

The Impact of Urban Renewal on Black Intergenerational Economic Opportunity and Income Outcomes in Asheville

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Abstract

The legacy of government supported urban renewal programs carried out throughout the mid 1900s into the 2000s has been overwhelmingly negative towards the black communities the programs often targeted. These efforts have been associated with the uprooting of communities, mass relocations, and great loss of black wealth. However, little research has been done regarding the potential impacts of urban renewal on intergenerational economic outcomes. Asheville's black communities serve as a prominent example of the plethora of negative consequences derived from urban renewal, and it is plausible to assume intergenerational mobility could be another. Looking at the Montford, East Riverside, and East End urban renewal programs carried out in Asheville, this paper attempts to answer the following research question: In the Asheville area, what is the impact of urban renewal on intergenerational economic opportunity and income outcomes for blacks, and how do areas directly affected by urban renewal compare with other census tracts within Buncombe county as a whole? This analysis utilizes both descriptive statistics and econometric analysis, drawing from the Opportunity Atlas dataset. This dataset provides a detailed, census tract by tract report of children's household income outcomes, at the age of 35 based on the area they grew up. For this analysis, a binary variable was created denoting whether or not a tract in Buncombe county was affected by urban renewal or not, with the intent of examining if growing up in an affected tract has a significant impact on black intergenerational economic outcomes. The analysis suggests that growing up in an area affected by urban renewal in Buncombe County does have a significant impact on intergenerational income outcomes for blacks born into families with higher percentiles of parental income, while being insignificant for those who were born into the 25th percentile of parental income.

1. Introduction

Recent progressions towards reparations in Asheville have sparked much discussion regarding the history and legacy of the black community, with the effects of urban renewal on the black community at the forefront. Between 1965 and the late 90's, the city of Asheville conducted several large scale urban renewal projects including the Montford, East Riverside, and East End projects, resulting in the upheaval of three of Asheville's most notable black communities. These neighborhoods included the Stumptown and Cherry/Hill St. communities (Montford), the Southside community (East Riverside), and The Block (East End/Valley St.) communities¹. While there is consensus that these projects disproportionately negatively affected the black population in Asheville and reparative policy needs to be enacted, the city of Asheville seems unsure of how best to address this issue^{1,2}. For this reason, it is essential that policymakers both understand the economic reality for black residents in affected areas and realize the economic impacts of urban renewal may span generations.

To potentially aid this endeavor, the following research question applies: In the Asheville area, what is the impact of urban renewal on intergenerational economic opportunity and income outcomes for blacks, and how do areas directly affected by urban renewal compare with other census tracts within Buncombe county as a whole?

Intergenerational outcomes refer to the economic position of individuals or households in comparison to their parents, considering the specific characteristics of their childhood. This study will attempt to localize and focus the previous influential research on intergenerational economic outcomes from Chetty et al. as well as Bhattacharya and Mazumder to potentially provide useful information to the city of Asheville in their efforts to right communities hurt by urban renewal projects^{3,4}. Such research could go hand in hand with UNC Asheville's current efforts to uncover the amount of black wealth lost during urban renewal, as the analysis sample encapsulates individuals who grew up during or soon after urban renewal projects took place in their neighborhoods and attacks a different economic angle which is more rarely analyzed through utilizing Raj Chetty's Opportunity Atlas dataset⁵. With a comprehensive analysis of intergenerational outcomes for black residents in both areas affected by and not affected by urban renewal, this analysis hopes to better inform the city of Asheville and provide statistical visualizations of income outcomes in affected areas to supplement ongoing research surrounding urban renewal.

2. Theory Review

Although urban renewal may not have been implemented with malintention, the phenomenon has since been associated with disproportionately poor outcomes for African American populations across the country. Government funded and planned urban renewal efforts began in the United States in the 1940s, with an aim to revitalize and rebuild seemingly blighted urban areas, and efforts have continued into the 2000s⁶. As explained by Mindy Fullilove, "Urban renewal, especially at the outset, was a program designed to clear large areas of 'slum' housing to make way for modern developments. In general, the cleared land was sold to private developers for use in new developments"⁷. While it can be argued urban renewal projects have seen beneficial outcomes in restimulating underutilized areas near central business districts, a program that inherently requires the relocation of residents and vast community upheaval is certain to have substantial implications for those in targeted locations⁶. African American neighborhoods were by far the most prominently targeted areas by these urban renewal projects, often forcing these communities into public housing and simply shifting poverty areas from one location to another while destroying close-knit communities and further segregating housing⁷. Such relocation efforts also came with a severe loss of black wealth, in the form of businesses and owned properties; for example, these losses are documented in areas like Charlottesville, VA, San Francisco, CA, Portland, OR, and Baltimore, MD^{8,9,10,11}. Although these works often lack statistical valuations of black wealth lost, most likely due to the sparse nature of official government records detailing urban renewal proceedings virtually everywhere it was enacted, the studies still highlight damages to black wealth and overall communities quite effectively.

