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The Cost and Quality of Housing in
White and Negro Areas of New York City, 1960

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REPORT

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80 LAFAYETTE STREET
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**The Cost and Quality of Housing in
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THE COST AND QUALITY OF HOUSING IN WHITE AND
NEGRO AREAS OF NEW YORK CITY, 1960

By Harold Goldblatt

My topic tonight is patterns and trends of racial distribution in New York City. My talk is based on an analysis of data from the 1960 census. We do not as yet have accurate, systematic and recent information about the Puerto Rican community as we do about the Negro community. So I have chosen to restrict my remarks in this talk to the Negro population only.

Let me first give you some figures on the increase in the Negro population of this city. Today there are more than one million Negroes in New York. For the city as a whole Negroes constitute about 14% of the total population. In terms of growth of the Negro population in the city the figures stand like this: Since the turn of the century the total population of the city has increased about $2\frac{1}{4}$ times; the total Negro population, about 18 times. If we break the figures down by boroughs, the Negro population of Staten Island increased by about 9 times during the past sixty years; that of Manhattan by about 11 times; that of Brooklyn by about 20 times; that of Queens by about 56 times; and that of the Bronx by about 69 times. At present the population of Manhattan is 23% Negro; Brooklyn is 14% Negro; the Bronx 12%; Queens, 8%; and Staten Island 4%. Or, percentaging the other way, we can say that of the total Negro population about 36% live in Manhattan, 34% in Brooklyn, 15% in the Bronx, 13% in Queens, and 1% in Richmond.*

So much for the growth of the Negro population in New York. I want now to present you with information on race and housing in New York in

*These statistics are taken from Florence M. Cromien, *Negroes in the City of New York: Their Number and Proportion in Relation to the Total Population, 1790-1960*. City of New York Commission on Intergroup Relations, May 1961. (Since March 23, 1962, City Commission on Human Rights of New York)

1960. We can reach some important conclusions concerning race and housing in this city by taking the census tract as our unit of analysis. In other words, where the individual person is the counting unit in most discussions of race and housing, the census tract is the unit of analysis in this presentation. The census tract is an urban area ranging in population from fewer than 100 residents to several thousand. I want tonight to study the way in which three characteristics of these urban areas or neighborhoods are related. These three characteristics are the racial composition of the area, the quality of housing in the area, and the rentals charged the people living in the area.

There are approximately 2200 residential census tracts in this city. We can classify each tract or area arbitrarily into one of five groups according to the percentage of Negroes living in it. At one extreme we have the areas of white segregation, or about 400 areas that are all white. At the other extreme are about 190 areas that are at least half-Negro. Between these extremes are the fringe or so-called integrated areas — those that are fringe to the white ghettos and therefore have only small proportions of Negroes, let us say fewer than 2.5%, and those that are fringe to the Negro ghettos and are, let us say between 10% and 49% Negro. Finally, there is a fifth category of areas, those that are between 2.5% to 9.9% Negro.

So racial composition is the first characteristic of an urban area in New York City for which we have information that is systematic and recent and above all accurate. A second characteristic is the quality of the housing in the census tract. The census enumerators classified every single residential building according to its structural soundness and whether or not it had interior plumbing facilities in the right amount and condition. Therefore we can classify each area in the city on the basis of the quality of the housing in the area as to whether it is among the “best” housing areas in the city, or one of the “fairly good” housing areas, or one of the “fairly poor” housing areas. When I talk about the “best” housing areas or the “fairly good” housing areas or the “fairly poor” housing areas in the city, I am using these labels purely for linguistic convenience because I do not want to strain your attention any more than I have to. But by these rather vague labels I have in mind very precise statistical meanings. By “best” housing areas I mean those census tracts in which at least 95% of all the residential buildings in the census tract are structurally sound and the plumbing adequate by census definition. By the “fairly good” housing areas I mean those in which between 65% and 95% of the housing is good housing according to census definition. And by “fairly poor” housing areas I mean those in which less than 65% of the housing, ranging all the way down, is good housing according to census definition.

