Four Case Studies on the Effects of Freeway Siting on Neighborhoods of Color

Anastasia Loukaitou-Sideris, Ph.D.
UCLA
<sideris@ucla.edu>

Susan L. Handy, Ph.D.
UC Davis
<slhandy@ucdavis.edu>

Paul M. Ong, Ph.D.

Jesus M. Barajas, Ph.D.

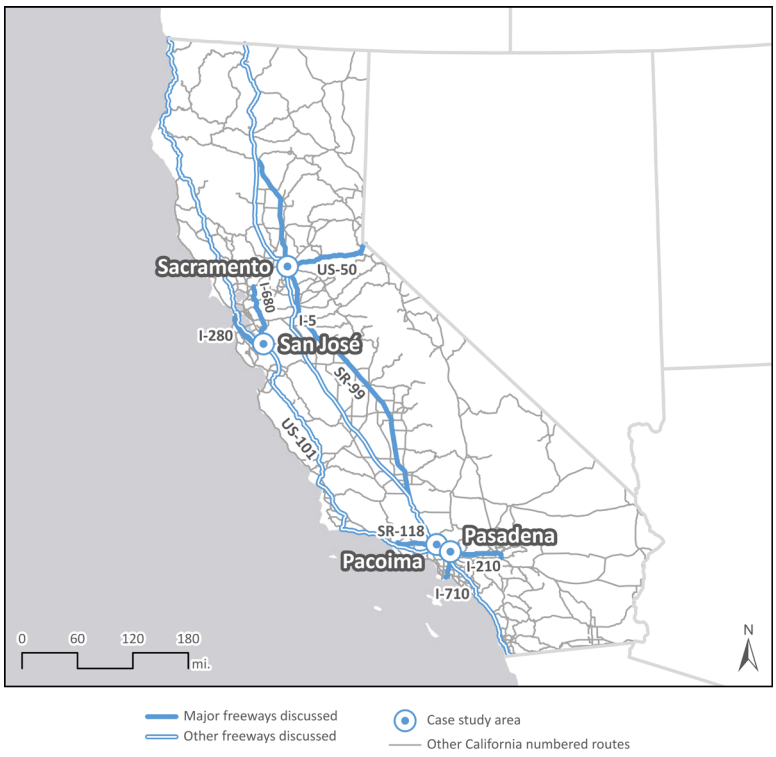
Jacob L. Wasserman

Chhandara Pech

Project Objective

U.S. freeways have come under increasing scrutiny for their disproportionately adverse impacts on low-income populations and populations of color. This study uses empirical research to not only understand but also quantify and describe in detail the historical impacts of freeways, mainly built in the 1960s, on communities of color in four California cities/areas: Pasadena, Pacoima, Sacramento, and San José (See Figure 1). Collectively, these case studies add to existing scholarship by showing freeways' effects on suburbs and the (then) edges of growing cities, as in city centers, using new quantitative as well as qualitative techniques.

Figure 1. Case Study Areas



Problem Statement

This study explores:

1. Was the choice of freeway alignments racially biased?
2. What were the direct effects of freeway construction? How many housing units did freeway construction destroy, and what was the racial composition of affected households?
3. What were the indirect effects of freeway construction? What impacts did it have on areas surrounding the freeway and the broader housing market?
4. What other impacts did residents of the affected neighborhoods experience?

Research Methodology

To examine the freeway impacts quantitatively, the research team employed and geospatially analyzed newly digitized information from historical documents. The team also reviewed local newspaper articles, university and local archives, planning documents, professional studies, maps, and citizen correspondence on the plans and interviewed civic leaders and community members.

Results

- Neighborhoods of color were often chosen as sites for disruptive freeway projects, which displaced many residents, significantly harmed those that remained, and left communities divided and depleted. The four cases differ in notable ways, but they share a disproportionate impact of freeway construction on communities of color (See Table 1).

