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Pursuing Antiracist Public Policy Education: An Example Connecting the Racist History of Housing Policy to Contemporary Inequity

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Abstract. We review the antiracism concept and contextualize it in Extension public policy education and the Extension system itself. Despite public policy education having a long history in Extension on a wide variety of issues, missing from this programming is the pursuit of antiracism. As a programmatic example, we review some historical causes of present-day housing inequities and an associated example approach for pursuing antiracism in housing policy education. Finally, we conclude by noting additional opportunities to pursue antiracism in Extension public policy education. In doing so, we emphasize that public policy education cannot be “nonracist” if it is not antiracist.

INTRODUCTION

Extension has a long history in the public policy education field, dealing with issues including health, environment, agriculture, housing, and community planning (Dodd & Abdalla, 2004; Fitzgerald & Spaccarotella, 2009; Huang & Lamm, 2015; Morton, 2002; Reeder, 1970; Walcott & Triezenberg, 2020; Weeks, 1970). This area has alternatively been labeled “public policy,” “public issues,” and “public affairs.” Most previous discussions on public policy education focus on Extension’s role, audience targeting, and topical area relevance (Kraft, 1999; Nuckton et al., 1992; Patton & Blaine, 2001), with surveys of Extension professionals indicating a high valuation of public policy education training and a demand for professional development opportunities (Singletary et al., 2007). Missing from these discussions is the importance of pursuing antiracism in public policy education. In fact, despite calls in Extension to examine racial inequities that hold back our institutions and our communities (e.g., Walcott et al. (2020) argue it is necessary that Extension do more through racial dialogue initiatives), authors have never written the word “antiracism” in the *Journal of Extension*, let alone discussed its essentiality to public policy education.

Pursuant to addressing this deficiency, in the next section we review the concept of antiracism and contextualize it in Extension public policy education and the Extension system itself. Then we review an example of pursuing antiracism in

housing policy education. Finally, we conclude with some additional brief examples of pursuing antiracism in Extension and a summary. In doing so, we emphasize that public policy education cannot be “nonracist” if it is not antiracist.

ANTIRACISM IN EXTENSION’S PUBLIC POLICY EDUCATION

An antiracist is one who is supporting an antiracist policy through their actions or expressing an antiracist idea (Kendi, 2019). A racist policy is any measure that creates or sustains racial inequity. Policy in this definition includes written and unwritten laws, rules, procedures, processes, regulations, and guidelines that govern people; for example, present-day housing policies sustain racial inequities, as this article will discuss in more detail below. In this framework, then, every policy is either racist or antiracist; a particular policy cannot be “nonracist” or “race-neutral,” because every policy in every institution in every community is producing or sustaining either racial inequity or racial equity (Kendi, 2016, 2019).

Racist policies are often framed in terms such as “biased policies” or “discriminatory policies” to avoid potentially disengaging community members. “Racist policy” is more accurate. “Racist policy” is “more tangible and exacting, and more likely to be immediately understood by people, including its victims, who may not have the benefit of extensive fluency

in racial terms” (Kendi, 2019, p. 18). Furthermore, anyone has the power to discriminate; hence, coding “racist policy” as “discrimination” diffuses responsibility and takes eyes off the central agents of racism: policies and policymakers.

Thus, the suggestion of pursuing antiracism in Extension’s public policy education differs slightly from many current Extension efforts that explicitly involve or acknowledge race. Many efforts acknowledge discrimination and disadvantage as an issue faced by gendered and racialized groups and suggest, for example, organized training to increase sensitivity to the needs of entrepreneurs of color, as well as training and networking opportunities for entrepreneurs of color (Pride et al., 1997). Others suggest adapting publications to reach the needs of diverse local audiences (Aubrecht & Eames-Sheavly, 2012; Yancura, 2008), or examine the value of empowering women with targeted and relevant public policy education (Gorman, 1999). Even if not explicitly labeled as such, these programs are antiracist efforts in Extension, as they seek to reduce race-gender inequities (whether in entrepreneurship, program access, or program relevance, respectively). But our suggestion is rather more explicit and comprehensive: Extension professionals must actively pursue antiracism in public policy education.