Coupled together, both a loss of black wealth as well as the destruction of social networks and community bonds have proven impactful in a plethora of affected urban areas, the same being true for Asheville. According to The City of Asheville, urban renewal efforts in the Montford, East End, and East Riverside areas have uprooted hundreds of black owned properties and businesses, and relocated thousands of residents². It is even possible that such an uprooting could have had an even greater impact in the city of Asheville in comparison to other urban renewal sites; according to Tighe and Opelt, Asheville was, "a smaller city with a small black population that saw itself as a distinct community with business owners, strong community associations, and a sense of place within the broader city"¹. Additionally, Asheville's black population was extremely centralized within the three aforementioned neighborhoods, meaning the majority of the black population was affected¹. Similar to other cities, public housing was implemented both before and alongside urban renewal efforts, with apartment style housing projects like Lee Walker Heights, Hillcrest, Ashton Park Towers, Klondyke, and Livingston Street all utilized to accommodate relocated residents¹². Putting Asheville's urban renewal process in context, the East Riverside project was the first and longest, roughly spanning the early 1960s into the 1980s. The East End project began in the early 1980s, followed by the Montford project in the late 80s¹³.

Considering the urban renewal timeline in Asheville, it is plausible to consider the program's effects on current intergenerational mobility. While accounts of urban renewal are limited as previously mentioned, the reported dilution of black wealth and unquantifiable damage to strong black communities could likely result in poorer outcomes for future generations who grew up during an urban renewal program or had family impacted years prior. It is also plausible this effect could be greater for black individuals born into wealthy or high earning families, as these families would have been likely to have built previous wealth through homeownership, property, or businesses located in affected neighborhoods.

3. Literature Review

The Raj Chetty et al. 2020 study *Race and Economic Opportunity in the United States: an Intergenerational Perspective* serves as a baseline for this analysis, alongside similar research regarding racial economic opportunity and mobility disparities from Bhattacharya and Mazumder, Margo, Andrews et al., and Ruth et al.^{3,4,14,15,16}. While each utilizes differing methods to analyze racial disparities, several clear takeaways are present in their studies. Primarily, the studies indicate that the black-white income and mobility gaps are large, and showcase the discrepancies in economic outcomes between the white and black populations. As concepts, economic mobility compares the relative economic position of an individual to the income quintile they were born into, while analyzing income outcomes compares intergenerational income averages between current groups. Margo notes that the black-white income gap has persisted since slavery ended, and is closing at a snail like pace¹⁴. In terms of intergenerational mobility, black individuals on average have far worse income outcomes than white individuals at every percentile of parental income, and are far less likely to outperform their parents^{3,4}. Shockingly, even when born into the top quintile of income, African Americans are more likely to fall to the bottom quintile of income than remain in the same percentile they were born into³. This trend of negative income mobility for blacks is consistent across the top income percentiles, including the 50th, 75th, and 100th percentiles of income.

Although the literature regarding economic mobility is limited due to the recency of studies and a noted lack of interest in comparing intergenerational income mobility between races, the introduction of the Opportunity Atlas allows for further, more focused research on this topic⁴. The 2017 study from Ruth et al. provided an example of a more focused analysis of economic opportunity to draw from, analyzing youth opportunity in the state of Connecticut¹⁶. Although not intergenerational, the study is concerned with determining the key predictors of youth success and how access to those predictors are divided by demographic to potentially inform policy making, specifically looking at how neighborhood characteristics influence outcomes. While this work serves as an example of a more localized study to draw from, there has not been any significant concentrated studies utilizing the Opportunity Atlas dataset with the history of an area in mind, nor has there been any significant research analyzing intergenerational economic mobility in relation to areas affected by urban renewal as a whole.

4. Methods

The dataset utilized in this project is the Opportunity Atlas, retrieved from Opportunityatlas.org⁵. This dataset provides a detailed, census tract by census tract report of children's household income outcomes, at the age of 35 based on the area they grew up¹⁷. The dataset draws from US Census data and the American Communities Survey (ACS) to provide detailed information regarding an individual's economic status and upbringing characteristics, focusing on the 1978-1983 birth cohort. In total, over 96% of the aforementioned cohort is present in the analysis sample¹⁷. The dataset allows a user to control for a myriad of variables, such as parental income percentile, socioeconomic characteristics, race, and neighborhood characteristics, allowing a researcher to uncover the key predictors of economic outcomes and mobility for a particular area¹⁷.

