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The State of Black Omaha: 1992 - Housing Conditions: Executive Summary

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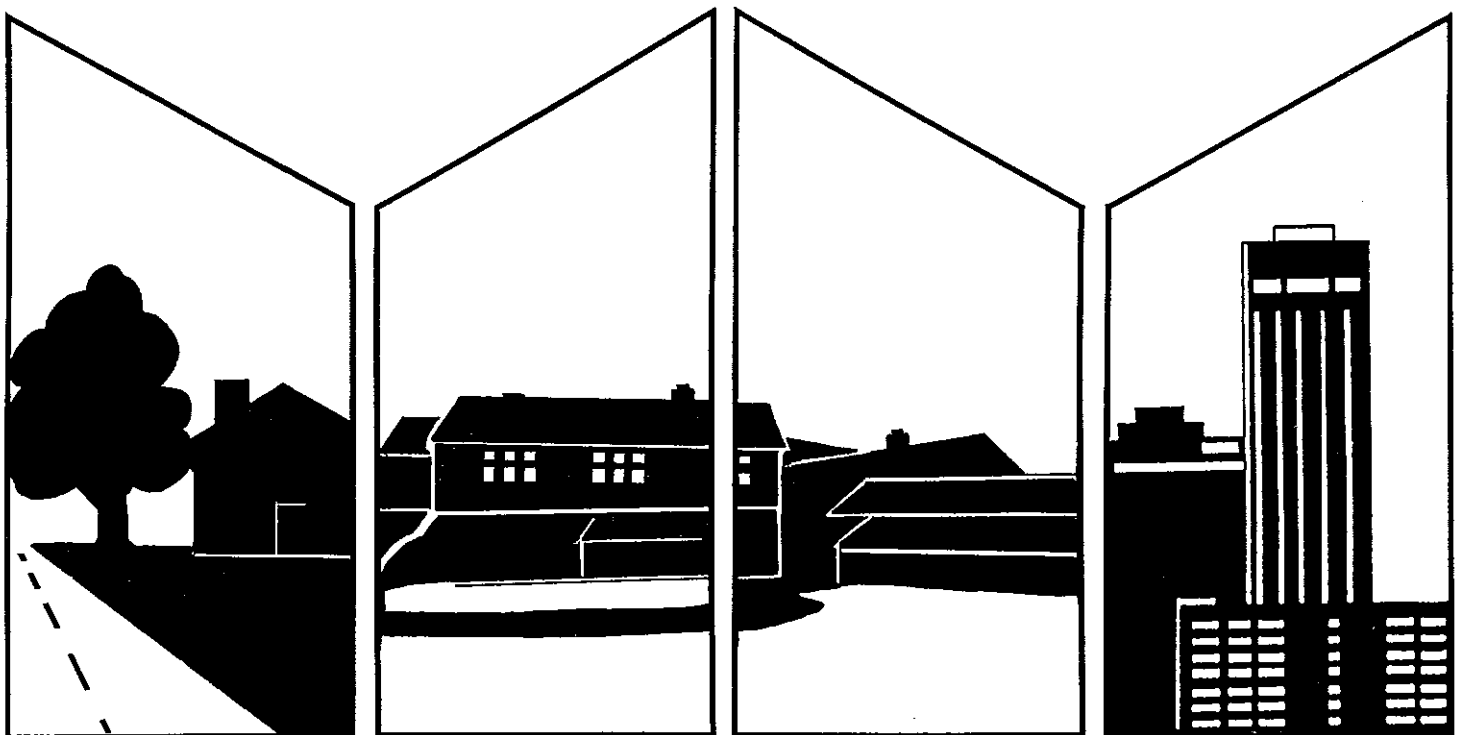


Urban League of Nebraska, Inc.

THE STATE OF BLACK OMAHA: 1992

HOUSING CONDITIONS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



State Of Black Omaha: 1992

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April 1992

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Executive Summary and Policy Recommendations

by Urban League of Nebraska, Inc.

