Whose Revitalization? Racial and social divides of revitalization programs in Detroit (2014-2020)

ADUFAH Prince, WANG Yuwei, WIART Louis

1./ Executive Summary

After several decades of decline, Detroit reached an all-time low in 2013, when the city went bankrupt, suffering from the disintegration of its once prosperous automobile industry and the bursting of the real estate bubble. 2013 Detroit was one of the least racially diverse cities in the US and had also one of the highest rates of home vacancy. As a result, Detroit was progressively turning into a ghost city. In 2013, the city was fueled with emergency federal funds to cope with the crisis, and has since been trying to implement a revitalization strategy. However, there are concerns that the revitalization program has been unevenly distributed across racial and social divides, fueling gentrification dynamics, displacement of low-income black residents and the return of wealthy Whites in the city center. Our maps try to assess this concern.

Keywords: Detroit, revitalization program, gentrification, racial and social segregation

2./ Introduction

Detroit, the former Motor City in the US, once a thriving, productive metropolis, has been particularly impacted by globalization and has suffered heavily from the de-industrialization process since the 1980s. In the 2000s, the city suffered from a conjunction of factors: the Great Recession following the financial crisis in 2007 delivered the final blow to the agonizing automobile industry while the bursting of the real estate bubble (mortgage crisis) accelerated the ongoing process of desertion (ghost houses and buildings).

This decline has therefore some tremendous urban implications: demographics, economics, social and spatial structure, racial segregation… Between 2000 and 2010, Detroit lost a quarter of its population, a decrease even more significant than the one experienced by New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina in 2005 (Willians, 2020), and overall, the population has decreased by a factor of 2.8 since the 1950s (City of Detroit, 2013). This decline has been accompanied by the departure of White populations formerly working in the automobile industry, and the city is now one of the least racially diverse cities in the US, with Black people accounting for some 80% of the total population in 2018 - despite recent dynamics that tend to make it more diverse (Mondry, 2020).

After several decades of decline, the city finally went bankrupt in 2013, reaching an all-time low. In reaction to the decline, there have been many attempts to support revitalization efforts and to recreate a positive dynamic, especially in the devastated city center. Thanks to significant input of $300 million from the federal state in 2013, initiatives supported by the city government aimed at demolishing out-of-age residential structures ($100 million) (City of Detroit, 2013), but also rehabilitating buildings, creating new infrastructure, and stimulating employment (City of Detroit, 2012). More recently, the city government and the Detroit Land Bank Authority which owns most of the disowned lands and ghost houses have made deals with large private developers to rehabilitate entire neighborhoods of the city. Practically, that means that large parts of the city have been “reserved” for the developers who are now responsible for the rehabilitation and that no one else can buy it.

Despite noticeable improvements and the return of the Whites, there are concerns that the revitalization program has been highly uneven and has fostered the dual dimension of the city: a new “Renaissance” Detroit in some areas of the densely populated city center in comparison with a complicated, majorly Black metropolis exposed to criminality, under investment and urban decay (Williams, 2020). In (mostly Black) neighborhoods, where rehabilitation is overseen by large private developers, delays and non-compliance to initial objectives, have led to persisting paralysis (Ikonomova, 2021).

Our research question is, therefore, to assess through maps to what extent the revitalization program in Detroit has been unevenly distributed across social and racial divides, and fueled gentrification dynamics in the city center.

Our approach will be first to show how 2014 bankrupt Detroit was a highly segregated and ravaged city regarding racial and income distribution, and then to focus more specifically on areas that have benefited from the neighborhood revitalization programs in 2015 and 2020 and the ones that have not. We further observe the racial

and income distribution in 2020 - especially in the beneficiary neighborhoods - to assess the level of variation between 2014 and 2020.