In public policy education, this pursuit includes education on the history of racist policies and their impact in creating contemporary racial inequality of opportunity. See the appendix for details on the difference between “inequity” and “inequality.” However, simply diminishing the ignorance of racist history and policies will not itself end discriminatory practices, which is why directly tying historic patterns and policies of racism to present-day policy recommendations is essential in antiracist public policy education.

While it is attractive to believe that racist ideas arise solely from ignorance or hatred, they were often more insidiously created to justify and rationalize entrenched discriminatory policies and perpetuate racial inequities (Kendi, 2016). To emphasize this point, we note that the Extension service itself is no exception. Indeed, many of the congresspeople voting for the Smith-Lever Act that created the Cooperative Extension Service had racist motives and justifications; specifically, a belief in the inferiority of Black people rationalized the conscious marginalization of rural Black interests within Extension (Harris, 2008). This racism justified both the passing of the Smith-Lever Act and the unequal provision of Extension services. For example, Congressman James K. Vardaman, expressing his support of the Smith-Lever Act, saw rural life (unlike urban life) as “the breeding place of the patriot,” where noble family life developed individuals—provided they were White—into the leaders of the nation (Carlson, 1970; U.S. Senate, 1914). Then Seaman Knapp, an institutional parent of Extension, led the racist provision of Extension services, arguing that because Black Extension agents could only work with Black clients,

who were inferior, funds would be needlessly wasted if Black agents were employed (Harris, 2008). In the later twentieth century, Extension leadership continued to move slowly on antiracist transformations, which contributed to a reduction of the Black Extension force (Harris, 2008). The broader Land Grant University system that operates Extension should not escape acknowledgement either, from the racist land grant (“land grab”) that provided Indigenous American land to states without the consent of Indigenous peoples (Lee & Ahtone, 2020) to current inequalities in funding between 1862 Land Grants and their 1890 and 1994 partners (APLU, 2013; Croft, 2019; Harris, 2021). Contextualized in this history and in present-day inequities (Daniel, 2013; Harris, 2021), unless Extension professionals pursue antiracist action, they perpetuate racist policy by sustaining racial inequities. We describe a specific example of Michigan State University Extension pursuing antiracism in their housing policy education below.

CAUSES OF PRESENT-DAY HOUSING AFFORDABILITY, INEQUITY, AND FEDERAL POLICIES

This subsection reviews some examples of racist policies that segregated and impoverished families based on race, as well as the legacy effects of these policies that are still felt today in racial disparities in housing affordability. Although the U.S. government organized and contributed to the segregation of other people of color, it was generally to a lesser extent and in the more distant past than the *de jure* segregation of Black Americans (Rothstein, 2017). This is not meant to diminish the horrific treatment experienced by other people of color. Indeed, this list is incomplete because an exhaustive review would be prohibitively long due to the extensive history of housing discrimination at the federal, state, and local levels. Part of Extension professionals’ work in their state can be in documenting and teaching their states’ specific history of racist housing policy.

Through the 1930s and 1940s, public housing projects were segregated; Black projects had fewer amenities and were of lower quality in terms of both location and construction. Often these segregated housing projects replaced previously integrated neighborhoods, increasing segregation and population density in Black neighborhoods (Rothstein, 2017). In 1934, President Roosevelt’s administration created the Federal Housing Administration (FHA) to insure mortgages and reduce their cost for homeowners (Freund, 2007). They also created the Home Owners’ Loan Corporation (HOLC) to purchase foreclosing mortgages and then issue amortized mortgages with lower interest rates. Amortized mortgages include principal and interest payments, which facilitated wealth accumulation for White homeowners but not Black homeowners — who were excluded. Specifically, HOLC

