

OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES IN THE NORTH



ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS

Why did so many Black Americans migrate to the North during the early and mid-1900s? How did housing policy play a large role in reinforcing racism and segregation?



OBJECTIVES

Students will:

- Define the Great Migration and identify the push and pull factors that caused it.
- Analyze primary and secondary sources that present Black perspectives on the Great Migration.
- Investigate examples of housing segregation and inequality experienced by Black migrants in the North.
- Interpret a speech by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. illustrating activism for fair housing laws and practices.



LEARNING STANDARDS

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



TIME NEEDED

105–135 minutes



MATERIALS

- AV equipment to show a video and project images
- *Black Americans Living in the U.S. South* handout (one to project or one per pair of students)
- *The Great Migration* handout (one to project)
- *Letters from the Great Migration* handout (one per student)
- *Urban Black Communities and Suburban Communities* handouts (one to project or one per student)
- *Excerpts from Chicago Freedom Festival Speech* handout (one per student)



VOCABULARY

activist	The Great Migration	redlining	suburban
discrimination	migration	segregation	urban
ghettos		slums	

4 Gather the class and examine the photo (on page 2 of the handout) of the migrants headed to New Jersey. Discuss the feeling conveyed and the possible hopes of the family members. Comment that during the first decades of the Great Migration, the percentage of Black people in New Jersey grew more than any other northern state.

5 Show the two PBS videos, *The Great Migration—New Jersey: Then and Now* [1:27] and *Social Effects of the Great Migration* [2:39]: <http://bit.ly/3dqi2sw>. As students watch, have them continue to add notes to their T-charts. Pause the videos as needed to allow students time to record their ideas. Afterwards, discuss some of the following questions:

- What do you think were the two or three strongest push and pull factors behind the Great Migration?
- What does the narrator mean by the “hopelessness of race relations” in the South? What was happening in that region that caused Black people to feel like there was no hope?
- Why were there more job opportunities in the North beginning in the 1910s? What was going on in the country that contributed to this situation?
- What were Black people’s experiences in New Jersey? Do you think their hopes for a better future were realized? Explain.
- The narrator comments that “racism worked against improvement.” What does he mean? What are specific examples of the ways in which racism limited opportunities for Black people in the North?
- How did Black people respond to the lack of equality they encountered in the North?

PART 2

The Rise of the Urban Ghetto (60–90 mins.)

6 Comment that while the Great Migration did increase opportunity, Black people continued to face prejudice and discrimination in northern cities. Highlight that housing segregation was a persistent problem in the North, where Black people were often limited to living in ghettos. Ask students how they would define *ghetto* and the associations they have with this term. Chart and organize students’ responses into a concept map, for example:

NOTE

Make certain students understand the dominant push factors (i.e., lack of economic opportunity, poor working conditions, segregation and racial violence) and pull factors (i.e., work and economic opportunities, desegregated schools/better education and greater social equality). Make clear that World War I and new limits on immigration created a need for cheap labor in the North, which created opportunity for Black people but also set the stage for racist backlash.

NOTE

As you debrief students’ concept maps, make sure to underscore that problems associated with ghetto life (e.g., crime, violence), are the result of environmental factors (e.g., overcrowding, poverty) and do not reflect any inherent qualities in the people who live in these communities.



NOTE

The use of the term ghetto as described above evolved from its original meaning as the section of a city in which Jews were required to live. The first ghetto was established in 1516 in Venice, Italy, (near a *ghèto* or foundry), where Jews were gated in and forced to wear a sign of identification.

7

Provide the following background on the meaning of ghetto: Since the early 20th century, ghetto has been used in the U.S. to describe crowded, run-down and poor neighborhoods occupied by immigrants and working-class groups. Black people in the North were not forced to live in ghettos or segregated communities by law (as in the South), but poverty and racism gave them few other choices. Though ghettos are often understood to be places that are under-resourced, many also view these communities as sources of culture and pride.

8

Show the truTV video “Adam Ruins Everything—The Disturbing History of the Suburbs” [6:16]: <https://bit.ly/37wOSUT>. This video uses humor to explain the history of housing inequality and why so many Black people were confined to ghettos during the period of the Great Migration. After the video, discuss some of the following questions:

- What government policies led to housing segregation?
- What was “redlining”? How did it contribute to racism and segregation?
- As suburbs grew, what practices kept Black people from moving to them?
- What advantages did white people in the suburbs accumulate? How did these benefits lead to education, work and other opportunities?
- How did housing policies trap Black people in poverty?
- Why did segregation continue even after the government outlawed housing discrimination?
- In your own words, how would you explain the narrator’s statement that white suburbs were “built on a foundation of segregation”?

