A photograph of three Black women smiling and laughing outdoors. The woman in the center has short, curly grey hair and is wearing a blue zip-up jacket. To her left, another woman is partially visible, wearing a teal headband and a white and grey striped shirt. To the right, a third woman is seen from the back, wearing a bright pink jacket and a large diamond ring on her finger. The background is a soft-focus outdoor setting with greenery.

JOYS AMIDST TRIBULATION — AGING WHILE BLACK IN OREGON

AGE+
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AGING STARTS EARLY

Our lives create the blueprint for how we age. Advantages given to us early in life by families and communities contribute to successful aging decades later. For every Oregonian, opportunity plays a big part in the quality of life as they age. When and where one was born and lives matters. Place matters. History matters. Community matters. These social and built environments are the stage on which our choices, opportunities, traumas and joys add up to create the arc of our personal stories. Over a lifetime, access to education, jobs, medical care, healthy air and water, security and justice, along with a thousand other threads weave together in the body, mind and soul, and determine our overall health and well-being.

However, when protective “social determinants” are missing from our lives, we are at a disadvantage. Outside factors combine and accumulate with the inside biological factors we are born with and develop over our life-course. Eventually, the sum is expressed in how healthy we are, how much retirement wealth we acquire, our life expectancy and our ability to live active, joyful lives.

Aging Black Oregonians face challenges living in the context of persistent institutional and structural biases. Disadvantages built into societal systems such as housing, education and medical care compromise the potential to achieve healthy, secure aging.

This short paper is meant to stimulate thoughtful reflection on the stressors and joys of aging while Black. It's a start on a big subject that needs everyone's contribution. Let the conversations begin!



DON'T BLAME GENES

PLACE, CHOICE & ACCESS TO HEALTHY OPTIONS MATTER, TOO

For example, high blood pressure (hypertension) is much higher among African Americans than White Americans. Simple genetics? The story is more complicated.

Rates of hypertension among Black people are different depending on where a person lives. Rates are lowest in rural Africa, but higher in urban Africa. They are higher still in the Caribbean and highest in the U.S.

FACT: Black people in Africa have less than half the rates of hypertension of White Americans.



DIFFERENCES ADD UP—A SNAPSHOT OF OREGONIANS 55+

	Black	Hispanic	Asian	White
Education (% College Grad+)	24%	18%	42%	34%
Median Household Income	\$41,000	\$53,000	\$60,000	\$55,000
Home Ownership	50%	65%	73%	78%
Median Net Worth*	\$24,000	\$36,000	N/A	\$188,000

CHALLENGES OF AGING WHILE BLACK

For older Black Oregonians, systemic and interpersonal racism have been barriers to livable incomes, quality education and occupational status. The daily stressors of racism, large and small, add up over a lifetime. Generational poverty in particular compounds negative risk factors among racial minorities. Racial inequities also reduce the chances of buying a home, paying for childcare and having access to healthy food. Over the life-course, these risk barriers contribute to higher rates of depression, early cognitive decline, hypertension, diabetes and more disabilities. Other significant barriers include:



PERSISTENT FINANCIAL DISADVANTAGES

Lack of pensions and opportunities to earn and save, as well as loss of generational wealth, mean many older Black people have little savings or income at retirement.

HOUSING INSECURITY

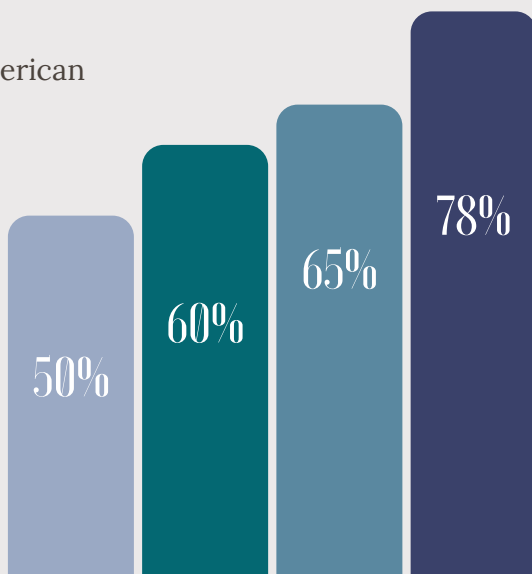
A host of barriers made it difficult for minorities to buy and maintain homes. The legacy of redlining, restrictive lending policies and gentrification have been especially harmful to people now entering their 60s and 70s. If people were unable to buy, maintain or keep homes during their working years, today they may be aging in rental housing that could become more and more expensive as years go by.

DAILY AND LIFETIME EXPERIENCES OF RACISM

The scientific evidence is overwhelming: racism accelerates aging. A 2015 review of 293 research studies confirmed that "perceived racism"—that is, the experience of racism—is associated with poorer mental and physical health. The impact can be seen in high rates of disability and even at the molecular level where scientists can document damage to a person's DNA.