Summary and Findings

The African American community in Omaha has undergone many changes since 1931. Although there is considerable evidence of progress and some cause for optimism, there also are reasons to be concerned. *The State of Black Omaha: 1992 Housing Conditions* has not attempted to construct an index of parity in housing, but if the housing data in the preceding section is any indication, it would appear that inequality between African Americans and Caucasian Americans in Omaha may be narrowing for some and widening for many others.

Inequality of living conditions usually does not provoke as much public outcry as gangs and drugs or racial incidents in the public schools. The effects of inadequate housing are more insidious and long-term, but nonetheless as real. Both Black and White leadership must devote more attention to this basic bread-and-butter issue.

The review of housing policies showed that the issue of decent, affordable shelter in America is multifaceted, involves a wide range of players, and is marked by public policy changes. In our city, many programs to address these needs have come and gone, and some have come and remained. *But the need for affordable housing still remains.*

The lack of decent, affordable shelter among Black people in Omaha is the result of several long term factors. For many years, the priority of the city was the removal of blight, rather than the provision of housing to less fortunate residents. When urban renewal was being considered, it became a highly politicized issue, and there was a lack of public consensus on how it should be implemented. (Urban renewal was never approved by the voters in Omaha.) During the 1960s, legislative efforts to combat housing discrimination met with resistance from those who resented government intrusion in the buying and selling of real estate property. During the 1970s, emphasis was placed on development of the Central Park Mall, to the detriment of low-income housing development. The 1980s saw the development of the riverfront area, with the continued deterioration of North Omaha.

Efforts to improve the housing conditions of Omaha's less fortunate African Americans frequently have been met with indifference or hostility. City and state officials have not been willing to make a significant budgetary commitment to affordable housing, relying instead on scarce federal dollars. Business leaders are reluctant to commit the investment funds for rehabilitation or new construction of housing. The Omaha Housing Authority often encounters vociferous neighborhood opposition in its efforts to place low-income African American working people in decent homes.

Other forces have contributed to the deterioration of Omaha's African American community. Construction of the North Freeway removed many homes during the 1960s and 1970s. The westward expansion of the city siphoned investment, and combined with racial stereotyping of the Black community, resulted in "capital starvation" of North Omaha. On the national level, there was a disinvestment by the federal government in affordable housing. Affordable housing for Americans of all races has become more difficult to achieve in recent years, but because Blacks are concentrated in the lowest income levels, this is a particularly critical problem for them.

Strategic planning consists of several structured group techniques that examine information relating to the environment, assessing the strengths of an organization, evaluating opportunities, and developing appropriate strategies. The strategic approach was modified so that the end result would be a set of housing policy recommendations. (To complete the strategic planning process, it will be necessary for the Urban League to develop an action plan to ensure the implementation of policy recommendations.)

A planning and review committee was selected, consisting of Urban League Board members Deanna Gaspard, John Ayres, and Dr. Negil McPherson; Urban League staff members George Dillard, Terry Rogers, and Aletha Gray; UNO Professor. B.J. Reed; and Debra Brockman from the Family Housing Advisory Services. The planning sessions were facilitated by Ray Clark and assisted by Robert Blair, both with the UNO Center for Public Affairs Research.

A broad, yet structured review of the information included in the report, known as an environmental scan, was conducted January 9, 1992. Following the redrafting and reorganizing of the information, key issues were identified on February 13, 1992, using a technique called SWOT (strengths/weaknesses/opportunities/threats) analysis. Following the summarizing of the key issues, there was a discussion of draft policy recommendations on February 27, 1992. The key housing issues and policy recommendations follow.

Key Housing Issues

A number of key housing issues were identified by those participating in the strategic planning process described above. Following is a summary of the issues, grouped in general topics:

1. The Nature and Condition of Housing Units

The study area has 45 percent of all boarded up housing units in the City of Omaha.

43 percent of all housing code violations (East of 72nd Street) are in the study area.

There is a larger number of single-family units in the study area when compared to the rest of Omaha. Conversely, there are fewer multifamily units in study area.

Within Census tracts located in the study area, there are substantial differences in the change in number of housing units.

The study area lost a significant number of housing units from 1970 to 1990.

