

Repairing the harm caused by the interstate highway system

The interstate highway system ripped through the heart of many thriving Black and Brown communities, forever impacting economic and social opportunities for those communities and creating durable physical barriers that persist today. Policymakers must accept responsibility to repair the harm caused by the growth of the interstate highway system and prevent further damage by improving the decision-making process to bring all communities to the table to develop intra-community connectivity. We must work to rectify the past, rebuild connection and opportunity, and ensure that future transportation planning allows Black and Brown communities to flourish.



We need to stop thinking of transportation as a way to move people at a low cost and start thinking about this from an interdisciplinary perspective. If we are not investing in quality of life and in intra-community connectivity, everything else is fleeting. Maybe we stop looking at transportation from the business case and start looking at this as a public good.

–Dr. Destiny Thomas,
Founder and CEO of Thrivance Group

Key discussion points

- 1. We must learn from the past to make a vision for the future.** America’s “urban renewal” policies often deliberately targeted communities of color and stripped vibrant neighborhoods of their economic and societal value. We must acknowledge this history, and that transportation planning primarily existed to first move cargo, including enslaved human beings, and much later to prioritize White commuters through these highways and the growth of suburban spaces. Without acknowledging our past, future infrastructure projects will maintain and exacerbate the generations of harm caused to Black and Brown communities by transportation and “urban renewal.”
- 2. Infrastructure must strengthen local communities, not just regional connections.** Intra-community connectivity is vital, especially in neighborhoods that have been divided and torn apart by highway infrastructure projects. Many of these highways built to transport suburban (and most often White) commuters through neighborhoods of color eliminated pre-existing connections within a community, destabilizing neighborhoods and making valuable inter-community connections more difficult. An equitable approach to transportation considers the impacts on everyone, values local communities as much as regional connections, and has a mindset of bringing the opportunity to the people.
- 3. New tools are required for equitable decision-making.** Transportation planning continues to use decades-old models and tools, developed along with the interstate highway system, that continue to result in the destruction of Black and Brown communities. These outdated mechanisms are still being used to plan transit corridors, bikeways, and pedestrian pathways that continue to bisect Black and Brown communities rather than link them to smart, sustainable development. Racial equity impact assessment tools should be applied to transportation plans to ensure that policymakers and planners do not continue a legacy of harm.



- 4. Create a system of community engagement that is compatible with real people's lives.** Participation in the public process must work for everyone and should prioritize listening to and engaging with the most underserved communities and neighborhoods. Policymakers and planners need to make participation accessible by holding public hearings in the evenings or in central locations. Engage the public in non-transactional ways by holding regular listening sessions, for example, by setting up a table on a specific street each month and engaging with passersby. By engaging regularly and maintaining long-term relationships with the community, there is less of a learning curve when the time comes to plan a specific project.

This is our moment to look at the impact of transportation on our communities. Transportation is not a silo issue: it's about housing, it's about our schools, our stores. This is environmental justice.

– Minnesota State Representative
Rena Moran

Questions to ask

1. What are some specific transportation projects in your community's recent history that either created or exacerbated racial inequities? How so?
2. If restoring past injustices should be a key aim of future infrastructure investments, what kinds of projects should be top of the list where you live?
3. What are ways that the transportation planning profession can shift the focus from moving people out of "undesirable" places to bringing more opportunity to communities?
4. What mechanisms, models, or tools are at your disposal to assess the racial equity impacts of proposed infrastructure projects?

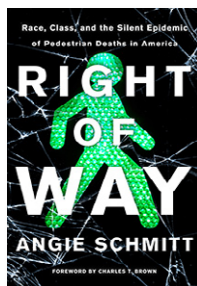
Recommended reading



A policy proposal to undo the damage of "urban renewal"

Third Way and Transportation for America

Third Way and Transportation for America recommend a suite of policies to undo the far-reaching damage of "urban renewal" projects to reconnect communities.



Right of Way

by Angie Schmitt

Right of Way unveils the inequality rooted in the undeterred reign of the automobile in cities and the rise in associated pedestrian deaths and energizes advocacy for road safety.

What to do next

Policymakers:

Meet the community where they are to solicit input and participation in the governmental process. Consider holding meetings in the evening and in locations central to where community members live and/or work. Considering the racial equity impacts of potential legislation and how you can undo past harms.

Planners:

Engage with communities every day to understand their lived experiences. Set up a table at a regular weekly time in a central location where you can meet and talk to community members meaningfully. Have dialogues with the community outside of major projects to better understand their needs.

Community coalitions:

In seeking major changes, someone always feels like they have lost something. Help communities understand the wide-reaching benefits of making systemic changes to the transportation system by amplifying the voices of the people whose voices have been silenced.