

## Modern Day Segregation: How the Black Ghetto Has Stood the Test of Time

*“I started thinking man, either they don’t know, don’t show, or don’t care about what’s happening in the hood.”*

*-Doughboy, Boyz N the Hood*

I was raised in South New Jersey, in Camden County. Camden County is known for its low-income black and brown community and violence. I grew up going to schools outside the immediate Camden city in the suburb called Pennsauken. But it was always interesting to me that many of my classmates who lived in Camden used family’s or friend’s Pennsauken addresses to attend the schools in this zone. Looking back, the reason is clear. The schools in Camden were dilapidated, underfunded, and understaffed. My classmates were majority black, Latinx, and Asian, but also some were white. Pennsauken, while it was still in Camden County, was just a bit more diverse, diverse enough to be just that much better than the schools in Camden itself. The schools sucked, yes (the reason my mom decided to move us to Maryland) but living in the black ghetto is much more. The tight-knit community fueled close neighborly bonds creating a sense of family with the people you lived with. The distrust of police, yelling “F\*ck metro” whenever they drove down the street, represented a clear them vs. us mentality. And the corner store was a meeting place and where each dollar that I found went to. Many view the black ghetto from the outside. The media, the press, and stereotypes, portray negative headlines and push false

narratives. And while the black ghetto is no safe haven, in many ways it is an honest depiction of the black identity.

“She is so ghetto.” “That house was hella ghetto.” “OMG, you’re acting so ghetto right now.” Ghetto. Many today use it as an adjective. An adjective used to describe something relating to stereotypes of poor black people in our country. The other definition, the appropriate one, describes a particular area that is primarily occupied by a minority group. The term has a rich history in this context that is explained by Mitchell Duneier in his book “Ghetto: The Invention of a place, The History of an Idea”. It came from the word, “geto” which stemmed from a Venetian gold foundry. In 1516, Venetian authorities put into policy the separation of their Jewish population from larger society. The term “ghetto” saw a brief disappearance until the Nazis re coined the term to describe their completely isolated, barbed wire enclosures where they confined their Jewish prisoners. While the Venetian ghettos were free for the inhabitants to come and go for work and allowed for cultural and economic thriving, the Nazi ghettos banned that and more. The people within the Nazi ghettos were deprived of basic necessities and from practicing their traditions. When African Americans began to draw connections between the Jews living under Nazi surveillance, to their own segregated state, ghetto made its application to the poor black cities of the United States (Duneier,1-25). Today in the United States, the word ghetto is used almost exclusively in relation to the majority of poor and black urban zones.

Whenever I bring up the topic of the black ghetto, I often get the typical line, “but other races and groups live in low-income areas too.” While this is true, that statement ignores the sheer number of African Americans that live in these ghettos. Among other racial and ethnic groups, African Americans have the highest poverty rate at 21.2% in 2017. Compared to Hispanics at 18.3% and whites at 8.7% (Center for American Progress). “Ghetto” has a negative history and

connotation. This word almost exclusively is used to talk about poor black living situations. Chinatown, barrios, and Little Italy, to name a few, also are ethnically homogenous areas, but the use of these other names implies a difference in the identity between them and the black ghetto. Not applying the label of “ghetto” on these other “ethnic enclaves” allows for them to take on a different position within the American landscape as a place of pride, such as barrio, or a major destination and cultural hub, like Chinatown (Duneier, 224). Equating the black ghetto to other ethnically homogenous areas also takes away the generational and systematic oppression and dominance that whites have over blacks. The modern black ghetto is the intersection of a history of racism and classism that has led to a perpetuation that has withstood the test of time, beginning from the Great Migration in 1916 and spanning into the 1970s. It was during this time of black migration from the south to the north that the Northern urban centers began to swell with an influx of black people.

Southern blacks heard stories of “The Promised Land.” In a class last semester about the black ghetto I learned about how they heard of new jobs specifically looking for African Americans, of integrated schools where white students meant more resources for their children, and of improved living conditions. Labor agents came to the south, telling of the job opportunities that were popping up everywhere in the North. World War I between 1914 and 1918 caused a halt in European immigration to the United States; the new job market now eager to fill the unskilled factory positions with black bodies. Black newspapers from the North were sent to the South. One of the most popular ones, *The Chicago Defender*, spoke about the acts of violence that blacks faced every day, about how they could come to the North to escape the ills of the South. These newspapers and labor agents were outlawed and seen as criminal in the South. Southern whites didn’t want their sharecropping field hands to abandon their land and head north. But letters home

from family members that had made it to the North encouraged Southern blacks to leave behind the only homes they had ever known and made their way to the big cities in the North. With the little they had, these strong, brave, and anxious migrants headed toward “The Promised Land.” Over the course of the Great Migration, over 6 million African Americans would make the journey.