Now suppose we take all 2200 residential census tracts in the city and classify every single one of them according to racial composition and at the same time according to the quality of the housing. This we have done, and we found out that in 1960 in the City of New York as a whole and in each of the five boroughs analyzed separately the poorer the housing, the larger the proportion of Negroes living in the area. Take, for example, the 394 all-white census tracts. Fifty-seven percent of them are in the category of “best” housing areas as we are using that term tonight. On the other hand, take the 190 tracts that are at least half Negro. Only 21% of them are “best” housing areas. If we look at the “fairly poor” housing areas in the city, we will be driven to the same conclusion. For example, of the all-white areas only about 7% are “fairly poor” housing areas whereas for the largely Negro areas the figure rises to fully 44%. In other words, the farther you go from the Negro

TABLE I
RACIAL COMPOSITION OF RESIDENTIAL CENSUS TRACTS
AND QUALITY OF HOUSING IN THE TRACT

Quality of Housing Area	Percent Negro				
	0.0	0.01-2.49	2.50-9.9	10.0-49.9	50.0 or more
“Best Housing” Areas	57.4%	58.3%	29.7%	23.6%	21.1%
“Fairly Good Housing” Areas	36.0	33.7	42.4	39.7	34.7
“Fairly Poor Housing” Areas	6.6	8.0	27.9	36.7	44.2
	(394)	(990)	(276)	(275)	(190)

areas the higher the percentage of good housing becomes. Which means that if you are Negro and you want housing as good as the whites have got, then on the average you have got to go where the whites are. The farther you go from your Negro relatives, friends, neighbors, and neighborhood institutions into white territory the better your chances for finding housing as good as the whites have got. Well, that of course is desegregation, and in this correlation between race and housing quality you have in very forceful, dramatic style the story of the social pressure upon the Negro to leave the Negro

neighborhoods if he wants to raise his standard of living, his style of life. Quite apart from the symbolic meaning of integration or desegregation as an assertion of social equality and of civil rights there is this economic significance.

What I have said about the correlation between race and housing quality for the city as a whole is true also for each one of the boroughs analyzed separately. It is true in Queens and it is true in Richmond. It is true in Brooklyn. It is strongly true in Manhattan. Of all the boroughs it is most true in the Bronx.

TABLE I-A

PERCENT OF CENSUS TRACTS WHICH ARE "BEST HOUSING" AREAS BY RACIAL COMPOSITION OF TRACT: ALL BOROUGHS

Borough	Percent Negro				
	0.0	0.01-2.49	2.50-9.9	10.0-49.9	50.0 or more
Bronx	68.2%	61.6%	48.5%	30.4%	8.3%
Brooklyn	57.6	59.5	24.1	14.0	15.6
Manhattan	*	17.2	5.4	15.1	6.7
Queens	56.5	70.8	51.2	47.5	37.7
Staten Island	42.9	38.7	19.2	23.1	**
Total City	57.4%	58.3%	29.7%	23.6%	21.1%

* Fewer than 10 census tracts

** No census tracts

Let me leave this relationship between race and housing quality for the time being and talk about the rentals that people pay for housing in white and in Negro areas. Again to make conversation easier, let us arbitrarily call an area where the average monthly rental is less than \$69 a relatively low-rental area. And let us call an area where the average rental is \$80 a month or more a relatively high rental area. And, finally, let us call the areas where the average rental is between \$70 and \$79 an intermediate rental area. On this basis of classification about 44% of the census tracts in the City of New York are what I am calling tonight relatively low rental areas, and about 35% are relatively high rental areas.

Now the general finding is that the larger the percentage of Negroes in an area, the lower the average rental in that area. The interpretation of this finding is surely not very far to seek. It is simply that, on the average,

Negroes are economically poorer than whites and that, again on the average, poorer people live in poorer housing and pay lower rentals than more affluent people do.