created risk maps, a practice now known as redlining, that labeled neighborhoods as high risk if a single Black family lived there, regardless of economic class or single-family home status (Jackson, 1985; Rothstein, 2017). An important nuance is that HOLC did not itself directly deny loans on the basis of race during its initial rescue phase (Fishback et al., 2020; 2022), but HOLC maps were an integral and intention-revealing part of a public-private ecosystem that created wealth in housing for some and not others (Winling & Michney, 2021). Furthermore, HOLC and FHA collaborated with private real estate groups to distribute racist appraisal practices through trade publications, workshops, and events (Freund, 2007). HOLC and FHA were intertwined, and FHA continued using the government mandated *Underwriting Manual* after HOLC stopped issuing loans and FHA continued issuing loans (Freund, 2007; Winling & Michney, 2021). The *Underwriting Manual* was specific, requiring appraisers to count “relative economic stability” and “protection from adverse influences” as worth 40% and 20%—together, the majority—of the neighborhood ratings, respectively (Rothstein, 2017). This manual also encouraged loans where “natural or artificial barriers” (e.g., highways, train tracks, walls, etc.) segregated Black people and White people for “the prevention of the infiltration of ... inharmonious racial groups” and specifically recommended zoning regulations and racially restrictive deeds and covenants (Jackson, 1985; Rothstein, 2017). The manual also deepened school segregation by increasing the risk rating where schools were not segregated (Rothstein, 2017).

There are numerous other government programs that explicitly discriminated against Black Americans. For example, the “war guest” program subsidized room subleases to White workers; this reduced housing costs in White neighborhoods but not Black neighborhoods (Rothstein, 2017). The Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) also rejected government-guaranteed mortgages from Black veterans after WWII. The VA and FHA together insured half of the mortgages in the U.S. in the 1950s, not only refusing to insure mortgages to Black people, but also refusing to insure mortgages to White people where Black homeowners were present, entrenching and creating segregation (Rothstein, 2017). They also financed entire subdivisions, imposing conditions that entire subdivisions, and in many cases even entire suburbs, be White-only. Without FHA financing, Black subdivisions were lower quality, had lower amenities, and were more likely to need to be rented due to higher-cost mortgages, even between Black and White families making similar incomes (Jackson, 1985; Rothstein, 2017).

Racially exclusionary zoning and deeds (i.e., deeds used by real estate developers that prevented sale to “non-Caucasians”) were additional ways that U.S. housing policy discriminated against Black people (Ehrman-Solberg et al., 2020). Racially exclusionary deeds were held up as entirely

legal in courts until a Supreme Court case in 1948 (*Shelley v. Kraemer*, 334 U.S. 1). However, racial covenants remained *de facto* legal in some areas for years afterwards (Rothstein, 2017).

Planning and land use regulations were also used as a tool of racial exclusion. For example, in 1933 the National Land Use Planning Commission developed zoning policies with the intent of preventing racial integration and eliminating existing racial integration (Jackson, 1985; Rothstein, 2017). This policy also contributed to the degradation of Black neighborhoods by allowing polluting industries to locate in Black zoned areas while preventing it in White areas, the legacy of which is health and environmental inequities today. Further, zoning allowed for taverns, liquor stores, nightclubs, and brothels in Black areas and banned them from White areas. In the 1960s and 1970s, the FHA made housing in or near industrial areas ineligible for mortgage insurance, which were then—by previous definition—Black neighborhoods (Rothstein, 2017). Thus, although these policies no longer explicitly considered race, they maintained the racial inequity created by previous policies.

Since the 1970s, the federal government has moved away from housing project developments and focused more on providing housing vouchers for low-income individuals. However, examples of explicit racial discrimination remained; for example, in 1984, of the roughly 10 million public housing tenants, almost all were racially segregated, and *all* the White projects had superior amenities, services, and maintenance (Flournoy & Rodrigue, 1985). Additionally, it was not until 1998 that a court ruling led to housing vouchers being offered to Black people in Miami; previously, Black people were assigned to housing projects, while White people received housing vouchers (Rothstein, 2017).

