THE BROOKINGS INSTITUTION

Why Black Cities Matter?

November 3, 2017

CONTRIBUTORS:

Host:

FRED DEWS

MAKADA HENRY-NICKIE

David M. Rubenstein Fellow,

Governance Studies, Race, Prosperity, and Inclusion Initiative

ANDRE PERRY

David M. Rubenstein Fellow,

Metropolitan Policy Program

(MUSIC)

DEWS: Welcome to the Brookings Cafeteria, a podcast about ideas and the experts who have them. I'm Fred Dews.

Over nine million black Americans or the majority population and over a thousand cities and towns across the country. If black lives matter, then black cities matter too, says my guest on today's show.

Andre Perry is a David Rubenstein fellow in the Metropolitan Policy Program here at Brookings. His research focuses on race and structural inequality, community engagement, education, economic inclusion, and workforce development.

Stay tuned in this episode for a new coffee break where you'll meet Makada Henry-Nickie, another of our new David M. Rubenstein Fellows. You can get the latest show information by following the Brookings Podcast network on twitter @policypodcasts. And now on with the interview. Andre, Welcome back to the Brookings cafeteria.

PERRY: Thanks for having me.

DEWS: It's very nice to see you again. We're here to talk about your new research project which is about majority black cities. Why are you doing a research project on majority black cities?

PERRY: One because many of us live in minority black cities. I was fortunate enough to grow up in one, and I lived in New Orleans for 14 years prior to coming to Brookings. I state that black cities are generally treated like black people. So if we're really going to address the needs of individuals and cities we really have to examine how we treat both.

DEWS: In your piece on our Web site that introduces the research project that you've embarked upon you open with telling some of the story of Black Lives Matter. And you write in the piece “if black lives matter, then black cities matter too.” Can you explain why you make that connection?

PERRY: After Trayvon Martin was murdered, one of the lessons learned [was] that if we're going to improve any kind of system and or individuals we're going to have to make sure that they have a right to exist. So for cities as for individuals, if we're really going to seek improvement, if we're going to try to uplift the economic options for people, we're really going to have to assume that these places have a right to stand.

And so that's where I begin, not necessarily saying that we should keep black cities the way they are, or that we should not reform certain things, but we have to say that these places matter enough for us to invest in, for us to consider. And that for me is the crux of what I'm trying to do is to find assets, to look at things to build upon. But more importantly they say hey these places matter and they should exist and we can then move forward from there.

DEWS: I want to explore some of those forward looking aspects of the research with you in a moment. But first let's step back and look at some of the definitional issues. Obviously a majority black city is one where over 50 percent of the population…

PERRY: Well there's different ways you can explore majorities.

DEWS: Okay, walk me through it. What is a majority of black cities?

PERRY: Yeah, and I chose to go with the supermajority—50 percent as opposed to a plurality—because there are several, because I really wanted to look at things like public expenditure related to the concentration of blackness. And so how are economic, educational, housing, social outcomes when we have a high concentration of black people in the city. So I chose that type of majority as opposed to a plurality.

DEWS: And these are places that you've divided up into three, I guess, sizes?

PERRY: Yes.

DEWS: Less than 2,500, 2,500 population to just under 50,000, and 50,000 or larger. And I think you mentioned there's over 1,200 communities of these types that are majority black.

PERRY: People are often shocked when I say there are over 1,200 majority black places designated areas by the census. That's a lot. And there are 700—roughly 700—that are small meaning less than 2,500. So a lot of them are small rural places, but then there are about 500 or so that are medium size. And I think I'm going to do a lot of deep dives on those smaller to mid-size cities because we don't think of a Ferguson until something negative happens.

Brookings, we focus on the top 100 metros. That does include Detroit, Memphis, and Baltimore, the big cities. And certainly they all get attention from me, but I just think there are a lot of cities like Wilkinsburg, Pennsylvania where I'm from that are overlooked unless something goes wrong. But these places are significant in the sense of all the majority black places; 30 percent live in these small to mid-size cities. And so they host a significant portion of the black community. And so if we're going to help every American succeed we've got to examine what's happening in these cities.

DEWS: Now are these places concentrated geographically in certain areas of the country?

PERRY: Yes they're in the south, which makes sense, but they're along the coast and so you'll see really from Texas all the way up through Maryland and D.C. you'll see a steady stream of folks along the coastline. But also there are some in the Midwest, obviously the Great Migration had an impact, but mainly there in the south.

DEWS: So you're starting with this research project and research project starting with hypotheses. What are your starting hypotheses for embarking on this?

