

## 7a – Property Values

For much of American history, law and custom have created segregated housing patterns. Beginning in the early 20th century, White communities around the country passed local ordinances that forbade Blacks, Jews and some ethnic minorities from buying property in their neighborhoods. Excluded groups were restricted to housing in certain sections of cities and towns - sections that were often already overcrowded and offered inferior housing.

In 1917, the Supreme Court ruled that such ordinances were unconstitutional. But White communities employed other means to ensure residential segregation. One of the most popular methods was the restrictive covenant. The covenants were agreements signed by property owners and real estate agents in some White neighborhoods promising they would not sell or lease the property to a specified group. Even the Federal Housing Administration endorsed such practices and refused to back loans in communities that admitted "inharmonious" - or non-White - groups.

More than any other group, African Americans were the targets of these discriminatory practices. Around the nation, Whites fiercely resisted Blacks moving into their neighborhoods. Arson, bombings, cross burnings and threats of physical violence were all used to force Black residents out of White neighborhoods. In July of 1951, for example, Illinois Governor Adlai Stevenson declared martial law in Cicero, a suburb of Chicago, when a mob of 4,000 Whites rioted for four days to prevent a Black man from moving into a White neighborhood. Similar incidents occurred in cities around the nation, including Miami, Dallas, Nashville, Denver, St. Louis and Detroit.

The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) devoted a great deal of its energy and resources to overturning restrictive covenants and other discriminatory housing practices. In 1948, the NAACP won an important victory when the U.S. Supreme Court declared in *Shelley v. Kraemer* that such agreements could not legally be enforced. Twenty years later, in *Jones v. Mayer*, the Supreme Court went even further in preventing housing discrimination by ruling that a person could not be denied the opportunity to buy a home on the basis of race. Other laws promoting fair housing were passed in the 1970s and '80s as well.

Although the legal obstacles to achieving integrated housing have been removed, the legacy of these discriminatory practices still defines our communities. Most Americans live, work, worship and attend school with people of their own race. In 2000, *The New York Times* surveyed Black and White Americans about racial attitudes. The poll revealed that racial hostility has sharply declined since the Civil Rights Movement. The vast majority of those polled, both Black and White, said they had no preference about the racial composition of the neighborhoods. And yet the majority also lived in neighborhoods that were composed almost solely of their own racial group, suggesting that segregated communities may be more a matter of history and habit than of choice. One of the reasons that Whites cited for maintaining segregated housing for much of the 20th century was to protect their property values. In fact, the code of ethics of the National Association of Real Estate Boards in 1924 stated that "A Realtor should never be instrumental in introducing into a neighborhood ... members of any race or nationality, or any individual whose presence will clearly be detrimental to property values in that neighborhood." Integration, the majority culture believed, had its costs.

But what price have we paid as a nation in maintaining segregated communities? And what values do we need for the 21st century to finally topple the invisible walls that still divide our communities along racial lines?

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