Today, Housing Choice Vouchers, commonly called “Section 8,” subsidize rental payments with the goal of helping low-income people find housing outside poor communities. However, it remains the prerogative of local housing authorities to determine how much a voucher is worth, which determines the type of neighborhood a voucher holder can afford. Further, it remains legal for landlords to refuse to accept housing vouchers. Together, these policies sustain and produce racial segregation.

The lasting and ongoing effects of past explicitly racist policies are still felt today, and status-quo acceptance maintains inequity. For example, in 2019, the median income for White families was about \$60,000 and only \$36,000 for Black families (Kendi, 2019). Median household wealth inequality was worse: \$134,000 for White families and \$11,000 for Black families (Kendi, 2019; Rothstein, 2017). These racial wealth gaps have *worsened* since the 1980s (Derenoncourt et al., 2022). Racist housing policies of the twentieth century are, of course, not the only cause of racial wealth inequality—but policies did cause some of

the inequality (Aaronson et al., 2021a; 2021b). And racial wealth disparities have spillover effects in other inequities. For example, lower wealth increases odds of experiencing homelessness, and although Black people account for 12% of the population, they account for 43% of the individuals experiencing homelessness (National Governors Association, 2018; Olivet et al., 2018).

Once we acknowledge that to be antiracist is to view these inequities between racialized groups as a problem of policy, we must link these inequities to their policy sources in public policy education.

EXAMPLE OF ANTIRACIST EFFORTS IN HOUSING POLICY EDUCATION

Given that a substantial source of U.S. racial inequities is housing policy, Extension efforts in housing public policy education that do not include the racist history of U.S. housing policy and its legacy are not antiracist because of the currently inseparable interaction of race, housing policy, and housing-related outcome. Hence, Extension housing programs that do not include the racist history of U.S. housing policy and its legacy fail to educate our communities, and thereby do not facilitate their informed decision-making.

Increasing the education of the history of *de jure* segregation in the United States, however, will not itself end discriminatory practices in housing. The history of racism within U.S. housing policy must be a part of related education efforts to encourage action to make a positive impact in planning. These efforts can be combined with discussion methods, reflection activities centering on local and regional legacies of exclusionary policies, and, consistent with previous Extension efforts, the consideration of the power of stories—such as personal narratives or excerpts from critically acclaimed books—to evoke deep feelings (Raison & Gordon, 2012). Some of these Extension techniques are already antiracist without being previously explicitly labelled as such. For example, with respect to race and housing affordability, the Great Migration is a major factor, so Raison and Gordon's (2012) suggestion of using personal stories from *The Warmth of Other Suns* (Wilkerson, 2010) may be a good option. Local stories can also be powerful. For example, in Michigan, stories from people who grew up on either side of a U.S.-government-required six-foot-high cement wall built to separate Black and White families are available in *Detroit's Birwood Wall* (Van Dusen, 2019).

Expressing antiracist ideas through compelling qualitative data and narratives is one facet of antiracist Extension programming that may help motivate antiracist policies. After motivating the audience by sharing history and qualitative data, Extension housing policy education should present communities with specific examples of antiracist policies and case studies of communities currently engaged

in the work. For example, an Extension program in Michigan, "From Exclusive to Inclusive: The Evolving Single-Family Residential Zone," reviews the exclusive nature of single-family residential zoning districts in Michigan and traces the long history of zoning as a tool of racial exclusion, including historical HOLC maps from Michigan communities presented side-by-side with modern demographic data to illustrate the lingering effects of racist housing policies. The program ends with an overview of many strategies and tools that could be used as part of a broader antiracist housing policy, such as eliminating single family residential zoning districts, reducing minimum dwelling unit and lot sizes, and refocusing infrastructure investments and services in areas that have historically borne the brunt of racist policies.

Figure 1 presents the historical HOLC map for Muskegon, Michigan. With these types of maps, educators root present-day racial inequity and segregation in policy. Specifically, historical HOLC maps are then paired with maps of modern demographic data. The narrative aspect of a community's racist history is directly connected with current racial inequity. For example, this was done for Muskegon, MI using the original HOLC Map (Figure 1) compared to a map showing the percent of the population that is people of color (Figure 2). The program highlights the city's current racial segregation, providing a clear visual connection between historical racist policies and the legacy of those policies in their community.