When the Southern African Americans arrived in “The Promised Land” they were faced with their fair share of hardships. It is often assumed that in the North, blacks were awarded more freedoms and integration. But this was not the case. In the South, with all other negatives aside, black and whites lived and worked side by side. However, in the Northern cities, blacks and whites lived in different areas. This can be seen starkly in Chicago where the use of restrictive covenants and redlining practices allocated only certain areas where African Americans could live and kept them from diffusing out. Restrictive covenants were legally put into place by the government and into writing by real estate boards saying that African Americans could not lease, rent, buy, or occupy certain neighborhoods in order to preserve white purity. Redlining was a practice that began when the Home Owners’ Loan Corporation was asked by the Federal Home Loan Bank Board to review 239 cities in the United States and outline the areas in colors based on their desirability. Areas that were marked in red were seen as the riskiest for economic support in the form of mortgages. These redlined areas were undoubtedly primarily low-income black neighborhoods. Being labeled as high economic risk zones caused property values to lower, landlords to abandon their properties, and led to further economic and physical deterioration. In Chicago specifically, restrictive covenants and redlining practices were very legal for some time and combined to keep blacks in the South and West side and whites in the North and East side of the city. In the North and East, whites were able to build up their land, bring in resources, and lived a better quality of life in response. And they knew it. When suburbs began popping up

during this post World War I time period, they were almost exclusively white. Redlining practices were clearly targeting black neighborhoods and whites saw integration as an economic liability. As the rise of black faces rose in a community, the white faces declined. The suburbs sprouting up were majority white and the residents fought using restrictive covenants as a neighborhood collaboration to keep blacks from being able to occupy the properties. Blacks stayed tightly concentrated in these low-income communities where many shared one room for an entire family for inflated prices at the whim of the white landlord (Greene, 3). “The Promised Land” while it offered better job security than unfair sharecropping in the South, blacks were still subject to the limited resources and declining living conditions of the overcrowded cities.

The characteristics of low-income black communities are widely known. High unemployment, broken family structures, violence, crime, poor housing, and limited resources. I would walk through Camden and I saw it myself. I saw the men in tattered clothing hanging around with bottles in hand outside the liquor store. I went to school with teachers that had to buy all the supplies that we had in the classroom. I stood outside with my best friend yelling, “f\*ck metro” at the cops, whose sirens never seemed to stop blaring through the streets. And I saw how her mom and my own mom worked tirelessly as single mothers, supporting children with fathers that at times could not be bothered. My grandmother was born and raised in Camden, and her parents were born and raised there. My mom made the decision to move us out. She sacrificed economic stability so I could go to a school where they had college counselors, a brand-new STEM building that cost six million dollars to build, and teachers that had attended colleges of high prestige who were truly passionate about their students. And even in today’s world that means going where the white kids go.

Since I was younger my parents stressed education. I always had my head in a book and I would spend hours in Barnes & Noble and the library. This start me up to take my schoolwork very seriously. Growing up in south Jersey I felt different than my peers. I was quiet and kept to my small group of friends. People knew me to be “smart” and would come to me to copy homework or help them to cheat on a test. When it came time for my older sister to go to high school, she ended up going to an all-girl boarding school in North Carolina. Being uninvolved in her process, I assumed it was her love of Harry Potter and her outgoing personality that led her to this decision. When it came time for me to high school, my mom gave me two options: either I would go to boarding school too or we would move. My mom was adamant that the high schools in the area, even the one private school, would not set me up to go to college. That the teachers there were not on par with teachers of better districts. And so, in August of 2014 we moved to Montgomery County, Maryland where the public schools were some of the best in the nation. I was devastated and fought against the decision every step of the way. In Jersey I went to public school where most of my peers looked like me, lived near me, and I had grown up with. In Maryland, I attended a college prep private school called Bullis in the upper class town of Potomac, Maryland. For the first time, I was the minority. I was not seen as smart, everyone was smart. I was stood out instead because I was a black girl in a predominantly white institution. My years at Bullis changed me. Being in a place where you can relate and see yourself in the people around you make you unaware of your identity in a way. At Bullis I realized what it meant to be a black woman in such a community. It made me more outspoken and passionate and goofy and ambitious. But from the eyes of my white peers and faculty I was seen as rebellious, disrespectful, loud, and uncontrollable. Bullis was a blessing in that it gave me the resources and opportunities that I could never have gotten had we stayed in Jersey. It was also a blessing in that it opened my eyes to the

truths of society, that made me more accepting and ready to take on a major in Africana Studies here at Miami. Bullis taught me a lot, but the most important lesson that I learned in my four years there, is that as a black woman, before I could truly show myself, I had to debunk and overcome any stereotypes that were stacked against me.