PERRY: I'm starting out with black cities are treated like black people. So I'm looking at how many resources are poured in to specific sectors, education, criminal justice, [and] housing. I start off with that premise because I just think that there's some connection to the concentration of people and how we've treated categories of people in the past because we know that red lining, environmental justice issues, and a number of race-based policies have impacted where people live. And that was predicated on how they were valued or not valued. And so I wanted to look to see if that extends to those

places, those perception, and certainly some of it does but I'm going to do a much deeper dive on that.

DEWS: You just mentioned two very specific public policy designs that you say historically have negatively influenced the outcomes for black Americans. And those are redlining and environmental justice. And you cite a third one in your blog post here which is displacement after disasters. Could you walk our listeners through each of those three policy design?

PERRY: Well you know during the 1930s FDR created loan policies to help folks get loans. And it's widely known that there were maps created, those that were colored red [and] those were color green. Those who lived in the green areas got loans. Those who lived in the red areas did not get loans. Guess who lived in the red areas, blacks and other ethnic groups. And so the inability to get loans impacted their ability to accumulate wealth to this day. And so yes, that contributed mightily to where we could live. So if you could not acquire a mortgage in a suburb, you were essentially forced to live in certain areas.

In terms of environmental justice, we know when municipalities and states are determining where to put companies that will dispose of waste or that will create pollution because of manufacturing. We know from the data that these places are more likely to exist next to a low income community or one that has people of color in it.

And then in terms of the displacement after the storm. One, because of redlining, because of the inability to purchase property in safer sections of the city, low income folks are essentially zoned in at-risk places. I lived in New Orleans for years. When Katrina hit and eventually homes were demolished and we had to sort of restructure how we did housing, the way we built up or develop places made it close to impossible for low income folks to resettle where they once could.

And so then folks will eventually move towards places where there are high concentrations of low income people. And this follows after most storms. And so until we figure out a way for developers to take on risks that would allow them to develop in

places for mixed income residents or for low income residents to reside, we're going to constantly have this problem.

Those three things really heightened where people live. And there's high concentrations of blacks because of a lot of those factors. But we're here, you know, we live in certain neighborhoods and there is a lot of good that have come out of living together.

One thing that we have to take note that folks in their defense against racism have developed certain skills. Everything from learning how to mobilize resources, maximize what is given, policy work, folks who live in these communities have developed a resilience. And that term is thrown around, but there is a resilience that if looked upon as an asset we should build upon. But we tend not to, we tend to look at people living in these areas as deficits, that they're handicapped in their ability to succeed, but in fact I'm starting with sort of the notion ‘Hey folks have been fighting these policies.’ And so there's some strength there that we probably need to acknowledge and see them as strength. So I'm hoping to find those assets, identify those assets and build upon them, so that when we create policy and we find ways to build up cities we can look to black cities as places for investment.

DEWS: Historically speaking, one thing I find fascinating but also kind of disheartening is you cited these three very specific public policy designs that are things that people have put into place that have effected disproportionately the African-American communities in this country beyond the problems that the 1960s civil rights laws address. I think a lot of people are like “oh wow there's these other factors that still come into play that effect especially the black community that Civil Rights Act and the Voting Rights Act didn't solve.”

PERRY: Well you know people don't like to see themselves as having privilege. But if you lived in the suburbs, got loans, acquired wealth, then you have privilege that will last much longer than any policy will. They made many of the redlining practice is illegal after 1968 but those privileges still exist, clearly. In terms of environmental justice, we know that if you live in certain parts of the city there is a privilege there and some of

that privilege can't be undone, some of the burdens certainly can be undone, if you live in Cancer Alley for instance you can't undo those things.

And so we just don't like to think of ourselves as having privilege. Or we'll say oh that was the past, that's no longer us. But we continue to live with privilege and that privilege oftentimes produces more privileges. A lot of the work here done at Brookings have found how social mobility essentially is stalled by those with the wealth, those with other privileges that would like to crowd out others from participating in that wealth. And so we can look upon these things at even a city level. That these smaller outlying cities, and boroughs, and areas outside of a larger city are oftentimes the places where you see sort of this intercity discrimination going on.

And so again, if so many people live in these places we really need to give them attention and make sure that we're not recreating some of the negative policies that were once explicitly done by race that we then move it to place. Because again we know that our race-based practices lead to majority black cities in some cases.

DEWS: let me stick with this question of the smaller places, not your Atlantis or your Detroit, but the smaller places on the outskirts or near larger urban areas and you address this question that some people ask "should black cities exist?"

And I think somebody might say "okay well Ferguson is a smaller community, maybe its city services, maybe its tax base, maybe its schools would be improved if it just merged with, I guess St. Louis is its larger city, just because there's…you know scale up and you get better services that size or something. How do you address people who say well some of these smaller places, maybe whether they're black majority or white majority, should just merge with their larger urban place?

PERRY: One, I want to dismiss this notion that I'm against cities changing. You know cities change, many of the government structures that were set up centuries ago are antiquated. No question. I just believe that you never come with a suitable solution if you really don't value the people in it.

