WHAT LIES BENEATH HEALTH EQUITY IN KANSAS CITY, MO

Note: This article is the first in a series that will examine structural & institutionalized racism in Kansas City, Missouri. We will consider all aspects, from policy to access points for health care, and how they function to this day under the weight of unrecognized institutionalized bias.

A “Culture of Health” starts in our homes, schools, workplaces, neighborhoods and communities. Our health is determined in large part by access to social and economic opportunities; the resources and supports available in our homes, neighborhoods and communities; the quality of our schooling; the safety of our workplaces; the cleanliness of our water, food and air; and the nature of our social interactions and relationships [1]. The City of Kansas City, Missouri’s 2015-2020 Citywide Business plan included a priority goal to “Increase overall life expectancy and reduce health inequities in all zip codes” [2]. When groups face serious social, economic and environmental disadvantages, such as structural or institutional racism, and a widespread lack of economic and educational opportunities, shortened life expectancy and health inequities are a result [3].

Kansas City, Missouri has a long history of racism and segregation, a product of slavery in the United States, one of the

"Perhaps more than most fields of work, public health is paved with good intentions, with the worthy goals of alleviating suffering and extending life. But we are at a point in public health history in which good intentions and good science are no longer enough.”

-Georges C. Benjamin, MD, Executive director, American Public Health Association

few countries where skin color was used as a tool for separation and preferential treatment [4]. In the mid-19th century, Kansas City’s African American population was a mix of slaves and some free persons, and the Emancipation Proclamation brought a large migration of freed slaves to the area, with promises of work and hospitality. Up until the early 20th century, Kansas City’s neighborhoods appeared to be fairly mixed, with African American families living in every neighborhood [4,5]. However, Missouri’s status as a slave state impacted White and African American interactions in Kansas City, and many African Americans found that, superficial acceptance did not equate to support of integrated communities [4,5]. As Kansas City entered the 20th century, white supremacist ideals became more overt and African Americans found that, poverty, but the cause of it; desperation and homelessness no longer brought drugs & crime, but the opposite was believed to be true [4]. These attitudes spread, affecting all aspects of African American life. For example, while employment records showed that African Americans were working in nearly every type of job available in Kansas City, the underlying statistics showed that, for most of these job categories, they composed less than 10% of the workforce [5]. As the economy and population grew, the city itself expanded, and developer’s like J.C. Nichols took advantage of this time of growth.

J.C. Nichols is among the most well-known historical names in Kansas City. The city’s most elaborate fountain holds his name-sake, as well as a thoroughfare linking Westport to the Plaza. Nichols has often been praised for his “city planning triumphs” by being among the first to create planned subdivisions, while others have called them “catalysts for social disaster” [6]. Nichols often referred to protecting his neighborhoods, not from the tactics of criminals, but rather, preventing property values from depreciation, which included prohibiting the sale of homes to African Americans [4,6]. This was done through the use of restrictive covenants, of which Nichols was not the first to use; he was simply the first to perfect it. Previously, many land restrictions had an expiration date and required a community to actively renew it; Nichols began to file restrictions in such a way that they automatically renewed and required a notice to amend restrictions five years in advance of its renewal date, and that all homeowners had to agree to the change [7]. This was so effective that, as of 2005, many neighborhoods in the Country Club Plaza area – Nichols most famous development – still have racially restrictive covenants, even though these were banned by the Fair Housing Act of 1968 [7].

The influence of developers like Nichols became increasingly apparent in the 1950s. As
Increasing numbers of Whites became suburbanized, African Americans were increasingly concentrated east of Troost, which was both actively passively supported by urban planners, housing reformers and city authorities by way of policies and practices. For example, federal subsidation of suburban housing (that often had racially restrictive covenants in place) reinforced the idea that that racial composition of neighborhoods should be a primary consideration when determining property values [8]. This, in turn, created a “racialized process of uneven development” between the suburbs and central Kansas City [9]. Lending institutions soon were refusing to lend to those living in areas of minority concentration, launching a cycle of disinvestment and physical deterioration that extended even to the schools [9].