For this particular study, the census tracts of focus encapsulate the three black neighborhoods in Asheville affected by urban renewal, as well as Buncombe county as a whole to determine the differences in black income and mobility for the 25th and 75th parental income percentiles in these areas. The analysis is both econometrics based and concerned with presenting descriptive statistics for these areas in order to provide clear economic context within each urban renewal affected tract, utilizing methodology similar to Chetty et al.³. In doing so, clear visualizations of the current average income statistics for each cohort in each area are provided (Figures 1-5), alongside an econometric analysis concerned with determining how current average income is impacted by being born into or not being born into an urban renewal tract within Buncombe county. The applicable regression equation is as follows:

$$Y = B0 + B1 (\text{Parental Income Percentile}) + B2 (\text{Urban Renewal Tract}) \quad (1)$$

In the regression equation (1), Y represents the current average income (specified by racial group), B1 specifies and controls for the parental income level of the group in question (25th and 75th percentiles), and B2 represents a binary variable in which each tract in Buncombe county will receive either a 0 or 1 to indicate whether or not a tract was affected by urban renewal (0= Not Affected, 1= Affected). Such a regression provides a means of determining whether or not being born into a Buncombe county tract which had previously undergone or was going through urban renewal had a statistically significant effect on the current average income for the group in question, parental income percentile held constant. Considering the noted impacts of urban renewal, it could be expected that being born into an urban renewal tract would have a negative correlation black average income outcomes, with more prominent impacts for those born into the higher 75th percentile of income.

It is important to note that the Opportunity Atlas presents tract data based on individuals who were born and grew up in a particular area, not solely a sample of individuals who lived in that specific area at the time of data collection¹⁷. The dataset also details the percentage of adults within the sample who remained in the tract or remained in the same commuting zone they were born in, which are provided alongside each average income statistic to reference. While this factor could be detrimental towards other econometric based studies utilizing the Opportunity Atlas, it is far more negligible given an understanding of the timeline of urban renewal in Asheville. Individuals in the 1978-1983 birth cohort born in the Montford, East End, or East Riverside tracts would have almost certainly grown up in communities or within families impacted by urban renewal and/or directly personally impacted in some form during their childhood. Even if a portion of the individuals within the sample did not remain members of these communities as of the time of data collection, the fact these individuals were born into and grew up during an era of ongoing urban renewal programs is most essential, regardless of their current whereabouts. With these timelines in mind, an intergenerational economic analysis in Buncombe county tracts within the parameters of the Opportunity Atlas remains valuable and relevant.

5. Data and Results

The four tracts in question are tract 37021000300 (Upper Montford), tract 37021000200 (Lower Montford), tract 37021000700 (East End/Valley St.), and tract 37021000900 (East Riverside). These tracts represent the areas affected by urban renewal projects in Asheville, three of which directly correspond with urban renewal zoning maps. Although the upper Montford tract was not directly zoned in the same fashion, it was included as an affected tract both due to upper Montford containing the large project housing development Klondyke, a noted relocation site, as well as its proximity to Lower Montford and the Stumptown/Cherry St./Hill St. project. Each of these selected tracts were identified in relation to other tracts in Buncombe county utilizing the created binary variable “UrbRenew”. The selected tracts were coded 0, while other unaffected tracts were coded 1. The title “UrbRenew” appears in the regression results as the nomenclature for the B2 (Urban Renewal Tract) variable in the regression equation (1).

Figures 1-5 portray descriptive statistics for each area in question, including the four aforementioned census tracts most impacted by urban renewal as well as Buncombe County as a whole. The statistics are delineated by race, with the intention of highlighting racial (black-white) opportunity gaps especially in the census tracts impacted by urban renewal. Although these disparities are to be expected and not the primary focus of this study, displaying racial intergenerational income gaps is still valuable in a larger context. In addition to current average annual household income outcomes, other useful descriptive statistics are provided for each census tract and Buncombe County as a whole. Outcomes for the 25th, 50th, 75th, and all percentiles of parental income are included for each area. Additional statistics provided include the % of the sample which remained in the same commuting zone they were born into, the current average income of only those who remained in the same commuting zone, and the % of households currently in the top 20% of income earners. The key takeaways from Figures 1-7 are presented in the following discussion section.