So this stuff is really more about getting people to see that black people are worthy of investment. That when Amazon announces that they're going to open up a

second headquarters—hopefully one day a third, you never know—that that they consider the historical context of how places evolved and that they can see that these places have strengths to build upon, and that we can create a new place, but first and foremost we have to value those people.

So this is not about keeping things as is. It's about changing our perceptions of people and their work. Again, the Black Lives Matter slogan which turned into a movement is sort of predicated on this notion that black people matter. That you have to see us as worthy in order to actually get justice. The same thing is true for cities. If you don't see people as having value then we're annexing them and we're probably still going to do the same thing to them in the larger city.

And in fact that's happening all over. Cities are getting bigger, but there's still massive inequality. The goal of annexation should be to become more efficient, to have greater opportunities for everyone, but if we don't value people will just ghettoized people the way we've always done. So again this is not about saying that black cities should stay the same and we should find ways to invest in black cities as is. No, we should find ways to value people, and if there are areas we can improve upon, improve upon those areas by first valuing the people.

DEWS: In the course of your research, do you need to necessarily do any comparing between majority black cities and cities that aren't majority black?

PERRY: No I actually want to avoid this comparing black cities to white cities because that sets up this deficit model that we typically apply. You know when I was going through graduate school, one of the first things we did — and I went to a school social work and I went to a school of education — one of the lessons of the statistics you learn is start measuring student outcomes and we always started off with a comparison against white men. And that was problematic in itself. And so what I learned from that is that if you really want to seek improvement you seek improvement in the context in those terms.

So we're looking at black cities not compared to white cities. And because, you know, what is a black city changes over time, what is the white city changes over time. It

is more important for me to understand what are the dynamics going on currently and how can we build upon the strengths of places with a high concentrations of black folk to maximize economies and regions and then states.

DEWS: In the course of your research will you be looking at the composition of the civic and business leadership of the majority black cities? For example, are those people who lead these cities also themselves African-American or otherwise? And is that an important function?

PERRY: Oh absolutely that's an important function because what we saw after Ferguson was the disparities between police forces and those who are incarcerated in terms of the racial compositions. Yes, leadership matters. And the race of those leaders matters because we know that race influences worldview.

And so, I'll be examining those dynamics. This is also important for me because I grew up in Wilkinsburg, Pennsylvania and this is part of a larger national conversation that's going on right now. Should Wilkinsburg in a ring borough of Pittsburgh exist? Which is the same conversation that's going on with East Cleveland and Cleveland.

But when you grow up in a majority black place you never think of yourself as the minority, you might sense discrimination, but you feel this sense of I have ownership, I have autonomy in what should happen to my city, my town, and my family. And that's something that we should value and it's not something we should take for granted. That there are places that there's a sense that I can actually impact myself, my family, and my community, and that's a strength that we should not want to dissolve. And so I want to examine leadership on those terms as well. What does it mean to run a city or town that looks like you?

DEWS: Looking ahead Andre, can you describe some of the research products that you expect that you'll be working on in the coming months?

PERRY: Yeah, you know there will be the typical analysis but eventually I want to go into communities, give them sort of a mirror [on] who they are, what their strengths are, what their weaknesses are. But I want them to complete the document that I produce. I want them to give policy recommendations that we can then trumpet here at

Brookings, to say hey this community went like so-and-so how can we make that happen. Because I'm very aware that Brookings influences particularly on federal policy. But I'm also aware that one of our blind spots is that we tend not to absorb local voice.

Certainly we listened to chambers of commerce and economic development organizations and up, no question about it. I want to also work with those groups. I want to get recommendations from folks impacted by the data, and that are reflected in the data. And so I hope to take whatever index that we create, take it to a community and say “Okay, what we can do with this? How can we improve upon the strengths of the city?”

I hope that we can find ways to work with national, state, local stakeholders to actually invest in places like Wilkinsburg and East Cleveland. Not to say that these places have to stay the same, but to say hey we can improve upon the life chances of millions of people across the country with products that are catered to their needs and really catered to the region's needs.

DEWS: Well I certainly look forward to continuing to follow you in this research journey and having you back on this program to talk about what you're finding, and I'm sure that we will see much of it on the Brookings website. Andre, I want to thank you for sharing your time and your expertise today.

PERRY: You’re welcome.

DEWS: And now meet Makada Henry-Nickie, one of our new David M. Rubenstein fellows.

HENRY-NICKIE: My name is Makada Henry-Nickie, I am a David Rubenstein fellow here at Brookings in the Governance Studies program.

I grew up in a couple of different places. I was born Makada Henry-Nickie on the sunny island of Trinidad and Tobago, and my seven siblings and I were raised by a single mother who worked hard as a self-employed woman to put a roof over our heads, food on the table, and help us to overcome some significant challenges.