9 Project or distribute the handouts *Urban Black Communities* and *Suburban Communities*, which show Levittown, New York, (discussed in the video) and other predominantly white and Black communities typical of the Great Migration era. Allow students to compare the settings and consider the disparate opportunities available to residents of each community. Have students devise a title for this collection of photos and do a few minutes of reflective writing that captures their thoughts and feelings in response to them.

10 Point out that while housing inequality is an issue that continues even today, the situation has improved due to the work of activists who demanded change. Tell students that Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. co-led the Chicago Freedom Movement in 1966, organizing marches and protests and uncovering discrimination in real estate practices. Distribute the handout *Excerpts from Chicago Freedom Festival Speech*, which is one of King's lesser-known addresses. In pairs or small groups, have students read the excerpts, highlighting key ideas and answering the questions that follow the passages.

11 Review students' responses and answer any questions they might have. Note that Dr. King's work in Chicago contributed to the breakthrough Fair Housing Act of 1968—passed shortly after his death—which made it illegal to discriminate in the sale, rental and financing of housing based on race, religion or national origin (and later expanded to include sex, people with disabilities and families with children).

12 Conclude the lesson by discussing some of the questions on the following page.

NOTE

The photos in this exercise are not indicative of the housing conditions for *all* Black or white Americans. There were many middle-class Black people and poor white people during the era of the Great Migration. However, these photos represent a pattern of segregation and wealth inequality that was driven by racism, persistent throughout the 20th century, and still reverberates today.



Discussion Questions

1

What were the expectations of Black people who migrated from the South? Did the realities of life in the North match their expectations? Explain.

2

What qualities do you think it took to start life anew in an unfamiliar place?

3

If you imagine yourself as a migrant in a new neighborhood and school, what might be your hopes, fears or other feelings?

4

How did race play a role in creating segregated housing in the U.S.? What has been the impact on Black Americans, even today?

5

Do you live in or near any communities that are racially segregated? If so, how do you feel about this in light of the history you have learned?

6

What are your beliefs about living in a community that is racially and ethnically diverse as opposed to one where people are mostly from the same background? Do you think it matters? Why or why not?

Lesson Extensions

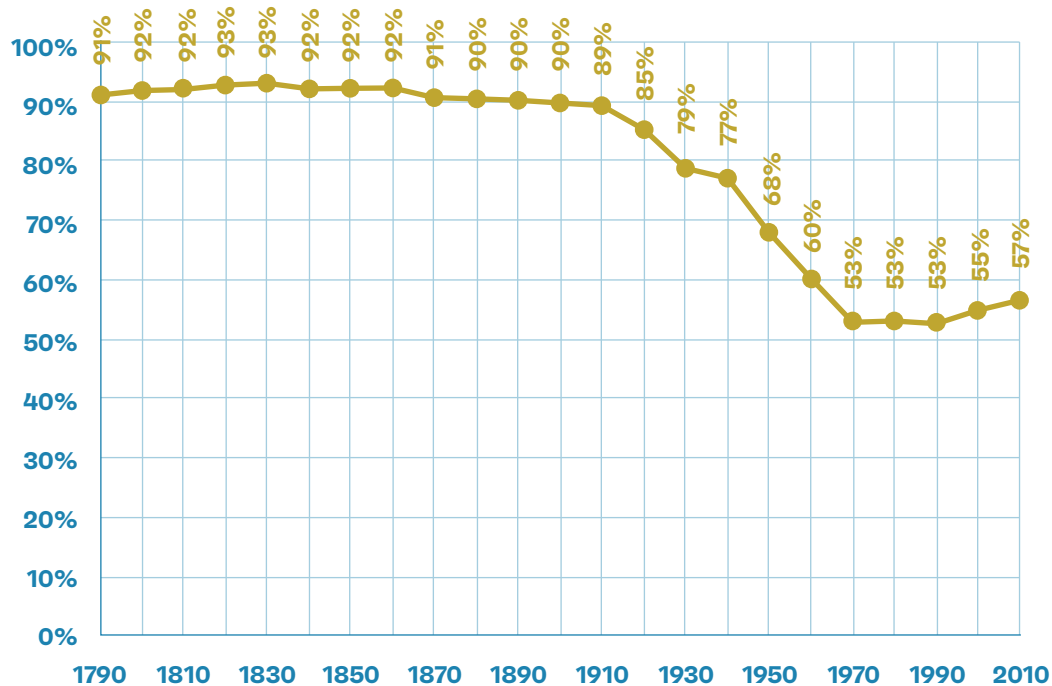
- Assign students to analyze some of the documents in the “Primary Source Set” on the Great Migration (see Additional Resources) to deepen their understanding of this period.
- Explore “The Migration Series” by African American artist Jacob Lawrence (see Additional Resources). This sequence of 60 panels depicts the experiences of Black people during the Great Migration. Have students write the story that some of the panels tell or create their own artwork portraying their understanding of the Great Migration.
- Show “The House We Live In” (see Additional Resources), which explores how housing policy has fostered segregation and racial inequality throughout our country’s history. It is the third episode of the PBS documentary *Race—The Power of an Illusion*, and is approximately 57 minutes long. See the activity featuring a clip from this video in the Unit 1 high school lesson, titled “Race and Public Policy: Constructing Whiteness with Segregated Housing Policy.”
- Assign students to research the demographic make-up of their own neighborhood and compare it to a neighboring area with a different make-up (perhaps a city if students live in a suburb, or vice versa). Have them look at differences in average income, per pupil spending and other data that might be available. Discuss any disparities that might be related to race and the impact these differences might have on community members.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- + Digital Public Library of America. “Primary Source Sets: The Great Migration.” <https://dp.la/primary-source-sets/the-great-migration>.
- + Newark Public Library. “My Newark Story.” <https://npl.org/mynewarkstory>.
- + The Phillips Collection. “Jacob Lawrence: The Migration Series.” <https://lawrencemigration.phillipscollection.org>.
- + PBS. *Race—The Power of an Illusion*. Episode 3: “The House We Live In,” <https://vimeo.com/265756935>.
- + RiseUp North. “Newark.” African Americans, Part 3 (First Great Migration), <https://bit.ly/2ZA5Du4>; African American Migration, Part 2, <https://bit.ly/3bsKhEi>.