Extension professionals then pair these maps with narrative reading of racist language from the Area Description Files (ADFs), which were written for all redlined cities by FHA appraisers following the government-mandated *Underwriting Manual* and are available from Nelson et al. (2020). In Muskegon, Extension professionals read from the ADFs that the area was graded A on this map because it was "closely held by [a racially-restrictive] syndicate" and note that area continues to have almost no people of color today, even as the city's overall share of Black residents increased (Wilkinson, 2017). Similarly, HOLC graded areas C because of the "detrimental influences" of being "bordered by 'D' or 'Red' areas," which were Red because of "infiltration of negroes." These areas, which were racially segregated by policy, continue to be starkly racially segregated today. These federally required ADFs exist for over 200 cities across the U.S., with a variety of racist language and justifications throughout. Michigan State University Extension Specialists created a website (<https://www.canr.msu.edu/redlining/>) that provides a similar process including the original redlining maps, present-day demographic overlays, and city-specific ADF overlays for all eleven Michigan cities that the government redlined.

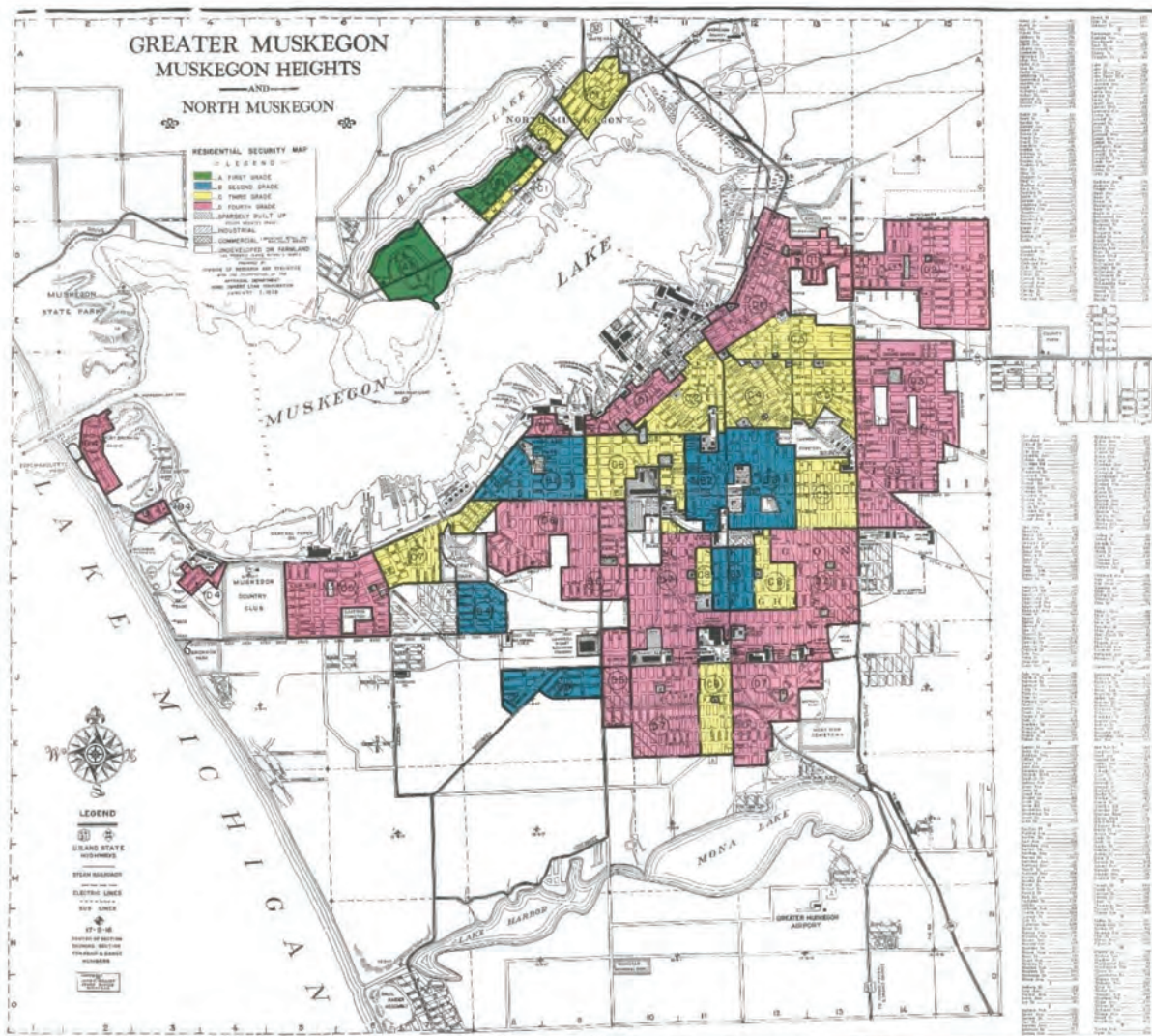


Figure 1. Historical HOLC “Redlining” map for Muskegon, Michigan. *Source:* Nelson et al. (2020).

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

