Teaching Resource on
HARTFORD HOUSING
1940–2019

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AFRICAN AMERICAN, PUERTO RICAN, & WEST INDIAN HOUSING STRUGGLES IN HARTFORD COUNTY, CONNECTICUT

1940 - 2019
HARTFORD, POVERTY & PLENTY: 1900 - 1950

I see one-third of a nation ill-housed, ill-clad, ill-nourished.

Franklin D. Roosevelt, Second Inaugural Address on January 20, 1937

The housing and economic crisis that defined FDR’s administration was part of a long boom and bust cycle that had transformed major American cities from the turn of the century until the Great Depression. Like many industrial cities in the Northeast, Hartford has been home to a succession of immigrant communities, in search of employment, a better life. The city’s population doubled between 1900 and 1930, going from 70,866 to 104,012, as European immigrants from Southern and Eastern Europe sought opportunities in the burgeoning industries that could offer better jobs than those found at home and seeking refuge from discriminatory laws and racial violence.

By 1940, the majority of Hartford’s foreign-born population claimed Italian, Polish, Russian, and Irish ancestry while the Great Migration deposited a significant number of African Americans from Georgia. The city could boast of 43 insurance companies, a robust manufacturing sector, and a bruising tobacco industry competing for white collar and blue collar workers. Yet major groups of Hartford’s population benefited unevenly from this cycle and these eight population shifts created significant changes in housing the sheer growth of new industries. Hartford’s informal housing board at the same time, black clearance, urban renewal, and public housing emerged as major policy interventions to urban Hartford and many other industrial centers.

While West Indians, Puerto Ricans, and African Americans joined the labor scene, Connecticut has represented many things a reservation to the mainland, to the North or to “Exterior,” as West Indian termed overseas territories. With new job opportunities came challenging neighborhoods with overcrowding, high rents, dilapidated houses, and absentee landlords.
Hartford

1900 → 1930

79,860 → 164,072
African American Settlement

I fear that] ten thousand recollections of the injustices African Americans suffered will lead to inevitable racial conflict."

Thomas Jefferson, Notes on the State of Virginia (1782)

Throughout the Atlantic world, the practice of slavery sparked everyday acts of resistance. Across the United States, people voted with their feet. In what journalist Isabel Williams calls a "silent migration," millions turned to the Americas. African Americans left the South. By 1920, 38 million African Americans had embarked on the Great Migration, now seen as the beginning of the Negro Exodus to the North. By 1930, the movement had reached its height, with 6 million African Americans living in the Midwest and Western States.

The transatlantic slave trade was the largest mass movement of peoples of African descent. Like the centuries of involuntary migration that preceded it, the Great Migration would reshape American cities. By 1940, half of the African American population was living in the Northern states. Another 12 percent originated from the Carolinas and Virginia. Americans, Brazilians, and other Latin American locales, a long pattern of migration to them, played a significant role in the racial makeup of the city. The North End of Hartford especially public housing projects of the 1940s.

West Indian Settlement

The 1950 census identified about 245,000 West Indians in Connecticut, many of them men who had come to the United States in the 1940s to contribute to the war effort.

By 1950, West Indians surpassed all other ethnic groups to become the largest population of foreign-born immigrants in Connecticut. The demographic trend was several decades in the making, with the original wave of the population arriving as guest workers in the Hartford region in the 1940s through complex labor agreements between British West Indian communities and the United States. The vast majority were males, but there were also. Interestingly, in these early years, the British workers were primarily in the tobacco and furniture industries. Later, the influx of West Indian laborers added a perspective to the already-established labor market that created new spaces to receive and restructure the labor of black men and women.

Some of these early workers included individuals who were native, born, and raised in the West Indian community. They were the first to hit the streets, like the Harlem Rhythms, and in Shiloh, and local social organizations. Many were among the first to form organizations, such as the West Indian Association, the Hartford West Indian Society, the Trinidad Tallow American Society, the Jamaican Progressive League, and the St. Lucia American Society, and the Carribean Hall of Fame among others.