TABLE II
AVERAGE RENTAL PER CENSUS TRACT BY RACIAL COMPOSITION OF THE TRACT

Average Rental	Percent Negro		
	0.0-2.49%	2.50-9.9%	10.0% or more
Through \$69.00	34.6%	66.0%	65.6%
\$70.00-\$79.00	23.5	18.1	14.8
\$80.00 or more	41.9	25.9	19.6
Total Tracts	(1,249)	(259)	(440)

The rule that average rentals are lower in Negro areas than in white areas is subject to certain qualifications, however. I would like to go into these qualifications in a little detail because our statistics enable us to locate the basis of two assertions that are heard frequently. First, that Negroes must pay more for their slum dwellings than whites pay for theirs; and second, that even those Negroes who can afford to pay for the more expensive housing are shut out from it.

Imagine a line drawing showing the percentage of city areas with relatively high rentals according to the proportion of Negroes in the area. That line drawing has the shape of a sliding pond. Let us take the Borough of the Bronx as a case in point. You climb the steps of the sliding pond until you get to the step marked 24%. At the 24% level on the scale of high-rental areas you are standing in all-white territory. When you get to the top of the sliding pond you are at the 31% level, and you are then standing in fringe-white territory. From there the sliding pond goes all the way down to zero, which means that there are no high rental areas at all. At that level, you are in the mostly Negro areas. The statistical curve for Brooklyn is very much like that for the Bronx. The fringe-white areas have the largest proportion of high rental areas while the Negro ghettos have none. In Manhattan almost 60% of the fringe-white areas are high rental areas while this is so of only 4% of the mostly Negro areas. Queens, however, is a clear exception to the rule. In the Borough of Queens there is no apparent relationship at all between the proportion of Negroes in an area and the proportion of high rental housing.

TABLE II-A
PERCENTAGE OF CENSUS TRACTS WHICH ARE
"RELATIVELY HIGH RENTAL" AREAS BY RACIAL
COMPOSITION OF TRACT: ALL BOROUGHES

Borough	Percent Negro				
	0.0	0.01-2.49	2.50-9.9	10.0-49.9	50.0 or more
Bronx	24.2%	31.4%	11.9%	9.4%	0.0%
Brooklyn	23.7	35.5	16.3	9.1	0.0
Manhattan	*	59.4	46.4	22.0	4.4
Queens	30.6	63.5	42.9	40.5	70.0
Richmond	63.6	60.7	21.7	*	*
Total City	28.3%	46.7%	25.9%	16.2%	24.2%

*Fewer than 10 census tracts

Now suppose we take a look at the lowest-rental areas, those with an average rental of \$49 a month or less. Everywhere throughout the city except in the Bronx all-white areas have a higher proportion of *low rental* areas than the mostly-Negro areas have. This means, apparently, that everywhere except in the Bronx poor Negroes pay more rent, on the average, than poor whites do. Another way to put these findings is this: The range of rentals is much narrower for the Negroes in this city than it is for the whites. Negroes less often live in the cheapest housing and also less often live in the relatively expensive housing. The significance of this finding lies in the comparative

TABLE II-B
PERCENTAGE OF CENSUS TRACTS WHICH ARE
"LOWEST RENTAL AREAS" BY RACIAL COM-
POSITION OF TRACT: ALL BOROUGHES

Borough	Percent Negro				
	0.0	0.01-2.49	2.50-9.9	10.0-49.9	50.0 or more
Bronx	0.0%	2.2%	1.7%	3.1%	16.7%
Brooklyn	11.9	10.1	23.2	16.1	3.1
Manhattan	*	12.5	32.1	24.0	6.7
Queens	3.7	1.1	0.0	2.7	0.0
Richmond	0.0	0.0	4.4	*	*
Total City	6.7%	6.1%	15.4%	12.0%	3.9%

*Fewer than 10 tracts

occupational distribution of Negroes and whites. According to our tabulations from the special census of 1957, more than twice as many Negroes as whites are employed at semi-skilled and unskilled occupations, in other words, at the low income occupations. The average personal income for whites in 1957 was about \$4500; for Negroes about \$2900. As a result of this combination of facts we have the racial pressure on the public housing projects. It explains why, if the occupancy of public housing is left to the ordinary workings of the housing rental market, the chances for obtaining a balanced ratio of low-income whites and low-income Negroes in housing projects are not very good. Our figures tell us of a squeeze situation where the relative proportion of low-income workers is greater among the Negroes than among the whites but where at the same time the proportion of lowest-rental areas is greater in the white ghettos than in the Negro ghettos.