Housing policy education is just one example of pursuing antiracism in Extension’s public policy education programming. Other topics for which Extension professionals provide public policy education should also pursue antiracism. For example, there are numerous aspects of the food system for which Extension professionals can integrate antiracism. Indeed, Michigan State University Extension compiles an annotated bibliography on structural racism in the U.S. food system, now in its ninth edition. The most recent edition includes recordings from webinars that focused on the intersection of food systems and racial equity (Kelly et al., 2022). In addition to education, this bibliography is a resource for specific antiracist public policy suggestions. The research summarized in the ninth edition includes policy suggestions for the U.S. Farm Bill (Ayazi & Elsheikh, 2016),

healthy food retail strategies (Hagan & Rubin, 2013), public procurement (Lo & Delwiche, 2016), and Tribal food policy development (Romero-Briones & Foxworth, 2016).

The need for more comprehensive Extension public policy outreach and new approaches for diverse clientele are necessary for the future success of Extension (Schauber, 2001), and we argue herein that these approaches should be antiracist. However, education alone is an insufficient condition for antiracism (Kendi, 2016, 2019). Hence, Extension public policy education must not only integrate antiracist education, but also tie racially inequitable outcomes directly to policies and policymakers. With a greater understanding of the historic racist foundations of national, state, and local policies, as well as the perpetuating effect of current policies, Extension clientele are empowered to take antiracist action themselves and to

