

# INTRODUCTION

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IN 1959, MARK'S GRANDPARENTS PURCHASED a two-story, brick, 2,500-square-foot row house with large windows and a finished basement in tree-lined Mount Pleasant. They were among the thousands of African Americans who achieved the American dream of home ownership in the 1950s. Mark's mother grew up in this sunlit and spacious three-bedroom home with ample space for backyard cookouts. She graduated from high school and secured a well-paying job with the federal government. She raised her three children in this home, who in turn raised their children there.<sup>1</sup>

In 1992 Mark was arrested and the federal government seized the house his grandparents had purchased, alleging Mark was using the property in his drug-selling operation, though he had not lived there for years. His mother was able to buy the house back from the federal government, but now she had a mortgage. When she took out a second mortgage to make repairs to the home, the payments ballooned.

She fell behind. Seven years after Mark was incarcerated, his mother lost the house she had inherited from her parents. Today the home is valued at \$1.5 million.

The story of Mark's family was the impetus for this book. Or, perhaps more accurately, my reflections on how my life took a different path from Mark's compelled me to write this book.

I went to high school with Mark's younger sister, Traci. My friends and I spent many hours together at Traci's home—as did her extended family of cousins, aunts, and uncles, who came and went as we sat around waiting for Traci to finish getting ready to go out or for one of our boyfriends to give us a ride. Traci and I have remained close friends, and when I spend time with her, our conversation often turns to the family home in Mount Pleasant. The loss of this home was distressing, both financially and emotionally.

When I interviewed Black men from Washington, DC, who had been incarcerated, I heard a version of this story over and over again. Their grandparents had purchased homes in the 1950s, just a few years after schools and lunch counters were desegregated. Their parents struggled to become home owners themselves. Although the homes their grandparents purchased are worth millions today, this has not translated into intergenerational wealth.

White people in the United States have, on average, eight times the wealth of Black people.<sup>2</sup> Wealth is not only the source of social and political power in a capitalist society; it also can be used to create opportunities, maintain financial security, and pass along a legacy to the next generation. Wealth takes on particular importance in a country like the United States where medical expenses and college tuition routinely put people without significant wealth in lifelong debt.

Inequality in home equity accounts for most of the racial wealth gap, which is why scholars who study racial disparities in wealth in the United States focus on home ownership. Less than half of Black people own the home they live in, as compared to three-quarters of White

people.<sup>3</sup> White people have more wealth than Black people because they are more likely to own homes and their homes are assessed at a higher value than those of Black owners.<sup>4</sup>

Activists have long fought to narrow the racial home ownership gap because of its relationship to the racial wealth gap. While it seems logical that promoting Black home ownership can narrow the racial wealth gap, my research reveals that simply increasing access to home ownership is unlikely to accomplish this. Anti-Black racism shapes the ways the public and private sectors invest in, and divest from, Black neighborhoods, which in turn leads to devaluing homes in areas where Black people live. In Washington, DC, Black neighborhoods have experienced dispossession, displacement, and disinvestment, followed by *carceral investment*, that is, state investment in policing and prisons, and *racialized reinvestment*, that is, when demographics shape neighborhood reinvestment patterns. These forces have prevented Black people from experiencing upward intergenerational mobility and accumulating wealth. Although there were over fifty thousand Black home owners in DC by 1980—seven times more than in 1940—by 2015 White people in the DC metro area had eighty-one times the wealth of Black people.<sup>5</sup>

Mark was sentenced to life in prison for drug distribution when he was twenty-three years old. During his decades of imprisonment, I often thought about how much of the world I was able to experience while he remained behind bars. I also reflected on how removing thousands of young Black men like Mark from families and communities in DC had lasting consequences. I began this research seeking to understand the experiences of Black men who were incarcerated during the War on Drugs and were released in the twenty-first century to a gentrified city. This investigation led to the unexpected finding that significant numbers of these men had experienced downward intergenerational mobility.

