Racial and Class Inequality in Houston

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RACE RELATIONS IN HOUSTON

After its founding in 1836, Houston's original charter initially divided the city into four geographical areas called "wards," and later into six. The city had local significance due to its proximity to the Port of Galveston and only grew in importance throughout the Civil War. After the Confederacy lost the war and Reconstruction began, communities of freed slaves, called "freedmen towns" were established across the South. Multiple locations in Houston were also settled by freed slaves and their children. By 1915, Fourth Ward was home to many Black dentists, doctors, and lawyers. These professionals founded the first Black hospital in Houston in addition to the Colored High School, now named after Booker T. Washington (Wintz, 1995). Third and Fifth Ward are neighborhoods also known for their large Black communities that began to grow in the 20th century. Many other settlements on the periphery of what was then Houston were established into neighborhoods such as Sunnyside, South Acres, and Independence Heights. These communities were "self-contained," thriving locations filled with black-owned businesses and homes (Harden, 2018). While integration was not intentional, Whites and Blacks sometimes lived within the same communities at this time, even across the street from each other.

After World War II, the city's population grew with the expansion of suburbs. Meanwhile, redlining, an exclusionary federal home financing practice, made it harder for black families to receive loans to buy homes (Jackson, 2021). Housing developments were planned and constructed over the following decades, expanding the city further. White Houstonians increasingly moved into the suburbs, leaving their Black neighbors behind in a phenomenon known as "white flight." Housing developments such as Kingwood took shape, largely absorbing this mass exodus. Additionally, redlining became embedded in the roads and represented a growing divide between different groups in Houston.

The label of "most diverse city in America" is attributed to Houston since no racial majority was found in the Houston-Woodlands-Sugar Land metropolitan area in the previous three censuses taken (Emerson, et. Al, 2012). However, studies still show that the entirety of Harris County has economic inequality closely related to the racial makeup of neighborhoods. White majority neighborhoods are typically wealthier than majority Black and Hispanic ones, with rates of poverty significantly higher in minority communities. The southwest portion of Harris County south of I-69 and west of Alt 90 is relatively well integrated between Blacks, Hispanics, Asians, and Whites. However, historically black neighborhoods have not been able to maintain the wealth created in their infancy. There are still many areas with only one racial group as the majority, conflicting with the belief that the city is no longer segregated. This realization should drive the pursuit of understanding Houstonian inequality.