Many assert and argue that the situation of the black ghetto is one that is caused by the residents themselves. It is a statement that dates back to imperialism, slavery, and then post slavery Minstrel shows and media depictions of descendants of Africans as lazy and dependent on others for their success. The justification for redlining and restrictive covenants came from the idea that where African Americans live is where there is violence, dilapidation, and crime. That blacks cause these problems exclusively. But this idea is not one that mirrors the chicken and egg debate. One clearly was caused by the other. African Americans didn't create the situation of the black ghetto, the black ghetto created the situation of African Americans: high concentration of poverty caused by a history of racism, classism, and institutional oppression. With a lack of fair paying jobs, residents are forced to turn to deviant ways of making more money in less time. These acts of making money have now been associated with the black ghetto, although only a small number of people living in these low-income neighborhoods actually partake in them. Having such a high concentration of people living in a small space creates tensions and alliances that fuel gang-related violence that is highly associated with the black ghetto. The black ghetto is homogenous in race, but it is still filled with individuals who live by a "code of the street". Sociologist and Yale professor, Elijah Anderson, talks about the ways that the residents of the black ghetto have been socialized to be able to survive in such a community. In his studies of Baltimore, Elijah Anderson has come to see that the black ghetto has divided itself into two groups: "street" and "decent". Although most people living in the black ghetto are "decent", the "street" people are all that have

been plastered and portrayed over time and space in the history of this country. “Decent” people want more for themselves. They want strong families and value education for their children, they have high morals, and instill responsibility. “Street” people have a lack of trust for dominant authority figures and feel that it is their job to protect their family and friends in a superficial way. Their criminal behavior is often the main narrative of the black ghetto and the one that media has chosen over time to portray (Anderson, 82).

When you grow up in a school with limited resources, in crime-ridden streets, and isolated from larger society a sense of psychological inferiority is constructed. I look back at my friends that I left after middle school that still live in Jersey. They feel as though their world is small. They look to parents that have lived there all their lives and at the resources that have led them to go straight into the workforce or to a college that is no more than an hour away. The inferiority complex of black youth growing up in the black ghetto was studied by Dr. Lynette Parker, a student in the graduate law program at the University of California. She talked about how students unconsciously connect their lack of resources and underpaid teachers to their implicit inferiority. Many students in the black ghetto come from families that have not reaped the benefits of a strong education that leads towards success. Many studies have been done that have shown the resources available or unavailable have a direct correlation to the success of students (5). Today, I had a conversation with my friend and fellow University of Miami student, Elijah Davis. Elijah grew up in the inner city of Boston. His middle school years he attended a nearly all black public school. When it came time to go to high school, Elijah toured around the private high schools in his area. He described the private schools as “castles” and was mesmerized by how amazing it was compared to where he came from. Elijah applied to many private schools with the hopes of being able to attend one but was rejected by all. Instead, he was accepted into a program that aimed to

bridge the gap for inner-city students between 8th and 9th grade to prepare them to go to one of the prestigious high schools. Elijah told me about how this bridge school taught him proper etiquette, stressed strict dress code, reprimanded incorrect English, and even took them to Martha's Vineyard for a trip. Upon graduation from this bridge school, Elijah was accepted into one of his dream high schools where he would become one of four black students in his class. I listened to Elijah's story in awe. He was being "re-socialized" by this bridge program to adhere to the white norms of American society even down to where they vacation. I wondered why this kind of school was even able to exist. And it made me realize that in many ways the school was socializing Elijah in a more formal and direct way that society socializes any black person that makes it past the blocks of the black ghetto. Elijah made it out of the inner-city public-school system, but many can't and won't. They are not toured around local private schools. They are not told about the different college and universities out there. They do not have etiquette classes. And Martha's Vineyard is merely a place that's heard of, if even that. It is no argument that access to resources plays a big part in who has the opportunity for upward mobility and who doesn't.