Percentage of Black Americans Living in the U.S. South



1 Describe the trend shown on the graph.

2 What might have been happening in the U.S. to cause this trend?

3 What questions does the graph raise for you?

SOURCE: Jajhill. "Percentage of African American population living in the American South." August 12, 2015. Accessed February 17, 2021. https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Percentage_of_African_American_population_living_in_the_American_South.png.

The Great Migration



SOURCE: Siegel, Michael, *The Great Migration, 1900-1929*, 2005, New York Public Library Digital Collections, <http://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/85f0908d-8265-f747-e040-e00a18062131>.



Letters from the Great Migration

These letters were published in *The Journal of Negro History* in 1919. They are from Black residents of the South who wanted to move to the North.

- What do they reveal about the *push* and *pull* factors leading to the Great Migration?
- What feeling do they express about the situation for southern Black people and their hopes for the future

1 LUTCHER, LOUISIANA, MAY 13, 1917

Dear Sir:

I have been reading the Chicago defender⁶ and seeing so many advertisements about the work in the north I thought to write you concerning my condition. I am working hard in the south and can hardly earn a living. I have a wife and one child and can hardly feed them. I thought to write and ask you for some information concerning how to get a pass for myself and family.

I dont want to leave my family behind as I cant hardly make a living for them right here with them and I know they would fare hard if I would leave them. If there are any agents⁷ in the south there havent been any of them to Lutcher if they would come here they would get at least fifty men. Please sir let me hear from you as quick as possible. Now this is all.

Please dont publish my letter, I was out in town today talking to some of the men and they say if they could get passes that 30 or 40 of them would come. But they havent got the money and they dont know how to come. But they are good strong and able working men. If you will instruct me I will instruct the other men how to come as they all want to work.

Please dont publish this because we have to whisper this around among our selves because the white folks are angry now because the negroes are going north.

2 SELMA, ALABAMA, MAY 19, 1917

Dear Sir:

I am a reader of the Chicago Defender I think it is one of the Most Wonderful Papers of our race printed. Sirs I am writeing to see if You all will please get me a job. And Sir I can wash dishes, wash iron nursing work in groceries and dry good stores. Just any of these I can do.

Sir, who so ever you get the job from please tell them to send me a ticket and I will pay them. When I get their as I have not got enough money to pay my way. I am a girl of 17 years old and in the 8 grade at Knox Academy School. But on account of not having money enough I had to stop school.

Sir I will thank you all with all my heart. May God Bless you all. Please answer in return mail.