So far we have considered the quality and the cost of housing available in white and in Negro areas. Now we have all heard and heard often that there is systematic rental discrimination because of race. It is said that there is rent gouging in the slums; it is said that at the level of good housing Negroes must pay premium rentals. But we have learned from our analysis of the most recent, the most accurate, and the most systematic data available to anyone that on the average Negroes do not in fact pay higher rentals than whites in the City of New York. Indeed, they pay lower rentals. If there is rental discrimination then, is it only occasional, only random, only sometime discrimination? Or, is rental discrimination really a considerable part of the social and economic organization of this city?

To answer that question we must separate out the influence of housing quality on rentals from the influence of race on rentals. We need an answer to the question: To what extent do Negroes pay extra because they are Negroes for housing *comparable* in quality to that enjoyed by whites? We can study the extent to which rentals are high according to the racial composition of the area and at the same time according to the quality of the housing in the area. Well, we have done that. Take the best housing areas as I have defined them in this talk: The percentage of high-rental areas is 37% in the all-white areas, but it is 64% in the Negro areas. Next take the fairly-good housing areas: The percentage of high-rental areas is 19% in the all-white areas, but it is 33% in the Negro areas. Finally, take the fairly-poor housing areas. Here the proportion of high-rental areas *decreases* from 6% in the white areas to 1% in the Negro areas. The conclusion, then, seems inescapable that in the best and in the fairly good housing areas, as we have defined them, the higher the proportion of Negroes in the area, the higher the rentals they must pay. On the other hand, in the fairly-poor housing areas the proportion of high-rental areas does not increase proportionately

TABLE III
PERCENTAGE OF "RELATIVELY HIGH RENTAL" AREAS
AMONG CENSUS TRACTS OF GIVEN RACIAL
COMPOSITION AND HOUSING QUALITY

Quality of Housing Area	All White Areas (0.0% Negro)	Intermediate Areas (0.01-49.9% Negro)	Mostly Negro Areas (50% or more Negro)
"Best Housing" Areas (95.0-100% sound, with all plumbing)	37.1%	53.7%	63.9%
"Fairly Good Housing" Areas (65.0-94.9% sound, with all plumbing)	19.2%	30.1%	33.3%
"Fairly Poor Housing" Areas (0.64.9% sound, with all plumbing)	5.6%	11.6%	1.2%

with an increase in the proportion of Negroes in the area. I believe, though I have not been able to get the data ready in time, that this fact reflects the influence of the good quality public housing in areas where fairly poor housing otherwise prevails.

I will conclude with a comment on the Fair Housing Practices Law of the City of New York. During the three and a half years that the Commission on Intergroup Relations† has been responsible for the administration of this law, about 85% of our complainants have been Negro. These Negro complainants are from all walks of life but not, however, in proportion to the makeup of the Negro population. Rather, they have been disproportionately middle class in occupation and in education and in income. I think the findings I reported upon tonight on the influence of race upon the quality and cost of rental housing go some distance to explain the characteristics of our complainants; namely, that the answer does not lie in the administration of the law but rather in the social and economic organization of the City of New York. We have found that the quest for housing as good as the whites have got, at rentals no more than the whites pay for it, takes the middle-class Negro on a search for vacancies in all-white and in fringe-white areas. For that is where the chances for such housing are the best. What happens to Negro applicants at that point is told in the records of more than 800 sworn cases of housing discrimination on file at the office of the Commission on Intergroup Relations.†

† Since March 23, 1962, City Commission on Human Rights of New York

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