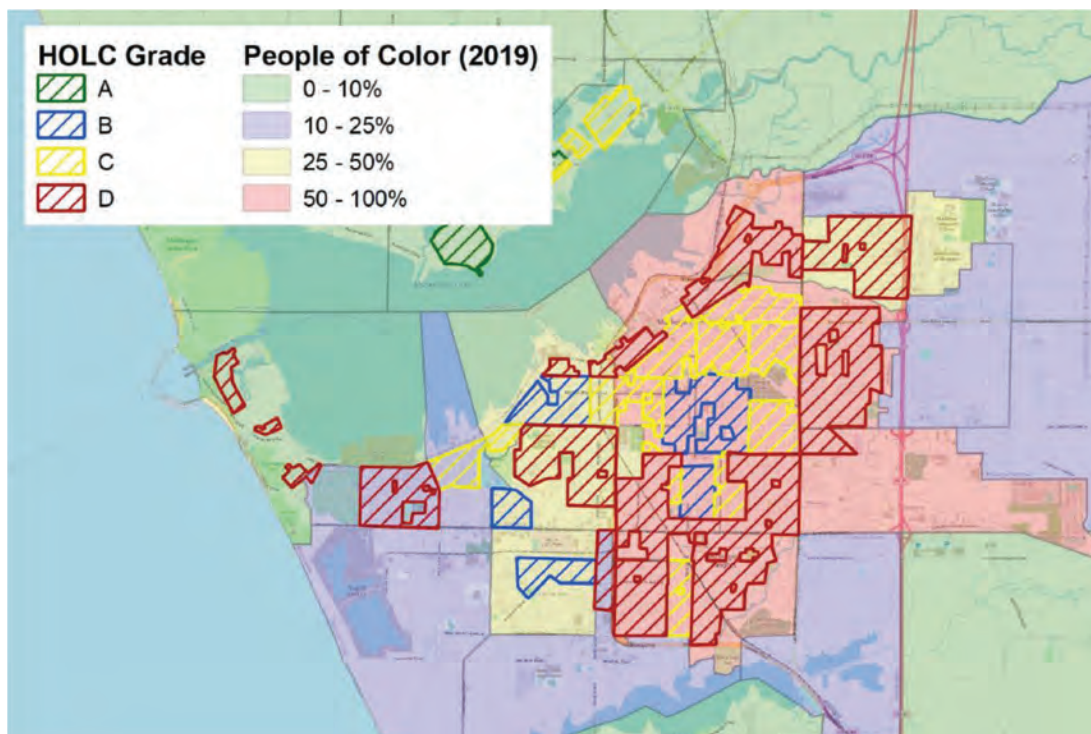


Figure 2. People of Color population by 2019 census tract in Muskegon, Michigan. Notes: Extension professionals overlay the historical HOLC “redlining” map on present-day demographic data to show the persistence and continued relevance of racist policies. Percent people of color are calculated for U.S. Census tracts as percent not “White non-Hispanic,” using the 2019 American Community Survey. Source: Our created map with data from Manson et al. (2021) and Nelson et al. (2020).

pressure policymakers to take antiracist action. Extension has generally omitted mention of antiracism in much of its educational programming, published materials, and in its own origins as an organization. By generally omitting the mention of racist foundations and implications of present policies while providing guidance on said policies, Extension has operated under the guise of a nonracist or race-neutral organization. But there is no such thing as a nonracist or race-neutral organization. To successfully strengthen our own mission, Extension professionals must recognize the necessity of pursuing antiracism in public policy education.

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APPENDIX. RESOURCES AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER READING

- For a resource on the history and legacy of redlining in Michigan, see <https://www.canr.msu.edu/redlining/>.
- For a resource on redlining maps, Area Description Files, and shapefiles for the entire United States, see <https://dsl.richmond.edu/panorama/redlining/>.
- For an explanation of the difference between “equity” and “equality” (and related definitions), see the *Natural Resources Defense Council’s* “Definitions of Equity, Inclusion, Equality and Related Terms,” available at https://www.broward.org/Climate/Documents/EquityHandout_082019.pdf.
- For more complete reviews of housing discrimination against Black Americans, see *The Color of Law* (Rothstein, 2017), *The Crabgrass Frontier* (Jackson, 1985), and *Colored Property* (Freund, 2007).
- For case studies of Detroit, including of a U.S.-government-required cement wall built between Black and White residents, see *Detroit’s Birwood Wall* (Van Dusen, 2019) or *Detroit’s Sojourner Truth Housing Riot of 1942* (Van Dusen, 2020).
- For a detailed academic case study of a housing initiative focusing on desegregation and its benefits, see *Climbing Mount Laurel* (Massey et al., 2013).
- For broader discussions of the history of racist ideas in intellectualism and the concept of antiracism, see *Stamped from the Beginning* (Kendi, 2016) and *How to Be an Antiracist* (Kendi, 2019).
- For a discussion of why White people have difficulty discussing race and ideas for confronting this difficulty, see *White Fragility* (DiAngelo, 2018).
- For a discussion on this use and choice to capitalize the terms “Black” and “White,” see Eligon (2020), Thúy Nguyễn and Pendleton (2020), or the APA Style Guide on bias-free language to describe racial and ethnic identity.