

The Fair Housing Act turns 50

PSU housing and segregation researcher Leanne Serbulo talks about the impact of the landmark legislation and the challenges to fulfilling its ultimate ideal

BY SARAH HANSELL
STAFF WRITER

Fifty years ago, a national advisory body known as the Kerner Commission released its landmark report on the causes behind the rise in racially-charged violence in America's cities. The report became a scathing critique of a white-dominated society and its policies – around laws, employment and housing – that isolated and oppressed African-Americans.

Among the report's documented inequalities was homeownership – the fulfillment of the American Dream. In 1968, when the report was released, black homeownership in the United States was at 41 percent, compared to 66 percent white homeownership.

That same year, President Lyndon Johnson signed the Fair Housing Act, the culmination of campaigns by civil rights and faith-based activist groups. It promised protection from housing discriminations on the basis of race, color, religion and national origin. Protections based on sex, disability and familial status were added in the 1970s and 1980s.

Under the Fair Housing Act, public housing began to be integrated, but private housing was and still remains harder to regulate, said Leanne Serbulo, a University Studies Professor at Portland State University who does research on housing and segregation in Portland. (In Portland, following the win of a class action lawsuit, housing discrimination complaints are processed through the city, which developed systems to hold sellers and renters accountable to the Fair Housing Act.)

Yet in 2018, there is one thing that hasn't changed, in fact has barely budged – the percentage of black homeownership. It has hovered at 41 percent for the last 50 years. White homeownership has increased modestly, from 66 percent to just over 70 percent.

Street Roots sat down with Serbulo and talked about what impact the Fair Housing Act really had, and what we can learn from it today as it's threatened by the Trump Administration.



Leanne Serbulo

"Without housing affordability and accessibility and just basic housing needs being met, we're never going to achieve fair housing."

Sarah Hansell: *The Fair Housing Act was passed in 1968, but there were aspects of discrimination that didn't necessarily stop, like redlining. I recently saw statistics that homeownership of black Americans between 1968 and 2018 hasn't changed. So, what impact did the Fair Housing Act really have for the black community, particularly in Oregon?*

Leanne Serbulo: The Fair Housing Act in some ways addresses one aspect of housing discrimination, and that's kind of that direct discrimination that happens when someone refuses to rent or lease or show a home to somebody. It did not necessarily address some of the deeper structural problems associated with racism, so it didn't do much to alleviate the disproportionate economic situation between blacks and whites, or employment discrimination. Though there were laws banning employment discrimination, that still persisted over time, and that has the impact on the spending power of people and on the ability to purchase or rent housing.

And it also didn't address the kind of cumulative effects and the generational effects of having been denied an opportunity to own a home or denied the opportunity to own a home in a way that wasn't exploitative or that wasn't substandard. So in that way, it's addressed one aspect of segregation but unfortunately it hasn't been able to address a lot of the more persistent and generational impacts.

S.H.: *What did activism look like for fair housing in Portland at that time?*

L.S.: In the late 1950s, a lot of the activism centered around faith-based movements in both black and white churches. There was an effort before the Fair Housing Act was passed here in Oregon – first of all, to get that passed, and to get other anti-discrimination legislation passed, but also to educate people. There was a real problem, when color barriers were broken in neighborhoods, and black families would move into a neighborhood, with white residents fleeing, because a fear that somehow their property values were going to be effected by having a multiracial neighborhood. And so there was an effort to educate people about that.

In the early 1960s, the efforts to integrate public housing were led by the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and neighborhood groups and the Urban League. They were picketing, and holding meetings, going to City Council to put pressure on City Council about where housing was being built. And the faith-based movements at that time were also involved. I believe it was the Council of Churches that had come up with a study. The League of Women Voters had done a study on the impacts of fair housing.

S.H.: *How impactful would you say that grassroots activism was in fair housing policy or enforcement of that policy?*

L.S.: I think it was critical. Because without people drawing attention to it, there would've been nothing done. I think it was helpful to a lot of the grassroots organizations when their goals were aligned with federal regulations around it. The feds have the power to withhold funding, for example. So when those two were aligned, it seems like that's when things were most effective, because the city didn't want to lose money or the state didn't want to lose funding, businesses wanted to get contracts. When you see the federal government retreating from and having a backlash against anti-discrimination and civil rights legislation under Reagan, then you see grassroots efforts really having to ramp up and take the full burden of that on. But without grassroots organizing, there



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What: Making Home and Community Before and After the Fair Housing Act: A panel discussion with Faye Burch, Donna Harris, Ronnie Hartley and Ken Adair, moderated by Dr. Carmen Thompson

When: 7-8:30 p.m., Monday, April 30. Doors open at 6 p.m.

Where: McMenemy Kennedy School
5736 NE 33rd Avenue
Portland, Oregon 97211

Cost: Free and open to the public

Page 12: Allan Lazo, executive director of the Fair Housing Council, reflects on the ongoing fight for fair housing.

wouldn't be a Fair Housing Act.

S.H.: *In your opinion, what issues related to fair housing are most pressing in Portland?*

L.S.: It's really difficult to tear out fair housing from affordable housing in general. We don't have a right to housing in our society, and without having a basic right to housing, the idea of having a safe, affordable, accessible fair home is nonexistent. Here in Portland, just making sure that everybody has a roof over their heads is critical to even begin to fully implement and enforce fair housing. But that being said, it doesn't mean that fair housing should be ignored or should be subsumed to any sort of struggle to get people's basic human right to housing. But without housing affordability and accessibility and just basic housing needs being met, we're never going to achieve fair housing.

And also in our attempts to try to get affordable housing, I think it's important to focus on homeownership opportunities too, and especially because there's a gap between black and white homeownership rates, and that gap is part of a legacy of

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