3./ Data sources

Name of data	Year	Source
Cartographic Boundary Files for Census Tracts	2014 & 2020	United States Census Bureau
City of Detroit Boundary	Updated in 2021	City of Detroit Open Data Portal
Neighborhood Revitalization Strategy Areas	2015 & 2020	City of Detroit Open Data Portal
Race and mean household income data of Wayne County, Michigan	2014 & 2020	United States Census Bureau

4./ Methodology

Geoprocessing

After processing both CSV and GIS data and importing them, we determined that the GIS census tract data was available for the whole of Michigan. Therefore, we created a layer with all tracts bearing FIPs (Federal Information Processing Standard Codes) indicated as COUNTYFYP in the GIS data that corresponded with Wayne County within which the city of Detroit is located. This new Wayne County layer was clipped to the city of Detroit boundary layer and further table joins (with socio-economic data in CSV files) and analysis was conducted.

Choropleth

Choropleth is our main approach to illustrate the spatial representation of the research topic. We grade spatial differences by colouring polygons on the maps with the internal choices explained as follows.

- Maps of black residents' proportion

To avoid the influence of different numbers of the total population in each census tract, we choose to use the black residents' proportion of the total population. We make modifications to the equal interval symbology and use 70% as the starting point of equal interval and use an interval of 5% after 70% to show the severity of black segregation and regard an area with a black proportion of lower than 70% as mixed or segregated white communities.

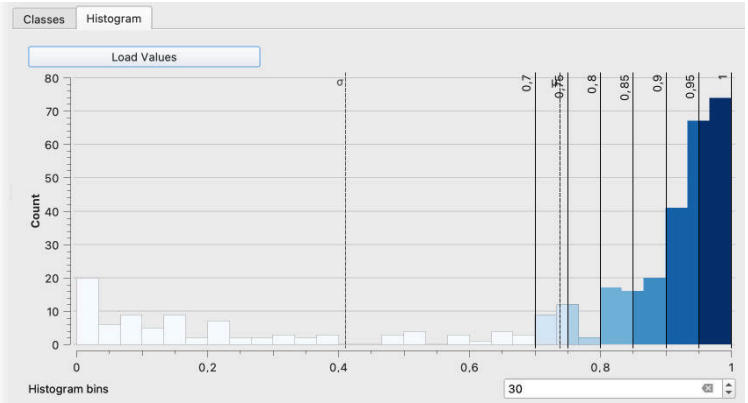


Fig 1. Histogram showing the distribution of Black populations in Detroit

- Maps of main household income

In order to recognize the low-income residents in the city, we make a reference to the Housing and Revitalization Department of Detroit for what is eligible low-income households. Accordingly, we use an approximate number of the standards given by the department to define low-income, very low-income, and extremely low-income households for our illustration of the maps and rate the remaining household income figure as above average (City of Detroit, 2020).

Problems and limitations

We encountered a problem related to the projection of Michigan: the QGIS cannot correctly display the NAD83 projection for Michigan whether the map is converted from the WGS84 projection or not. We could not solve the

problem based on class content or Google research (the solution seems to require programming), so the maps look stretched compared to the published ones.
Another issue we encountered was that we found many relevant socio-economic variables that could be best represented by surface layers (race, income, employment) and choropleths, therefore, at the beginning, we tried to think about how to display several surface layers on the same map. Our aim was to assess the existence of "White neighborhoods with low incomes", "White neighborhoods with high incomes" etc., to be able to show the gentrification process - especially, to make the difference between low-income White people that suffered from the decline of the automobile industry, and higher-income White people who settled in the city center as a result of the revitalization strategy. We thought about creating a bivariate choropleth but encountered issues in designing it and the legibility of the resulting map was not satisfying, that is why we ultimately adopted several, lighter maps.

5./ 2014 Detroit, a highly segregated, suburbanized, and ravaged city

Our first two maps are aimed at taking a 'photography' of bankrupt Detroit in 2014 and emphasizing the segregated dimension of the city in terms of race and levels of income. Our findings suggest that people living in the city center were mostly Black people, accounting for 70 to 100% of the population - with the exception of a few neighborhoods in the South. Regarding income levels, we observe that most census tracts located within the city boundaries in 2014 had a mean income below the Area Median Income (AMI) of the Detroit Metropolitan Area (City of Detroit, 2020). We also observe that census tracts with mean incomes above the AMI had lower proportions of Black residents. By looking at the level of the whole of Wayne County (maps not represented here), we can see the result of the suburbanization of the wealthy White population. Indeed, we observe in this case that people who live in the suburbs of the city are mostly white and have a level of income above the AMI.