⁶ *The Chicago Defender* is an African American newspaper, founded in 1905. It campaigned against Jim Crow era violence and encouraged Black people in the South to migrate north. *The Chicago Defender* stopped printing in 2019 and exists today online.

⁷ "Agents" were representatives of northern companies sent to the South to recruit Black people to fill jobs. Southern states, angry that their cheap work force was being lured away, arrested labor agents and banned newspaper ads with job opportunities in the North.



Letters from the Great Migration

3 LEXINGTON, MISSISSIPPI, UNDATED

My dear Mr. H --- :

I am writing to you for some information and assistance if you can give it.

I am a young man and am disable, in a very great degree, to do hard manual labor. I was educated at Alcorn College and have been teaching a few years: but ah: me the Superintendent under whom we poor colored teachers have to teach cares less for a colored man than he does for the vilest beast. I am compelled to teach 150 children without any assistance and receives only \$27.00 a month, the white with 30 get \$100.

I am so sick I am so tired of such conditions that I sometime think that life for me is not worth while and most eminently believe with Patrick Henry "Give me liberty or give me death." If I was a strong able bodied man I would have gone from here long ago, but this handicaps me and, I must make inquiries before I leap.

Mr. H ---, do you think you can assist me to a position I am good at stenography typewriting and bookkeeping or any kind of work not to rough or heavy. I am 4 feet 6 in high and weigh 105 pounds.

I will gladly give any other information you may desire and will greatly appreciate any assistance you may render me.



These migrants moved from Florida to New Jersey in 1940. What hopes do you think they had for the future?

SOURCES:

Delano, Jack. *Group of Florida migrants on their way to Cranberry, New Jersey, to pick potatoes. Near Shawboro, North Carolina. July 1940.* Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division, Washington, D.C. <https://www.loc.gov/pictures/resource/fsa.8c02701>.

Hanover College. "Letters of Negro Migrants of 1916-1918." <https://history.hanover.edu/courses/excerpts/260GMigration.html>.

History Matters. "Sir I Will Thank You with All My Heart: Seven Letters from the Great Migration." <http://historymatters.gmu.edu/d/5332>.



Urban Black Communities, 1920s–1940s



Ida B. Wells Housing Project for Negroes, Chicago, Illinois, April 1941



Detroit Negro Quarter, 1929

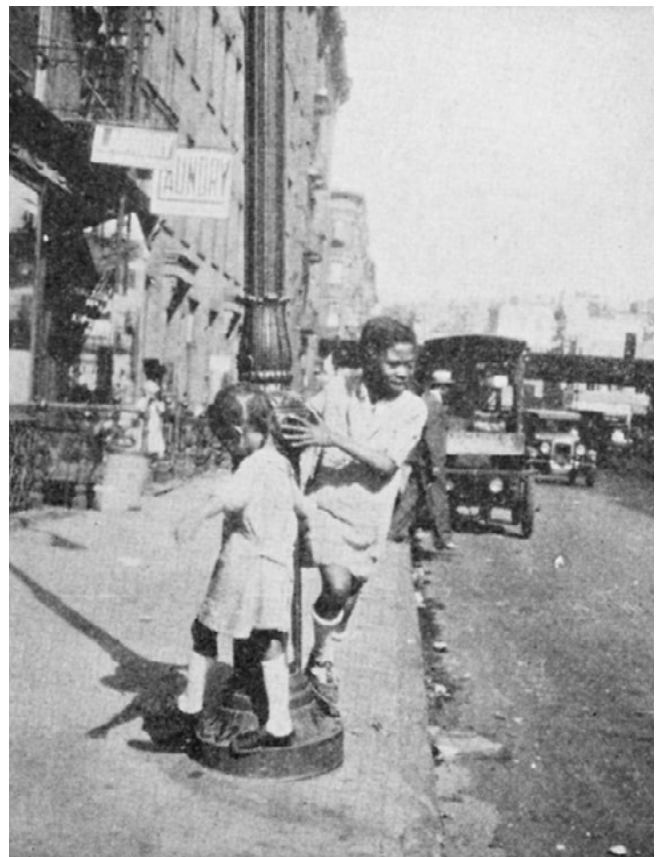
SOURCES: Lee, Russell. *Ida B. Wells Housing Project for Negroes, Chicago, Illinois, April 1941*. New York Public Library Digital Collections. <http://on.nypl.org/3bjcfm8>; *Housing, Detroit Negro quarter*. 1929. New York Public Library Digital Collections. <http://on.nypl.org/3k1LhDq>.



