

The Racial Injustice of American Highways

Demonstrations over the death of George Floyd in the Twin Cities occupied a major artery that tore apart a thriving African-American neighborhood.

By [Linda Poon](#)

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Demonstrators march on I-94 in St. Paul. *Scott Olson/Getty Images*

Thousands of peaceful protesters in the Twin Cities occupied Interstate 94 over the weekend as they marched from the Minnesota State Capitol in St. Paul to Minneapolis. For the region's African-American community, which has been leading the ongoing protests over the fatal arrest of George Floyd and the use of police force on black Americans, the concrete they were standing on bears significant meaning.

It was this highway that, in the 1950s and '60s, tore apart the once-thriving neighborhood of Rondo – the heart of St. Paul's largest African-American community – and helped spur decades of racial segregation in the region.

Minnesota Governor Tim Walz acknowledged as much during a Saturday press conference. “It wasn’t just physical – it ripped a culture, it ripped who we were. It was an indiscriminate act that said this community doesn’t matter, it’s invisible,” he said. “This convenient place to put a highway so we can cross over this place and go from the city out to the suburbs.”

This kind of destruction and devastation are familiar to older African Americans in other cities across the U.S., whose communities were decimated by the construction of the Interstate Highway System. And as protesters take over major highways – from I-630 in Little Rock, Arkansas, I-40 in Memphis, Tennessee, I-75 in Cincinnati, Ohio – the symbolism has not been lost on some of those marching.

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The relationship between highways and racial injustice exemplifies the kinds of systemic issues that many protesters are now seeking to challenge. Policies that on their face may have appeared to be about easing transportation barriers and revitalizing cities were – and still are – often rooted in longstanding racial prejudice, and carried with them cascading effects that worsened pre-existing inequalities.

“The cities were already segregated, and what happens is that these freeways can act as concretizing the barriers to integration that exist,” said Joseph DiMento, a law professor at the University of California, Irvine, and the co-author of the book “Changing Lanes: Visions and Histories of Urban Freeways.”

Starting in the 1950s, state and local officials bought into the idea that highways would be welcomed as revitalization tools for struggling downtowns by reducing commuting costs and improving accessibility, which would in turn make those areas inviting to businesses. This interest in highway-building came around the same time as a movement for massive “urban renewal” projects that razed neighborhoods considered blighted. It’s no coincidence that many of these were low-income and black neighborhoods into which discriminatory housing practices after the Great Depression discouraged investment. Affected communities often protested proposals that demolished or tore through their own neighborhoods. But in many cities, protests couldn’t stop plans from barreling forward.

In St. Paul, when white suburbanites shifted from mass transit to automobiles and began calling for easy access into the Twin Cities and between their business corridors, running an expressway through the neighborhood of Rondo became the obvious option. It conveniently sat between the two cities’ downtown cores.

During the first half of the 20th century, Rondo residents were mostly middle and working class, and many owned homes and businesses. The neighborhood had an abundance of gathering places that helped foster a vibrant music, theater and sports scene. And as home to several black newspapers and to the city’s chapter of the NAACP, Rondo was also an active civil rights hub.

Black leaders objected to the highway plan, but without the same political influence as a white community, their concerns about the life of the neighborhood and the future of people in it fell largely on deaf ears. Construction began September 1956, just a few months after Congress passed the Federal Aid Highway Act that initiated the building of the highway system, and by 1968, a vast roadway spanning multiple lanes sliced down the middle of Rondo.

Local historians estimate that more than 300 businesses were destroyed, and more than 600 families lost their home. Some had little choice but to sell their property to the city at a fraction of its value, while those who resisted were forcibly removed. Thousands of residents were left to find a new place to live in a region where officials deliberately used redlining practices and racial housing covenants to restrict home sales to African Americans.

DiMento’s research documented similar costs to African Americans when highways tore through other cities. In Syracuse, New York, for example, many of those displaced were low-income

renters whose buildings were condemned and razed for the development of I-81. “They weren’t welcomed in white communities and in suburbs, so their dispersion throughout the existing less economically viable parts of city took place,” he said.

In city after city, black residents who were left behind in their cut-up neighborhood were now walled off by these highways in “border vacuums” with far more limited access to job opportunities across town. “It’s just quite remarkable how little fluidity there is across these barriers.” DiMento said.

Between high rates of unemployment, population loss and lowered land values, the effects of racial segregation carried over to generations of residents. In the Twin Cities today, only 25% of black families are homeowners, a rate that remains almost as low as the years right after the opening of I-94. The federal Fair Housing Act of 1968, which made housing discrimination illegal, has done little to mitigate the damage from segregation.

The U.S. continues to fund roadway expansion over public transit infrastructure – exacerbating the economic and health disparities among African Americans. As Governor Walz emphasized Saturday, the continual push for those projects still says to communities that they are, for all intents and purposes, invisible.

Taking protests to those very highways is in that sense a pursuit of visibility. It’s not just in the demonstrations for George Floyd, but in past uprisings over police brutality as well: Dozens shut down I-94 in 2016 after police killed Philando Castile during a traffic stop in a Minnesotan suburb. And in 2014, mass protests stalled traffic on 101 freeway in Los Angeles and highways in several other cities to demand justice for 12-year-old Tamir Rice and 18-year old Michael Brown – both shot dead by white police officers in separate incidents.

“I don’t know how the decision was made to protest on the freeways but I think it has an interesting symbolic gesture,” DiMento said. “Freeways move people out of inner cities to the suburbs; freeways are escape routes from the lower-income areas. They represent decisions made by the powerful that have historically served people who didn’t live in the poor communities.”



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