

# **The American Highway Tragedy:**

## **How Highways Destroyed our Cities**

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February 13, 2014

The story of Denver, CO and its suburb Aurora, CO is characteristic of what many American cities endured in the late 20th century. In 1960, Aurora, CO was 1/10 the population of Denver. In 1990, it was one half the population of Denver.<sup>1</sup> I-70 and I-25 passed through Aurora, stimulating growth through shopping malls, businesses, and housing.<sup>2</sup> Denver's downtown shopping district lost sales to the new suburban shopping centers. Inner city offices moved to the suburbs.<sup>3</sup> Public transit systems grew dilapidated and disused. Through the 20th century, the stature of Denver shrunk rapidly. This same story repeated itself many times, as suburbanization took the lives of many 20th century American cities. The growth of the automobile and the Interstate Highway system led to the decline of the American city in the 1960s and 1970s because of its social, economic, and geographic effects. It hurt many Americans by destroying their homes and neighborhoods. It put small businesses in American cities out of business. Finally, highways transformed the American map. It changed America into a land of suburbs and automobiles, of highways crisscrossing our forests and cities.

The desire for good roads started before the very first automobiles were manufactured. In the 1880s, bicycle manufacturers wished to popularize the bicycle as a mode of transportation and commuting. They began to lobby the government to improve the old dirt, gravel, and brick roads.<sup>4</sup> In the early 20th century, the advent of automobiles in America further increased the demand for better roads. Automobile manufacturers and their lobbying groups took control of the highway movement by “insinuating their economic interests into the fabric of American political and popular cultures, and into the state and federal legal codes.”<sup>5</sup> On January 15, 1953, Charles E. Wilson, Chief Executive Officer of

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<sup>1</sup> Owen D. Gutfreund, *Twentieth Century Sprawl: Highways and the Reshaping of the American Landscape* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 112.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 40.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 118.

<sup>4</sup> Gutfreund, *Twentieth Century Sprawl*, 9.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

General Motors, testified before the Senate Armed Services Committee. He was appointed Secretary of Defense by President Eisenhower. When a Senator suggested that it was conflict of interest, Wilson replied: “What was good for our country was good for General Motors and vice versa.”<sup>6</sup> Thus began the Interstate Highway Program and America’s great highway era. By the end of the century, tens of thousands of miles of interstate highway crisscrossed the nation, nearly enough to built two interstate highways around the world.<sup>7</sup> Of the interstate highways built by 1996, over a third was constructed within American city limits.<sup>8</sup> Interstate highways had taken over America.

.The growth of highways had many economic effects that hurt American cities. One effect was the movement of business from city to suburb. As suburbs became easily accessible by the highways, companies moved there for the lower taxes, cheap land, and faster commute times. By the mid-20th century, proximity to a highway was quoted as a factor for business success.<sup>9</sup> Companies saved thousands on transportation costs by relocating their business outside the city.<sup>10</sup> They could employ the educated affluent that lived in the suburbs, resulting in a stronger workforce. Industrial towns near Boston like Lawrence and Lowell thrived after the construction of nearby highways while others like New Bedford and Fall River lagged in success.<sup>11</sup> After the New York Thruway was constructed between New York City and Buffalo, the areas surrounding the highway attracted \$150 million in new investment.<sup>12</sup> By 1960, many new industrial plants were built in this area by companies such as General Electric, General Motors, Chrysler, Westinghouse, Sears-Roebuck, and Eastman-Kodak.<sup>13</sup> This surge

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<sup>6</sup> Gutfreund, *Twentieth Century Sprawl*, 7.

<sup>7</sup> Tom Lewis, *Divided Highways: Building the Interstate Highways, Transforming American Life* (New York, NY: Viking, 1997), ix.

<sup>8</sup> Tom Dunham, *Dayton in the 20th Century* (Bloomington, IN: AuthorHouse, 2005), 85.

<sup>9</sup> John B. Rae, *The Road and the Car in American Life*. (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1971), 128.

<sup>10</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> Rae, *The Road and the Car in American Life*, 126.

<sup>13</sup> *ibid.*

in business in suburban areas resulted in a relocation of wealth from the city to the outskirts. Therefore, cities lost valuable tax revenue from the corporations, crippling their infrastructure in the long run. The shift of business from city to suburb as a result of highways hurt city governments and residents.

