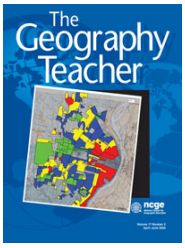

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Lesson Plans

"The Most Insidious Legacy"—Teaching About Redlining and the Impact of Racial Residential Segregation

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"The Most Insidious Legacy"—Teaching About Redlining and the Impact of Racial Residential Segregation

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Geography, as a social studies discipline, can be a powerful tool for students to explore how their social and political worlds have been built. In this sense, the discipline can be an affirmational, positive inquiry into how humans organize in and around spaces to form communities. It can also, however, be used to explore how discriminatory practices and beliefs are acted out, in the creation of physical or conceptual boundaries. The reality of racial residential segregation is, and has been, an enduring feature of American life. It has been fostered along through the use of a variety of repressive policies, laws, and practices, but possibly the most insidious characteristic of the phenomenon is how invisible it can be, both to those it benefits and those it victimizes. This article explores the origins and continuing influence of racially restrictive covenants and the practice of redlining, as well as how teachers can use modern tools to help students see its presence in their lives.

Racial Residential Segregation

For many Americans, their understanding of segregation is primarily that it no longer exists, in a legal sense—to them, the 1955 Supreme Court decision in *Brown v. Board of Education, Topeka KS*, ended the practice and, thus, further solutions are unwarranted. A similarly ahistorical view is that segregation, and negative racial views in general, are regrettable features of a particular geographic region of the U.S.—specifically, the South, which many still associate with terms like the Confederacy, "Jim Crow," and white supremacy.

Convincing people that the situation is otherwise often runs headlong into the historical development of American social life. Yee (1996) describes how neighborhoods comprising a common ethnic group, termed "ethnic enclaves," became common in the U.S., especially as initial immigrants were joined by later waves of people of similar backgrounds. This stereotype of multiethnic distribution may be depicted as a positive, even charming, feature of American society, but it ignores that millions of African American citizens today live in what Massey and Denton (1993) termed "American apartheid."

After the Civil War, black Americans filtered north in what is often termed "the Great Migration"—a mass movement of people searching for economic opportunity as well as fleeing systemic oppression. To that point, Mock (2018) argues that we should reconceptualize the Great Migration for what it really was: "*the Great Massive Forced Exodus*" (italics original), away from the South and the "threat of racial terrorism" (para. 8). What these people found, in the North, was less overtly threatening, but it could hardly be termed "welcoming" and was, in fact, a more subtle but no less repressive system, one designed to regulate the presence of African Americans in public spaces.

Terming what many Northern states did as "systemic" is not too blunt a term—it was not haphazard or without intention but was the result of specific policy choices and collective action. Smith (1998) states that "the emergence of the black ghetto did not happen by chance, but was result of the deliberate housing policies of the federal, state, and local governments and the intentional actions of individual American citizens" (91). Unlike Southern states which employed specific and specialized laws against racial integration, Northern states used housing laws and restrictive covenants to functionally achieve the same outcome—segregation and ghettoization (Laughlin 2019, para. 29).

Restrictive covenants first appeared in Brookline, Massachusetts, in 1843 (Santucci 2019, 7) and were initially little more than a clause in a house's deed which forbade its sale to anyone outside the owner's race (Coates 2014; Cutler, Glaeser, and Vigdor 1999; Seitles 1998). Such covenants were ruled illegal by the Supreme Court in 1948, but crucially, the language itself wasn't made illegal until 1968 (Laughlin 2019, para. 8). Racial covenants, therefore, existed long after they were technically outlawed and, as a result, they steered people of particular racial/ethnic backgrounds toward less desirable neighborhoods and away from ones they might have chosen—which were, inevitably, whiter (Santucci 2019, 5).

Redlining was a more subtle, but possibly more damaging tool for promoting racial residential segregation. Those who have been part of redlining policies often deny their impact or even their existence; a bank officer in Georgia (after an exhaustive study was published detailing racial discrimination in home loans) claimed "I've never known of anybody redlining areas … I believe that any qualified borrower can get a loan today." Another claimed "It's a myth that banks have a map with a red line on it … we don't avoid any area" (Dedman 1988, 2). While it may be true that lending institutions no longer nefariously rely on maps marked with red ink to deny home loans to African American buyers, the presence of such obstacles alone was a chief factor in the perpetuation of segregation. Badger (2017) asserts that "maps alone didn't create segregated and unequal cities today. But the role they played was pivotal" (5). Figure 1 features a 1937 redlined map of Baltimore, Maryland, showing areas deemed fit for investment and those that were not.

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