HEALTHY HOMES AND NEIGHBORHOODS ARE HEALTHY PLACES TO AGE BUT BLACK HOME OWNERSHIP LAGS

■ Black
■ Native American
■ Hispanic
■ White



AND RENTERS RISK LOSING BOTH HEALTH AND WEALTH

In 2019, homeowners in the U.S. had a median net worth of \$255,000, while renters had a net worth of just \$6,300.

Black householders had a median household wealth of \$12,780 compared to \$139,300 for White householders and \$19,990 for Hispanic householders.

Higher homeownership rates within Black neighborhoods reduced the association between Black residents and mortality.



ALL GOD'S CHILDREN GOT WINGS

THE STRENGTHS OF BLACK COMMUNITIES SUPPORT OLDER ADULTS IN AGING

Families and communities offer deep supports for the well-being and security of older people of color. Rich social connections strengthen individuals and bring joy. Aging in community is a goal of many older Americans. In this, many Black Oregonians walk the talk. Advantages like these accumulate, too.

ABIDING FAITH

Faith communities offer sanctuaries of sharing and mutual support, especially for older members. Historically, Black churches, mosques, clergy, music and social activities have provided support and connection that research shows protect older Black people against psychological distress while promoting happiness and life satisfaction.

MULTIGENERATIONAL HOUSEHOLDS

Minorities and ethnic groups are more likely to live together. This arrangement benefits all family members and offers resiliency in times of setbacks. It allows older people to age in place with family caregivers. And older people can often assist with raising children which provides purpose and meaning to their lives.

MENTAL & EMOTIONAL RESILIENCY

Lived experiences of adversity appear to offer older Black people mental resources for aging. A few examples:

- Black people have similar or lower rates of psychiatric disorder as White people, despite experiencing greater stress exposure and economic disadvantage.
- After experiences of trauma, older Black patients have better outcomes than older White patients.
- Black caregivers of persons with dementia tend to maintain better psychological well-being compared to White caregivers.

CULTURAL JOY

Black joy and creativity express ways to live connected and meaningful lives amidst injustice and disadvantages. This means being surrounded by a community knitted together with shared stories conveyed through music, oral traditions and language. Humor, too, can be a form of resistance. There is a freedom to express the full spectrum of human emotions.

Older people in Black communities often hold power because they link generations as carriers of cultural memories and experiences of change that give history meaning.

“WHEN WE WERE GROWING UP [BLACK PEOPLE] JUST SAW EACH OTHER AT SCHOOL, AT CHURCH, AT THE SALVATION ARMY. I MEAN, SOME PLACE WE SAW EACH OTHER. WE KNEW WHAT WAS HAPPENING.”

- PORTLAND SHARP STUDY PARTICIPANT

AGING IN OREGON HAS BEEN HARDER FOR SOME

"IT IS ONLY THROUGH EXAMINING HISTORY THAT YOU BECOME AWARE OF WHERE YOU STAND WITHIN THE CONTINUUM OF CHANGE." - JOHN LEWIS, CIVIL RIGHTS LEGEND

Consider the life story of a Black woman born in north Portland 70 years ago. As a child, she thrived in the tightknit community surrounded by family, despite her family having little choice but to settle there due to "redlining" after the Vanport Flood of 1948. Then in the 1960s, construction of Interstate-5 cut through the Albina neighborhood, the heart of Black Oregon. She saw homes, businesses and churches condemned and destroyed. One-third of her community, Portland's Black population, was forced to relocate. By the time Emanuel Hospital expanded, her neighborhood had lost almost half its residents and schools. Her family held on only to see the gentrification of the 2000s further erode her community. Today, she's finding it hard to "age in place." Her neighborhood feels different. While some familiar families, friends and churches remain, many do not. She's survived, but carries the weight of Albina history, of lost social connections, and her diminished health and retirement wealth.

WHAT THE CONSTRUCTION OF I-5 DID TO THE ALBINA NEIGHBORHOOD

- In 1970, 9 out of 10 Black Portlanders lived in the Albina neighborhood. Today, just over 1 in 5 Black Portlanders live there.
- At least \$500 million dollars in Black owned property and generational wealth were lost.
- Some of the nation's worst air pollution still occurs along I-5.
- Hundreds of intergenerational families were separated.
- Scores of businesses that created family wealth and jobs were lost.