Highways also hurt cities by putting downtown retailers out of business. The growth of highways resulted in the construction of new suburban malls and big-box outlets. In 1958, Cinderella City, the largest mall west of the Mississippi River at the time, opened in Englewood, CO, a suburb of Denver.<sup>14</sup> Many large retailers found homes in malls like these, occupying the acres of land now made easily accessible by highways. As land values and taxes were lower in the suburbs than in the city center, retailers could charge lower prices, undercutting the downtown businesses. In downtown Denver, many small, family-owned stores closed soon after Cinderella City opened.<sup>15</sup> Eventually, this destroyed most of Denver's "main street" businesses, leaving behind rows of boarded-up storefronts in a once thriving district.<sup>16</sup> Downtown retailers were hurt by the growth of suburban malls created by highway expansion.

Another economic effect of highway construction was the high maintenance costs. Highway cities and towns faced severe difficulty in the maintenance of the newly constructed highways. Before a highway's construction, the maintenance costs were not advertised to emphasize the low cost of the highway and to gain public support. Therefore, the majority of highway maintenance costs were left to the local and state governments, with the federal government only chipping in a small amount.<sup>17</sup> In 1949, congressional testimony of highway engineers in Vermont estimated over \$150 million (\$1.1 billion in 2000) on highway repairs. However, federal highway grants to Vermont were only \$1.5 million per year

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<sup>14</sup> Gutfreund, *Twentieth Century Sprawl*, 118.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Howard Brock, *Row of Commercial Buildings, Cripple Creek*, December 17, 1969, Denver Public Library, Denver, CO.

<sup>17</sup> Gutfreund, *Twentieth Century Sprawl*, 140-141.

from 1946 to 1950.<sup>18</sup> In addition, highway maintenance costs multiplied eight times from 1941 to 1949.

<sup>19</sup> American towns and states struggled to keep up with the expenses. They were federally mandated to pay for it, even if they did not use the highways. One such example is Middlebury, Vermont. In 1920, fewer than 100 residents had automobiles, but the state mandated the town to maintain its highways.<sup>20</sup> The state paid only 20% of the cost, while the rest came from Middlebury residents, the majority of whom did not own cars. The new highways led to congestion in the town center, robbing Middlebury residents of their town. Highway maintenance costs had a significant impact on American towns.

The growth of highways resulted in many social effects for the American city. An underlying social theme of the highway era was taking from the poor and giving to the rich. The highway system took advantage of the poor in a variety of ways while the rich reaped the benefits given to them by the new system. Therefore, the Interstate Highway System is an image of inequality, of “reverse redistribution”. The government essentially transferred money “from urbanized regions to rural regions, and from all taxpayers to those who drove automobiles.”<sup>21</sup>

The “reverse redistribution” through highway construction was implemented through the government’s use of eminent domain. Under the “Takings Clause” of the Fifth Amendment to the Constitution, the government could take private land for public use if “just compensation” was provided for the possessed land. Highway officials repeatedly used this as a weapon to support their cause. Tens of thousands of Americans were dispossessed of their land and saw their homes and neighborhoods destroyed.<sup>22</sup> Sometimes, the replacement cost for a house of comparable size or value was greater than

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid, 155.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid, 140-141.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid, 27.

<sup>22</sup> Lewis, *Divided Highways*, ix.

the market value which was paid by the government under eminent domain.<sup>23</sup> Since the government had to compensate the owners for their lost property, they obtained the cheapest possible land. It was much cheaper to put highways in lower income neighborhoods than in industrial or higher income areas.<sup>24</sup> The Boston Urban Planning Aid Group (UPA) found that of the nearly 5,000 housing units to be taken by the proposed Boston urban highway program, 50% had incomes of less than \$4800 (\$24,000 in 2000).<sup>25</sup> 43% of these families were financially eligible for public housing, but no future construction of such was proposed by the highway program.<sup>26</sup> The use of eminent domain in low income neighborhoods was also beneficial for government revenue. Since lower income families did not pay that much taxes, it prevented the loss of tax base from industries, companies, and higher income families. There were also many political motives for this. Officeholders wanted to retain support from their wealthy constituents and corporate donors. There would also be greater community opposition in high income neighborhoods. Since the rich are generally more powerful than the poor, the highway system favored them.<sup>27</sup>

Highways brought a wave of urban decay upon cities. As more people moved from the central cities to the suburbs, it led to an increase in slums, ghettos, and other unhealthy urban areas.<sup>28</sup> The cities were left with the poor while the suburbs had all the wealth. This “eviscerated the tax base, leaving the funding of older streets, schools, and civic amenities to the black and white poor.”<sup>29</sup> Houses, streets, and neighborhoods deteriorated as the maintenance of the inner cities was neglected. In New York

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 142.