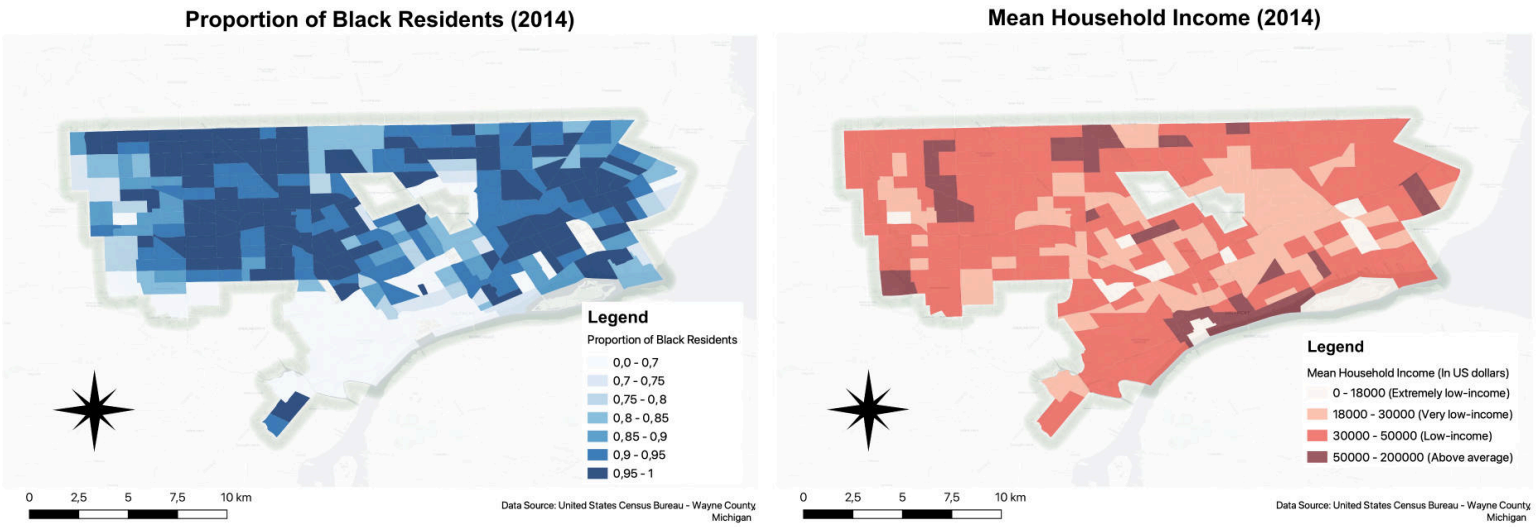


Fig 2. Racial and income maps in 2014 suggest Detroit was then a highly segregated and predominantly low-income city

It is quite interesting to observe that whiter neighborhoods located in the South of the city center do not necessarily have a higher median income than neighbouring Black neighborhoods which suggests those White people may be the former blue collars who have suffered from the decline of the automobile industry.

6./ In the 2010s, the revitalization program has been unevenly distributed across racial and social divides

After observing that Detroit was a highly segregated, suburbanized city in 2014, we wanted to assess the revitalization program and how it affected the city. In 2015 and 2020, municipal authorities established Neighborhood Revitalization Strategy Areas (NRSA), i.e. priority areas to demolish or rehabilitate vacant houses and buildings and bring in new public services. The following map displays those NRSA.