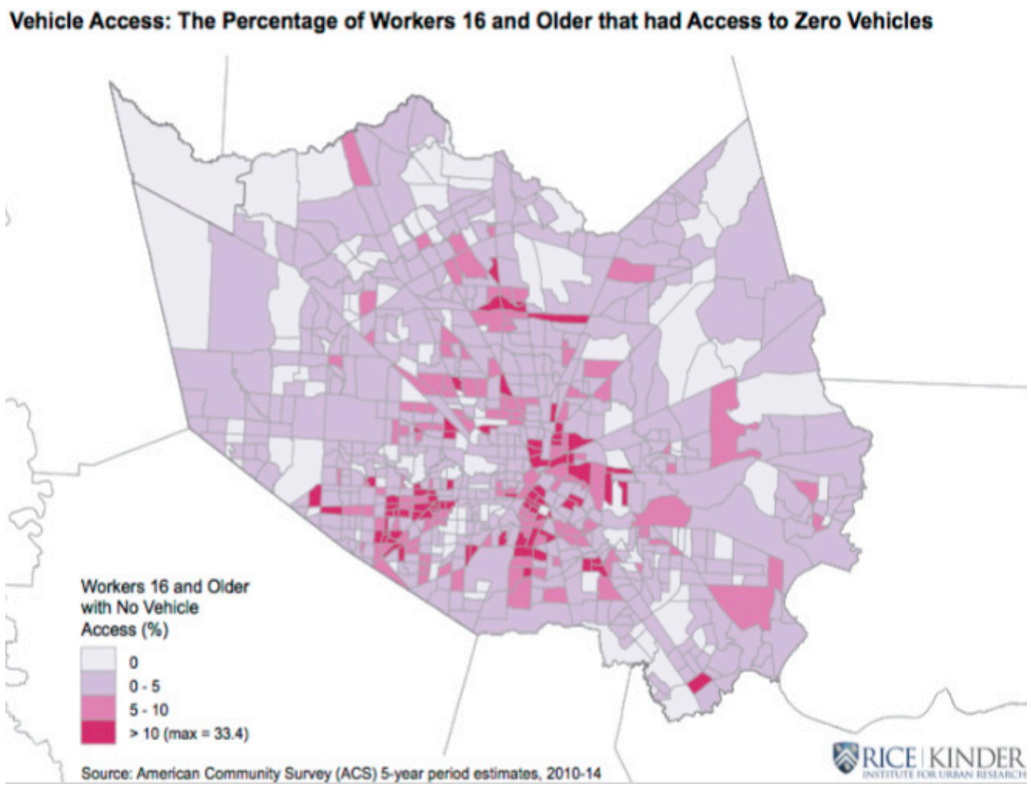

Figure 1: Workers in Harris County without access to a vehicle, Rice Kinder

area in the previous three censuses taken (Emerson, et. Al, 2012). However, studies still show that the entirety of Harris County has economic inequality closely related to the racial makeup of neighborhoods. White majority neighborhoods are typically wealthier than majority Black and Hispanic ones, with rates of poverty significantly higher in minority communities. The southwest portion of Harris County south of I-69 and west of Alt 90 is relatively well integrated between Blacks, Hispanics, Asians, and Whites. However, historically black neighborhoods have not been able to maintain the wealth created in their infancy. There are still many areas with only one racial group as the majority, conflicting with the belief that the city is no longer segregated. This realization should drive the pursuit of understanding Houstonian inequality.

TRANSPORTATION

Houstonians are no strangers to navigating endless highway construction. The magnitude of their effect on existing communities can be so grand that both major harm and benefit to residents' livelihoods can occur. Most of the Houston Metropolitan Area is sprawling in single-family homes with very low density, making cars a near necessity. Access to public transportation and influence in roadway expansion projects define the boundaries by which Black and low-income communities establish their livelihoods.

The Wheels on the Bus Go Round: Public Transportation

Households without reliable self-transportation can find alternative mobility available in the METRO system. This city-wide transit system includes buses, a light rail, and a taxi service for elderly and disabled Houstonians. Utilizing this system is much more affordable than buying, fueling, and driving through traffic with a car. A one-way trip by bus or METRORail costs $1.25. The system also has options to park a personal vehicle and ride a METRO across the city, known as the Park and Ride.

The METRO system is integral for the movement of over 200,000 riders in Houston daily. Although minorities made up 85% of riders in 2017, inequality is still a problem even with METRO's dependence on these communities (Reyes, 2020). Ridership on the Park and Ride is 60% White, while ridership on the bus is 60% Black (Spieler, 2020). The Park and Ride is designed for seating and routes to be as comfortable as possible since riders typically live in suburbs, make higher wages, and choose to drive to park and ride. With the regular bus, riders don't have the same luxury in how they will get to work, school, or the doctor's office, so there is little incentive to increase the quality of a bus ride. Houston's public transportation has created a divide in the socio-economic status of the riders which can be seen directly by the quality of the transit infrastructure.

I Want to Ride My Bicycle: Bikes and Walking

Vehicle-free modes of transportation like walking and biking are not encouraged or embraced in most Black and low-income neighborhoods. The lack of bike lanes and the abundance of deteriorating sidewalks are not the most welcoming to pedestrians. Wealthier communities tend to have sidewalks in pristine condition and bike lanes protected by barriers. In poorer neighborhoods like Gulfton, residents are fighting for sidewalk improvements, with some streets not having a sidewalk at all. In her writing on Philadelphia's transportation inequality, Mimi Sheller commented, "These transport inequalities are emotionally embedded in forms of racial coding, such as fear of the public transit system that goes through poor, Black or ethnic minority neighborhoods" (Sheller, 2015).

As Third Ward and Sunnyside begin to gentrify and a demographic of physically enthusiastic residents moves in, the call for bike lanes to be added to roads will likely grow. Executive Director of BikeHouston, Joe Cutrufo said, "With few exceptions, trying to share the road on Houston's streets is like swimming with sharks" (Begley, 2023).