<sup>24</sup> Alan Lupo, Frank C. Colcord, and Edmund P. Fowler, *Rites of Way; the Politics of Transportation in Boston and the U.S. City* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1971), 216.

<sup>25</sup> UPA, *People before Highways*, 255.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Lewis, *Divided Highways*, 124.

<sup>28</sup> Rae, *The Road and the Car in American Life.*, 216-217.

<sup>29</sup> Lewis, *Divided Highways*, 80.

City, the Gowanus Parkway stretched ninety-four feet wide across Third Avenue in Brooklyn. Notable journalist Robert Caro describes the highway: “It buried the avenue in shadow, and when [it] was completed, the avenue was cast forever into darkness and gloom, and its bustle and life were forever gone.”<sup>30</sup> The highway engulfed the neighborhood, swallowing it alive. Many businesses and homes were torn down by the highway’s construction. People stopped walking down Third Avenue and its side streets, alienating the already shrinking neighborhood. The traffic, noise, and pedestrian deaths led many to move out to the suburbs, turning Third Avenue into “a ghost town”.<sup>31</sup> Cathy Cadorine, a former resident of Third Avenue, described the fate of her neighborhood:

Drunks as well as whores roamed the avenue, cadging drinks until they fell asleep in doorways. Cheap saloons opened in some of the abandoned stores. Soon there were street gangs, fighting gangs, Irish and Puerto Rican teen-agers, seeping down from the notorious Red Hook section to continue their racial warfare and prey on passersbys... Rotting litter, rain-sodden mattresses and broken glass filled the sidewalks and gutters. Rats began to grow bold in the rubbish in vacant lots. There were even, to the horror of those residents who remained, drug addicts.<sup>32</sup>

This shows the extent to which neighborhoods decayed after the introduction of highways. The exodus leaving these neighborhoods resulted in an increase in crime and urban decay.

Highways were also unequal because of the inequality of service it provided. The affordability of an automobile was a serious detriment to its availability to the poor. In 1972, more than 50% of families with incomes less than \$4,000 had no cars.<sup>33</sup> The elderly, the youth, and many women could not drive cars or did not have access to them.<sup>34</sup> Since the poor and the rich paid the same taxes, they both contributed to the construction of highways.<sup>35</sup> However, only one side benefited from the construction of highways. The poor who did not use highways did not see any benefits from highway construction.

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<sup>30</sup> Robert A. Caro, *The Power Broker: Robert Moses and the Fall of New York* (New York: Vintage Books, 1975), 523.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Caro, *The Power Broker.*, 524.

<sup>33</sup> Ronald A. Buel, *Dead End: The Automobile in Mass Transportation* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1972), 9.

<sup>34</sup> UPA, *People before Highways*, report (Boston: Urban Planning Aid), 255.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid, 150.

The growth of highways impacted cities by their decimation of urban public transit systems. Before the ubiquity of the automobile, rail, walking, bicycling, and horse driven carriages were the only modes of transportation used by urban dwellers. After the automobile surged in popularity, usage of public transportation declined drastically. Less people considered walking anywhere, citing the “great, wide roads [that] obstruct our path.”<sup>36</sup> Blue collar workers who used to commute by train now grew in love with the increased mobility of the car.<sup>37</sup> Housebuilders also contributed by building new houses near highways instead of near railroad lines.<sup>38</sup> This ensured that only the car-owning wealth could settle in such neighborhoods. As workplaces moved further away from the city centers, they became inaccessible through public transportation. Therefore, job openings became restricted to those who owned cars, alienating the car-less poor.<sup>39</sup> Often, only the urban poor and minorities used the trains, while the rich commuted in their automobiles. The inner city lines were used frequently by the car-less poor while the suburban lines were used infrequently by the car-driving rich. Therefore, the revenue from the inner city lines used by the poor was used to subsidize the operation of the infrequently used suburban routes. In cities, trains were considered impediments to the path of cars. Denver city planners called for the removal of streetcar tracks from the roads in 1932 because they obstructed the path of automobiles.<sup>40</sup> In the era of car travel, mass transit became a “necessary, but inconvenient afterthought.”

<sup>41</sup> The growth of highways hurt the urban public transit that many low income residents relied upon.