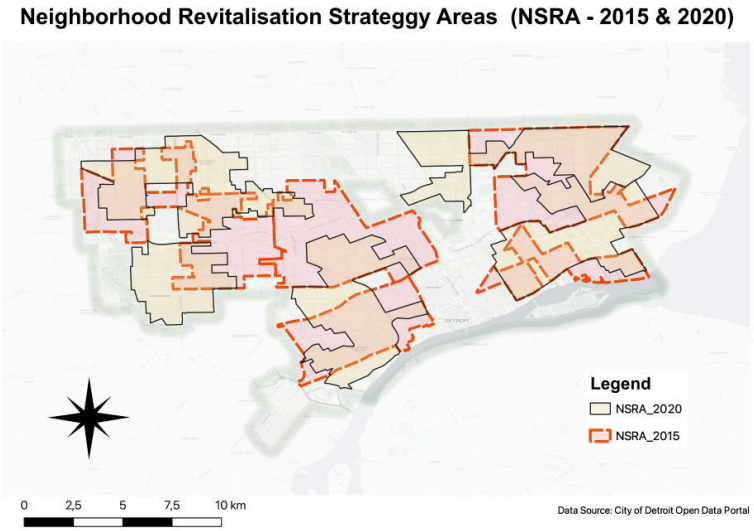


Fig 3. Neighborhood Revitalization Strategy Areas in 2015 and 2020

The 2015 and 2020 Neighborhood Revitalization Strategy Areas cover a large part of the city center and significantly overlap. Nonetheless, these revitalization programs may have contributed to the situation displayed in the two following maps in terms of race and income (in 2020):

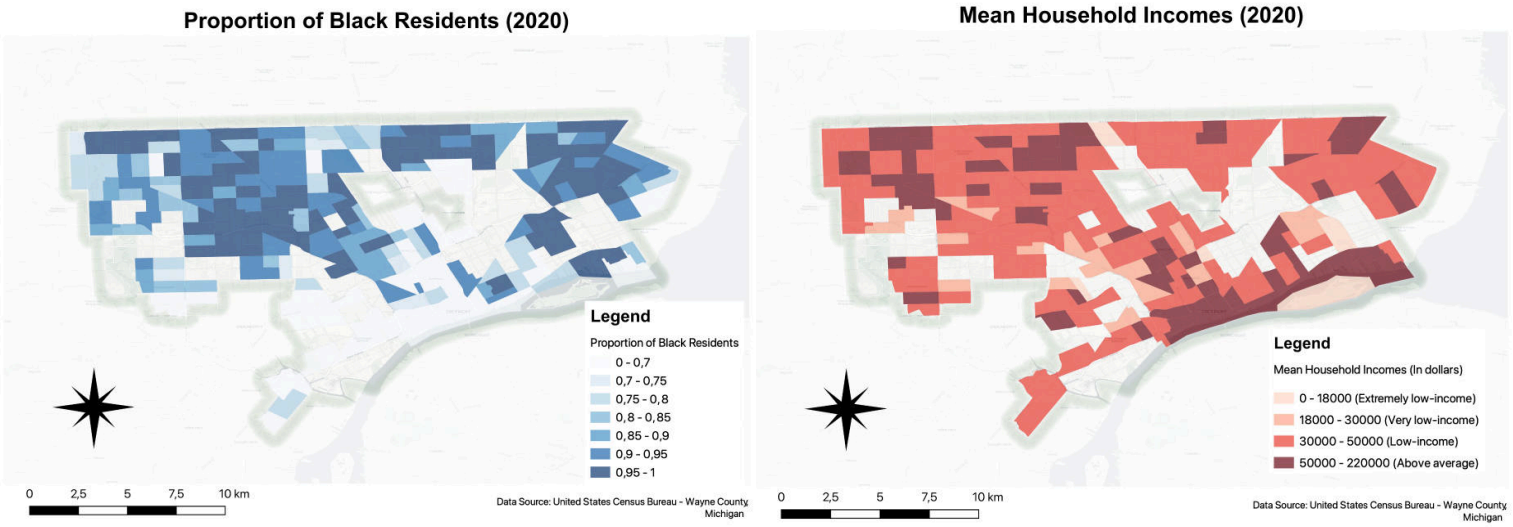
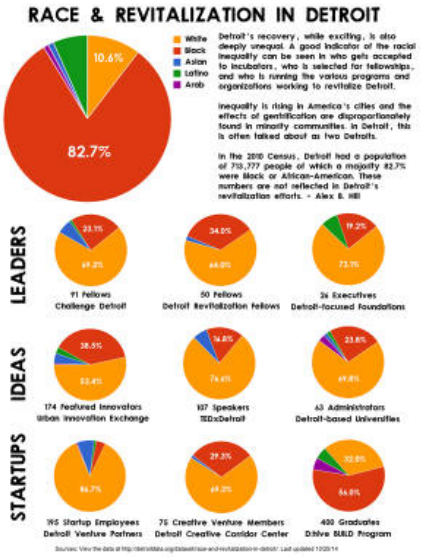