The election of Barack Obama was no doubt a huge win for the black community. But the benefits of having a black president still do very little in addressing the issues of the black ghetto. In a study conducted by Cathy Cohen in 2008 for the 2008 Mobilization, Change, Political and Civic Engagement, she asked respondents between the ages of 18 and 30 if the election of Barack Obama as President of the United States suggests that race is no longer an issue. 69% of black youth responded that racism remains a major problem. 51% of Latino youth answered that racism was still a major problem. And 63% of white youth claimed that racism exists but it's not a major problem (16). Examining the youth is the best predictor of what the present says and what the future will be. The election of President Obama told many whites and people of privilege, any

race, that we are living in a post racial climate. But the withstanding of the black ghetto is proof that that's not true. The black ghetto lacks affordable sound housing, neighborhoods free from violence, police that care about the communities and people they serve, well-paying jobs, and an education system that is just as good as one in a white neighborhood. Small businesses are being closed by stores like Wal-Mart or K-Mart (205). And the people of these neighborhoods are being put out and displaced by gentrification and urban renewal projects. These projects that aim to "repair and rebuild" a dilapidated community ignore the generations of families by raising their rents and forcing them out. Without financial literacy or basic resources to defend themselves, the residents of these black ghettos are left helpless to improve their situations. Cohan in a focus group with black youth from Chicago found that many residents within the black ghetto see their situation as one caused by generational oppression and racism. They agreed that their circumstances would not be seen in a white neighborhood. "...black youth have indicated through their answers to surveys, comments in focus groups, and in-depth interviews that they are looking forward to the day when race is no longer a factor in determining the quality of their schooling, their access to health care and quality food, how they are treated by the police, and whether they are able to land good jobs and have promising careers" (207).

Growing up in a black ghetto, residents adopt a mental model of the world that lacks trust in the system they are living in. They learn that if you want anything in life you have to take it upon yourself to get it through unconventional means. A mental model is created by how we are socialized and taught to think of the world and people around us. It influences our thinking in automatic ways and is crucial to interpersonal relationships. A good example of this is taken from *The Autobiography of Malcolm X as Told to Alex Haley*. Throughout his young years and carrying on into his early adulthood, Malcolm saw how his mother was very prideful and even after the

murder of her husband refused to accept the charity from those around her, insisting that she can take care of her eight children herself. She eventually lost the custody after she suffered an emotional breakdown and was admitted to a mental institution. Malcolm was led to a life of crime to bring himself and his siblings financial stability. He later began to abuse drugs and alcohol to numb the pain of such a lifestyle. This mental model of supporting yourself and family by any means necessary has led to labels of deviance from the outside and greater policing and stricter laws and penalties for these communities. In turn, families are still being broken, a legacy of deviance continues, and the black ghetto is perpetuated, and the cycle continues.

Elijah Anderson in his essay, *The Iconic Ghetto*, talks about the idea of the “iconic Negro.” Anderson describes the “iconic Negro” as the collective stereotypes that are used to justify white fear and mistrust of the black community. He describes the “big, black man” in a black hoodie or the “welfare queen” a big, black woman that is over sexual, has too many kids from too many men and that takes advantage of the taxes paid by hardworking men and women. This idea of black people living off welfare while lazing around at home was used by Reagan and other conservatives to destroy the social welfare initiatives. These stereotyped figures are unconsciously held by much of society, and not just whites, but even elite blacks who look down on the black ghetto as lazy and unsuccessful people that hold back the entire group. The “iconic Negro” image affects every black person (16). It’s the reason that Obama was the first black president. It is the reason that Elijah and I get stared at as we walked into the pool at the Ritz- Carlton. It is the reason why my dad must watch the way he speaks to his white colleagues and shave his facial hair to look “less threatening.” And it is the reason the media often portrays blacks in a mugshot and whites in a family picture for the same crime. Society may have forgotten about the situation in the black ghetto, but they have not forgotten about the stereotypes and mental

models they hold regarding black people. And that is why my mom tells me not to speak in the slang I grew up hearing and why I used to straighten my hair religiously. I was denying the reference point of my identity that I was trying to negate to my white peers and teachers in high school. But this is why the understanding of the black ghetto is so important. It is important in understanding the black identity and the dynamics of race and class in this country to examine and pick apart the history and present afflictions in terms of the black ghetto; to see that the problems facing the black ghetto are not intrinsic but rather the result of generational inequality.