The inequality created by the highway system is also evident in the racism it was founded on. Like the poor white, most African Americans and other minorities did not benefit from automobiles or

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<sup>36</sup> Lewis, *Divided Highways*, xiii.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 80.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>39</sup> Buel, *Dead End*, 151.

<sup>40</sup> Gutfreund, *Twentieth Century Sprawl*, 9.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*



highways. In 1972, 50% of African American families did not own cars.<sup>42</sup> Still, their taxes helped pay for the construction of highways, which were often constructed through their own neighborhoods.<sup>43</sup> Many argued that the engineers of these highways had deliberately taken homes of blacks, not considering other alternatives.<sup>44</sup> In Philadelphia, a proposal to connect the I-76 and I-95 highways would cut through a primarily Black neighborhood, disrupting the lives of many prosperous African Americans. Africans Americans saw it as “a wall intended to divide the blacks from whites.”<sup>45</sup> Many African Americans believed that the highways were used as an extension of the anti-black sentiment prevalent in the 1960s. They saw it as another form of segregation. In Washington D.C, highways through predominantly black neighborhoods were described by its residents as “a white man’s road through black men’s bedrooms.”<sup>46</sup> Highways were another way African Americans were victimized in the 1960s.

In addition to disrupting African American residential neighborhoods, highways also tore through African American businesses and colleges. In 1968, a proposed three mile stretch of I-40 through Nashville, TN would have disrupted 234 African American businesses with a gross annual volume of \$11.7 million. This area represented more than 80% of all the African American owned businesses in Nashville’s home county.<sup>47</sup> In addition, I-40 was carefully routed around white colleges like Vanderbilt, but isolated three African American institutions.<sup>48</sup> When I-40 was built, there were no exit ramps in Nashville’s inner city African American neighborhoods. All of the vital parts inside the

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<sup>42</sup> Buel, *Dead End*, 9.

<sup>43</sup> Lewis, *Divided Highways*, x.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 197.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>47</sup> Buel, *Dead End*, 80-81.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*

inner city were blocked off and isolated.<sup>49</sup> Therefore, the highway was only useful for white commuters who lived outside the city. Highways excluded African Americans from its benefits, casting a shadow over their neighborhoods.

Highways also contributed to the destruction of many inner city neighborhoods. When highways were constructed, engineers did not see the importance in neighborhood integrity, particularly in low income communities.<sup>50</sup> In the 1960s, there was a theory that razing low income neighborhoods was beneficial for the city. Engineers believed that low income neighborhoods were unstable. Therefore, they were logical locations for new highways, which “destroy the instability.”<sup>51</sup> “Slum clearance,” as it became known, was growing increasingly popular.<sup>52</sup> It was a way for politicians and highway officials to justify their actions to the public. However, the lives of those relocated by the highways worsened drastically. Charles Carpenter, a former Boston postal worker, asked of the imminent Central Artery overpass construction: “If they can depress a road in one area, why can’t they do it in another area?... Just because we’re a poor community... why should we suffer?”<sup>53</sup> Highway construction hurt low-income families by destroying their neighborhoods.

Those dislocated by the highway construction often faced challenging circumstances. As the government only compensated them for the minimum possible assessment of their land, it was almost impossible for them to find new homes.<sup>54</sup> The relocated were forced into poor public housing and sometimes became homeless. Even if residents were able to find a new house, it was unaffordable and limited. Families displaced by highways saw an average increase in rent.<sup>55</sup> Many endangered their lives

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<sup>49</sup> Nancy DeVille, "Nashville Rising: North Nashville," *The Tennessean*, March 30, 2013, accessed January 20, 2014.

<sup>50</sup> Lupo, Colcord, and Fowler, *Rites of Way*, 31.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 216.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 31.

<sup>54</sup> Buel, *Dead End*, 148.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*

by moving into structurally deficient buildings. This resulted in overcrowdedness, as many displaced families moved together, living in dirty, tight quarters. Relocation also had many serious psychological effects on its victims. Highway programs failed to offer adequate counseling for the displaced.<sup>56</sup> The poor, who were more likely to already be depressed, “were likely to suffer even more emotional distress when they were forcibly removed from their homes and from familiar neighborhoods.”<sup>57</sup> Even those who were living stable lives before the highway construction were troubled by the change in setting after they were relocated. Relocation was difficult for everyone. However, it was especially difficult for nonwhites. Many of these minorities lived in tight-knit communities in the inner city. After they were displaced by the highway, they resettled in different places, separate from one another. Many encountered racism in their new neighborhoods.<sup>58</sup> It was extremely difficult for them to assimilate and integrate within their new communities. Relocation “caused the rich to get richer and the poor get poorer, economically, socially, and psychologically.”<sup>59</sup> Highway construction in cities had very negative consequences for those relocated by it.