Urban Black Communities, 1920s–1940s



Negro family living in crowded quarters,
Chicago, Illinois, April 1941



There are few playgrounds in Harlem [New York City].
Negro children must play on the streets.

SOURCES: Lee, Russell. *Negro family living in crowded quarters, Chicago, Illinois*, April 1941. New York Public Library Digital Collections. <http://on.nypl.org/2NpBScX>; *There are few playgrounds in Harlem. Negro children must play on the streets*. 1929. New York Public Library Digital Collections. <http://on.nypl.org/2Zv0L9B>.



Suburban Communities, 1940s–1950s

Park Forest, Illinois, (near Chicago) and Levittown, New York, (near New York City) were both planned communities for veterans returning from World War II.



"If Dad's home, this must be a weekend. The men were away from the community all week. They made up for lost time on weekends, doing home improvements, playing with the kids, and participating in community groups."



Levittown NY
Ranch Model circa 1950

SOURCES: Park Forest Public Library. "Building the backyard barbecue." <https://americanhistory.si.edu/america-on-the-move/city-and-suburb>;
Mark Mathosian. "Levittown, L.I. N.Y." <http://bit.ly/2M5ehgU>.



Suburban Communities, 1940s–1950s



PRICE: \$7990!
DOWN PAYMENT: Not a penny!
MONTHLY CHARGES: \$58!

EVERY WEEK, for twelve solid hours, every day of the seven days of the week, from 10 A.M. to 10 P.M., people are rising and paying about the sensational Levittown House of 1949.

They're all veterans, because only veterans can buy this remarkable house. And they're right in being excited. They don't need any down payment, and their monthly carrying charges are only \$58! That includes all taxes, water charges, free insurance, interest, and complete payment of the purchase price.

Now let's see what you get for \$7,990. It's the house pictured above in any one of five different designs, all with the same layout and features.

First, your grounds are 60 by 100, all leveled, landscaped, and shrubbed. Even fruit trees have been planted. Your living room overlooks the rear garden. And we mean it when we say "overlooks," because one entire wall—nineteen feet long—is in Thermopane glass from floor to ceiling! Think of it. A double-thick insulated wall made entirely of glass!

But that's only one of a hundred features that will leave you wide-eyed and open-mouthed. The fame of this house has spread over the whole world and it deserves it. Look at the fireplace that's open on two sides and works as a barbecue as well as the conventional way. Look at the closets, eight feet long, with sliding ventilated doors. Look at the built-in chests of drawers and the chromium, non-tagging rods.

And that kitchen! Nobody knows housework, but since you've got to do it, you might as well enjoy yourself. All cabinets are gleaming Tracy steel with a white porcelain finish. And gone is the old-fashioned sink that chipped every time you looked at it. Instead you'll see the stainless-steel, satin finish Tracy version with the built-in vegetable sprayer.

In one corner is the newest General Electric refrigerator, on the side, the G.E. range. In another corner, the Bendix Automatic DeLuxe Laundry with the special Levitt-designed stainless steel top.

There are so many things we could write about. For instance, the storage wall with the built-in desk, closet, book-shelves—and the entire wall revolves! Or the very newest aluminum Venetian blinds with the automatic slats. Or the great big open second floor that can easily be converted into two more bedrooms and another bath.

Sure we could talk about our shopping centers, our schools, our playgrounds, our athletic fields. We could show you our gorgeous swimming pools and adjoining kiddie pools—all yours at no charge if you live here. But after all, you've got to see all this yourself—so here's what you do:

Come out to Levittown anytime you want—today, tomorrow, any day—from 10 A.M. to 10 P.M. If you're a veteran file an application, leave a good-faith deposit of \$100, and you'll move in in October, at which time your deposit will be refunded. You won't pay anybody a single penny, and it'll only cost you \$58 a month thereafter to own your own home.

So hurry out, Mr. Kibbey. Pretty soon there'll be no more houses for October, and then it'll be for November, then December—and then ??? Then you won't have any home at all, and you can't say we didn't tell you.

Drive our Grand Central Parkway. Turn right in the bend marked "Southern Parkway." Leave at the forkhead and W-11 marked Levittown. From there you can't miss the Exhibit Home which is right on Hempstead Turnpike.

Levitt and Sons
 INCORPORATED
 EXECUTIVE OFFICES - MANHASSET - LONG ISLAND

This flier advertised Levittown, New York, in 1949.

