

# “Roadblock to the Middle Class”

## An Essay on the impact of Housing Insecurity in America

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### Part 1

A home is more than where a person resides. It’s where friendships are formed, memories are made, and families grow. Fights, laughter, dinners, late-night gaming sessions, everything happens in the place we call home. It’s where life is lived, in the broadest sense of the word. And as a result, it has a profound impact on the kind of life that an individual experiences.

I’ve lived in more houses and apartments than I can count. Just like jobs and relationships though, some have had a larger impact on me than others. The history of the housing I’ve lived in, and the access I’ve had to different housing, is the history of my existence. Who I am is a product of where I come from, and why I come from there.

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The early 1990’s is remembered as a violent time of gang conflict in the city of Hartford, especially in the south end.

Of course, housing does not simply determine where you live, or what kind of housing you live in. It also determines where you go to school- or in my case, where you can’t. The story of how housing segregation keeps people of color out of high-performing school districts is well documented. My experience was somewhat different though.

Our neighborhood school was R. J. Kinsella Elementary School. Long before it was known as a magnet school for the performing arts. Kinsella was simply another “failing”



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elementary school in the city. My parents decided that the legacy of housing segregation meant that I couldn't go there, not if I wanted an education that would prepare me for my future. They took the only choice they realistically had and entered me into Project Concern.

According to the [Cities, Suburbs and Schools Project at Trinity College](#), Project Concern was one of the first voluntary school desegregation programs in the United States. The program functioned by bussing Hartford students from “low-performing” schools in the city to “higher-performing” schools in the surrounding suburbs. The two major goals of the program were to diversify the overwhelmingly White suburban schools, and to provide Hartford students with a level of education they allegedly wouldn't receive in the neighborhood schools.

I was accepted into the program. Instead of walking 500 feet from my home and enduring Kinsella's dilapidated building and out of date textbooks, I would be bussed 15 miles away to Latimer Lane Elementary School in the Simsbury school district. My day started at 6:00 AM when I woke up to get dressed, eat breakfast and be driven across town in the morning traffic to the North End, where my bus stop was located on the corner of Blue Hills and Albany Avenues. There were a handful of other children there too. We were the “lucky” ones, the students who were being allowed to transcend our geographical boundaries and see how the other half lived and learned.

One of my strongest memories was the first time I visited the home of one of my Simsbury classmates. It stands out in my mind as a perfect day, with the sun beaming overhead in a crystal-clear sky. His home loomed in front of me as we approached. It was almost palatial, with a gleaming white fence surrounding the well-kept yard and multi-car garage. Inside, the ceiling soared above a living room which was almost as large as the entirety of the first floor of



my apartment back home. It was my first time being in a White person's house; I'd joined the Tiger Scouts, and our troop meetings were held at his house.

The median home price in Simsbury is \$367,419, by the way. That's nearly [three times the median price](#) of a home in Hartford.

I returned home to Van Block Avenue each night. Even if education was the great equalizer, it wouldn't equalize anything for years. My parents still worked in low wage jobs which made leaving our apartment complex impossible. In that regard, my parents were like so many other parents living in the city.



The American Dream is not simply the possession of a bunch of material goods which define success- a house, a car, a boat. It's the drive to build a better life for oneself and their family. It's why my parents put me on a bus to Simsbury every morning, so that someday I would have something better. After my parents divorced, my mother decided that someday would be today. We were done living in apartments and being carted around Greater Hartford for a shot at opportunity. No more just visiting houses. We were going to have our own. But the realities of money and racial housing segregation constrained the choices that she was able to make. Still, there was one place where it was at least possible to make the dream a reality. That place was Bloomfield.

Bloomfield is one of the main destinations for upwardly mobile Black people moving out of Hartford. While it may appear that it's simply the result of people choosing to live close to the city, Bloomfield's demographics are in fact the result of a past racist practice known as [blockbusting](#). As more Black families moved into Bloomfield, real estate agents convinced White families to move out of integrating neighborhoods, which they then turned around and



sold to other Black families. Ultimately, this created a pattern of segregation which is not seen in official statistics of the town's racial makeup. But at the street level, there are neighborhoods in Bloomfield that are completely Black, and those that are completely White. The segregation was especially prevalent in the town's high school, where white flight had hollowed out the demographic makeup of the town's families. Black families sent their children to the town's public schools while the white families either left or sent their children to nearby private schools like Northwest Catholic.

Our home was in one of the Black neighborhoods which was adjacent to Hartford. The home we eventually moved into was almost 90 years old. The light blue paint was cracking and chipping on the sides. The drywall was sagging and crumbled under the slightest touch. There was no shower, just a clawfoot tub that was older than my mother. The fuses constantly blew under the strain of our modern electronics. But it was a house, with a yard. The neighbors lived in houses with yards too. The street was quiet and safe. Despite its shortcomings, it was miles better than where we'd come from. It was available due to the generosity of our family. The house had belonged to one of my great aunts. When she passed, the house fell to her sister, who leased it to us on extremely generous terms.