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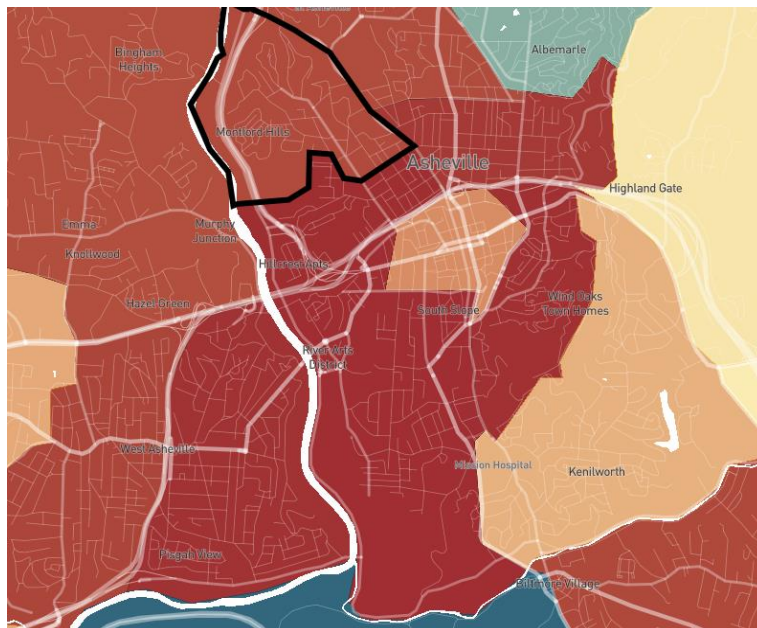
25th Percentile	50th Percentile	75th Percentile	All Percentiles	% Remaining in Commuting Zone at age 35	Households remaining in commuting zone at age 35: Current Income	% of households in the top 20% of income earners
\$21,000	\$24,000	\$26,000	\$21,000	61%	\$17,000	3.9%

White:

25th Percentile	50th Percentile	75th Percentile	All Percentiles	% Remaining in Commuting Zone at age 35	Households remaining in commuting zone at age 35: Current Income	% of households in the top 20% of income earners
\$35,000	\$41,000	\$48,000	\$44,000	56%	\$32,000	24%

Figure 1. Upper Montford, Tract 37021000300: Average Household Income at Age 35 by Parental income Percentage, Descriptive statistics, and Reference Map of Area-

Reference Map of Area



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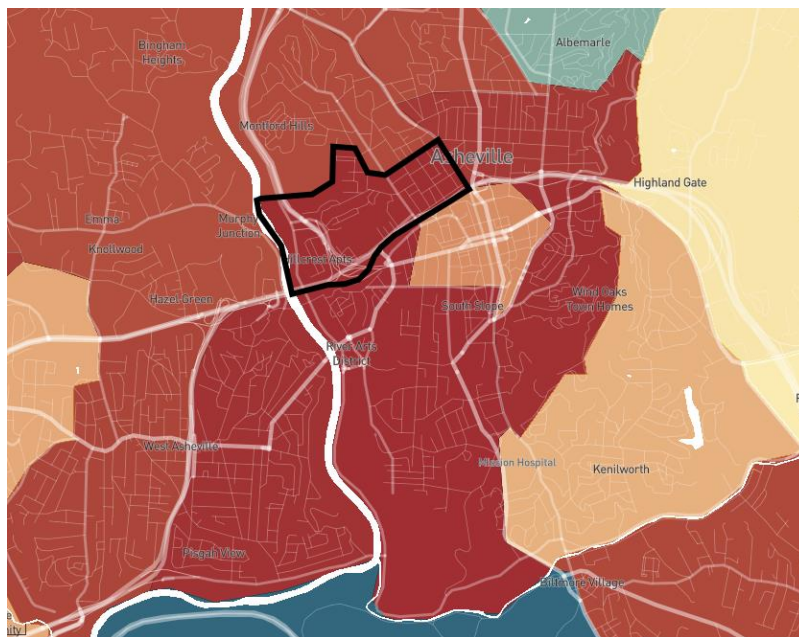
25th Percentile	50th Percentile	75th Percentile	All Percentiles	% Remaining in Commuting Zone at age 35	Households remaining in commuting zone at age 35: Current Income	% of households in the top 20% of income earners
\$18,000	\$16,000	\$14,000	\$19,000	64%	\$18,000	<1%

White:

25th Percentile	50th Percentile	75th Percentile	All Percentiles	% Remaining in Commuting Zone at age 35	Households remaining in commuting zone at age 35: Current Income	% of households in the top 20% of income earners
\$35,000	\$43,000	\$52,000	\$38,000	59%	\$33,000	10%