A biker was struck and killed near Downtown in November 2023 after he drove on the side of a road when his bike lane ended. Bikers without lanes are forced to share the road with enraged, impatient drivers, or risk sharing sidewalks with equally annoyed pedestrians.

City Roads, Take Me Home: Highways

The vision to create a network of national roadways began to take shape in the 1930s but went unfulfilled due to the United States' involvement in World War II. A 1939 memo from the then Bureau of Public Roads emphasized, "Highway planning should take place within the context of an ongoing program of slum clearance and urban redevelopment" (Salimbene, 2023).

Urban "revitalization" came to Houston in the 1950s and 60s with the expansion of the existing highway system and the addition of new projects. Public engagement was not considered during planning or construction in the infancy of the Interstate system, which included I-10, I-45, and I-69 (De Los Santos, 2018). The neighborhoods that were built typically had a majority Black population. Some of these areas, like Third Ward, were considered "blighted," a term defined as "a critical stage in the functional or social depreciation of real property beyond which its existing condition or use is unacceptable to the community" (Breger, 1967). Neighborhoods with declining populations, growing poverty, and increasingly common crime were often the first to be considered for demolition.

Two neighborhoods in Houston fought against the city's vision of urban decay, Courtlandt Place and Third Ward. The former is a planned neighborhood settled in the 1900s by wealthy White businessmen who built large homes on the prairie outside Houston (Gordon, 2008). The latter is historically black and was once described as the "Park Avenue of Houston" (Bliss, 2015). Both areas were declining in living standards by the 1960s. Plans to expand I-69 and I-45 respectively were introduced to the public, and backlash ensued. Courtlandt Place residents advocated for a historical designation and made progress in reducing the impact of the new roadway's effect on the area (Shelton, 2015). Although Third Ward used similar arguments, their plea to the city not to expand I-45 was not seriously considered, and construction resumed.

Courtlandt Place survived the construction and now maintains a middle-class population, while Third Ward continued its economic decline. This one example summarizes the effect of low political capital held by the mostly Black and Hispanic residents of the area. The city government historically overlooked minority and low-income communities with little influence in policy and decision-making. The lack of value for the concerns of low-income Houstonians continues to present a challenge to residents and city leaders.

EDUCATION

Children in low-income neighborhoods like Third Ward tend to face more obstacles to their academic success than

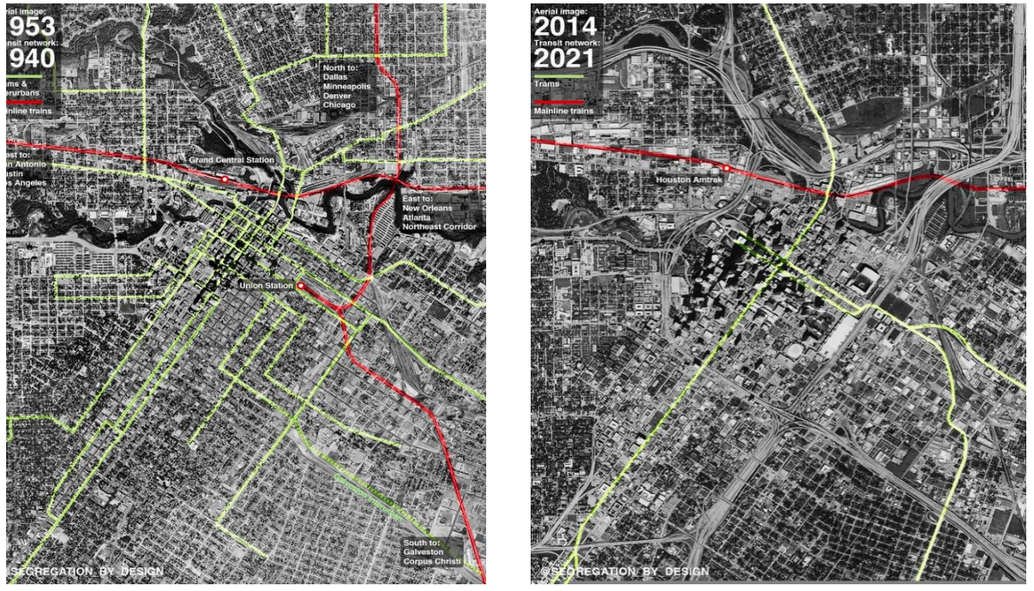

Figure 2: Light and Passenger Rail in Downtown Houston in 1940 and 2021, Segregation by Design

in neighborhoods with higher incomes, like Midtown. Students in these neighborhoods may attend schools with poor test scores and low funding. Low-income and majority-Black neighborhoods overlap. Students and families in these neighborhoods have seen trends of excessive punishment and lack of extracurriculars that can drastically affect the academic success of the next generation.

