

RACE AND PUBLIC POLICY: “CONSTRUCTING WHITENESS” WITH SEGREGATED HOUSING POLICY



ESSENTIAL QUESTION

How has housing policy been used as a tool of racism in the United States?



OBJECTIVES

Students will:

- Explain the difference between a law and a policy.
- Identify examples of laws and policies that have promoted racial segregation and inequality.
- Discuss racism and segregation in U.S. housing policy and its impact on Black Americans.
- Analyze primary source material on “redlining” in the U.S. in the 1930s and 1940s.
- Connect contemporary housing patterns and their historical antecedents.



LEARNING STANDARDS

See the [standards alignment chart](#) to learn how this lesson supports New Jersey State Standards.



TIME NEEDED

60 minutes



MATERIALS

- AV equipment to show a video
- *The House We Live In* handout (one per student)
- *Redlining in Essex County, NJ (1940)* handout (one per student)



VOCABULARY

FHA	policy	segregation
GI Bill	redlining	

Procedures

- 1** Have students engage in a turn-and-talk in response to the following questions: “What is the difference between a law and a policy? What are examples of laws and policies that affect our lives?” Discuss students’ responses and make sure they understand the following distinctions:
- A law is a formal procedure that must be followed; it is usually aimed at ensuring justice and is enforced through a justice system, including the police and the courts. Examples that govern students’ lives include minimum ages for working, voting and driving, as well as regulations against drug use.
 - A *policy* is a set of guidelines or plan of action for achieving certain goals. It is not a law, but can lead to new laws. Examples include school attendance, cellphone use, dress codes and respectful use of social media.
- 2** Review the definition of *segregation* (the act of keeping different racial groups separate from each other) with students: Ask them to identify ways that segregation of Black people has been enforced in our country through laws and policies, past or present. List their thoughts on the board (see examples below). Help them clarify ideas and emphasize that laws and policies have worked together throughout our country’s history to produce racial inequality.

LAWS	POLICIES
— Black people had to attend separate schools.	— There have been tests, taxes, voter ID checks and other ways to keep Black people from voting.
— Black people were not allowed to marry white people.	— Banks have made it hard for Black people to get loans.
— Black people were barred from voting.	— Some schools have had unfair admissions policies based on race.
— Black people had to sit in separate sections on the bus.	
— Black people had to use separate water fountains and bathrooms.	

NOTE

The full version of *The House We Live In* (approximately 55 minutes) can be found online at <https://vimeo.com/265756935>.

NOTE

If laptops or tablets are available, this exercise can be done online at “Mapping Inequality: Redlining in New Deal America”: <https://dsl.richmond.edu/panorama/redlining/#loc=4/40.953/-105.499>. Users can search for a city, then click on neighborhoods for demographic and descriptive information.

3

Distribute copies of *The House We Live In* handout to each student and review the instructions. Divide the class into four groups and assign each one of the categories on the handout. Explain that they will watch a video clip exploring how housing policy has fostered segregation and racial inequality throughout our country’s history. Show *Race: The Power of an Illusion, Episode 3—The House We Live In* [6:04]: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mW764dXEI_8. Pause the video at key spots to highlight important points and allow students to take notes.

4

After the video, divide students into small groups of four so each group contains students who have focused on a different category on the handout. Direct them to share the quote, question and graphic they recorded, and to describe how their responses address their assigned topic. Circulate and help groups process key information from the video clip.

5

Have students remain in their small groups and distribute a copy of *Redlining in Essex County, NJ (1940)* to each student. Review the introduction together, explaining that the chart and map contain primary source information demonstrating how redlining was used in one county in New Jersey. Direct groups to read through the materials and highlight evidence of bias or unfairness in the lending industry at that time.

6

Conclude the lesson by reviewing the evidence students identified in the redlining source material, and by discussing some of the questions listed on the following page.

Discussion Questions

- 1 How did World War II and the GI Bill lead to new economic opportunities? How were the opportunities different for white people and people of color?
- 2 How did suburbs like Levittown represent the American Dream for some people and a bad dream for others?
- 3 How did the U.S. government “racialize” or create inequality in housing?
- 4 Where does the term “redlining” come from? How did this practice worsen patterns of segregation?
- 5 How did housing policy contribute to the gap in net worth or wealth between Black and white people?
- 6 What are the benefits of home ownership? What are the consequences of being left out of this opportunity?
- 7 What advantages or disadvantages do people have when they live in a community that consists of only people like themselves?
- 8 Is your community segregated racially? What do you think contributes to residential segregation in today’s world?

Lesson Extensions

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- + Clark, Adam, "N.J. schools are among the most segregated in U.S. This lawsuit could change that," nj.com, last modified January 20, 2019, <https://www.nj.com/education/2018/05/lawsuit-calls-for-statewide-desegregation-of-nj-sc.html>.
 - + Massey, Douglas S. and Denton, Nancy, *American Apartheid: Segregation and the Making of the Underclass* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993).
 - + Jackson, Kenneth T., "Federal Subsidy and the Suburban Dream: How Washington Changed the American Housing Market" in *Crabgrass Frontier: The Suburbanization of the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 190–218.
 - + Rothstein, Richard, *The Color of Law: A Forgotten History of How our Government Segregated America* (New York: Liveright Publishing Corporation, 2017).
 - + Teaching Tolerance, "Toolkit for 'Segregation by Design'" <https://www.tolerance.org/magazine/fall-2018/toolkit-for-segregation-by-design>.
 - + *This American Life*, "House Rules," aired November 22, 2013, <https://www.thisamericanlife.org/512/house-rules>.
- The title of *The House We Live In* is taken from a 1940s short film called *The House I Live in*, starring Frank Sinatra (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vhPwtnGviyg>). It was made to combat antisemitism at the end of World War II. Though the film promotes a message of inclusion, it uses derogatory language in reference to Japanese people and is silent on issues of interracial understanding. Have students watch the film and discuss its merits and drawbacks within the context of the 1940s. Then have them update one or more stanzas of the title song to reflect an inclusive message by today's standards. (See the original lyrics at <https://www.azlyrics.com/lyrics/franksinatra/thehouseilivein.html>).
 - Investigate the legacy of housing policy set in the early and mid-20th century, and how it continues to perpetuate racial segregation and inequality today. Have students listen to *House Rules*, a multi-part radio series from *This American Life*: <https://www.thisamericanlife.org/512/house-rules>. The series, featuring the voices of New York City residents, explores the "destiny of your address" and how where you live can dictate education, health, employment and other opportunities. In response, students might journal about their own experiences related to residential segregation or create their own short video about its consequences in today's world.