Most research on people who return home from prison focuses on intergenerational poverty. For example, in *Doing Time on the Outside*,

Donald Braman argues that mass incarceration in Washington, DC, has devastated poor Black families and keeps them in poverty. In *Intersecting Lives: How Place Shapes Reentry*, Andrea Leverentz describes how people returning home from prison experience changing neighborhoods and navigate their post-prison experiences. In these works and others, the underlying assumption is that incarcerated people's poverty is intergenerational. In contrast, my conversations with men returning home to Washington, DC, after their incarceration revealed that many of them came from families that had achieved one of the hallmarks of middle-class status: home ownership. I found that incarceration has effects far beyond the people William Julius Wilson calls "truly disadvantaged."<sup>6</sup>

Because my research began with questions about the long-term effects of the War on Drugs, I do not explore in depth the experiences of Black families who were able to avoid the ill effects of mass incarceration. However, most Black families in DC have been affected by the widespread criminalization of Black men in the 1990s: by 1997, half of Black male youth in DC were caught in the carceral web, meaning they were on probation, in prison or jail, out on bail awaiting trial, or had a warrant out for their arrest.<sup>7</sup> To be sure, some of the descendants of African American migrants to Washington, DC, have achieved remarkable success and have far surpassed the social and economic achievements of their parents and grandparents. This book, however, considers the barriers to upward intergenerational mobility (and even to class reproduction) many Black families face and the role that prisons and policing as well as disinvestment in Black communities has played in this.

*Before Gentrification* explores how Black neighborhoods in Washington, DC, became places that could be gentrified. I argue that disinvestment as well as carceral investment in Black communities in DC displaced and dispossessed Black residents, making gentrification through racialized reinvestment possible. The decision to use prisons and policing to solve the problems in Black communities in DC in the twentieth century, instead of investing in schools, community centers,

social services, health care, drug treatment, and violence prevention, facilitated gentrification in the twenty-first century.

These policies also prevented home ownership from leading to inter-generational wealth for Black DC residents. The central argument of this book is that Black neighborhoods in DC have experienced dispossession, displacement, and disinvestment, followed by carceral investment and racialized reinvestment and that this trajectory helps us understand the persistence of the racial wealth gap.

My arguments build on the work of gentrification scholars such as Neil Smith and Ruth Glass, who argue that insofar as gentrification is a process whereby high-income people (the gentry) move into poor, disinvested neighborhoods, disinvestment is a precursor to gentrification.<sup>8</sup> My work also builds on the scholarship of geographers such as David Harvey and Ruth Wilson Gilmore who argue that disinvestment is a form of “organized abandonment” whereby the public and private sectors abandon communities. Gilmore further contends that these abandoned areas become sites of “organized violence,” referring to heavy policing and environmental degradation.<sup>9</sup> I considered using the term “organized abandonment” instead of “disinvestment” and the term “organized violence” instead of “carceral investment” but ultimately decided that the language of disinvestment, carceral investment, and racialized reinvestment allows me to highlight the role of *investment* in these phenomena. In the context of racial capitalism, the investments that flow and fail to flow to communities shape their fates. In DC, these investments have created the racial wealth gap.



Lance Freeman explains in *A Haven and a Hell* that the economic prospects of Black people nationwide improved between 1940 and 1970, as average annual wages nearly tripled during this period. These improved economic prospects, along with White flight to the suburbs, allowed

some Black people to leave dilapidated inner cities and purchase homes in neighborhoods like Eckington and Petworth that were built for White occupancy. In the Washington, DC, neighborhood of Petworth, where I grew up, there were only 146 home owners who were not White in 1950. By 1960, there were 3,463 Black home owners, accounting for two-thirds of home ownership there.<sup>10</sup>

Most scholarship on the rise in home ownership in the mid-twentieth century focuses on the fact that Black families were locked out of opportunities to own homes and were often confined to public housing projects.<sup>11</sup> In *The Color of Law*, Richard Rothstein explains that prior to the 1968 Fair Housing Act, Black people were not able to access White neighborhoods. Rothstein also discusses neighborhoods like East Palo Alto, where Black people were able to purchase homes, but his account suggests that these neighborhoods overwhelmingly became overcrowded slums. In Washington, DC, many neighborhoods built for White people became majority Black yet did not become slums.

Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor's book, *Race for Profit*, describes the barriers Black people confronted when trying to obtain traditional home financing. Her work documents a phenomenon she terms "predatory inclusion," which explains how realtors and mortgage brokers convinced low-income Black women to buy substandard homes they couldn't afford to repair. Moreover, they purchased these homes on land installment contracts, which, instead of generating intergenerational wealth, stripped assets. Taylor's account, however, focuses primarily on the 1970s, even though most of the growth in Black home ownership occurred in the decades before that.

I agree with other scholars who argue that Black people have been locked out of opportunities to build wealth.<sup>12</sup> However, whereas many scholars argue that Black people were denied federally subsidized mortgages, I find that thousands of Black people were able to gain access to those mortgages. And whereas other scholars argue that the

TABLE I  
US Home Ownership Rates by Race, 1940–2020

Year	% White	% Black
1940	45.7	22.8
1950	57.0	34.4
1960	64.4	38.4
1970	65.2	41.6
1980	67.8	44.4
1990	68.2	43.4
2000	73.8	47.2
2010	74.4	45.2
2020	74.5	44.1

SOURCE: US Census home ownership data.

areas where Black people lived became slums, I argue that many of these areas were not slums, although they did experience disinvestment.<sup>13</sup> A more precise understanding of the mechanisms by which Black people have been denied the opportunity to build wealth is critical as it allows us to create more informed solutions to the racial wealth gap. One thing is clear: simply increasing access to home ownership is unlikely to close the gap. The reason for this is that neighborhoods where Black people live have consistently experienced disinvestment and carceral investment, and this is what needs to change.

Home ownership rates for Black people grew from 22.8 percent in 1940 to 41.6 percent in 1970, according to US Census data.<sup>14</sup> Home ownership among White people grew from 45.7 to 65.2 percent during the same period. (Table 1.) Although Black Washingtonians were largely unable to purchase homes in the new all-White suburbs in Maryland and Virginia, they were able to purchase homes in the areas White residents were leaving. In Washington, DC, these formerly all-White areas quickly transformed into segregated all-Black communities, with rows of solid brick homes housing Black working, middle, and upper classes.

Despite the growth of neighborhoods with large numbers of Black home owners in the twentieth century, nearly all scholarship on Black

urban communities has focused on the poor. In *The Truly Disadvantaged*, William Julius Wilson describes how the departure of the Black middle class from inner cities in the 1970s led to concentrated poverty and joblessness in many Black urban communities. Similarly, Douglas Massey and Nancy A. Denton focus on the negative consequences of segregation and concentrated poverty in *American Apartheid*. However, as the sociologist Mary Pattillo explains, three-quarters of African Americans are not poor, and many middle-class Black people did not abandon the city.<sup>15</sup>

Although some middle-class African Americans did leave Washington, DC, for the suburbs in the 1970s, many stayed and formed strong communities in this majority-Black city. Washington, DC, however, is unique, and that uniqueness plays a role in the narrative that unfolds in this book. Thus I want to take a moment to explain why DC residents do not enjoy full democratic rights.

The District of Columbia (DC) is a city that is not embedded in a county or a state. Before 1967 Congress had complete control of DC's budget and laws. In 1967 President Lyndon Johnson implemented a plan whereby nine appointed council members were charged with the city's budget and legislation. This decision transferred legislative power from Congress to this newly appointed body, yet Congress retained veto power over its decisions, a power it maintains today. In 1968 the city elected its first school board, its first elected body in decades. Five years later Congress passed the District of Columbia Home Rule Act, which permitted the city to elect a mayor and a city council democratically and set its own budget.<sup>16</sup>

However, the pathway toward DC residents gaining democratic control has been long and beset with setbacks, and it is far from complete. There are four congressional committees that have oversight of DC's laws and budget. None of these four committees is made up of people elected by DC residents. This has budgetary implications for the city but also shapes its relationship to the federal government, as Con-