Figure 2. Lower Montford, Tract 37021000200: Average Household Income at Age 35 by Parental Income Percentage, Descriptive Statistics, and Reference Map of Area-

Reference Map of Area:



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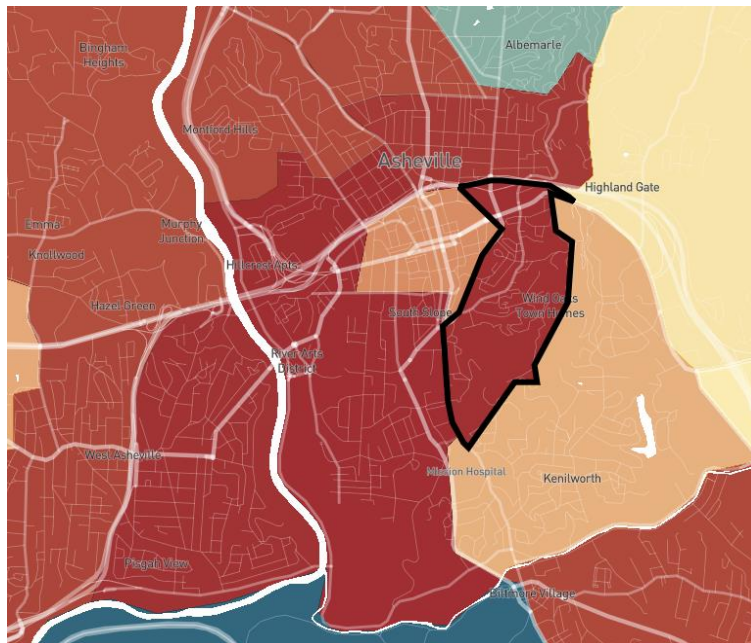
25th Percentile	50th Percentile	75th Percentile	All Percentiles	% Remaining in Commuting Zone at age 35	Households remaining in commuting zone at age 35: Current Income	% of households in the top 20% of income earners
\$20,000	\$24,000	\$29,000	\$21,000	78%	\$17,000	3.2%

White:

25th Percentile	50th Percentile	75th Percentile	All Percentiles	% Remaining in Commuting Zone at age 35	Households remaining in commuting zone at age 35: Current Income	% of households in the top 20% of income earners
\$30,000	\$38,000	\$46,000	\$37,000	46%	\$29,000	21%

Figure 3. East End/Valley St, Tract 37021000700: Average Household Income at Age 35 by Parental Income Percentage, Descriptive Statistics, and Reference Map of Area-

Reference Map of Area:



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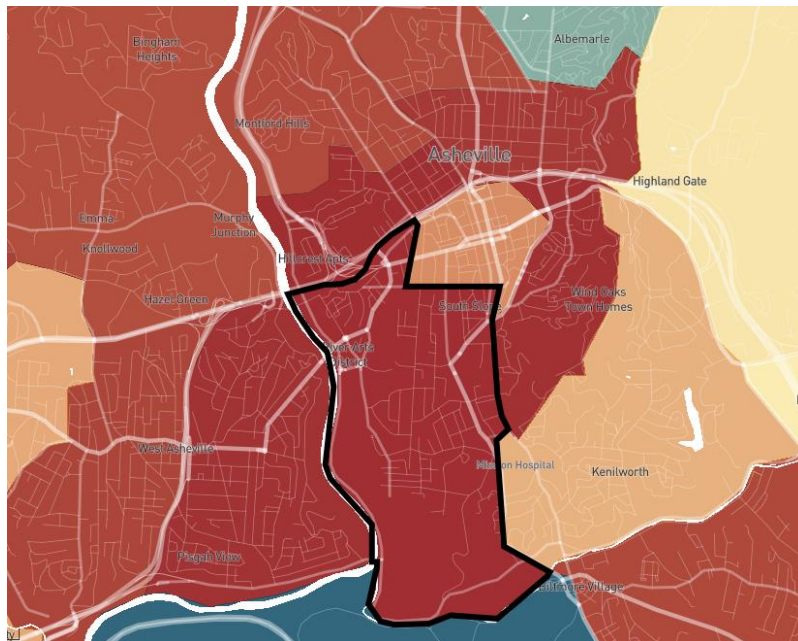
25th Percentile	50th Percentile	75th Percentile	All Percentiles	% Remaining in Commuting Zone at age 35	Households remaining in commuting zone at age 35: Current Income	% of households in the top 20% of income earners
\$21,000	\$26,000	\$30,000	\$23,000	67%	\$17,000	4.2%