After a year of living at that house, my mother had saved enough money to take the next step and buy a home herself. To say that we were excited would be an understatement. Our own home! We moved only a few hundred yards away, but it felt like our new home and the old one was worlds apart. It felt good to be out in the suburbs and lay claim to the trappings of middle-class life that come only with a house in a certain area.

But pretensions to those trappings is not the same as having them. Living in a house is not the same as owning it, or even being able to afford it. The same forces that plagued my



family and so many others- low pay, underemployment, poor benefits- were now compounded by the unforeseen costs of living in a house. The lawn had to be cared for. The snow shoveled. There was no landlord to rely on anymore, so we were on the hook for all the maintenance the new house needed. It bled heat in the winter and cool air in the summer, driving our energy costs through the roof. Compounding those challenges was the fact that living in a city made transportation easy, as the buses ran like clockwork. In the suburbs though, a car was a necessity, and became another persistent bill. This was my first experience with how much a house cost. It's so much more than just rent.

Ultimately, it proved to be too much. After two years of struggling to make ends meet, the bank repossessed the house, and we were out on the streets. What followed were years of bouncing between different apartments, houses and family members as we tried to get back on our feet.

I started my childhood in Connecticut in an apartment in Hartford and ended it in an apartment in Bloomfield. On some level, I suppose that's progress. But I promised myself that I would make more, do more when I was an adult and could make the critical decisions.

It's funny what you think when you don't know any better.

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In 2006, I met a woman I fell in love with, and we moved in together. College consumed most of our time, and a good deal of our money as well. The \$9 an hour I made at my part-time job at a gas station was nowhere near enough to pay for market rate rent. But my girlfriend had the golden ticket: she lived in subsidized housing.

Despite its reputation for being concentrated in urban centers like Hartford, subsidized housing is still relatively rare. If you've heard the stories of rent-controlled apartments in New



York City being passed down from parents to children, then you have a good idea of how subsidized apartments are treated here. It was a no-brainer that I would move in with my girlfriend and her mother, to hold on to that all-important apartment. We lived on Mansfield Street in Hartford, in an apartment building which had been built as part of the rush of housing needed for workers who were building the arsenal of democracy at Pratt & Whitney during the Second World War. The apartments showed their age. Many of the rooms lacked overhead lighting. There was one electrical outlet in most rooms, and no hookups at all for most many appliances, such as dishwashers and dryers. The main problem with the building was not the lack of 21st century amenities though. It was the lack of 21st century management.

Our building, and several throughout the North End of Hartford, was managed by [Housing Resource Corporation](#) (HRC). On its website, HRC states that it is “devoted to the success and longevity of the properties in its portfolio as well as the satisfaction of the tenants who call them home.” I did not see this commitment in practice. Our building was constantly in a state of disrepair. We dealt with panhandlers and addicts who stalked the halls because the lock on the front of the building was broken. Mice scurried throughout our apartment despite our persistent attempts to keep our space clean. The hallways were filthy, and the outside property was poorly kept.

On top of it all were the people who worked at HRC. Trying to speak to them was a thankless, insulting task. They spoke to me as if I was some dumb kid with nowhere to turn and no understanding of my rights- until I spoke back with the same attitude they gave me. But that didn't change the lack of respect they showed me. Instead, I moved up the ladder slightly, from “charity case” to “someone who was different.”



All their favor got me though was access to their trash talk about other tenants. Why couldn't they be more like me? Why did they fight and argue so much? Why did they have so many kids running around? I was under no illusion though that they weren't saying the same things about me when someone they liked more came through the doors of their office. That kind of disregard is how you end up with dirty, dangerous housing. It's rooted in presumptions of inferiority, dependence and laziness. It belittles the human beings that need a safe place to rest. My girlfriend and I were already making plans to start saving and scrape together enough money to get out of there.

And then I got her pregnant.

## **Part 2**

Being a parent is difficult to begin with. The prospect of raising a child on \$180 a week was terrifying. But mostly, I didn't want my son growing up in those apartments, where rat feces and mold poisoned the air. Where management looked down on him as less deserving. I wanted to give him space and dignity, the very basics that a child deserves. Those things cost money though, and that was something I didn't have.

With the impending arrival of our son, we could no longer live in the two-bedroom apartment with my soon-to-be mother-in-law. She graciously moved out, leaving the apartment



to us, and went into another with HRC. When we informed management that a child would be coming into the apartment, we received two cans of white paint to cover the walls of his bedroom. That was it. I promised that I would work hard, save, finish school and move my son out of that place before he was old enough to remember it. It was a promise I was unable to keep, although we did get out of that apartment a different way.

