

Redlined Then, Divided Now: New Jersey's Housing Legacy and Path Forward

Growing up in New Jersey, it is easy to notice that while some neighborhoods feel full of opportunity, others are starved of it. In a multitude of towns and cities, Black families pay more to rent crowded apartments while white families enjoy the security of stable inherited homes. Researchers in the state have shown that New Jersey has one of the nation's largest racial homeownership gaps, with black residents far less likely to own homes and build wealth when compared to white residents (New Jersey Future, 2025). This noticeable divide is not just the result of individual choices; instead, it is the product of policies that have intentionally steered Black families away from stable homeownership for generations. New Jersey's long history of housing discrimination has produced the numerous inequities residents see today. These policies continue to shape Black communities' daily lives, and demand concrete changes in policy in order to build a more just future for everyone.

New Jersey's unequal housing map was drawn decades ago by policies that explicitly targeted black neighborhoods. Federal and private lenders once used "redlining" maps to mark Black communities as too "risky" for investment. Residents in those areas were routinely denied mortgages or were forced into unfair and borderline predatory loans. "Especially with New Jersey's history of redlining and segregation, it was nearly impossible for Black and Brown residents to ask for financial assistance, buy property, and of course, refinance" (Davis, 2024). These decisions did more than shape where black Americans could live; they stripped black families of the chance to build equity and pass down property. Decades later, the neighborhoods that were outlined in red still tend to have lower property values, fewer banks, and absentee

landlords, while communities that were deemed “desirable” (ones that were predominantly white) benefited from stronger schools and better-funded public services.

“The HOLC maps encouraged disinvestment in neighborhoods in which residents were predominantly members of racial and ethnic minority groups while directing investment to wealthy and predominantly White neighborhoods” (Yang et al., 2023). Redlining did not just label neighborhoods; it actively steered money and opportunity toward white communities and away from communities of color. Together, these patterns of targeted disinvestment and biased support for white neighborhoods laid the groundwork for the racial wealth gap that can be found in New Jersey today.

The legacy of those unjust decisions still continues to shape the lives of Black New Jerseyans even today. Recent statewide analyses show that white households are almost twice as likely as Black households to own their homes, and the homes owned by white families are generally worth more and located in communities with stronger schools and safer streets. “The statewide homeownership rate for white New Jersey households is 76.6%, nearly double the homeownership rates for Black and Latino... households who have homeownership rates of 41.3% and 40.4% percent, respectively” (New Jersey Institute for Social Justice, 2025). This statistic showcases a cycle, one where white families can accumulate wealth through rising property values and equity. One report on the racial wealth gap found that the typical white family in New Jersey has hundreds of thousands of dollars more in wealth than the typical black family, a difference which researchers link directly to unequal access to homeownership and inherited housing equity (New Jersey Institute for Social Justice, 2024). This gap is not random; it is the direct legacy of policies such as redlining that funneled investment to white suburbs, leaving black communities with fewer opportunities to buy and build stability. For black renters,

this reality often looks like paying high rent in aging buildings, dealing with landlords who delay repairs, and facing constant worry about eviction or rising costs. This leads to black families having to pour income into rent instead of assets, making it harder to save for education, emergencies, or retirement; further perpetuating generational disadvantages.

Repairing these harms requires more than just symbolic gestures; it demands policies that change where and how Black families can live. One powerful tool is fully enforcing the Mount Laurel doctrine so that every town plans and builds meaningful, affordable housing rather than pushing it into already segregated cities. “In the last seven years, Fair Share Housing Center has settled over 340 cases with New Jersey towns to ensure they build their fair share of affordable housing, resulting in tens of thousands of new affordable homes for NJ residents and families” (Davis, 2024). The Mount Laurel Doctrine has been proven to work when enforced. Fair Share housing demonstrates that holding towns accountable creates real change for Black and low-income families seeking suburban opportunity. When Mount Laurel is enforced, thousands of new affordable homes are built in communities with better schools and job access, giving black families a real chance to move into neighborhoods that have been closed off to them (Report Enumerates Impact of New Jersey’s Mount Laurel Exclusionary Zoning Ruling, 2026). Community-based strategies also matter, supporting tenant unions that organize against unfair evictions, funding home repair grants for longtime residents, or creating community land trusts that keep housing affordable. These approaches center the voices of black residents who know what is best for their neighborhoods.

When discussing housing policy in New Jersey, what is really being discussed is whose children get to breathe clean air, attend well-funded schools, and grow up without the constant fear of displacement. The history of redlining and exclusionary zoning did not just draw lines on

a map; it drew lines through the futures of numerous families, separating those who could build home equity from those locked out of that possibility. By enforcing fair housing laws, investing in truly affordable homes, and listening closely to black residents, the state of New Jersey can begin redrawing those lines in a way that upholds its values. New Jersey has already taken important steps, but the choice to create a more equitable future will depend on whether we treat housing not as a privilege to be hoarded, but as a right and foundation that every community deserves.

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