The sale of homes on contract is a practice that systematically undermined the accumulation of wealth by African-Americans throughout the mid-20th century. As Rebecca Burns's investigation showed, contract-selling has once again become widespread in Chicago since the foreclosure crisis. It's exacerbated poverty and thwarted economic recovery in some of the poorest neighborhoods in the city.

Through research of deeds and court records in Cook County, Burns discovered that several large, Wall Street-backed investment firms have bought up foreclosed properties on Chicago's west side and then resold them on contract-for-deed terms (rather than with a traditional mortgage) to low-income buyers. She conducted the first market analysis for post-recession contract sales in Chicago, finding nearly 400 such transactions—more than 90 percent of which occured in non-white census tracts. Homeowners can lose homes bought on contract after missing just one payment and lack any equity in the property or other protections that come along with a traditional mortgage foreclosure. Some of these homes were purchased for just a few hundred dollars from Fannie Mae and then re-sold to unsuspecting first-time home buyers for hundreds of thousands of dollars.

One of the major difficulties with identifying contract-for-deed sales is that investment firms usually purchase properties through shell Limited Liability Corporations, and then sell them to people without making it clear that the buyers are entering into a contract sale. Burns manually compiled a database of foreclosed homes bought in bulk by three large investment firms, and then re-sold through shell LLCs. Because contract sales weren't registered in Illinois, Burns then had to go door-to-door in neighborhoods where investment firms had bought foreclosed properties to find homeowners who had purchased the homes on contract. It took months to find a homeowner willing to go on record about her experience.

Burns's article immediately attracted the attention of advocates and other media, and the story eventually led to new state regulations of contract sales. Three months after the article was published, the Illinois General Assembly passed Senate Bill 885. The law provides additional protections to contract-for-deed buyers, including requiring the contracts become public record and be registered with the Recorder of Deeds. Contract buyers now have 90 days to cure a default, the same period afforded to homeowners with a traditional mortgage. The law also requires the disclosure of building code violations and the fair cash value of the home, as properties sold on contract are often in poor physical condition.