The Kansas City Missouri School District had been segregated since its beginnings in the late 19th century [10], and, up until 1954, was the only school district in the area to have a African American high school. This influenced a migration of African American families from surrounding areas, like Liberty, into central Kansas City so their children could easily attend school [10]. After 1954, the school district eliminated racial attendance lines, yet replaced them with identical neighborhood lines that appeared to be influenced by attendance rates and distance students had to travel. However, these lines would be constantly redrawn, as the compositions of neighborhoods changes and the White population migrated west of Troost Avenue [8]. Real estate blockbusters leveraged the drawing of these lines to encourage White flight from areas east of Troost [9], and, to this day, Troost remains a racially dividing line in Kansas City.

The effects of this long history remain in KCMO today. Inequities affect the non-White, and particularly African American, population disproportionately in a manner that is neither random nor unpredictable. Those that experience the greatest disparities in health outcomes are also those who experience greater social and economic inequities [3]. In Kansas City zip codes with the lowest life expectancy, nearly 83% of residents are non-White, 37% live in poverty and the median family income is nearly $67,000 less than those living in zip codes with the highest life expectancy (see Figure 1 and Table 1). Within the Kansas City Council Districts, life expectancy at birth is the lowest in districts 3 and 5, where the highest percentage of African Americans live. High rates of poverty are also concentrated in the 3rd and 5th City Council Districts, and particularly in the areas just east of Troost Avenue and...
south of the Plaza/Brookside area. These same areas have the highest concentration of African Americans and other non-White minorities (data not shown).

These inequities not only negatively impact non-White Kansas Citians, but they also advantage White Kansas Citians. On average, Whites in Kansas City, Missouri live nearly 9 years longer than their African American peers and 12 years longer than their Hispanic peers (data not shown). Whites tend to have higher levels of education, which is strongly correlated with higher incomes, an increased probability of having health care coverage and increased access to quality housing in Kansas City. In all city council districts, Whites have the lowest proportion of persons living in poverty when compared to African Americans and Hispanic or Latino persons.

In a city ranked among the most segregated cities in the U.S. in 2015 [11], we, as a city need to take a hard look at how our past has shaped the present, and will shape the future of all residents. We cannot be successful as a city if some among us are still oppressed. By directly naming structural & institutional racism and examining in-depth how it is working in our city today, we can have frank and meaningful discussions on breaking the cycle of inequity so we can raise life expectancy for all Kansas Citians.

**Table 1. Selected characteristics of residents living in Life expectancy ranges, KCMO 2010-2014**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Life Expectancy Range</th>
<th>Percent Non-White</th>
<th>Percent Below Poverty Level*</th>
<th>Median Family Income*</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>81-83 years</td>
<td>16.2</td>
<td>5.8</td>
<td>$97,382</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>73-79 years</td>
<td>34.7</td>
<td>10.6</td>
<td>$59,701</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>70-72 years</td>
<td>83.6</td>
<td>37.5</td>
<td>$30,470</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*2010-2014 American Community Survey 5-year estimates

**Figure 1. Life expectancy by zip code, KCMO 2010-2014**

A SEGREGATED KANSAS CITY IS NOT GOOD FOR OUR HEALTH

Note: This article is the second in a series that will examine structural & institutionalized racism in Kansas City, Missouri. In this article, we examine the link between segregational real estate practices of the 20th century, how those practices linger today, and the link to lower life expectancy for all Kansas Citians.

Race, place and socioeconomic status are closely intertwined throughout the United States, with recent national and international discussions on racial segregation pointing to Kansas City, Missouri as an example. Here, Whites and people of color largely live separate from each other, with negative effects on the economic, physical and mental well-being of Hispanic, American Indian and African American residents. Since the early 20th century, segregation has been shaped by discriminatory practices, in which the real estate industry and federal, state and local governments have actively participated (see Figure 1). Today’s built environment is not due to a natural progression, but has been profoundly shaped by these practices.

Residential segregation did not exist before 1900. While African Americans were discriminated against, most neighborhoods were a mix of races up until the First World War. Around this time, there was a need for unskilled labor in Northern states, sparking a migration of African Americans from the South. Northern Whites saw African Americans as a threat to economic stability and used their resources to push them to poor neighborhoods. In Kansas City, African Americans were originally concentrated in the West Bottoms area, however, expansion of railroad and commerce left families looking for new housing with close proximity to public transportation. One of these areas of relocation was that immediately east of Troost Avenue.