Like the African Americans who had come before or along with them, West Indians flocked to the North End of Hartford. They participated in an important role of community social and political advocacy that led to high homeownership rates and a significant business presence in the North End.
Between 1950 and 1960, 470,000 people, or approximately one-fifth of Puerto Rico's population, relocated to the United States.

New York attracted the vast majority of these newcomers who settled in manufacturing, service, maintenance, and domestic jobs. Like other ethnic groups before and since, they sought better economic opportunities in their cities of first entry before moving out to nearby cities like Philadelphia, Chicago, Bridgeport and Hartford, to join family or secure better opportunities.

The Jones Act of 1917 granted Puerto Rican U.S. citizenship, making education to the mainland far easier to pursue than other groups impacted by the restrictive immigration policies that closed U.S. borders for the next four decades. Yet, there were programs offering employment opportunities alongside an important role in facilitating the initial transportation to the United States. These programs recruited 423,568 Puerto Rican workers between 1917 and 1930, the second largest mobilization of non-white labor after the Mexican Bracero program.

Connecticut's state tobacco industry was one of the sectors that attracted Puerto Ricans to the Hartford area, like other migrants however, seasonal work was a temporary strategy. Once settled in Hartford, the manufacturing and service sector became their focus of interest, despite U.S. citizenship. Puerto Ricans faced discrimination in housing, employment, and the provision of equal educational services. Whatever the actual level of English language proficiency, resources were scarce, and the resident majority of white families wanted to keep a tight lid on the education of new migrants. Social service agencies that could help them settle in the local area often had no bilingual service. Catholic Charities, on the other hand, were an important source of income and a form of social support. Spanish schools proved effective and sometimes neglected in addressing the demographic changes unfolding their midst. Bilingual education became one of the touchstones of Puerto Rican civil rights activism in Hartford and across the United States.
Puerto Rico

1950 → 1960

470,000
Comerío, Caguas, Cayey, Puerto Rico → Hartford
US Farm Labor Recruitment, Puerto Rico

1948 → 1990

4,211,238
Housing Challenges
Old Housing Stock
 Poorer Sanitation And Repair

Municipal Neglect:
 In the Areas of
 Street Cleaning, Paving, And
 Lighting
Settlement: Clay Hill Area
Albany Avenue
Main St

Public Housing: Charter Oak, Bellevue Square
Housing pressures:

- Supply,
- Overcrowding
- High rent
- Push to South Green
- and Frog Hollow
CHARTER OAK TERRACE

With 1800 units Charter Oak Terrace held the promise of addressing the severe shortage of affordable housing in Hartford. The unit located at Capitol and Hawthorne Avenues, and Dart and Chamberlain Streets, was twice the occupancy of Bellevue Square and opened in 1941. Whereas Bellevue Square sat on 15.5 acres, Charter Oak Terrace covered 184 acres. The design, like other public housing units, encompassed recreational, educational, religious and religious services. The Hartford Boys’ Club hosted recreational activities and the Christian Activities Council of Hartford conducted Sunday School and Church Services. Children attended the local community school at Mary Hooker School, which like the housing complex was new.

This planned community represented both an important policy intervention and a particular vision of urban planning. Children would have access to education, healthcare and religious services, and would be raised in a wholesome environment that promoted family values. Those who grew up at Charter Oak Terrace in its early years, like Vietnam Veteran Ron Craig, recall with pride the sense of the community and family. Whether they were going to the library, or the movies, playing basketball, football, or baseball, it was possible to have a good childhood. Many of the kids spent their summers at Camp Conner and for a moment, the goals of public housing seemed like they had been achieved.

I was born in Hartford, at Hartford Hospital. My mom lived in Charter Oak at the time. We grew up there and lived on 81 Delta St. I went to Walburton Pre-K, Mary M. Hooker kindergarten through 6th grade, Fox Elementary for 7th and 8th and Bulkeley for high school. I got my diploma through the adult education school on Washington St., though. Being a young mom (16 to be exact) and married at 16, I couldn’t do full time school and work. I lived in Charter Oak Terrace on and off for 23 years.