Fig 4. Racial and income maps in 2020 suggest an ongoing process of gentrification

By looking at the income map, there undoubtedly are more areas which have an income above the municipal average than before. Those areas are located in the South and South East parts of the city center - along the river, but also in the North West where several census tracts are now classified “above average” while they used to be classified as low-income areas. The racial map (there are a few tracts where we were not able to get data in the East) seems to be whiter than in 2014. Indeed, this is particularly visible if looking at the neighborhoods located along the river, but also in the North West areas that used to be the “blackest” areas with many neighborhoods having a proportion of Black residents above 95% in 2014. Even if those North West neighborhoods remain mostly Black, the proportion of Black people seems to have decreased significantly, with many districts now having a proportion of Black residents below 85%. There seems to be some form of correlation between the areas that got richer and the areas where the share of Black residents decreased the most, suggesting the revitalization program brought a new category of White residents, wealthier than the two existing categories of residents in the city center in 2014 (predominantly low-income Black residents) and a possible displacement of these residents.

7./ Explanatory factors



We identify three main factors that may have contributed to reinforcing the uneven dimension of the revitalization program. First of all, it's interesting to notice that Black communities are largely underrepresented in framing the program and not involved in the decision-making processes. Therefore, the program appears to be "addressing Black problems with White solutions" (Hill, 2015). Hill has analyzed the racial composition of a large set of actors involved in the program, from leaders holding key positions in the decision-making process to startups bringing in ideas. His compilation reveals that across all the programs, only 23.7% of individuals were classified as Black - with Black communities accounting for more than 80% of Detroit's population - suggesting that the revitalization program is biased and is not driven by a representative sample of the local population.

Fig 5. Black problems, White solutions. Race & Revitalization in Detroit (Hill, 2015).

Another determinant factor we identified is related to the specific pattern of the revitalization process in Black neighborhoods. Looking more precisely at two particular neighborhoods, Virginia Park and Fitzgerald, we can identify a common pattern (Ikonomova, 2021). In both cases, the neighborhood is a largely Black, depressed area with a high rate of home and land vacancy. The Detroit Land Bank Authority holds ownership of valueless land and wrecked houses. Detroit's municipality then supports a major project of rehabilitation (commercial or public services) - in the case of Virgina Park, the Herman Kiefer Health Center - and contracts with a private developer. The developer will be in charge of the project, and as additional incentives, the municipality and the Land Bank agree to support investment in services and facilities in the area (eg. a park.) and to reserve valueless lands and houses for the developer to buy. The number of houses and parcels is very high (several hundred), and the developer commits to buying the parcels and rehabilitating the houses within a few years. However, sometimes for valid reasons (Mondry, 2021), ambitious plans are not implemented, lands are not bought, and remain inaccessible for years to other buyers and community organizations who are willing to be involved in the revitalization process. This leads to the paralysis of Black neighborhoods.

One-third explanatory factors that appear relevant are related to mortgages. A recent study suggests that large banks in Detroit have been discriminatingly allocating mortgages alongside racial divides (Hill, 2014). The study shows how Black borrowers have been virtually deprived of new mortgages in the city center since 2008, allowing for gentrifying processes and the return of wealthy White tenants.