Discipline and Punishment

Behavioral problems are a significantly greater concern in majority-minority schools compared to schools with more white students. In Houston ISD, access to the number of students' disciplinary action was taken against was outlined for every school in the district, from 2019 to 2021. In the 2021-22 school year, Thomas, Cullen, and Attucks Middle Schools had the top three highest percentages of students disciplined. Averaging these three schools, approximately 98% of students are economically disadvantaged and 69% of these students are Black (HISD Assessment, Accountability, and Compliance, 2023). The neighborhoods where these schools reside, South Acres and Sunnyside, are majority Black and low-income residents.

Students are treated with a one-size-fits-all when it comes to assessing a response to disruptive or disrespectful behavior. The disciplinary violations committed by these students can range from bringing drugs to school to chewing a Pop-Tart into a

gun, and even wearing "inappropriate" hairstyles. Due to "zero tolerance" policies, it has become easier in recent decades for students to find themselves in trouble for minor violations.

Implicit bias is a factor that not only influences teachers' response to negative behavior in the classroom but who they expect to cause trouble. Research was conducted by the Yale Child Study Center in 2016. In this study, the researchers used eye tracking to show that preschool teachers and staff spent significantly more time looking at Black males than any other student of either gender or race. The teachers in the study most often found problems with the actions of the black male preschoolers (Gilliam et. Al., 2016). The actual behavior of these students was consistent and did not vary wildly, as they were all playing at the same table. An expectation of a conduct violation from Black students likely contributes to a higher rate of expulsion beyond preschool, into a child's remaining years of education.

The Council of State Governments (CSG) conducted a study within Texas where over 900,000 students' disciplinary records were tracked from 7th grade until high school graduation. This study found that between 1999 and 2009, Black students were more likely to receive disciplinary action than their white peers. About 75% of Black students faced discipline at least once compared to 49% of White students (CSG Justice Center, 2011).

Removing students from school does not give them a wake-up call to take their education seriously, but rather discourages them from continuing. In reality, excluding students from school "makes students more likely to engage in subsequent behavior that will land them in jail" while schools continue to "push students in that direction by formally referring students to the juvenile justice system for relatively minor misbehavior" (Black, 2016). The quality of the student's education declines in this context as the learning environment no longer fosters learning, but rather carelessness about academics.

We Ball: Extracurriculars and Student Success

Access to extracurricular activities supplements academic success. Students are able to "demonstrate higher levels of academic achievement, greater character [and social] development… and a greater sense of the importance of community involvement" (Christison, 2013). Common activities like basketball, cheer, or band may be offered by schools, but others like martial arts, dance, and cooking classes are often out of reach for low-income families. These activities provide benefits to the well-roundedness of students and create impactful experiences that mold their view of the world.

Schools in higher-income neighborhoods like Meyerland tend to have a wide range of activities for their students. Meyerland Performing and Visual Arts Middle School has several extracurriculars listed on its website, including softball, debate, and karate. The variety of activities offered appeals to a larger proportion of students and creates opportunities to build different types of skills. Participation in athletics helps students with problem solving while participation in academic clubs helps build leadership qualities. However, schools with a lower household income tend to have fewer activities available overall. Sunnyside is home to Attucks Middle School, who have no activities listed on their website. Meyerland's median household income is around $100,000 per year while Sunnyside's is under $50,000 per year. Students in low-income neighborhoods who would like to go to schools in wealthier areas would need to rely on school buses to get to class. Missing the bus or attending extracurricular functions could mean parents take a longer trip to attend to their student by car, or the students transferring METRO buses two or three times.