White:

25th Percentile	50th Percentile	75th Percentile	All Percentiles	% Remaining in Commuting Zone at age 35	Households remaining in commuting zone at age 35: Current Income	% of households in the top 20% of income earners
\$31,000	\$43,000	\$57,000	\$35,000	69%	\$30,000	18%

Figure 4. East Riverside (Southside), Tract 37021000900: Average Household Income at Age 35 by Parental Income Percentage, Descriptive Statistics, and Reference Map of Area-

Reference Map of Area:



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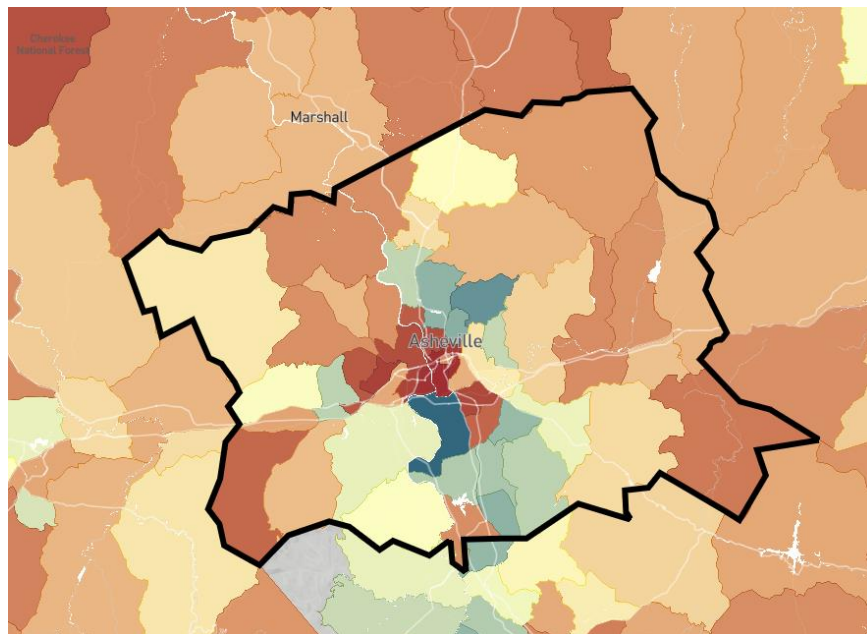
25th Percentile	50th Percentile	75th Percentile	All Percentiles	% Remaining in Commuting Zone at age 35	Households remaining in commuting zone at age 35: Current Income	% of households in the top 20% of income earners
\$21,000	\$27,000	\$34,000	\$24,000	66%	\$20,000	4.2%

White:

25th Percentile	50th Percentile	75th Percentile	All Percentiles	% Remaining in Commuting Zone at age 35	Households remaining in commuting zone at age 35: Current Income	% of households in the top 20% of income earners
\$31,000	\$40,000	\$50,000	\$43,000	61%	\$36,000	17%

Figure 5. Buncombe County: Average Household Income at Age 35 by Parental Income Percentage, Descriptive Statistics, and Reference Map of Area-

Reference Map of Area:



Figures 6 and 7 show the results of running regressions utilizing equation (1), illustrating the impact of being born in an urban renewal coded tract in comparison to other unaffected Buncombe County tracts on black current average household income. Figure 6 controls for being born in the 25th percentile of parental income, while figure 7 controls

for the 75th percentile. Both figures contain regression results as well as a scatter plot with a line of best fit to help visualize the correlations within the data. Within the scatter plots, the dots above the value 0 represent outcomes for all tracts unaffected and coded 0, while those above the value 1 represent affected tracts coded 1.

```
. reg kfr_black_p25 UrbRenew if state == 37 & county == 021 [aw = count_black],r
> obust
(sum of wgt is 4,178)
```

```
Linear regression                Number of obs   =      27
                                F(1, 25)       =      0.68
                                Prob > F            =     0.4189
                                R-squared           =     0.0195
                                Root MSE        =    3782.9
```

kfr_black~25	Robust		t	P> t	[95% conf. interval]	
	Coefficient	std. err.				
UrbRenew	-1093.253	1329.998	-0.82	0.419	-3832.435	1645.929
_cons	21305.1	995.8509	21.39	0.000	19254.11	23356.09