8./ Conclusion

There is a connection between the revitalization program and the gentrification process that has been observed in Detroit this last decade. The program has partially achieved its goal of recreating a positive dynamic in terms of employment and opportunities for companies and residents in the city center. However, the growing literature about two diverging realities suggests the program has been less beneficial for low-income black residents, possibly resulting in their displacement from several revitalized neighborhoods. We identified some factors to explain this: underrepresentation of Black communities in designing and managing the program, privatization of the revitalization strategy failing to comply with initial objectives, and discriminated attribution of mortgages. Alongside the COVID-19 crisis, President Biden's American Rescue Plan (ARPA - 2021) has been allocating significant resources to Michigan ($532 million) (City of Detroit, 2021), and part of it is supposed to fuel the revitalization program in Detroit. Integrating zones that have been marginalized by the previous plans, associating resident communities in the process and better enforcement mechanisms by the city government are key challenges to address. While contending a correlation between the neighborhood revitalisation programs and the variations in racial and income variations in the observed periods, we acknowledge that several other internal and external factors may have contributed to these dynamics. Further areas of research could assess the effects of the arrival of other races in the city, economic development in surrounding counties and neighborhoods as well as federal aid programs and their respective conditions on the emerging neighborhood dynamics within the city.

9./ References

City of Detroit. (2012). *Detroit Future City - the Economic Growth Element: the Equitable City*. https://detroitfuturecity.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/DFC_EconomicGrowth_2nd.pdf

City of Detroit. (2013). *Detroit Hardest Hit Fund Strategic Plan*. https://detroitmi.gov/sites/detroitmi.localhost/files/2018-04/Hardest%20Hit%20Funds%20Strategic%20Plan.pdf (see also https://detroitfuturecity.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/03/dfc-hardest-hit-fund-20140228.pdf)

City of Detroit. (2020, April 1). *Affordable housing - who is eligible?* https://detroitmi.gov/departments/housing-and-revitalization-department/affordable-housing/who-eligible

City of Detroit. (2021). *How Detroit's ARPA funds are being spent. Three ways to learn more and take part.* https://detroitmi.gov/departments/office-chief-financial-officer/how-detroits-arpa-funds-are-being-spent

Hill, Alex. (2014, September 24). Map: Discriminatory Mortgage Lending in Detroit. *DetroiTopography*. https://detroitography.com/2014/09/24/map-discriminatory-mortgage-lending-in-detroit/

Hill, Alex. (2015, March 19). Black problems, White solutions. Race and Revitalization in Detroit. *Alexbhill.org* [blog]. https://alexbhill.org/2014/10/16/detroit-black-problems-white-solutions/

Ikonomova, Violet. (2021, April 19). Held Hostage: How Two Detroit Neighborhoods Fought To Break Developers' Grip. *Deadline Detroit*. https://www.deadlinedetroit.com/articles/27796/held_hostage_two_detroit_neighborhoods_fight_to_break_developers_grip?fbclid=IwAR0tdd9Z3OLqBUANb8StzKRaIIwQgCC0nMVDW2cc5e31wb7vbchKbjrYG_E

Mondry, Aaron. (2020, January 23). New report shows Detroit diversifying, but anxieties around race remain. *Curbed Detroit*. https://detroit.curbed.com/2020/1/23/21078956/detroit-demographics-black-white-diversity

Mondry, Aaron. (2021, May 18). The Fitzgerald Revitalization Project is winding down. Why did it fall short of expectations? *Detour Detroit*. https://detourdetroiter.com/fitzgerald-revitalization-project-detroit/

Williams, Joseph. (2020, January 22). A Tale of Two Motor Cities. *US News*. https://www.usnews.com/news/cities/articles/2020-01-22/amid-detroits-rebirth-many-african-americans-feel-left-behind?context=amp&fbclid=IwAR3W47-q8vibp5q_cxl5tS0Pwi3PAcvVCbDDPMCIFZNF6X6-uiP98CdZKLU