When I was about 16 I sort of had a lucky strike. I was offered the opportunity to move here to the U.S. and so I moved to New Jersey. I spent two years working as a caregiver and a domestic helper in exchange for my community college tuition.

I think that's where I learned to grow up, which is why I describe myself as growing up in a couple of different places. Most of my young life was characterized by poor circumstances, those are the sorts of experiences I draw on to help inform my personal and professional choices as well as the kinds of lessons I pass on to my children about hope and hard work.

At Hunter College, at the City University of New York, the Andrew Mellon Fellowship Foundation provided me with my start. They have a unique, wonderful program that is committed to boosting minority representation in the ranks of higher education and that's how I got my start to scholarship. I feel that their investment really created for me opportunity, real meaningful opportunity, and I used that opportunity, that window, to springboard myself far beyond the circumstances into which I was born.

I was inspired by the impact that transformative opportunity had on my life. It's that inspiration that continued to sort of direct me towards scholarship; because as a scholar I feel that–particularly here at Brookings—my work can raise awareness for or just draw attention to issues and questions that I think are most relevant to poverty and economic inequality.

I think that the most important issue or challenge that we're facing today is inequitable access to opportunity. When I say inequitable access to opportunity, what I'm referring to is a combination of job quality, neighborhood quality, school quality, and child care quality that I think collectively determine the different kinds of opportunities that children and emerging young adults have access to.

My neighborhood, for example, is a gentrifying one. One street divides us into two different worlds. The kids on my side have deep social networks and deep capital networks to draw upon. But, on the other side of the street—I pass there daily—hundreds of families are steeped in poverty, [and] are neatly contained in this big thick metal fence.

One street and one fence decides two different futures for children who on the outside look very similar. Those are the sort of differences or inequities that worry me. And so for those reasons, I think that inequitable access to opportunity is really a threat to our future security and social cohesion.

I'm excited to join Dr. Camille Busette to stand up Brookings's new Race, Prosperity, and Inclusion Initiative. Camille and I are both very committed to reframing this narrative around struggling families in poverty.

I think very few people will argue with me when I say in this country when we talk about poverty certain images and words predominate that discussion: lazy, unambitious, unwilling to work, and black. My work intends to disrupt this narrative by offering data driven analyses to show the exact opposite.

The recent Federal Reserve Report on Economic Well-Being shows that 73 million people are struggling to get by, or just making it. It's hard for me to believe that 73 million people are all lazy. I'm certain that they are creative, that they work hard to sustain themselves and to create opportunities. So, I would prefer to focus on measuring social networks, social capital, informal work participation, and nonlinear trajectories in addition to income. I think taking that approach will help us to better understand and learn about the kinds of coping strategies that struggling families use…to help sustain themselves, so that we can craft policy solutions around these strategies and amplify them.

I also think that neighborhood context matters. So some of my work will also focus on place-based policies such as credit rationing through redlining. I think access to credit is a very important part of the economic opportunity story.

I'd like to recommend two books. The first book would be "Place, not Race" by Sheryll Cashin. I think that Cashin's thesis on place-based policies offers us some important considerations that we need to take a step back and really take a hard look at. Her idea that place-based policies have the potential to serve a broader constituent of disadvantaged people. I'm really attracted and intrigued by her boldness to suggest—[and I'm sure she's taking a lot of heat for this] that race-based policies are probably too

restrictive, too under inclusive to really address the kinds of economic and equities that have [us] stuck.

The second book—I'm still impacted by it— is "Evicted" by Matthew Desmond. His graphic illustration of housing instability across different family demographics I think offers, anecdotal, but compelling evidence to support Cashin's thesis that place-based policies probably offer us some more options to deal with the kind of multi-racial economic disadvantage that we're seeing today.

DEWS: Hey listeners, want to ask an expert a question? You can by sending an email to me at BCP@Brookings.edu. If you attach an audio file I'll play it on the air and I'll get an expert to answer and include it in an upcoming episode. Thanks to all of you who have sent in questions already.

And that does it for this edition of The Brookings Cafeteria brought to you by The Brookings Podcast Network. Follow us on Twitter @policypodcasts. My thanks to audio engineer and producer Gaston Reboredo with assistance from Mark Hoelscher.

Thanks to Brennan Hoban and Chris McKenna for production assistance. Bill Finan does the book interviews. Our interns or Pamela Berman and Julian Chung. Design and web support comes from Jessica Pavone, Eric Abalahin, and Rebecca Viser. And finally, thanks to David Nassar for his support.

You can subscribe to the Brookings Cafeteria on Apple podcasts or wherever you get podcasts, and listen to it in all the usual places. Visit us online at Brookings.edu. Until next time, I'm Fred Dews.