Whites continued to feel widespread concern about property values and fled to newer developments west of Troost where people of color were largely unable to purchase homes; this was done mainly through the use of racially restrictive covenants, perfected in Kansas City by developer J.C. Nichols. Nichols’ focus on con-
trolling his own developments and “protecting” their worth reinforced disparities between neighborhoods. By the 1940s, integrated neighborhoods were essentially non-existent. Experts agree that racial segregation is the reason for urban disinvestment, employment discrimination, and the persistence of biased attitudes among Whites.

The well-intentioned FDR-era New Deal became the catalyst for redlining practices, led by the Home Owner’s Loan Corporation (HOLC) and the Federal Housing Administration. While both organizations were instrumental in preventing the foreclosure on and loss of homes for millions of Americans, they also had significant negative side effects. Redlining, the practice of denying credit to entire neighborhoods based on the race or ethnicity of the residents, became a cornerstone for both organizations in deciding who received mortgages. The denial of home loans kept many African Americans and Latinos renting, unable to accumulate wealth through home equity. Those who were able to purchase homes only had access to those with lower values, a trend that persists today (see Figures 2 and 3).

In the time after the Second World War, the Kansas City population began to shift as minority populations grew at a faster pace than the White population. The majority of this population lived in the area known as Southeast Kansas City, which was the target area of urban redevelopment projects and highway construction in the 1960s and 70s that displaced tens of thousands of resi-

**RED-LINE /RED LIN/ V: TO DENY LOANS TO CERTAIN NEIGHBORHOODS BASED ON THE RACE AND/OR ETHNICITY OF ITS OCCUPANTS. THE IMPACT OF WHICH IS STILL EVIDENT IN AMERICAN CITIES TODAY.**

With a large number of African American residents looking for new housing, blockbusters seized the opportunity to define their movement into White neighborhoods as a harbinger of crime and decreasing property values. Blockbusting agents would create a sense of urgency among Whites to sell at deflated prices, only to resell to African Americans at inflated prices. To this day, declines in neighborhoods can be linked to the White flight that occurs when people of color, particularly African American and Latino, begin moving into a neighborhood. White homebuyers’ biased perceptions create the belief that the neighborhood is in decline and begin to move away, even if the new residents are in their socioeconomic class. White flight is a catalyst for the “downward spiral” of a neighborhood, with subsequent falls in property values, increases in taxes, and decreasing availability of public services, eventually resulting in a community that is susceptible to placement of highways, pollution industries, and businesses such as pay day lending and liquor stores. In Kansas City, these practices resulted in widespread disinvestment in the area east of Troost Avenue and is likely one of the influential reasons the Highway 71 Parkway (Bruce R. Watkins Drive) was built in its current location, as opposed to the originally proposed location of the streetcar tracks along Brookside Boulevard.

Although many of the worst real estate and economic policies and practices are now illegal, the past still affects families today, as wealth (or lack thereof) is passed on from one generation to the next. The racial wealth gap gave White families a head start, and this gap appears to only have grown since the Civil Rights Movement, despite the changes in population over time. In Kansas City, the White population has declined 15% from 1980 to 2010, while the African American population has grown 12% and the Hispanic population has more than doubled since 1990. Even with the growth of minority populations, a larger proportion of Whites are home owners, and have owned their homes longer; these two factors are considered the largest drivers of wealth. In Kansas City, African Americans, American Indians and Hispanics, on average have lived in their homes a shorter amount of time, have higher housing costs as a percentage of their total income, have higher interest rates on their home loans and owe a larger proportion on their home loan, despite a lower median home price as compared to Whites (see Figures 4 and 5).

The Great Recession of 2007-2009 devastated the wealth of most families in the United States, except for the wealthiest one percent. Much like life expectancy, extreme wealth inequality hampers economic growth for the community as a whole, and disproportionately affects communities of color. A
2009 national survey showed that the median wealth (income and assets) of white families was $113,000, compared to just $6,325 for Hispanic families and $5,677 for African American families. Studies of the drivers behind this wealth gap indicate barriers to opportunities in the workplace, school, and community that “reinforce deeply entrenched racial dynamics in how wealth is accumulated and that continue to permeate the most important spheres of everyday life.” These spheres include health. When we look at “hot spots” of outcomes like childhood lead poisoning, high rates of hospitalizations for asthma, low birth weight rates, and many other health outcomes across the city, including life expectancy, those communities are also those that have been marginalized (see Figures 6, 7, 8). Traditional public health interventions, like individual behavior change...
and increasing the availability of affordable health insurance have done little to change these outcomes\textsuperscript{15}. It is clear that something more is at play.

