Canadians inherit a Landscape of Injustice

What you need to know:

Can you imagine someone taking your home, all your possessions, and your freedom? In 1942, Canada forcibly removed and interned 21,460 Japanese Canadians from British Columbia (BC). They could bring only what they could carry. Officials promised to protect the rest. Instead, Japanese Canadians were dispossessed: everything was stolen or sold.

This chapter of a book on the dispossession focuses on 1,700 parcels of real estate sold without the consent of Japanese Canadian owners.

What is this research about?

The dispossession cut short Japanese Canadians' progress toward economic well-being.

In 1942, over 1,000 Japanese Canadians were landowners. After their property was taken, its new owners saw immense profits. In Vancouver's suburbs and on coastal islands, farms were subdivided and sold. In the city, new owners benefited from skyrocketing prices.

Losses echoed through generations. Their properties taken, many Japanese Canadians struggled. Their children lost opportunities and inheritances that they deserved.

What did the researcher do?

Using land title records, researchers with the Landscape of Injustice project traced the history of real estate transactions—the sale and resale of properties for a generation after the dispossession—to analyze the economic impacts of this injustice.

The chapter examines the legacies of loss for Japanese Canadians by the comparison with the people who purchased their lands and benefitted over time. Using the records of real estate transaction, researchers were able to quantify, with unprecedented precision, the long-term economic harms of the dispossession, as well as the benefits that accrued to the other British Columbians who got their lands.

Tsunetaro Murakami, with cane on far right, lost his farm on Salt Spring Island when he was interned in 1942. A generation later, the subdivided land sold for $3 million. This stolen inheritance should have belonged to his son Peter, front, smiling. Nikkei National Museum, 2013.57.2.3.11. (with permission).

What did the researcher find?

Forced to sell, real estate owning Japanese Canadians lost intergenerational wealth: wealth that had been accumulated at great pains and that could have changed the lives of their children and grandchildren. Instead, that benefit went to others.

Those who owned in Vancouver were forced to sell at the worst possible time—prices had never been lower. Farmers in the lower mainland were deprived of the benefit of historic postwar price increases. Banned from reinvesting in real estate, all former owners were forced to use their equity to meet their basic needs during the internment. Afterwards, they were forced to start again from virtually nothing.

Meanwhile, the purchasers of their properties saw the value of the land they acquired double, and redouble in the decades that followed. Their benefit, and Japanese Canadians' losses, compounded over time. Dispossession can only be understood in the context of history.

How can you use this research?

This research is important to understanding the continuing legacies of systemic racism in Canada. It demonstrates, in material terms, the lasting legacies of dispossession. The internment was not a chapter that closed, an historic period that neatly ended. Rather, we still walk atop its sediment.

If Canadians intend to improve upon past choices, we must learn from such histories. Engagement with the legacies of past injustice can catalyze introspection and learning aimed at promoting the responsible supervision of public power.

About the researchers

Jordan Stanger-Ross is a Provost's Engaged Scholar, Associate Professor in the Department of History and the Project Director of Landscapes of Injustice at the University of Victoria (UVic).

The Landscapes of Injustice Research Collective is comprised of community members, researchers and organizations dedicated to researching and retelling the history of the forced sale of Japanese Canadian-owned property.

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