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The problem with talking about “inner cities”

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Feedback


Last week, Donald Trump unveiled his “[New Deal for Black America: With a Plan for Urban Renewal](#).” In this plan, he writes, “year after year the condition of black America gets worse. The conditions in our inner cities today are unacceptable,” thereby explicitly associating African Americans with the inner city—which Trump has done time and again in speeches and presidential debates.

Accordingly, his “new deal” places a particular focus on inner cities; for example, the plan offers strategies such as implementing “tax holidays for inner city investment” and proposes using “a portion of the money saved by enforcing our laws, and suspending refugees, to reinvested [sic] in our inner cities.”

Beyond the lack of clarity and consistency among the plan’s strategies, Trump misses an important reality: not all African Americans live in the “inner city,” which in itself is a vague and loosely defined geography. The evidence also shows that African Americans, like every

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other community living in the United States, are too diverse for generalizations as broad as Trump’s plan implies.

The term “inner city” gained popularity through the work of urban theorists and sociologists in the 1960s and 1970s to describe central cities and the communities of color who lived there. Even Jane Jacobs, the famous opponent to federal urban renewal, talked about the widespread “inner city stagnation and decay” in *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*.

But the “inner city” has no formal census-designated definition and is largely a colloquial and rhetorical device. Thus, in my attempts to characterize these areas, I use the central city within a given metropolitan area as an imperfect proxy for an “inner city.”

Atlanta—one of the nation’s fastest-growing metropolitan areas, especially for African Americans—is an instructive case. As the map below shows, African Americans live well beyond the central city of Atlanta, with predominantly black neighborhoods dispersed across the metropolitan landscape. Only 12 percent of the Atlanta metropolitan area’s black residents live inside the city of Atlanta.



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 Atlanta metro

This is not a story unique to Atlanta, either. In Philadelphia, 53 percent of the metropolitan area's black residents live in the city proper, and in Baltimore, only 48 percent do.

In the [third presidential debate](#), Trump said that "our inner cities are a disaster... They have no education. They have no jobs." Atlanta sharply contradicts this contention. Almost 15,000 of the city's black residents have graduate or professional degrees, and almost a quarter of its households earn more than the [area median income](#) of \$64,000 for a family of four.

Furthermore, in framing this plan under the banner of urban renewal, Trump is venerating a period in urban history that involved [top-down development that often had disproportionately harmful impacts](#) on predominately minority neighborhoods in central cities. He is offering a narrative of African Americans that is false, outdated, and dismissive

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of structural forces and policy decisions that have contributed to the perpetuation of black poverty.

The majority black and brown neighborhoods characterized by concentrated poverty that Trump's plan targets are very much products of [outright housing discrimination](#) and a set of [deliberate strategies to block wealth accumulation](#). These are among a multitude of racially biased laws, policies, and private-sector actions whose legacies benefit white communities to this day often at the expense of poor communities of color across the nation.

In using this coded language of the "inner city," Trump is simultaneously invoking and attempting to downplay the troublesome history of urban policy in our nation. By conflating the inner city with African Americans generally, which Trump's new plan does, he is telling a story of African Americans and establishing a policy agenda that is not based in evidence and is problematically incomplete.

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