- In Pasadena, a historic suburb of Los Angeles, the Foothill Freeway/I-210 ran through the city's Black neighborhoods of Orange Grove-Lincoln and Fair Oaks, in concert with an urban renewal program—though an alternative with far less displacement was proposed (See Table 2). The construction of another segment of the same freeway was ultimately abandoned in white, organized, and wealthy South Pasadena nearby.

Table 1. Estimated Direct Population and Housing Displacements by Freeways in Case Study Areas

	Population Displaced under Freeway	Housing Units Lost under Freeway	Share, Households of Color under Freeway, Incl. Latino/a
Pasadena Study Area	2,681	923	66%
Pacoima Study Area	841	252	66%
Sacramento Study Area	4,503	1,802	32%
San José Study Area	4,149	1,812	51%

- Three major freeways divide Pacoima, an ethnically diverse but largely disenfranchised growing suburb in the San Fernando Valley in Los Angeles left virtually absent from decision-making processes. Two sets of white neighborhoods to the west battled over the routing of the Simi Freeway/SR-118, while the route through Pacoima followed as merely a consequence of that decision. The chosen route cut through more neighborhoods of color than the alternative (See Table 2).

- To the north, many residents uprooted from Sacramento's West End, largely demolished for an urban renewal project, settled in Oak Park—which too was later cleaved from the rest of the city by the US-50 and SR-99 freeways. The chosen US-50 route was not the one that would have displaced the most households nor residents of color (See Table 2). However, redevelopment and housing segregation subsequently pushed residents of color into areas adjacent to the growing freeways.

- The construction of freeways shaped San José as it grew, where the I-280 and I-680 freeways cut through Little Saigon, Little Portugal, and Eastside Mexican neighborhoods. The one alternative route publicly considered disproportionately displaced households of color. Because the city's population and housing stock were growing at the time, freeway construction had a comparatively more moderate effect, but the freeways continue to serve as a barrier between neighborhoods of color and the core of the city.

- Demolition and displacement were the most visible and immediate effects of the freeways (See Table 1), but toxic pollution, noise, economic decline, and stigmatization remained long after.

- These case studies expose flaws in participatory planning processes. In suburban areas, white, affluent interests often succeeded in pushing freeways to more powerless neighborhoods.

- Massive roadway construction complemented other destructive governmental actions such as urban renewal and discriminatory practices such as redlining. Freeways and suburbanization were key components in separating neighborhoods of color from job centers and fueling a decline in available transportation options to overcome that mismatch.
- Understanding the history of racism in freeway development can inform restorative justice in these areas and the development of equitable transportation policies and practices.

Table 2. Comparison of Alternate Freeway Routes, 1960 Demographics

		Chosen Route	Unchosen Route(s)
Pasadena Study Area	**Population**	1,702	221
	Share, Households of Color, Incl. Latino/a	76%	54%
Pacoima Study Area	**Population**	720	1,128
	Share, Households of Color, Incl. Latino/a	85%	49%
Sacramento Study Area	**Population**	4,503	4,019-7,358
	Share, Households of Color, Incl. Latino/a	32%	19%-39%

Note: Statistics for Pacoima and Pasadena differ from those in Table 1 because Table 1 uses actual freeway footprints, including ramps, while Table 2 uses standardized freeway footprints for those areas to fairly compare chosen and unchosen routes.

More Information

This research brief is drawn from the "The Implications of Freeway Siting in California: Four Case Studies on the Effects of Freeways on Neighborhoods of Color" research report by the UCLA Institute of Transportation Studies, UC Davis Institute of Transportation Studies, and UCLA Center for Neighborhood Knowledge. The full report can be found at https://www.metrans.org/research/the-implications-of-freeway-siting-in-california-four-case-studies-on-the-effects-of-freeways-on-neighborhoods-of-color and https://www.its.ucla.edu/project/the-implications-of-freeway-siting-in-california/.

Figure and Table Data Sources

1960, 1970, and 1980 U.S. Censuses.

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