And we see even with the passage of the fair housing act in 1968, the damage had been done and we feel the ramifications of those policies in black and brown communities today.
- Redlining was a shift to a more elegant forms of racism.
- Coates defines “elegant racism [as] invisible, supple, and enduring. It disguises itself in the national vocabulary, avoids epithets and didacticism. Grace is the singular marker of elegant racism. One should never underestimate the touch needed to, say, injure the voting rights of black people without ever saying their names. Elegant racism lives at the border of white shame. Elegant racism was the poll tax. Elegant racism is voter-ID laws.”

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- And “if you sought to advantage one group of Americans and disadvantage another, you could scarcely choose a more graceful method than housing discrimination.”
- Coates goes on to say, “Housing affects your chances of being robbed and shot as well as your chances of being stopped and frisked. And housing discrimination is as quiet as it is deadly. It can be pursued through violence and terrorism, but it doesn’t need it. Housing discrimination is hard to detect, hard to prove, and hard to prosecute. Housing segregation is the weapon that mortally injures but does not bruise.”
- As a result of the vestiges of redlining and exclusionary zoning, Los Angeles County ranks as one of the most segregated metropolitan areas in the United States.
- Let me say that again – a weapon that mortally injures but does not bruise.
- According to the NY Times, for every \$100 in white family wealth, black families hold just \$5.04.
- And the Economic Policy Institute found that more than 1 in 4 black households have zero or negative net worth, compared to less than 1 in 10 white families without wealth.
- So, in the black community, living paycheck to paycheck and being one paycheck or one health crisis away from homelessness is almost inevitable.
- The wealth gap in America is primarily a housing wealth gap because housing equity – financial equity, not social equity – makes up two-thirds of all wealth for the typical household.
- Even when the FHA made redlining illegal, racism in the mortgage industry didn’t go away. Black Americans were hardest hit by the recent subprime mortgage crisis, for example, in part because they were targeted.
- Over the past two decades, black homeownership has declined at nearly five times the rate of White homeownership.
- Effectively locked out of homeownership African Americans turned to renting and continue to find racism still un-leveling the playing field.
- We all know that in our county, black people make up nearly 40 percent of the homeless population, despite representing only 9 percent of the general population. And this isn’t just an LA County problem as the national rates are 40 and 13 respectively.
- So, it’s not surprising 43% of the Los Angeles County Development Authority’s voucher recipients are African American.

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- Yet, an October 2018 Urban Institute Report found that 76% of landlords in Los Angeles County refused to accept vouchers AND that number climbs to 82% of landlords in low poverty neighborhoods. And this is in one of the tightest rental markets in the country.
- As Coates said, housing discrimination is the epitome of elegant racism. A weapon that mortally injures but does not bruise.
- Similarly, to housing discrimination, another form of elegant racism, the criminalization of “black” is also silently erasing a generation of black men and women, is a root cause for homelessness and is an impediment for housing justice.
- The end of slavery didn’t stop former slaveholders from thinking of Black people as slaves. The 13th Amendment abolished slavery but left in a loophole: “except as punishment for crime.”
- States throughout the former Confederacy immediately began drafting laws guaranteed to lead to the arrest of Black people, who were then put back to work (sometimes in prisons that had once been plantations, like Angola in Louisiana) as enslaved people in all but name.
- Enter the Black Codes.
- The Black Codes were restrictive laws designed to limit the freedom of African Americans and ensure our availability as a cheap labor force after slavery was abolished during the Civil War. Though the Union victory had given some 4 million slaves their freedom, the question of freed blacks’ status in the post-war South was far from resolved. Under Black Codes, many states required blacks to sign yearly labor contracts; if they refused, they risked being arrested, fined and forced into unpaid labor.
- The roots of today’s mass incarceration and the criminalization of black people are in those Black Codes.
- Nationally, according to the U.S. Census, Blacks are incarcerated five times more than Whites.
- Let me put this another way. They way that I see the world.
- My son, Sekou, a brilliant, creative and inquisitive 11-year-old, is five times more likely to be incarcerated than his white peers.
- My daughter, Zora, a smart, outgoing and sassy 9-year-old, is twice as likely to be incarcerated as her white peers.
- There’s a direct line from slavery and the Black Codes to the fact that Black people, while only 13% of the overall population, make up 40% of the prison population.
- According to the Los Angeles County Office of Diversion and Reentry, black people represented 30% of the overall population in county jails.

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- Nationwide, African American children represent 32% of children who are arrested, 42% of children who are detained, and 52% of children whose cases are judicially waived to criminal court.
- African Americans and whites use drugs at similar rates, but the imprisonment rate of African Americans for drug charges is almost 6 times that of whites.
- African Americans represent 12.5% of illicit drug users, but 29% of those arrested for drug offenses and 33% of those incarcerated in state facilities for drug offenses.
- **If African Americans and Latinos were incarcerated at the same rates as whites, prison and jail populations would decline by almost 40%.**
- Back in 2013, the Sentencing Project issued a report that said that 1 in every 10 black men in his thirties was in prison or jail on any given day.
- A weapon that mortally injures but does not bruise.
- A criminal record can reduce the likelihood of a callback or job offer by nearly 50 percent. The negative impact of a criminal record is twice as large for African American applicants.
- Moreover, we know that a large share (64%) of unsheltered black people experiencing homelessness reported involvement with the criminal justice system.
- According to the Prison Policy Initiative, “formerly incarcerated people are almost 10 times more likely to be homeless than the general public. People who have been to prison [even] just once experience homelessness at a rate nearly 7 times higher than the general public.”
- A service provider from San Pedro noted during the listening sessions for the Ad Hoc Committee on Black People Experiencing Homelessness, that “It [was] nearly impossible to house black people with criminal histories.”
- A weapon that mortally injures but does not bruise. Mortally injurers.
- Slavery isn’t something from the distant past – its impact is felt and seen right now, particularly by Black Americans, every single day.
- In modern day it transformed from slavery to more elegant forms of racism like redlining and Black Codes whose impacts we see even today as we look at the large numbers of black faces on our streets and prisons around this county and around this country.
- This country has never truly reckoned with our history of slavery, Jim Crow, Black Codes, redlining, mass incarceration, etc.

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- But we cannot approach a real effort to end homelessness without acknowledging that institutionalized racism, and these policies and programs have systemically set black and brown people back by generations.
- There can be no housing justice, without reparations.
- I think the Funders Together to End Homelessness said it best in their commitment to racial equity.
- The truth is...structural racism and racial inequities are a root cause of homelessness.
- The truth is...historical and persistent structural racism in housing, employment, healthcare, education, criminal justice and other systems contribute to high rates of homelessness for people of color.
- The truth is...people of color have been excluded from opportunities for home ownership, wealth accumulation, and economic mobility throughout the history of America.
- The truth is virtually every institution with some degree of history in America, be it public, be it private, has a history of extracting wealth and resources out of the African American community.
- Our ability to achieve true housing justice, to end homelessness and housing insecurity, relies almost exclusively on our ability to embrace the truth about our collective history even the parts that bring us shame and make us want to look away.
- As Coates said, “An America that looks away is ignoring not just the sins of the past but the sins of the present and the certain sins of the future.” Looking away isn’t an option. Ignoring our history is not an option. Not for any of us.
- **And we must provide resources to restore what was taken.**
- There can be no housing justice, without reparations.
- Thank you.