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Cincinnati -- One of America's Most Livable Cities?

By the Alliance for Leadership and Interconnection

The city of Cincinnati's characterization on the national stage as one of America's most "livable" cities was undeniably challenged in the aftermath of the urban uprising this past April.

What the establishment media commonly referred to in oversimplified fashion as "race riots" were in actuality the social ramifications of the system of economic apartheid under which thousands of Cincinnatians have lived for years and continue to live under everyday.

In its application for Federal Empowerment Zone status in 1999, the city recognized that compared with the 75 largest cities in the country, Cincinnati had the:

- 12th highest rate of poverty, 24.3percent -- higher than New York, Chicago, Los Angeles and Baltimore;
- 9th lowest median household income (\$21,006);
- 9th greatest population loss during the 1990s (minus 5 percent);
- 6th lowest percent of new homes built between 1980 and 1990; and
- 9th lowest home ownership rate (35 percent).

More recently, federal census data for 2000 show Cincinnati stands as the eighth-most racially segregated city in the United States as measured by an "index of dissimilarity." What's more, this represents a worsening from its position as the 18th-most segregated city a decade ago.

For 50 years, the city has used statistics and data from African-American neighborhoods in its applications for federal and state assistance; and yet these same neighborhoods remain underdeveloped today, as evidenced by their declaration as Federal Empowerment Zones two years ago.

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In 1949 the city began applying for federal grants under Title I of the Housing Act of 1949, which targeted monies to local governments to assist residents in the revitalization of underdeveloped neighborhoods.



In 1959 the city of Cincinnati passed its own Urban Renewal Law making local tax resources and development assistance available to city residents for the purposes of neighborhood revitalization.



In 1961 the US Department of Housing and Urban Development sanctioned the city for its inequitable use and distribution of community development funds and mandated the city to implement a plan of corrective action in these African-American neighborhoods.



1978 was the first year the city of Cincinnati passed a minority preference law in its awarding of city contracts, development agreements, grants and loans in the face of multiple studies finding patterns of racial discrimination and economic exclusion over a period of many years.



In 1992 the "Croson Study" (performed by the University of Cincinnati's Institute for Economic Policy) was released, showing that despite the initial passage of the minority preference law in 1978 and its seven subsequent amendments, there was no significant increase in minority participation and benefits in the city's economic expenditures.



In 1999 HUD declared parts of nine predominantly African-American neighborhoods in Cincinnati "Economic Disaster Areas" as evidenced by their official designation as Federal Empowerment Zones.



Already under the microscope of one federal investigation into police practices, the city of Cincinnati has recently been forced by HUD to respond to a request for another federal investigation into the city's housing and community development programs.

The city's attention to the development of its riverfront, professional sports teams, retail shopping districts and integration of market rate housing in urban neighborhoods has come at the direct expense of the underdevelopment of these poor and African-American neighborhoods for over 50 years.

The City of Cincinnati must be held accountable.

The criminal injustice system

Ohio is no exception to the startling national trend toward the extremely disproportionate incarceration of its African-American population. Newly released figures from

the 2000 census, as reported in *The Cincinnati Enquirer*, show that Ohio's total African-American populations is at 11.5 percent, while African-Americans comprise over half of Ohio's total prison population at 50.1 percent!

The figures are similar for Ohio's condemned-prisoner population, of whom 50.2 percent of the 199 inmates awaiting execution on death row are African-American.

Such disparities begin early in the criminal justice machine in Cincinnati. Of the nearly 40,000 people arrested and set to stand trial in 2000, almost 64 percent were African-Americans in a city whose census 2000 figures show to be only 42.9 percent African-American.

The claims by the Hamilton County Prosecutor's office and Cincinnati Police officials that they do not unfairly target the city's minority population certainly ring hollow in the face of such evidence.

A primary means by which the criminal justice system targets African Americans is through its "war on drugs" rhetoric. While most credible evidence and research suggests that drug use in society is distributed widely across race and class variables, national figures show that four of every five people in jail on drug offenses is either African-American or Hispanic.

The nationally institutionalized racism embedded in drug law enforcement is perhaps most clearly visible in the notorious disparities between federal sentencing laws for abuse of the crack and powder varieties of cocaine.

The city of Cincinnati has targeted its poor and African-American urban communities for drug law enforcement to the extent that since 1995, police have averaged 2,300 drug arrests per year in its Over-the-Rhine neighborhood with a population of only 7,600. The drug enforcement hysteria reached a zenith in Over-the-Rhine, where from 1996 until January 2000 the city enforced a drug exclusion ordinance in the neighborhood, under which individuals were banned from their own homes for drug arrests and convictions for anywhere from 90 days to a year. The ordinance has since been dismissed by the Ohio Supreme Court and in federal court as unconstitutional.

Contrast such zero-tolerance enforcement targeted at the city's poor urban communities with the recent decisions by an arbitrator to reinstate a Cincinnati Police officer to his former position as a drug crimes investigator after he had been fired for admitting to his own past drug use and constitutionally questionable police practices, and it becomes difficult to explain away the appearance of a double standard.