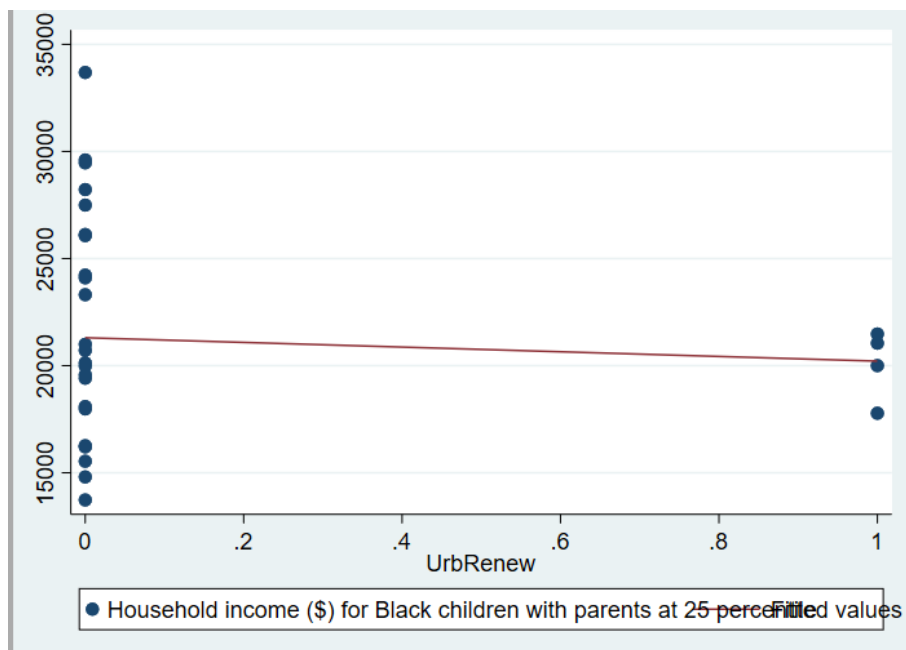


Figure 6. Regression analysis at the 25th percentile of parental income.

Figure 6- Being born into an urban renewal coded tract in Buncombe County is associated with an average current annual income loss of \$1093.253 compared to non urban renewal tracts, for black children born in the 25th percentile of parental income. This result is not significant.

```
. reg kfr_black_p75 UrbRenew if state == 37 & county == 021 [aw = count_black],r
> obust
(sum of wgt is 4,178)
```

```
Linear regression          Number of obs   =      27
                          F(1, 25)         =      4.53
                          Prob > F         =     0.0434
                          R-squared        =     0.1364
                          Root MSE     =    11286
```

kfr_black~75	Coefficient	Robust std. err.	t	P> t	[95% conf. interval]	
UrbRenew	-9186.886	4318.255	-2.13	0.043	-18080.5	-293.2732
_cons	34533.82	2114.292	16.33	0.000	30179.35	38888.29

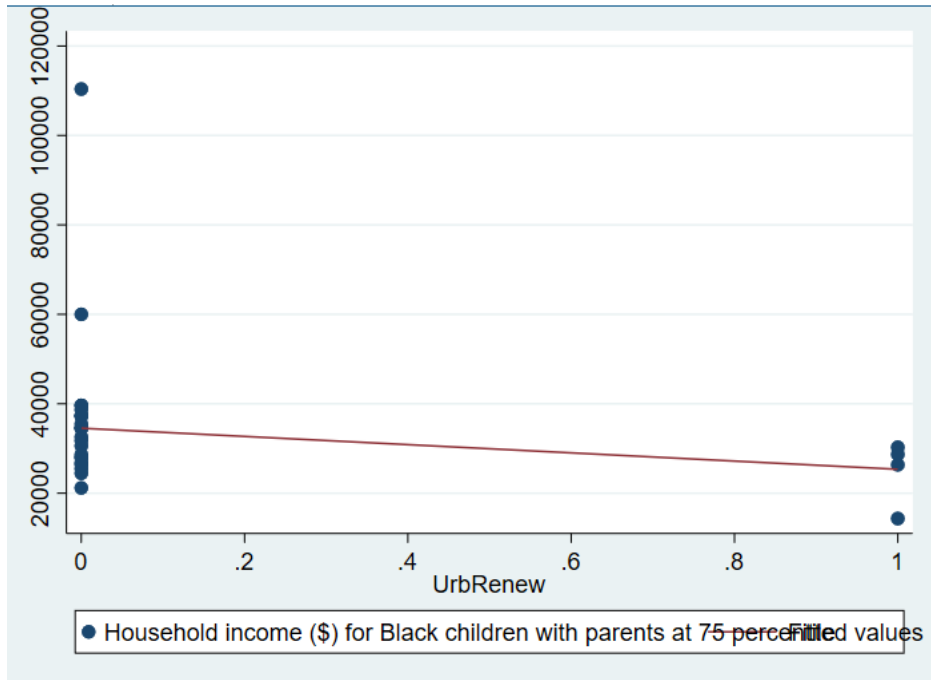


Figure 7. Regression analysis at the 75th percentile of parental income.