Research has shown that residential segregation, and wealth inequality are fundamentally linked to increases in health disparities, and continue to have lasting implications for the well-being of people of color and the overall health of a community\textsuperscript{16,17}. Segregation is a primary factor in racial differences in socioeconomic class, which in turn remains a fundamental cause of racial differences in health\textsuperscript{17}. In Kansas City, neighborhoods with little diversity are a reality; this means that schools, public services, jobs and other opportunities that affect health are also segregated. In the neighborhoods that are cut off from opportunity and investment, we see poor health outcomes accumulate and life expectancy decrease. This is not a product of individual choice, but a product of continued bias that keeps people of color in neighborhoods with lower housing quality, higher concentrations of poverty and less access to opportunity. Just last year, in 2016, the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development settled with a local Kansas City bank for redlining practices\textsuperscript{18}. As Kansas Citians, we must be aware of the ways that residential segregation may become a barrier to good health and opportunity. Solutions require creativity, collaboration and authentic engagement of all people in a community.

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References
12. U.S. Census Bureau, 1980-2010 Decennial Census
In 1990, nearly half of Kansas City, Missouri’s major zip codes were at least 90% white. Over the course of the next thirty years, these zip codes have slowly become more integrated, such that only one major zip code is at least 90% white. However, five zip codes in the heart of the city have remained at least 60% black since 1990. These are the same zip codes that have the lowest life expectancy in the city and some of the worst health outcomes. We can no longer let these zip codes remain isolated and segregated. The City of Kansas City is doing something about that: these five zip codes, 64109, 64128, 64130, 64132, along with zip code 64127 are listed as priority zip codes in the City Business plan, with the focus of increasing life expectancy.
Southwest High School, located near the intersection of Wornall Road and 67th Street, opened in 1925, with an inaugural class of 951 boys and girls. Over the course of the next ten years, Southwest High doubled its enrollment, received national accolades as one of the top schools in the U.S., and boasted thriving academic and athletic programs.1

At the end of the 1997-1998 school year, Southwest High School closed its doors. Enrollment had fallen to 465 from the 1960’s peak of nearly 2,500, with test scores well below the national average, a poor attendance rate and a student body that was 95% Black and Brown.2

The transformation of Southwest High School from a predominantly White, middle-class school into a nearly all-Black and Brown school and from a standard of excellence to eminent closure is not unique; it’s a typical example of the failure of the fourteen school districts serving Kansas City, Missouri to provide quality education to young People of Color and the deterioration that “white flight” can leave in its wake.2

Poverty and segregation resulting from the redlining, block busting and exclusionary real estate practices of the first half of the twentieth century in neighborhoods east of Troost deeply compromised the education of young People of Color, particularly Blacks/African Americans. White flight, a subsequent declining tax base and the rising costs of public services caused the Kansas City Public School District (the District) to become increasingly dependent on federal funding.3 In the late 1950’s, the college attendance rate for Kansas City Blacks was just 11%, and only 20% graduated from high school.4 When national segregation was ordered in 1954, the state of Missouri left the responsibility to local jurisdictions and school districts, the District “allowed the eastern schools to go black, while protecting the western schools against integration”, using Troost Avenue as a convenient “wall” between White and Black Kansas City.4 Every public school east of Troost had become virtually all-Black by the 1970s. Paseo High School enrollment changed from all-white to 98% black from 1954 to 1969, as did Southeast High School from 1954 and 1973. However, Southwest High School, just west of Troost, remained less than 1% Black during the same time period.5

Residential patterns further complicated neighborhood attendance zones in promoting any integration. In what was deemed an “emotional response” to residential and educational integration many White families relocated from the heart of the city to the ever-growing suburbs.5 As these neighbor-
Figure 1. 1951 street map of Kansas City showing grade and high school neighborhood boundaries. “Colored Schools” are marked in green. Source: Missouri Valley Special Collections, Kansas City Public Library, KCMO.
hood populations evolved, the District continually redrew attendance zone boundaries, but Troost “was always the east-west dividing line, reinforcing the segregated school communities” (Figure 1)². When it was clear that the District was not successful in integrating schools, decision makers refused to modify the original integration plan; by the 1970s, the District was no longer in compliance with national standards of integration³.