BEFORE | AFTER

NEIGHBORHOOD

SCATTERED TO SUBURBS

SMALL BUSINESSES

LOST OPPORTUNITY

CHURCHES

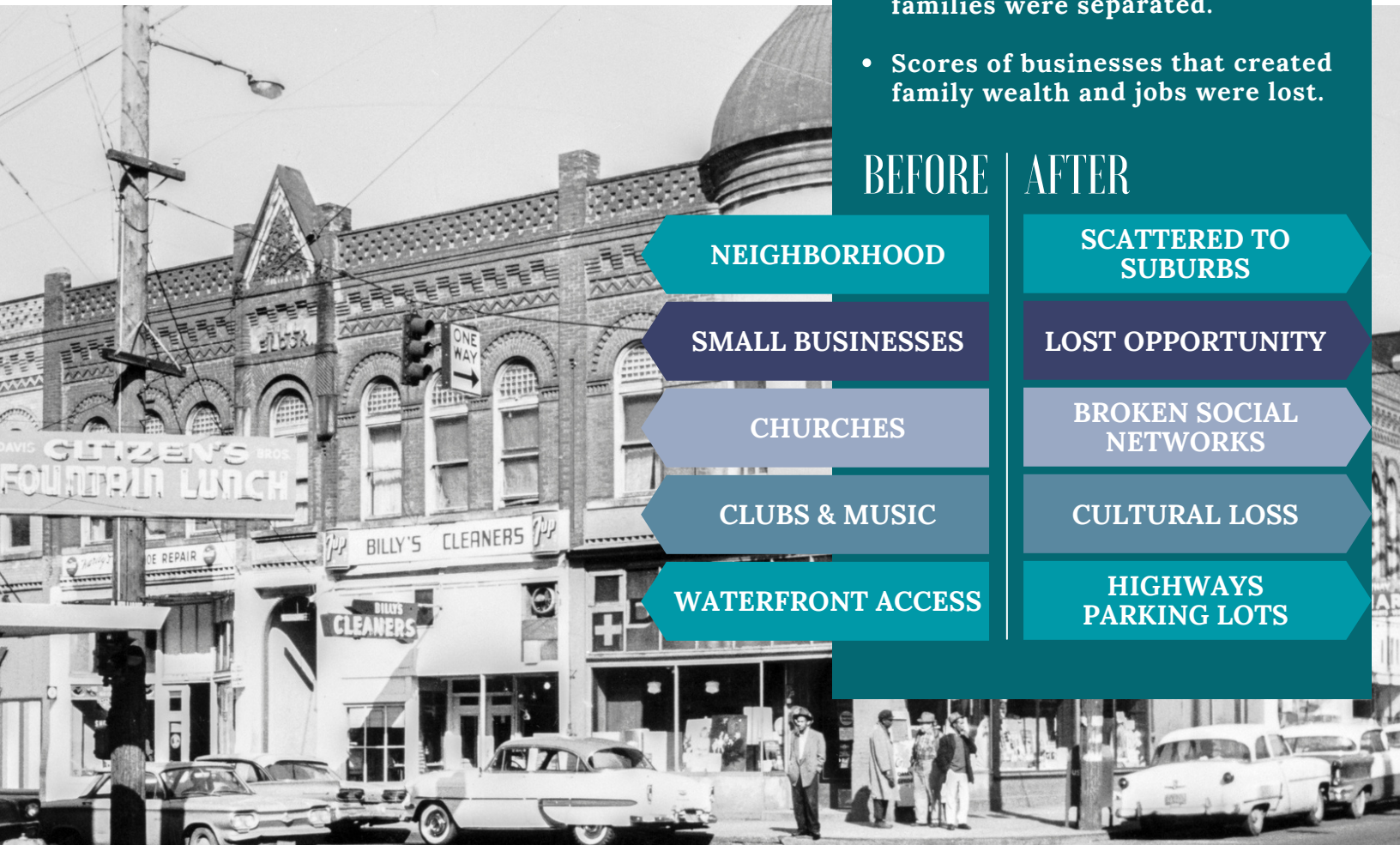
BROKEN SOCIAL NETWORKS

CLUBS & MUSIC

CULTURAL LOSS

WATERFRONT ACCESS

HIGHWAYS
PARKING LOTS





KEEPING THE FAITH IN THE OLD NEIGHBORHOOD

A wealth of evidence shows improved health among older adults who participate in social activities. OHSU researcher, Raina Croff, Ph.D., is testing exciting ways to link older adults to social activities, their lived environment and neighborhood history.

Dr. Croff says, "We're finding that helping older people get outside and walk with others, and reconnect with streets, places and memories from their past seems to improve their mood and looks promising for slowing cognitive decline."

How it works:

- Groups of 3 meet for walks in the old neighborhood.
- Using a group tablet pre-programmed with 1-mile routes, GPS-linked images of local Black history, places, people and events prompt group reminiscence.
- Group memories are recorded for a digital oral history archive.
- Learn more at www.sharpwalkingstudy.org.

Photo by: OHSU/Kristyna Wentz-Graff, SHARP Study

WE INVITE YOU TO JOIN US IN THIS DISCUSSION OF THE CHALLENGES AND JOYS OF AGING WHILE BLACK. WHAT ARE THE IMPLICATIONS FOR OLDER OREGONIANS?

SHARE YOUR STORY OR COMMENTS AT WWW.AGEPLUS.ORG/STORIES.

About AGE+

AGE+ empowers communities of all ages to value and care for older adults, especially those who are isolated, low-income and underserved. AGE+ engages communities through stimulating partnerships, training caregivers and developing innovative programs that address the real and growing challenges facing aging in America.

Contributing Editor

Raina Croff, Ph.D. is Assistant Professor of Neurology at the NIA Layton Aging and Alzheimer's Disease Center at Oregon Health & Science University. Her work focuses on creating culturally celebratory approaches to physical activity, social engagement and reminiscence therapy for healthier aging, particularly amidst the trauma of gentrification and its implications for older Black adults' cognitive health and social connectedness.

For sources go to: www.ageplus.org/sources

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