Figure 7- Being born into an urban renewal coded tract in Buncombe County is associated with an average current annual income loss of \$9,186.886 compared to non urban renewal tracts, for black children born in the 75th percentile of parental income. This result is significant at the 95% confidence level with a P value of .043.

6. Discussion and Conclusions

Looking at incomes by race presented in Figures 1-5, there is an apparent black-white intergenerational opportunity gap at all levels of parental income for both affected tracts as well as Buncombe county as a whole. Black populations have lesser economic outcomes by every descriptive measurement recorded in Figures 1-5, excluding the non-economic statistic regarding the % remaining in the same commuting zone. In every instance except for Buncombe County as a whole, whites born into the 25th percentile of parental income had better average income outcomes than blacks born into the 75th percentile. Comparatively, Lower Montford area (Figure 2) had the worst metrics when it comes to black intergenerational outcomes; at each parental income percentile, average annual household income was

the lowest of all four tracts in question. There was no case where more than 5% of black households were amongst the top 20% of income earners in the national income distribution. Another key takeaway is the negative mobility experienced by blacks in the 75th and 50th percentiles in every urban renewal tract, as well as Buncombe county as a whole. Although whites are also more likely to fall out of their parental income percentile at the 75th and 50th percentiles than remain in the same percentile, the negative mobility experienced is of far less magnitude. Additionally, it is astounding how little being born into a higher income percentile contributes to higher income outcomes for blacks in each urban renewal tract, with the highest income jump between quintiles being only \$5,000. The lower Montford area even experienced falling average household income averages as parental income percentiles rose, falling from \$18,000 at the 25th percentile to a shockingly low \$14,000 at the 75th percentile.

The econometric analysis utilizing equation (1) presents interesting results, however, most notable are the outcomes represented in Figure 7. While figure 6 indicates black average annual household income for those born in the 25th percentile of parental income drops by \$1,093.253 when located in an urban renewal coded tract in Buncombe county, this result was not significant considering the associated P value of 0.419. The majority of tract outcomes at the 25th percentile contain extremely low average household incomes, whether urban renewal was once at play or not. At a higher percentile of parental income, however, black current household income outcomes in Buncombe county did prove significant and presented a large overall gap in average income between outcomes for affected tracts and unaffected ones. Being born in the 75th percentile of parental income while growing up in an affected tract was associated with an average annual household income decrease of \$9,186.886, significant at the 95% confidence level with a P value of 0.043. As aforementioned, the significance of the results at the higher 75th percentile compared to the 25th percentile are entirely plausible, as urban renewal programs likely had very damaging effects on black families who had larger amounts of wealth or investment in a certain community; this could have been through owning property, businesses, or holding high valued jobs in those fractured communities, all forms of prosperity which could have been hindered and destroyed during urban renewal and consequently affected the next generation's intergenerational economic outcomes. In the same manner, the insignificant results in figure 6 are also plausible, as persons being born into low socioeconomic standing are unlikely to have positive economic outcomes in general. The effects of urban renewal were mostly likely more community based for this group, not necessarily resulting in a disruption of their families wealth or income earning ability as it may be for those born in higher percentiles of parental income. In response to the research question first posed, the analysis suggests that growing up in an area affected by urban renewal does have a significant impact on intergenerational income outcomes for blacks at higher percentiles of parental income, while being insignificant for those who were born into the 25th percentile.

While this analysis certainly provides insight into the realities of black economic intergenerational outcomes in relation to urban renewal in Buncombe county specifically, it should be noted that a far more expansive and all encompassing analysis would have to be done to prove urban renewal has had a negative impact on black intergenerational income or mobility outcomes on a larger scale. For future research on the economic impacts of urban renewal, this study and its approximate methods could potentially serve as just one way to quantify the impacts and further the discussion surrounding urban renewal as a whole. Even if one simply presents the descriptive statistics similar to figures 1-5, this type of data visualization could be valuable for local government and policymakers who are unaware of intergenerational outcomes in their areas. Hopefully, this analysis and the statistical visualizations presented in this study can be of use to either the city of Asheville or Buncombe county in their attempts to better understand areas affected and potentially rectify their implementation of urban renewal.

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