The geographic effects of the highway system have redrawn the American map. Town centers were replaced with highway exits surrounded by a cluster of town shops accessible only by automobile.<sup>60</sup> This new trend has been named “Rurbanism.” Rurbanism is a “fusion of rural and urban elements in American society.”<sup>61</sup> Because of highways, there was an increased fluidity between the urban and the rural. Areas were connected more easily by car, and there was no need to live within walking distance of a town square. Therefore, the entire structure of American neighborhoods changed as a result of

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<sup>56</sup> Buel, *Dead End*, 148.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>60</sup> Lewis, *Divided Highways*, xiii.

<sup>61</sup> Rae, *The Road and the Car in American Life.*, 166.

highways.

An effect of the rurbanism created by highways was the loss of seclusion in rural life. As highways cut through rural areas, they experienced a cultural urbanization, losing some of their distinct qualities. The quaintness and rusticity of rural America was replaced with “homogenous universality”.<sup>62</sup> All through America, small homesteads were ripped out and replaced with cookie-cutter suburban single family houses. In one sweep, the charm of living in rural America was lost. William Laird Levitt, a New York developer, created many “Levittown” suburbs. These were mass-produced suburbs, called “the most perfectly planned [communities] in America.”<sup>63</sup> Highways helped bolster the suburban real estate in the 1960s.

Rurbanism also supported the urban sprawl of many American cities. The new “suburban style” involved living in single family housing on the outskirts of town.<sup>64</sup> These areas had low traffic and were free from the chaos and confusion of the inner city. The land was cheap and plentiful. The government and banks offered low interest loans to those wishing to build or purchase a home. These incentives made it almost impossible for any well-off white family to move from the city. The car and highways also removed another impediment from these areas, ease of access. Highways allowed residents to easily commute into the central business districts.<sup>65</sup> However, the outskirts construction was not easily accessible by walking or public transit. These areas became exclusively auto-oriented.<sup>66</sup>

As more and more housing was constructed, more people settled into these suburban areas, changing the population map. In 1950, the population of Suffolk County (Boston, Chelsea, and Revere,

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<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

<sup>63</sup> Lewis, *Divided Highways*, 76-77.

<sup>64</sup> Gutfreund, *Twentieth Century Sprawl*, 186.

<sup>65</sup> Rae, *The Road and the Car in American Life.*, 212-213.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid., 187.

Massachusetts) was 896,615.<sup>67</sup> In 1960, after just ten years, the population dropped to 791,329.<sup>68</sup>

Over 100,000 people left Boston that decade. This shows the magnitude of the exodus that left Boston for the suburbs. Many cities followed suit, having increased population in areas surrounding the city than in the city proper.<sup>69</sup> Urban activists, fearful of this transformation, argued that cities would soon become ghost towns, as everyone would move to the suburbs.<sup>70</sup>

One of the greatest casualties of the automobile and the Highway System was the environment. As highways increased the popularity of the automobile, the emissions released added up quickly. Of the 200 million tons of pollutants spewed into the atmosphere in 1968, 50-90% were traceable to the automobile.<sup>71</sup> Highways also took land from our nation's forests and wildlife preservations. One mile of 4-lane highway takes up approximately 17.4 acres of land.<sup>72</sup> In Milton, MA, the proposed Southwest expressway would cut through Fowl Meadow, a refuge for wild birds.<sup>73</sup> The highway's construction was opposed by several environmental groups including The Audubon Society and the Sierra Club. Another problem with highways was that they provided easy access to areas that should not be as easily accessible. National Parks and wilderness refuges, once secluded areas, grew crowded and noisy from the automobiles that invaded it. A witness observed the situation present in many national parks:

It was very easy to get the impression that the American landscape was being overrun by a horde of ignorant and wantonly destructive savages, whose idea of enjoying the beauties of nature was to line the roads with empty beer cans, litter the beaches with refuse, throw rubbish into the geysers of Yellowstone, scrawl obscene remarks on rock formations and toss burning cigarettes into woodlands.<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> "FactFinder," *U.S. Census Bureau*, January 20, 2009, accessed January 21, 2014, <http://www.census.gov/population/cencounts/ma190090.txt>.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>69</sup> Rae, *The Road and the Car in American Life.*, 212-213.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, 216.