The high concentration of poverty has now created a legacy of inequality that is hard to break from. Projects such as Moving to Opportunity and Gautreaux have worked to try to decentralize poverty by giving residents the means to move out through housing vouchers and rent certificates. Moving to Opportunity focused on moving low-income people from Chicago, Baltimore, Boston, Los Angeles, and New York to neighborhoods with poverty rates under 10%. This focus on class but no attention to race was largely unsuccessful. These residents were being moved to affluent yet still highly segregated communities where the native residents did not feel much inclination or desire to have new low-income neighbors. This caused many of the Moving to Opportunity participants to not be any more self-sufficient or even attend different schools than they were. Boys that were part of the Moving to Opportunity project were even more likely to engage in risky behavior. Gautreaux, on the other hand, focused on building affordable housing in integrated neighborhoods in an attempt to deconcentrate the black ghetto. When focusing primarily on race, Gautreaux was monumentally more successful with youth more likely to graduate high school and attend a four-year college. Adults were more likely to find better jobs and get higher pay and be more self-sufficient and successfully getting off welfare programs. The success and failure of these programs represent the important part that race plays on the black

ghetto. More needs to be done to deconcentrate the racial aspect of the black ghetto if people are going to have better life chances like the Gautreaux Program suggested.

In September of 2016, Donald Trump was asked about “crime in the black community” and addressing “black-on-black crime.” He responded:

I would do stop-and-frisk. I think you have to. We did it in New York, it worked incredibly well and you have to be proactive and, you know, you really help people sort of change their mind automatically... You understand, you have to have, in my opinion, I see what’s going on here, I see what’s going on in Chicago, I think stop-and-frisk. In New York City it was so incredible, the way it worked. Now, we had a very good mayor, but New York City was incredible, the way that worked, so I think that could be one step you could do. (Fox News, 2016)

Donald Trump’s remarks tell the chilling truth of what many Americans think of the black ghetto; that there is a pathological difference in blacks that causes them to make up 13% of the United States but 40% of the United States prisons (Shirazi, 2016). For the *Berkley Journal of Criminal Law*, Reshaad Shirazi talks about how conservative politics created an epidemic that targeted low income communities as centers of crime and violence to combat the strides made during the Civil Rights Movement. This rhetoric has sustained over time by Presidents such as Reagan, Nixon, and now Trump. Shirazi emphasizes how Nixon’s “War on Drugs” inflated the crime rates of incarcerations for drug related abuses that targeted the black ghetto and destabilized the economies, family structures, and the inner cities. Money is constantly going into these police forces to increase their activity in black ghettos where it is easier and more accessible to catch and arrest offenders although 82% of drug use in the US is by whites compared to 17% of blacks. But this is not the story that is pushed in the media. Instead the narrative remains that teaches the subconscious that poor blacks are to blame for their own situations, ignoring the situation that led to it.

While in this paper I have primarily chosen to highlight and reveal the problems afflicting the black ghetto, I do not want to take away from the positives of living in such a community. The people living in the black ghetto support one another and see their neighborhoods as one big family. Kids all grow up playing together and take care of each other as if they are all each other's own brother or sister. Since the emergence of these black cities in the North, the black ghetto has been a cultural hub. From Harlem to Boston to Chicago to Los Angeles to Atlanta, there is little argument that these cities produce the best musicians, athletes, activists, creators, artists, and writers. When you grow up knowing all the people around you, you create a safety net of strength and pride that is necessary when living in a community that seems it has been left to fend for itself.

The black ghetto is integral in understanding the black experience in this country today. It's a story of resiliency and power of a people that have suffered oppression in all segments of American society over generations since the first boat came to the Americas from Africa in 1680s with human cargo. But the black ghetto is one that has been forgotten about in many ways, seen as "out of sight out of mind" as we move farther from the race discussion to focus more on class. But if we are ever going to come to terms and make amends with the dark history of this country in terms of slavery, we must keep the black ghetto in the discussion. We must see how education is the foundation of life outcomes. Public schools in inner cities lack the resources, supplies, and the highly paid and qualified teachers to lift children out of their inherited situation. Our public education system is highly segregated by class. Where there is money, there are better schools. Where we see poverty, we see the system failing. As the election comes up in 2020, I have been looking at how candidates are addressing reformation of public schools. I am looking for candidates that talk about pouring more money into schools of low-income communities rather than giving families vouchers for private schools, and tackling the pay raise of teachers. It is

important that we look at the problems facing the black ghetto as effects of the highly concentrated poverty caused by racial discriminations, not as outcomes caused by the people living there. The problem of the black ghetto is one that must concern everyone. I have the privilege of being able to learn about, write about, and discuss the topic of the black ghetto. I am black, yes. I am a woman, yes. But I was able to move out of the black ghetto. I was able to attend a high school that assumed I was going to college. I now attend a great university that has given me the education to voice my opinions. But many don't and won't think about their privileges that allow them to make a real difference. Africana studies is an elective. No one *has* to learn about what it means to be black in this country and world. So, we must choose to care. Choose to learn about the forgotten black ghetto. In this way, we can better understand the issues and maybe one day be able to fix the problem entirely.

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