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Impacts of Freeway Siting on Stockton's Asian American Community

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Issue

Stockton, California, underwent spatial restructuring in the decades following World War II. State and local government contributed and responded to these changes by implementing connected freeway and urban renewal programs. Xenophobia and racism placed Asian American communities in their path.

A major economic hub for California's agricultural sector, Stockton and the surrounding region had a racially and ethnically diverse population in the mid-1900s, with people of color restricted to the lowest rungs of society. Asian Americans played a major role in the city's development but were socially, economically, and politically marginalized. Since the mid-1800s and into the 1970s, Asian Americans were targets of multiple forms of discrimination, some shared by other people of color and others unique to Asians, including xenophobic immigration restrictions, prohibitions against owning land, and mass internment.

Residential segregation limited their housing options, forcing many to settle in and around downtown. Despite facing racism and having limited resources, Asian Americans were able to form vibrant albeit low-income ethnic enclaves: Chinatown, Japantown, and Little Manila.

Government actions initiated, facilitated, and responded to a postwar restructuring of the urban landscape through suburbanization and the abandonment of the central

business district. A dramatic expansion of the freeway system made way for urban sprawl. At the same time, Stockton responded to the commercial decline of its downtown by pursuing urban renewal. These coordinated, massive infrastructure programs were linked through a common agenda of "slum clearance" that sought removal of entire neighborhoods. Tragically, the Asian enclaves lay along the path of destruction of both.

Research Key Findings

- The freeway route choice was racially biased. The neighborhood surrounding an unchosen route was predominantly white, whereas that of the chosen route was predominantly home to people of color (Table 1).
- Freeway construction during the 1960s and '70s directly displaced more than 1,000 people and destroyed nearly 800 housing units in the downtown area. The majority of those affected were people of color (67%) and Asians in particular.
- In the study area, the Asian American enclaves were most impacted; their housing stock declined by about three-quarters between 1960 and 1970. The communities also lost many of their ethnic-based businesses and cherished community institutions. There were additional losses adjacent to the freeway, with much of the destruction also due to "slum clearance" for urban renewal.

	Chosen Route (Excluding Interchanges)	Unchosen Route (Hypothetical Path)
Population	1,131	934
Housing units	813	424
Households	660	396
Non-white, non-Hispanic households	372	11
Share, non-Hispanic households	56%	3%
Households of color	438	24
Share, households of color	66%	6%

Table 1: Stockton Freeway Alternatives: Comparison of Estimated Displacement, 1960

- The losses were not only physical, as the freeway and redevelopment eviscerated once vibrant ethnic commercial hubs. The social, cultural, and economic impacts affected both residents directly displaced and those who used the downtown enclaves as central places for social interaction, bonding, and culturally anchored shopping.
- Asian American leaders and activists fought to save their neighborhoods and had limited success in building affordable housing and community centers. When they could not rebuild within the enclaves, they re-established them elsewhere. Although they lacked the political clout to stop the destruction, their struggle was an important part of an emerging movement for social justice.

Conclusions

- Using qualitative and new quantitative methods, this case study offers a comprehensive understanding of

the fundamental societal causes of the tragic and racist history of freeway development. It contextualizes the events within the broader dynamics that transformed American cities after World War II and the earlier history of racial marginalization that put Asian Americans in harm’s way.

- The case study provides an important lesson about the systemic biases and limitations of past governmental action and infrastructure programs. The state of California and the city of Stockton failed to revitalize the downtown area as a vibrant commercial space and destroyed its cultural diversity. The transportation field must learn from this example, as well as others, so that it can transform its policies and practices to eliminate explicit and implicit racism.
- Remedying past harms from systemic racism requires restorative justice. State agencies have taken initial steps by acknowledging their prior historical wrongs. Caltrans has also attempted to redress the damages done to Asian Americans by proposing the Stockton Downtown Transformation Project.

Further Information

This policy brief is drawn from “Stockton’s Crosstown Freeway, Urban Renewal, and Asian Americans: Systemic Causes and Impacts” research report by the UCLA Institute of Transportation Studies and the UCLA Center for Neighborhood Knowledge. The full report can be found at <https://www.its.ucla.edu/project/the-implications-of-freeway-siting-on-stocktons-asian-american-communities/>.

Figure Data Source: U.S. Census Bureau (1961). *U.S. Census of Housing: 1960; City Blocks: Stockton, Calif.* U.S. Census Bureau. <https://www2.census.gov/library/publications/decennial/1960/housing-volume-3/41994949v3p4ch1.pdf>

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