Extracurricular activities also provide an opportunity for high school seniors to heighten their college applications and essays. Colleges are more encouraged to admit students involved in clubs, organizations, and volunteering than their uninvolved peers. In addition, participation in athletic and club activities is associated with a 5 percent increase in bachelor's degree attainment expectations (Lipscomb, 2007). Social and emotional intelligence, problem-solving, and discipline are key skills built through involvement before and during college. Without a strong foundation including these skills, students tend to find the transition into adulthood and self-responsibility more challenging and thus may be more susceptible to not finishing their degree.

HEALTH AND WELLNESS

It is imperative for this analysis of health justice to "abandon any notion that Black people have inferior bodies or minds that are inherently susceptible to disease and illness because they are Black" (Ray, 2023). Minorities generally have poorer health than white Americans and this has its origins in factors aside from genetics. Rates of high blood pressure, diabetes, obesity, and kidney disease are significantly higher in Black communities than in any other racial group in the United States (CDC, 2022). Being a parent and keeping children healthy can also be a burden. Access to family planning, the quality of one's diet, and environmental injustice are factors that rest as the biggest determinants for the health and well-being of Black and low-income neighborhoods in Houston.

Family Matters: Reproductive Health

An intimate issue facing low-income neighborhoods is that of accessibility to comprehensive safe sex education and contraception. In Texas, there are no mandatory requirements for safe sex education in high schools beyond abstinence teaching. This influenced the state's consistent ranking in the top ten states with the most teen pregnancies since at least 2005 (CDC). The Texas Education Agency authorized an opt-in system for sex education to begin in fall 2022 (Rivera, 2022). Schools that have enacted this curriculum so far have had issues reaching students with disengaged parents--students who could stand to benefit the most by opting in.