"...Only veterans can buy this remarkable house...They don't need any down payment, and their monthly carrying charges are only \$58! That includes all taxes, water charges, free insurance, interest, and complete payment of the purchase price... Sure we could talk about our shopping centers, our schools, our playgrounds, our athletic fields. We could show you our gorgeous swimming pools and adjoining kiddie pools—all yours at no charge if you live here..."

SOURCE: Mark Mathosian. "Levittown, L.I. N.Y." <http://bit.ly/2M5ehgU>.



Excerpts from Chicago Freedom Festival Speech

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., March 12, 1966

The Negro has come North, crowding into...Black ghettos, seeking a promised land. Lured by the promises of a better life, he has found not a land of plenty but a lot [filled] with poverty...Instead of fulfilling his dreams, the Negro immigrant has found himself [in] festering slums on Chicago's Southside and Westside, in New York's Harlem, in Detroit's Paradise Valley and Black Bottom, [and] in Los Angeles' Watts...

The purpose of the slum is to confine those who have no power and [continue] their powerlessness. In the slum, the Negro is forced to pay more for less... In short, the slum is an invisible wall, which [holds back the progress] of persons because of the color of their skin...[and] leaves its inhabitants...segregated and humiliated at every turn.

[In 1960] forty-one per cent of all negro families in Chicago were reported living in dwellings that were dilapidated, deteriorating or lacking in plumbing services. Negroes were paying ten dollars a month more than whites for comparable rental units. At the same time, Negro purchasers paid on an average of \$1,500.00 more than whites when buying houses. On top of that, Negro home buyers paid higher interest rates... In effect, the Negro is forced to pay a color tax while



1966 Chicago Freedom Festival: Sidney Poitier, Harry Belafonte, Martin Luther King Jr., Rev. C.T. Vivian, Mahalia Jackson, Al Raby. Bob Fitch photography archive, Stanford University Libraries.

receiving less than whites in quality and service.

Racially segregated, slum housing [also has negative] effects on educational chances for Chicago's Negro school children. Slum housing...leads to...segregated schooling... Slum education lead[s] to lowered self-esteem and motivation on the part of Negro youngsters, lowered academic achievement, [and] higher dropout rates...

Yes, we must seek to lift ourselves by our own bootstraps, but it is a cruel [joke] to tell a bootless man to lift himself by his own bootstraps. The fact is that many Negroes have been so...crushed by the iron feet of

poverty that they have been left without a boot. A failure to realize this has often caused many middle-class Negroes to accept the judgment of many whites that they...are poor because they are lazy and lack initiative and moral fiber.

I received a letter the other day from a lady who argued that people who live on dirty streets could not hope to gain the respect of others. Therefore, she suggested that I organize a committee to buy brooms and get squads of women and children to sweep the streets. This, she said, would give them pride in themselves. This well-intentioned lady did not understand



Excerpts from Chicago Freedom Festival Speech (continued)

that it is not the job of people to sweep the streets. It is the job of the Department of Sanitation. It did not occur to her that it would be better to organize the people to demand the services to which they are entitled...A nation that can spend billions of dollars to put a man on the moon, can spend billions of dollars to put a man on his two feet on earth.

Let us be dissatisfied until every...ghetto and rat infested slum is plunged into the junk heaps of our nation and Negroes and whites live side by side in decent, safe and sanitary housing. Let us be dissatisfied until every [sign] of segregated and inferior education will become a thing of the dark past and Negro and white children study side by side... Let us be dissatisfied until every handcuff of poverty is unlocked and work-starved men will no longer walk the streets in search of jobs that don't exist.



Many Black migrants to Chicago lived in a narrow strip of blocks on the South Side nicknamed the "Black Belt" or "Black Ghetto." One writer suggested using the less insulting name, "Bronzeville."

THINK ABOUT IT...

- 1 How did the hopes of Black people who migrated north differ from the realities they faced once they arrived?
- 2 What did Dr. King mean when he compared the slum to an "invisible wall"?
- 3 Describe at least three ways in which segregated housing communities limit opportunities for Black people (then and now).
- 4 Why did Dr. King say that it is a "cruel [joke] to tell a bootless man to lift himself by his own bootstraps"? How does this relate to the woman who wanted community members to sweep the streets?
- 5 What changes do you think Dr. King was demanding through this speech?

PHOTO SOURCE: Lee, Russell. *Apartment building in Negro section of Chicago, Illinois*. April 1941. Retrieved from the Library of Congress. <https://www.loc.gov/item/2017743610>.