Two years passed. My girlfriend was now my wife. I'd finally finished my time in community college and had moved onto a four year school. I'd swapped my low wage gas station job for low wage work around the campus, working in offices and the mailroom at the student rate as a 24-year-old with a family to provide for. My son was walking and talking, and most importantly, remembering. I wonder if he remembers the night that we were all laying together in bed, sleeping peacefully.

“FIRE! FIIIRREE!!”

My neighbor's scream ripped through the apartment building. I snapped awake. My wife was awake now too, hurriedly grabbing jackets so that we wouldn't freeze in the winter's early evening. My son was still asleep, but he too awoke when I snatched him out of the bed. We ran as fast as we could, shuffling down the stairs with the rest of the tenants. The other families were just as shocked as we were, fear etched into their faces as we hurried out. I could see the smoke beginning to bellow out of my neighbor's apartment as we passed.

Everyone made it out of the building safely. We stood across the street as firefighters trudged into the building. HRC assured us that after the fire inspectors checked the building, we'd be allowed to return if it was safe. In the meantime, we went to stay with my mother in law, who lived a few streets away in another subsidized unit. We hoped it would only be a couple of days, but our apartment had been damaged by the fire. It was an electrical fire that had started in



the walls of the complex. It began in my downstairs' neighbor's closet, raced up into ours and all the way to the third floor. There was no way to return home. In an instant, we'd gone from living in bad housing to no housing.

As terrible as the experience was, I tried to look at it as a positive. We'd finally get out of Mansfield Street, hopefully into something safer and cleaner. But HRC applied the same level of care it showed at Mansfield Street to the rest of its properties as well. We moved into a new apartment on the corner of Vine and Edgewood streets and found the same old problems. Those weren't the only challenges my family was facing though. The stresses of being broke young parents with limited relationship experience and college work to complete had finally strained our marriage to the breaking point. My wife told me she wanted a divorce in September 2010, and by the following April I was moving again.

Unlike almost everyone else in the city of Hartford, I had an advantage in the housing search. I'd been grandfathered into subsidized housing thanks to my ex-wife, so I didn't have to apply or get on a waiting list. Despite the poor quality of the apartments, I knew I was extremely lucky. People all over Connecticut coveted the housing subsidy, as was shown a few years ago when even trying to apply for housing became [a dangerous affair](#). That's the maddening conundrum of poor housing. I resented it but was thankful at the same time because there were those who didn't even have the luxury of resentment.

My final HRC apartment was located on the corner of Main and Nelson streets. It stood in stark contrast to the recently rebuilt Nelton Court housing complex right across the street. Several of Hartford's housing complexes had been rebuilt over the preceding decade, including Dutch Point, my old stomping grounds as a child. It was a reminder of what I had told myself, that I would make better decisions as an adult and live in a better place than I grew up. But now



that place was better, and somehow, I'd ended up worse off. None of my attempts to get ahead seemed to work. I finished my bachelor's degree in 2013, after a decade of pursuing it. My income nearly tripled as a result, from just over \$12,000 to about \$32,000; but so did my rent. I was firmly stuck in the housing donut hole. Without some major increase in my income that far outstripped my decrease in benefits, it felt like I was moving on a treadmill that was slowly moving me backwards.

This isn't how it's supposed to work, right? You're supposed to work hard, sacrifice and follow the rules, and get to a better place. Yet nothing I tried seemed to work. My ex-wife thankfully made her escape from HRC. She moved in together with her boyfriend in Enfield, and our son was finally able to leave the dilapidated buildings that exacerbated his asthma and made him feel unsafe. He still returned to one on the weekends though, because I had failed to keep my promise to him. I hated living there. I hated that maintenance broke into my apartment and robbed me. I hated that I had to recertify my income every year, confirming that I was incapable of taking care of myself and my family. I hated that my neighbors, good people who only wanted the best for their families the same as me, were constantly belittled by the property manager when he visited. I hated that this system which was supposed to help us had instead trapped us in a dependency cycle, relying on people who seemed not to give a damn about us.

Again, I got lucky. I managed to escape HRC in 2018. It wasn't due to my Herculean effort or an amazing job that finally allowed me to pay rent and save at the same time. Instead, I was rescued by a friend who owned a house in East Hartford. In a moment of true serendipity, he called me just as my lease was expiring and I needed to recertify. I didn't think twice. I moved my stuff out and dropped off my key without a word to HRC. It was my middle finger to them



for years of poor treatment. Finally, my son would have a nice place to live. A backyard to play in. A house that wasn't making him sick, that didn't become a brick furnace in the summer.

As fortunate as I am and thankful to be in good housing, it's not lost on me that I'm receiving another, different kind of subsidy. My friend is in the Army. He earned this house with multiple tours of duty in Iraq. The GI Bill and his disability payments underwrite much of the costs here. In some ways, this is the same arrangement I've had before. Yet the difference in being treated well, in controlling my own space and feeling secure, can't be put into words. There are still people living in my old apartment building, my neighbors and friends, who are still trapped. Luck and access are the only difference between us, because I was with them for a long time. They deserve better too.



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