Marisol Sanjuan
PUBLIC HOUSING IS NO LONGER AN EXPERIMENT

Hundreds of our communities all over the country have seen fit to erect dwellings that have done much to beautify the surroundings besides giving to the underprivileged many of the living conditions that they were heretofore unable to receive. Another effect, and most important, is the clearance of slum districts and sub-standard dwellings. From a health, economic, and social viewpoint the benefits are immeasurable. Excessive fire and accident hazards, unsafe and unsanitary houses will be a thing of the past. Safe play for children, indoors and out, will be provided.

ROBERT A. HURLEY
GOVERNOR OF CONNECTICUT, 1941-1943

THERE IS A NEED FOR A HOUSING REFORM...

which need cannot be fully answered until there is complete cooperation between our own city, our contractors, our building trades, and the individual citizen.

To solve the entire problem calls for not only the cooperation of all of us but a willingness upon each of us to make some personal sacrifice for the ultimate good of the community.

Sound economics cannot be abandoned in housing any more than any other enterprise. On the other hand, when there is a scarcity of rents such as now exist in our city and when the cost of those rents is prohibitive for the person of small income, the result is far-reaching and affects all of us.

THOMAS J. SPELLACY
MAYOR OF HARTFORD, 1935-1943
THE RESURGENCE OF TENANT ACTIVISM AND ORGANIZING IN HARTFORD
SLUMLORDS THEN...
SLUMLORDS NOW.

Slumlords. Urban blight. Black mold. Rodent infestations and numerous other housing code violations. Recent Hartford Courant headlines continue to document the enduring legacies of segregated housing and poverty in Hartford. “Hartford has the Highest Rate of Urban Dwellers Living in Economically Troubled Neighborhoods,” a June 2018 Courant headline read. These headlines are disturbingly timeless for many of the ethnic and racial minorities who call the city their home. They could have described any decade between the 1930s and 2010s as poverty-limited housing options and poor housing created or exacerbated poverty. Even middle-income families facing poor housing choices can have their health and job prospects ruined when they have to spend emotional and financial capital addressing horrendous living conditions. Hartford again made headlines when the United States Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) terminated the contract of New York’s infamous landlord, Emmanuel Ku. After years of inadequate maintenance and deplorable living conditions that posed a risk to his tenants’ health and safety, tenants and community activists finally won their bid to oust Ku. An organized group of tenants demonstrated that ordinary people could win against a wealthy, unscrupulous landlord. HUD’s regime of inspections continues to fail many of the clients who rely on the agency to certify that housing units are suitable for occupancy.

MICE. MOLD. BED BUGS. POOR VENTILATION. LACK OF HEAT. BROKEN WINDOWS. MISSING SCREENS.

These violations are legion among properties owned by slumlords, yet often fall through the cracks based on inspection protocols that emphasize the exterior of the building. In many instances, misconceptions about the character of the tenants may lead the public to make value judgments about what people living in public housing deserve. The No More Slumlords movement has worked to change these perceptions. New horizons remain in the struggle.