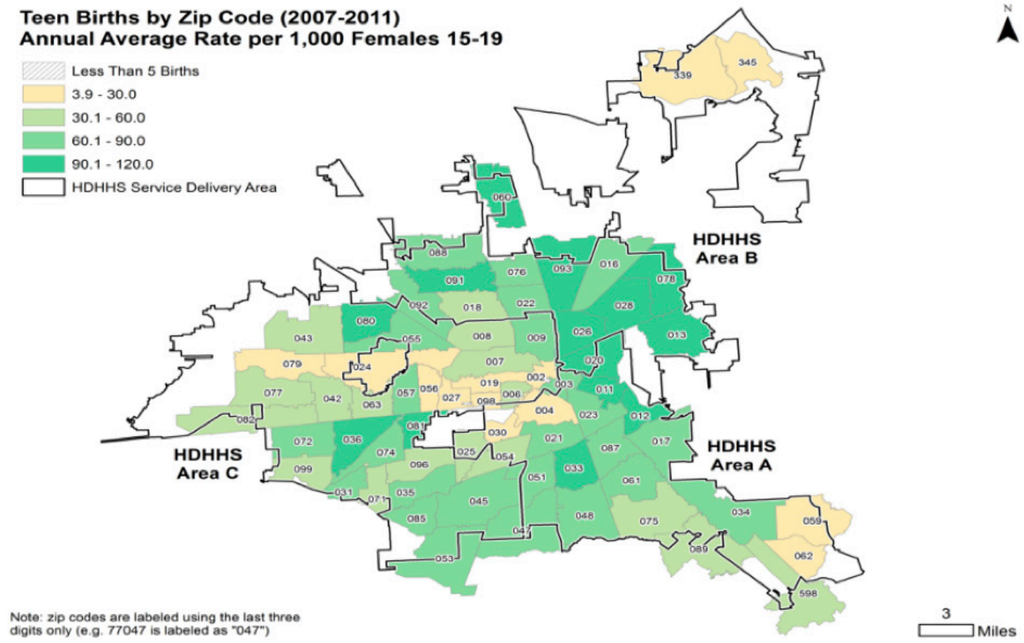

Figure 3: Teen Birth Rates by Zip Code, City of Houston

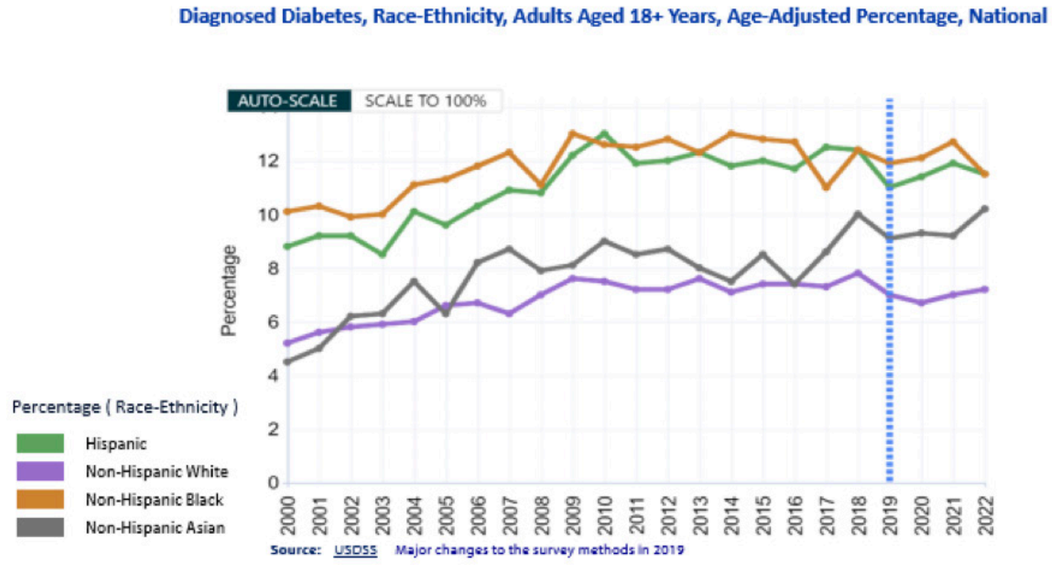

Figure 4: Percentage of Racial Groups with Diabetes, USDA AtlasEnvironmental Injustice in wealthier ones (Sirsat et. Al., 2021)

Independent organizations were for the purpose of providing the support and mentoring that schools do not have the ability to contribute towards. Civic Heart, a nonprofit in Houston, aims to educate Black and Hispanic teens on confronting risky behaviors like drug use and sex, in addition to money habits through their HYPE program. HYPE visits high schools where the students are the most vulnerable to face harm from these risks (Civic Heart, 2023). The higher risk of Black and low-income Houstonian girls becoming pregnant also transfers to their education. Teen mothers often face the decision to continue their high school education or focus on working and taking care of their children. Even still, research also suggests that the greater presence of family planning clinics is related to reductions in the practice of unsafe sex and increases in the effectiveness of contraceptives used by teenagers (Wisniewski, 2018). This link indicates that greater investment in local clinics can reduce unplanned teen pregnancies. If more teens can access resources to make smart decisions about sex, they will also benefit in their adulthood. Less children may be born to single mothers, and potential fathers can have more time to help create an environment their future children will appreciate. Most low-income neighborhoods in Houston have civic centers with free clinics, providing a centralized space to educate locals.

Fresh Prince of Bellaire, not Sunnyside: Food Deserts

Another barrier to good health in these communities is access to fresh foods. A food desert is a place where a third of the population lives more than one mile from the nearest supermarket. For the many people who live in food deserts, a quick way to get something cheap to eat is to go to a fast-food restaurant or convenience store. Junk foods like soda, chips, and candy are readily available. These snacks are filled with saturated fats, salt, and excessive sugar. About 500,000 Houstonians live in a food desert according to an infographic released by the Department of Agriculture (Ojeda, 2020). Wealthier areas like Bellaire and Midtown have easy access to a grocery store, while MacGregor Park, Sunnyside, and so many others do not. The neighborhood of Sunnyside has multiple fast-food restaurants and gas station convenience stores, but only one grocery store in a one-mile radius: a Fiesta. The nearest HEB is approximately a two-mile drive from the center of the neighborhood and is situated in a higher-income neighborhood on South MacGregor Way, a now gentrified part of the Historic Third Ward. Access to personal transportation, limited income, and the geography of supermarket investments make it difficult for some families to get fresh groceries.

Even when fresh food is available to populations with a low socioeconomic status, it is not always the best quality. Students at the University of Houston (UH) uncovered that grocery stores in low-income neighborhoods are more susceptible to eating food that makes them sick. When testing for pathogens on loose-leaf Romaine lettuce, it was found that E. coli, coliform, yeast, and mold were outrageously more prevalent in stores with low-income customers than The grocery stores located in high-income areas did not have as severe of issues with pathogens.

