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Racial Segregation, Freeways, and Institutional Mechanisms in Pasadena



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Issue

In 2022, the State of California made a landmark decision to relinquish ownership over a controversial “stub” of State Route 710 to the City of Pasadena, which is now considering new uses for the land. The stub — the only part constructed of a now-cancelled freeway expansion — as well as the 210 freeway to its north ran through many of the city’s historic neighborhoods, including its enclaves of color. To approach this opportunity from a lens of restorative justice, researchers from the UCLA Center for Neighborhood Knowledge and Institute of Transportation Studies analyzed U.S. Census data and reviewed historical documents to examine the roles of freeways and institutional mechanisms in shaping patterns of racial and ethnic residential segregation in Pasadena.

Freeway construction in Pasadena is steeped in racial histories and legacies. In the 1960s and 1970s, state freeway planners and local officials planned and built Interstate 210 and State Route 710. In the northwest section of the city, the I-210 cut straight through Pasadena’s historic Black neighborhoods and ultimately displaced over 1,700 people — the majority of whom were people of color (An alternate route through the Arroyo Seco valley, which would have displaced just over 200 people, half of them residents of color, was not pursued.). To the south, however, communities in and adjacent to the path of the planned 710 freeway — some now Hispanic, others suburbs with a deep history of racial exclusion — successfully halted construction, leaving behind an approximately 11-block stub

of the uncompleted freeway. The city and private actors subsequently transformed the area through urban renewal, which further contributed to the displacement of Pasadena’s communities of color.

By centering the racial histories and contemporary impacts of freeway construction in the 20th century, a case study of the 710 stub in Pasadena presents a critical example for the growing number of states and cities across the country undergoing transformative processes for freeway removal and redesign projects.

Key Findings

- Pasadena and Los Angeles County have become more racially diverse over time, transitioning from predominantly white after World War II to majority residents of color today.
- Despite these demographic changes, racial segregation persisted in Pasadena, with people of color disproportionately concentrated in the northwest. However, segregation levels began to decline moderately in the 1960s, and Pasadena now shows lower levels of segregation than the rest of the county.
- Neighborhoods along the freeway corridor have grown increasingly segregated and economically polarized. In the northern part of the study area along I-210, the share of residents of color increased, while areas south of the interchange lost residents of color and housed an increasingly disproportionate number of white residents (See **Figure 1**).

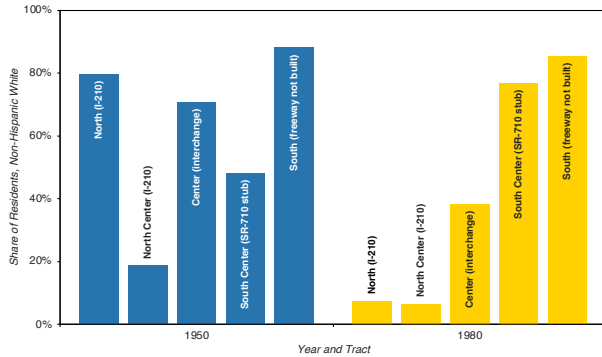


Figure 1. Share Non-Hispanic White in the Study Area Tracts, 1950–1980

- From 1960 to 1970, tracts affected by freeway construction lost nearly 1,800 units (a 28% reduction), while the city overall and the southern tract — not directly impacted by freeway construction — experienced steady growth. Home values, rents, and income generally fell north of the 710 freeway but rose south of it. Today, areas to the north face higher levels of particulate matter and other pollutants from vehicles.
- Pasadena mirrored national trends in housing discrimination during the freeway-development era, including redlining, racially restrictive covenants, school integration resistance, and anti-integration ballot measures. In the face of these barriers, residents of color successfully organized protests and pursued legal remedies to combat segregation.
- Under the guise of eliminating urban blight, urban renewal projects disproportionately displaced communities of color. Along with the city's 1962 General Plan, major developments such as the Norton Simon Museum, Parsons headquarters, Ambassador

College, and Old Pasadena contributed to housing loss and displacement, with residents of color particularly affected near the 710 freeway stub.

Conclusions

- Freeway construction and related urban restructuring exacerbated racial segregation, deepening demographic and economic polarization in neighborhoods along I-210 and State Route 710.
- Mid-20th century freeway development left a lasting legacy of environmental and social inequities, with neighborhoods of color north of the interchange bearing higher environmental burden and having limited access to opportunities.
- As Pasadena determines the future of the 710 stub, restorative justice must guide decision-making. Proposed actions should address specific harms and prioritize the values and needs of affected communities, particularly those disproportionately harmed by past policies.

More Information

This policy brief is drawn from the “Racial Segregation in Pasadena: The Role of Freeway Development and Institutional Mechanisms” research report by the UCLA Institute of Transportation Studies and UCLA Center for Neighborhood Knowledge. The report can be found at www.its.ucla.edu/publication/racial-segregation-in-pasadena-freeway/.

The full series of UCLA Institute of Transportation Studies research on freeway history can be found at www.its.ucla.edu/projects/freeway-siting-in-california.



Figure Data Sources:

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Additional Reading:

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