For more than 50 years, largely the same poor and African-American neighborhoods of Cincinnati have been identified for relief and revitalization, while little of any real substance has changed. The city continues with its apparent position of benign neglect and then blames the victims in these neighborhoods for the conditions of social decline to which it contributes and perpetuates in the first place.

Economic polarization in the 1990s

The distribution in Ohio of economic gains made in the 1990s mirrors that of the country at large, in that upper-income households saw their earnings soar while the vast majority of average- to low-income families struggled to keep pace with inflation. Census figures for 2000 show that Ohio's median household income of \$39,480 increased by one percent over the decade after adjusting for inflation, while the number of households in Ohio earning \$100,000 or more increased 337 percent over the same time period.

In its report, "The State of Working Ohio 2001," the non-profit research institute Policy Matters Ohio observes that in 2000, the inequality ratio between the 90th percentile (highest) of wage earners in Cincinnati and the 10th percentile (lowest) stood at 4.74 -- the highest such ratio of all major metropolitan cities in Ohio.

The report further observes the widening gap in median wages between white and African-American workers. During the 1990s, white male wages recovered by three percent, while black male wages continued to fall for a net decline between 1979 and 2000 of 23 percent, compared to a net decline in white male wages of eight percent over the same period of time.

Renting in Cincinnati

Given the trend of increasing economic polarization by race in Ohio, African Americans are likely to be affected disproportionately by the city's lack of affordable rental housing.

The Cincinnati Post described in an article how, in the summer of 2000, 28 moderately priced apartments in the West End were filled immediately upon completion of construction, leaving a lengthy waiting list of hopeful tenants in their trail. It further cited a data survey compiled by a coalition led by the Mortgage Bankers Association, which concluded new construction of federally insured rental housing has "all but disappeared in Cincinnati and a dozen other cities."

Further numbers compiled by the National Low Income Housing Coalition paint an equally dire picture for

Hamilton County:

- An extremely low income household (earning 30 percent of the area median income of \$61,000) can afford monthly rent of no more than \$458, while the fair market rent for a two-bedroom unit is \$576.
- A worker earning the minimum wage (\$5.15 per hour) must work 86 hours per week in order to afford a two-bedroom unit at the area's fair market rent.
- The county's housing wage stands at \$11.08. This is the amount a worker would have to earn per hour in order to be able to work 40 hours per week and afford a two-bedroom unit at the area's fair market rent. This wage is 215 percent of the current Ohio minimum wage of \$5.15 and represents an increase of 3.41 percent between 2000 and 2001.

Home ownership

The latest census figures on home ownership show Cincinnati to be no less of a segregated city. Cincinnati's overall home ownership rate of 38.9 percent in 2000 lags behind that of every other major metropolitan city in Ohio. Home ownership rates for 2000 by race show a breakdown of 48.3 percent for whites versus 27 percent for blacks, starkly illustrating that African-Americans in Cincinnati are much less likely to own their homes than their white counterparts. Similarly, these figures rank lower than all other Ohio cities.

Home Ownership Rates in Major Metropolitan Cities in Ohio

City	Ownership	White	Black
Toledo	59.7%	66.2%	41.8%
Akron	59.4%	66.0%	43.6%
Dayton	52.7%	59.2%	45.2%
Columbus	48.9%	53.6%	39.4%
Cleveland	48.5%	57.9%	40.7%
Cincinnati	38.9%	48.3%	27.0%

Source: Census 2000

These housing disparities persist in Cincinnati amidst a continued trend during the 1990s of "white flight" to the city's neighboring counties and suburbs. Between 1990 and 2000, the city's population as a whole declined by nine percent, which included an exodus of 44,793 white residents while the city's African-American population increased by 4,109 residents.

The future of housing in Cincinnati

Faced with the dilemma of a shrinking tax base, the city of Cincinnati under the leadership of Mayor Charlie Luken has charted a course toward catering to its wealthy minority in the hope of drawing them back to its core urban neighborhoods surrounding the central business district. Multi-million dollar tax-subsidized stadiums go up while the Milner Hotels, Laurel Parks and Lincoln Courts of the city all come down, to be replaced with fewer overall units and even fewer of those geared toward affordability.

The latest salvo in the government's charge to cleanse the city of its impoverished population was fired by Democratic City Councilman John Cranley in proposing to prohibit approval of new subsidized housing projects within the city limits of Cincinnati and divert any federal block grant monies targeted for low-income development outside of the city as well, done under the familiar guise of blaming the poor for the conditions of economic inequality.

It is clear that the current city council favors the needs of its minority of campaign donors over the majority of the city's population and must be dealt accordingly with at the polls.

The Alliance for Leadership and Interconnection (ALLY) is a local organization committed to popular education and participatory research in the service of community improvement. For more information, contact seedsoffish@yahoo.com.

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