The recommendation from the researchers at UH was to investigate supply chain practices that could contaminate food. Suppliers could be sending lower-quality food to stores themselves. Another perspective to view this is through the practices of the stores themselves that could possibly lead to poor quality. Workplace cleanliness and refrigeration are all integral to the safety and purity of food, and if stores themselves are not making sure their environment meets a health standard, they place customers and their neighbors at risk.

Easy access to junk foods and lack of access to healthier options explain some of the health challenges that Black people face from youth. Between 2013 and 2015, Black children and adolescents were found to have an obesity rate nearly double that of their White peers. The percentage of both Blacks and Hispanics with adulthood diabetes is equivalent, but nearly double that of Whites. In 2021, 12.7% of Blacks and 7% of Whites had diabetes, a trend well documented over the course of the past two decades (CDC, 2022). Additionally, minorities have remarkably higher rates of hypertension, chronic kidney disease, and coronary heart disease.

ENVIROMENTAL INJUSTICE

Environmentalism is a concern for Black and low-income neighborhoods as much as higher earning ones, but the efforts led in pursuit of consciousness in the former go unnoticed. Low-income people and people of color are more likely to live in neighborhoods dominated by toxic industries and diesel emissions (Alkon, 2011). It was the custom of the City of Houston until the 1970s to place landfills and incinerators in or near largely Black neighborhoods. Even the city of Bellaire sent their waste to a dump in Riceville, a black community at that time. Fortunately, this policy was defeated, but the blatant disregard for the health of the residents leaves a scar on both them and the land. On Bellfort Avenue near Highway 288, the former site of a dump remains empty.

The Sunnyside dump and incinerator operated until 1974. Near the landfill location on Holmes Road, a child drowned in a deep water-inundated hole half a decade prior. Then newly elected mayor Fred Hofheinz shut the facilities down after a scathing report from the Environmental Protection Agency about lead being released into the air (Harden, 2018). Recently, residents were offended at city officials' initial proposal to build a new health and multi-service center atop one dump sight. The proposal was withdrawn, and a new location was chosen near the old center. The dump, now overrun with trees and grass, remains contaminated and is a constant reminder of the low expectations for city leaders to deliver for their constituents, especially those with little political capital.

City of Houston Garbage Incinerators[a]

Site of Incinerator	Neighborhood	Ethnicity	Location
Fourth Ward (Gillette and Hobson)	Fourth Ward	Black	Southwest
Patterson Street (2500 Patterson and Katy Freeway)	West End/ Cottage Grove	Black	Northwest
Kelly Street (North Loop and Eastex Freeway)	Kashmere Gardens	Black	Northeast
Holmes Road (Bellfort and South Freeway)	Sunnyside	Black	Southeast
Velasco (Velasco and Navigation)	Second Ward	Hispanic	Southeast

Figure 5: Incinerators in Houston c. 1920-75, Bullard

CONCLUSION OF THE MATTER

Inequality isn't just a narrative to be studied; in Houston, it is a very stark reality. It has been embedded in the city since its founding. This separation continued throughout its history and highlights the physical and social infrastructure of the city. A quarter of Houston is Black, but economic discrimination presents leads to those residents experiencing. The lack of public transportation makes commuting to grocery stores nearly impossible. Even then, Houston's food deserts make it impossible for many minority residents to access healthy, fresh food. Black children face discrimination in schools, where they are expected to fall behind and many are left neglected by a system that is supposed to nurture them. Inequality is systemic and life-altering, Houston's high teen pregnancy rate leaves many vulnerable and stuck in the city that thrives on their downfall.

Houston should not be known simply for its cultural or economic significance, but for its racial divisions entrenched into the fabric of the city. Neighbors and coworkers will have drastically different perceptions and experiences of what the city is truly like. The disparities in access to ad-

equate transportation, investment in education, and ability to promote health and wellness cause struggles for Black and low-income communities to grow and become stronger. These challenges also make it more difficult for Black residents to wield authoritative influence in determining their future. Houston is fashioned as a haven of diversity but truly embodies long-term segregation in the 21st century.

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