<sup>71</sup> UPA, *People before Highways*, 256.

<sup>72</sup> Buel, *Dead End*, 10.

<sup>73</sup> Lupo, Colcord, and Fowler, *Rites of Way*, 31.

<sup>74</sup> Rae, *The Road and the Car in American Life.*, 141.

As the above describes, the highways allowed Americans to destroy nature and take advantage of our beautiful landscape.

In addition to ruining spoiling the environment, highways had serious health effects on the residents of cities. Emissions resulting from increased highway usage hurt many living in urban areas. A linkage between air pollution and an increase in pulmonary and heart disease has been found in many cities.<sup>75</sup> Studies have also shown increases in emphysema, chronic bronchitis, asthma, and lung cancer in residents who live near highways.<sup>76</sup> Therefore, many urban areas were plagued with health problems. In Boston, I-93 over Somerville was “one of the meanest and most disagreeable portions of highway in America.”<sup>77</sup> In 1976, technicians from Bell Laboratory found the noise level inside Somerville homes near the highway to be at 68 decibels.<sup>78</sup> Most people cannot tolerate more than 45 decibels when trying to sleep. Repeated exposure to these levels of sound can cause chronic stress, tension, and high blood pressure. Before the highway was built, Somerville residents fought to have it made underground. Federal officials rebuked the argument, saying it would cost three times as much to build an underground highway. The *Somerville Journal* replied, saying that “the costs to the city, both short and long term... economics, health, safety, aesthetics... are infinitely greater.”<sup>79</sup> As shown in Somerville, the interstate highways had a dramatic effect on a city’s well being, leaving its infrastructure and people in shambles.

Highways also changed the American urban landscape. Many thought a properly planned urban freeway system could be an asset for the metropolitan area and the city.<sup>80</sup> In the 1960s and 1970s,

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<sup>75</sup> UPA, *People before Highways*, 256.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid., 234-237.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid.

<sup>79</sup> UPA, *People before Highways*, 235.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid., 329.

many clamored for highways to be built through cities and urban areas to increase their ease of access and reduce congestion on existing roads. In reality, these highways did the opposite. Although traffic on roads entering and leaving the city decreased, it increased congestion in already congested downtown areas.<sup>81</sup> This negative effect was justified by saying that it would increase business, efficiency, and industry in downtown areas. The pro-highway lobby argued that it would keep the downtown's health in good condition. As usual, the government lobbyists and car manufacturers were wrong. The construction of urban highways destroyed many historical areas and heritage sites. It ruined the city's peace with ugly overhead steel structures, creating artificial boundaries within communities. The urban highways ruined neighborhoods and livelihoods across American cities.

Many argue that highways have been a significant contribution to American society in the 20th century. It made travel much easier and greatly increased one's mobility. However, this mobility came with severe costs. In Boston, a proposed highway program would have had tremendous consequences. The program called for creating an Inner Belt, I-95 (not Route 128), I-93, South End Bypass, and a Route 2 extension into Cambridge.<sup>82</sup> These highways would have displaced more than 4,000 jobs in the Boston area, mostly working class jobs.<sup>83</sup> This shows the unfairness of the proposed highway construction as most of its victims were low income families who would lose their jobs. The proposed construction was also unfair for Boston residents. In 1968, when the highways were proposed, 48% of Boston households and 40% of Cambridge households did not own cars.<sup>84</sup> This figure was even higher in Boston's low income areas. It does not make sense to build highways if they only benefit the top half of the population, leaving the other half with no means of commute. Urban highways in Boston would

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<sup>81</sup> Rae, *The Road and the Car in American Life*, 315.

<sup>82</sup> Lupo, Colcord, and Fowler, *Rites of Way*, 26.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid.

have had a significant impact on the city's residents. This outweighs the ease of access that highways offered.

To conclude, America's system of highways and their social, economic, and geographic effects have contributed to the decline of our nation's cities. Once bustling hubs of activity, many cities have transformed into lifeless towns. Today, our society struggles to imagine an age when automobiles did not exist. We take the automobile for granted, riding leisurely on highways that displaced many. We have transformed the car into a requirement of today's American lifestyle. However, we fail to recognize the sheer number of people we have hurt through this. For the past century, people have suffered through our dependency on the automobile. As we look towards the future of our nation, we must change. We must lessen our dependency on the automobile in order to transform America into a sustainable society.