The No More Slumlords campaign has become a beacon for other residents interested in addressing substandard and unsafe conditions in their housing units. Since that pivotal victory, resident leaders like Teri Morrison, Milagros Ortiz, and Joshua Serrano have attended dozens of tenant meetings, rallies, public hearings, community dialogues, and coalition meetings to remove the public that the network and task began. Overhauling Hartford’s outdated, inefficient municipal housing code was one new prong in the movement; navigating the challenge of retooling to another suit proved to be another. Some families like Milagros Ortiz’s, have had to move more than once, while others are left behind because of the limited resettlement options. Housing conditions have proven no better in some instances and many tenants have expressed dismay about how dispersed has atomized the sense of community. Limited financial help, unrealistic deadlines, and faceless relocation specialists have wrought further emotional and financial havoc on tenants who have had to attend to their families’ needs while propelling a major social movement forward.
The roots of Josh Serrano’s journey into community activism can be traced to his family’s history in Hartford. His mother, at around age 16, Luz Belinda Estremera moved to Hartford from Ponce, Puerto Rico along with his maternal Aunt Edith. It was a journey undertaken by several generations of Puerto Ricans before them. Luz would settle and move around in the north and south end while Edith settled permanently at Bellevue Square. She would marry Jesus Serrano and Josh was born on Enfield St, Hartford. Spurred by the opportunity to pursue a better life for her children, Luz worked in Head Start and Community Renewal Team (CART); her husband worked as a window washer and eventually became the building superintendent where he lived. The family moved between the north and south end of Hartford, sometimes driven by hardship, in other instances moving to better accommodations. These journeys would take them to Zion, Magnolia, Garden, and Bedford Streets. Along the way, they adopted a cat, Kitty who accompanied them on their journeys. The family moved finally to the Clay Arsenal Renaissance Apartments (CARA) when Josh was about 13 years old. Ms. Estremera eventually passed down the residency to Joshua who then became the head of household and she moved to the Blue Hills area.

As a tenant leader in the Hartford Slumlords Coalition, Milagros Ortiz has become accustomed to sharing her story with the media. She found the inspiration for her activism in 2005 when she and her 21-month-old son were evicted from their home in West End of New York. Her family was forced to leave their home, she worked several jobs at Carsons, McDonald’s, and as a cleaning lady to support her family. Her father, Román Ortiz was a landscaper and worked across the state in.

Milagros remembers her childhood in New Britain being enjoyable. Filled with lots of open space and parks and a strong sense of community. They brought happy families and celebrations that helped to maintain the tradition of spending time with your family. Milagros aspired to be a welder, making statues of Dag Hammarskjöld and David Austin. She was active in softball, wrestling, basketball, cheerleading, gymnastics, chorus, and played numerous instruments and attended many summer camps. Although she loved her work in the rentals, 4 years worked for Florida, New York, and New Jersey, she found the work difficult because it did not provide a sense of purpose. At one time she had several dogs, three cats, two kittens, two hens, and a rooster. 4 cats, 2 Kraegers, 5 parakeets, 3 guinea pigs, 2 rabbits, and an autistic son. Jendi, loved animals. She eventually relocated to Hartford to Clay Arsenal for better opportunities and to be closer to family in the north.

After a period of good maintenance and property value, when she first moved to Hartford, the arrival of a new owner brought disorganization and chaos. Many tenants experienced labor with the management during the rent increases, repairs, and work orders. Milagros personally experienced issues with pests. She met Pastor Johnson during a meeting between tenants and the project manager, where the landlord was a key player. Tenants agreed to meet at a later time to discuss accusations being thrown forward, which led to what became known as the “Doorman Incident.”

It may take a while for Ortiz to tell you that her housing struggles were deadly for her pets, that the comfort Jendi took in these animals was one of the sacrifices she was forced to make. She continues to reach out for support network.
SERRANO’S HARTFORD

Joshua Serrano’s Hartford was a multi-cultural one, with Puerto Ricans and African Americans coexisting alongside each other, forming bonds of trust, friendship, and mutual reliance. The adults looked out for each other’s children. Kids played tag, kick the bottle, and soap and rope. As the second generation to live in public housing, Serrano could compare the challenges his mother faced when she wanted to address complaints to her landlord to his own struggles.

Second-generation public housing residency also means, however, that some people could get used to conditions they may have experienced their entire childhood and adolescence. Puerto Ricans and African Americans also shared this experience and with it, the steady deterioration in the quality of life in their public housing units. Real, limited resources to nemesis for routine maintenance, ineffective, cosmetic approaches to address major infrastructure, lack of proper and spot treatment that made children more susceptible to respiratory illnesses. These were more than violations of the multiple housing code; these were explicit conditions that threatened the health and well-being of the families who called these residences home. Although lacking any elucidation, required a massive effort in organizing. Joshua Serrano was ready for the challenge when he met AJ Johnson, the Christian Activists Council, now the Center for Leadership and Justice.

