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# Freeways' Splitting and Cordoning Effects in Neighborhoods of Color: Colton, Fresno, and San Diego



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## Issue

Spanning more than six decades between the 1940s and early 2000s, the construction of the U.S. federal Interstate Highway System perpetuated racial inequality, weakened social institutions, disrupted local economies, and physically divided neighborhoods.

Systemic racism embedded within housing, educational, and labor systems depressed land values, hindered homeownership, and made neighborhoods of color more vulnerable to selection for freeway routes. Unequal political power in the decision-making process also disadvantaged people of color, who often were excluded from participatory planning processes. Additionally, unlike white Americans, people of color had significantly less ability to relocate to rapidly expanding suburbs if displaced by freeway construction.

Expanding on prior work conducted by researchers at the UCLA Institute of Transportation Studies and Center for Neighborhood Knowledge, this study incorporates three additional case studies in California: South Colton (Inland Empire), West Fresno (Central Valley), and City Heights (San Diego).

## Key Findings

- In Colton, railroad tracks separated white residents to the north and Latino/a residents to the south. Along with building internal institutions (from civic clubs to theaters to unions), South Colton residents organized to challenge racism and a proposed freeway routing through their neighborhood. Of three route alternatives for Interstate
- 10 — one through the white neighborhoods, another through the Latino/a neighborhoods, and a third between the two along the railroad tracks — the state and city ultimately chose and built the third option. Despite protests and organizing, the route's lower cost, rather than public participation, motivated the selection. The ultimate path displaced an estimated 28 individuals.
- Prior to freeway construction, West Fresno was home to a mix of people of color and white immigrants. With support from local decision-makers, state planners moved State Route 99 from the commercial edge of the neighborhood to residential areas within it — largely ignoring alternate route possibilities through downtown or bypassing central and West Fresno altogether. The freeway construction led to the demolition of more than 400 homes and displaced around 1,000 people. Freeway development contributed to transforming West Fresno into a community of color, as white immigrants moved elsewhere.
- City Heights in San Diego was not initially a community of color. But as State Route 15 took nearly half a century to complete — constructed in two stages separated by a prolonged delay — the area subsequently transformed. Traffic and other issues from the long-unfinished "Spur" contributed to disinvestment in City Heights. The area became home to a growing number of people of color seeking affordable housing. Altogether, these factors generated "white flight." When SR-15 finally finished, advocates successfully fought for Teralta Park, a freeway cap covering the freeway for a block with green space and play areas, along with other improvements.

City	Neighborhood	City Size	Built Environment	Region	Primary Population(s) of Color on the Eve of Freeway Construction	Freeway	Decades of Development	Alternative Routes	Impact
Pasadena*	Northwest Pasadena	medium	satellite city	Greater Los Angeles	Black	I-210	1960s-1970s	multiple routes considered; path through community of color chosen	clearance and displacement through neighborhood of color
Los Angeles*	Pacoima	large	suburban	Greater Los Angeles	Black, Latino/a	SR-118	1960s-1970s	multiple routes considered; path through community of color chosen	clearance and displacement through neighborhood of color
Stockton**	downtown Stockton	medium	urban core	Central Valley	Asian	SR-4	1960s-1970s	multiple routes considered; path through community of color chosen	clearance and displacement through neighborhood of color
Fresno	West Fresno	medium	urban core	Central Valley	highly diverse; mixture of racial/ethnic groups	SR-99	1950s-1960s	multiple routes considered; path through community of color chosen	clearance and displacement through neighborhood of color, "white flight"
San Diego	City Heights	large	urban	Greater San Diego	initially non-Hispanic white; subsequently diverse	SR-15	1950s-2000s	no	clearance and displacement, followed by "white flight"
Colton	South Colton	small	outer suburban/exurban	Inland Empire	Latino/a	I-10	1940s-1950s	multiple routes considered, but path through community of color not chosen	reinforcement of barrier isolating neighborhood of color

\* From Loukaitou-Sideris et al. (2023)

\*\* From Ong et al. (2023)

Table 1: UCLA Freeway History Case Study Sites

## Conclusions

- Early, technocratic state freeway development largely ignored or excluded community input from people of color. But increasing opposition led governments to adopt new policies that provided more meaningful opportunities for disadvantaged communities to engage in planning. Relocation assistance, analyses of socioeconomic and environmental impacts, and mitigation strategies became standard procedure.
- Despite commonalities in societal structures, outcomes differed across communities (Table 1), influenced by local conditions. Freeways nearly erased some neighborhoods, while others were able to escape construction running through them. Some populations of color shrank; others grew. In most cases, the freeways internally fragmented the community. In Colton, construction of I-10 reinforced pre-existing racial boundaries.

- Freeways not only harmed residents at the time they were built but also left a legacy of harm due to continued environmental and traffic impacts on communities.
- Restorative justice requires transportation agencies to acknowledge and remedy their historical role in harming communities of color. Nascent federal and state initiatives, such as Reconnecting Communities, are allocating transportation investments so that a meaningful portion of the benefits flows to disadvantaged communities.

## More Information

This policy brief is drawn from the “Further Implications of Freeway Siting in California: Freeway Development and Communities of Color in Colton, Fresno, and San Diego” research report by the UCLA Institute of Transportation Studies and UCLA Center for Neighborhood Knowledge. The report can be found at <https://www.its.ucla.edu/publication/further-implications-freeway-siting-california/>. The full series of UCLA Institute of Transportation Studies research on freeway history can be found at [www.its.ucla.edu/projects/freeway-siting-in-california](http://www.its.ucla.edu/projects/freeway-siting-in-california).



Loukaitou-Sideris, A., Handy, S., Ong, P., Barajas, J., Wasserman, J., Pech, C., Garcia Sanchez, J., Ramirez, A., Jain, A., Proussaloglou, E., Nguyen, A., Turner, K., Fitzgibbon, A., Kaepelin, F., Ramirez, F., & Arenas, M. (2023, March 3). *The Implications of Freeway Siting in California: Four Case Studies on the Effects of Freeways on Neighborhoods of Color* (J. Wasserman, Ed.). Pacific Southwest Region University Transportation Center. <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/7mj2b24q>.

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