2. Differences in Housing Rents and Values/Home Ownership

Black Omahans who rent are more likely than non-Blacks to live in single-family housing units.

There is no significant difference between value of housing and the rent charged to all Blacks in Omaha and those who live in the study area.

Over 50 percent of rent for Black Omahans is between \$200-\$400/month. Difference for Black and non-Black is not that significant in this range.

Housing value above \$50,000 is highly concentrated in ownership by non-Blacks.

Because of perceptions, many people will not live, invest, or start a business in North Omaha.

The loss of population in the study area has led to loss of housing stock. The economic and business vitality of the area is very difficult to maintain and does not appear to be a priority of community leaders.

Within Census tracts located in the study area, there are substantial differences in housing values, change in number of housing units, and population.

When tract 63 is excluded from in the study area, there would be even greater differences in housing values, housing units, and population compared to the rest of Omaha.

Policy Recommendations

The recommendations included in this study support the overall goal of a “good life” for all Nebraskans by the implementation of public policies that help provide decent and affordable shelter for everyone. In order to reach that goal, several broad recommendations need to be identified, and a series of specific actions need to be taken to implement the recommendations.

Recommendation Number 1. A Public-Private Partnership Is Needed to Broadly Address the Complex Housing Issues Facing Black Omahans.

Omaha’s political and business leaders, and organizations representing the people with housing needs, should form a public-private partnership to address housing issues. First, the Mayor and the City Council need to view affordable housing as a policy priority for the City of Omaha.

Next, the business community should come to view expenditures in decent, affordable housing as an investment in Omaha’s infrastructure that will help create a stable, productive work force and expand productivity.

And finally, existing community efforts advocating affordable housing should be broadened and expanded to include a coalition of people from communities of color, in particular, Blacks, Hispanics, Native Americans, Asians, and groups representing handicapped citizens, senior citizens, and single parents.

Action steps:

1. Create a community forum, consisting of representatives from the public and private sectors and citizen interest groups, to discuss housing issues affecting African Americans and devise policy responses to these issues.
2. Organize a committee of local bankers, representatives from other financial institutions, and other interested citizens to examine ways to increase the use of Community Reinvestment Act resources to meet housing needs of Black Omahans and people living in North Omaha.
3. Encourage the City of Omaha to take immediate steps to preserve and protect existing quality affordable housing stock in and contiguous to the study area.

4. Encourage that recommendations and data included in this study are considered in the preparation of the City of Omaha's Comprehensive Housing Affordability Strategy for 1992, and are included in the city's comprehensive planning process.
5. Promote public participation and citizen involvement in all planning efforts involving Black Omahans.

Recommendation Number 4. There Needs To Be a Recognition That the Inequity of Housing in Omaha Affects the Economic Development of the Entire Community.

Omaha leadership needs to recognize that affordable housing is a critical factor in the growth and development of our city. Members of business, government, churches, and the academic communities need to come together to devise creative strategies to allocate community resources. Specific housing needs must be recognized, including those of single mothers, the handicapped, senior citizens, and the homeless. Data also shows the need for multifamily, as opposed to single-family, to unite in the Black community.

While not a prerequisite to action, this study suggests further inquiry into several areas, whether by community activists, the business community, or government. There needs to be a clearer picture of the past allocation of CDBG funds. The development and implementation of the Nebraska and the Omaha CHAS needs to be monitored. Community activists need to continue to provide input into the budgetary priorities of the City of Omaha. Members of the business community need to research local sources of financing, find creative ways of raising dollars, and secure a reasonable return on investment. At the same time, all Omahans should be free from housing discrimination, and federal, state, and local civil rights legislation should be vigorously enforced.

Action steps:

1. Form a committee of the Omaha Area Chamber of Commerce to seek ways to increase private sector investment in North Omaha businesses, including a variety of incentives and support mechanisms.
2. Organize a committee of home builders, developers, realtors, and financial institutions to examine ways to increase home building in North Omaha by the private sector, including incentives and public finance support.
3. Support the enactment of an enterprise zone law in Nebraska that assists in the development of distressed areas in North Omaha.