ASHLEY “AJ” JOHNSON
SENIOR PASTOR. URBAN HOPE REFUGEE CHURCH. HARTFORD AREA COMMUNITY ORGANIZER. CHRISTIAN ACTIVISTS COUNCIL.

ASHLEY "AJ" JOHNSON


When he was a young boy, Ashley “AJ” Johnson saw a dream in the notion of a church that could transcend the limits of church. In this dream, the church was central,植根于社会，经济，和政治使命，甚至将基督教信仰融入日常生活。Ashley Johnson was born in Connecticut, and grew up in a family that instilled the values of community and social justice from an early age. Johnson has been involved in numerous community organizations and initiatives throughout his career, working to address issues of poverty, education, and housing. He is a strong advocate for grassroots organizing and community-driven solutions to social problems.

Whether he speaks at rallies for civil rights or leads a meeting of the homeless, Ashley Johnson’s passion for social justice is evident in his work and activism. Johnson has made it his mission to bring together individuals and organizations from diverse backgrounds to work towards a common goal. He is committed to creating a more just and equitable society, where all people have access to the resources they need to thrive. His leadership and vision have inspired countless others to join the fight for a better world.

Ashley Johnson is a shining example of what can be achieved through dedication and hard work. His tireless efforts have made a significant impact on his community and beyond, and his legacy continues to inspire others to be agents of change. At the heart of it all is a deep commitment to justice and the belief that every person deserves the opportunity to live a fulfilling life. We look forward to seeing what the future holds for Ashley Johnson and the positive change he will continue to drive forward.
Why is this important?
In the last 80 years Hartford has become a majority-minority city, with 80%:

- African Americans
- Puerto Ricans
- West Indians
Puerto Ricans

Hartford, CT  \#5

- 41,995 (By total Numbers: NY, Philly, Chicago, Springfield)

Hartford, CT - \#6

By Density 33.66\%
Three (3) Connecticut’s cities, Hartford, Waterbury, Bridgeport, feature in the top 15 cities for overall Puerto Rican population.
Like the African American population, New York, Philadelphia and Chicago: top three cities for the overall number of African American and Puerto Rican
Why is this important?
Themes

Segregation by Design

Urbanization
Segregation
Demographic Change

Housing
Access and Discrimination

Community Identity Resilience
Key Questions

- How did urbanization impact Hartford's demographic profile?
- How did housing access and discrimination shape where African Americans, Puerto Ricans, and West Indians settled in the city?
- How did residents organize to build community, develop strong cultural identities, and to promote resilience?
Why is this important?
You Document Cultural Resilience

Social Organizations

Local Businesses
You should how people build monuments
You Document Resistance

- Tenant Organizing
- Political Organizing
- Home Ownership
Resistance
Resilience
“I was born in Hartford, Hartford Hospital. My mom lived in Charter Oak at the time. We grew up there and lived on 81 Delta St. I went to Walburton Pre-k, Mary M. Hooker kindergarten thru 6th grade, Fox Elementary for 7th and 8th and Bulkeley for High school. I got my diploma through the adult education school on Washington St, though. Being a young mom (15 to be exact) and married at 16, I couldn’t do full time school and work. I lived in Charter Oak Terrace on and off for 23 years.” (Marisol Sanjuan)
You make people visible; you dig through the archive.
You triangulate with other sources and other public programming
You Capture Testimony

https://ctdigitalarchive.org/islandora/object/50002%3A5531

Jasmin Agosto’s HPL programming on revolutionary Latinas

You share the story with the public, invite them to participate and tell their stories;

You rinse and repeat
Thank you!

Questions?
African American Population

Population doubles between 1910 and 1920 and increases again by 70% by 1930 but still 4% of the population

YEAR  1910  1920  1930  1940
POP. 1745  4567  6510  7090

1945: 250 West Indians

By 1960, 6000 Puerto Ricans