For the next thirty years, the District would be consumed by legal issues, mainly a result of a suit filed in 1977 by the District on behalf of the students, alleging it was the joint responsibility of both Kansas and Missouri, as well as the suburban school districts, to be a part of a solution to finally desegregate public schools in Kansas City⁶. In 1985, Federal Judge Russell Clark excused the suburban districts from the suit and ordered the rebuilding of the District at any cost, birthing “one of the most watched experiments in public education”⁶. New magnet schools were built, teacher salaries increased and nearly $2 billion later, the District should have been the best of the best. However, the racial gap persisted, student performance failed to improve and there was less, not more, integration⁶,7. Historical patterns reigned supreme, and the District continued to have, on average, 6-8 times the Black share of all districts in the Kansas City Metro Area (KCMA), more than twice the Hispanic population and nearly 3.5 times the poverty rate of other KCMA school districts³. The court-ordered integration experiment was deemed a complete failure; by 2000, the District had failed to meet all 11 performance standards necessary for state accreditation, including test scores, dropout rate, and attendance and 28 of the District’s 61 schools were closed, many with high Black and Hispanic populations as compared to the District’s average (Figures 2 & 3)⁴,8.

In recent years, the District has made progress in several areas. In the 2014–2015 school year, 13 schools had met the state standard for accreditation, with an additional 8 meeting the standard for provisional accreditation⁷. In the fall of 2016, the District announced that it had schools at “full accreditation level on the state-issued report that measures progress in a number of performance areas, including how well students did on standardized tests”⁹. However, inequities remain, including that the four-year graduation rate for all students remained well below the state average, dropout rates are 3 times that of the state, and suspension rates are twice that of the state¹⁰. In 2014, nearly
90% of KCPS’s students were eligible for the free and reduced lunch program, compared to an average of less than 30% of students in suburban school districts, such as Park Hill, Liberty and Blue Springs\textsuperscript{10}. What’s more is residents of Kansas City, particularly White, middle and upper class residents, seem to have accepted the only solution for a quality education in Kansas City is to send their kids elsewhere, rather than work to address these issues. Although recent surveys by the District indicate most residents (90%) agree the District is moving in the right direction nearly 75% do not believe the District provides equitable access to quality education\textsuperscript{12}. Simultaneously, enrollment continues to decline, while charter schools and surrounding suburban school districts continue to grow (Figure 4)\textsuperscript{10}.

The District has not accepted this as the status quo, however. In July of this year, KCPS released its 2018-2023 strategic plan, which focuses on a community-wide commitment to student learning and success. The plan focuses on more than academic achievement, but also aims to ensure the social-emotional, cognitive, health and community support for students. The strategic plan is designed with the idea that there is a role for everyone in making these goals a reality, from students to teachers, from school leadership to district leadership, and from family members and caretakers to members of the Kansas City community. The strategic plan stands as a collective promise to turn good intentions into stronger results, and a stronger district\textsuperscript{11}.

\textbf{Why this matters}

Graduation from high school is a strong predictor of better health. Research has found high school graduation to be associated with a longer life expectancy, improved health and an increased quality of life\textsuperscript{13}. In Kansas City, the “entrenched social and economic separation” between Whites and Blacks has become the status quo. Lower graduation rates and test scores and higher dropout rates among the District’s students have similarly become an accepted part of life in Kansas City. \textit{The reality is that this is simply unacceptable.}

It may be well-known that one cannot “dropout of school into a good job”\textsuperscript{14}, but beyond a lower earning capacity (high school dropouts earn, on average, 41% less than someone with a high school diploma), having less than high school education creates a deficit of essential skills needed to fuel the economy and instead fills the pipeline to prison\textsuperscript{14}. In Missouri, Black/African American men make up a disproportionate number of inmates in the state prison system, which is aligned with national trends (Figure 5).

Across the nation, boys of color, particularly Black and Hispanic boys, are at increased risk of
imprisonment during their lifetime, and are also more likely to be held back a grade in school as compared to white children\textsuperscript{14}. In high poverty school districts, nearly half of potential dropouts can be identified by 6\textsuperscript{th} grade, with grade retention as a key indicator. The correlation between these statistics and the racial makeup of the prison population is not by accident\textsuperscript{14}.

The majority of interventions around these issues have almost exclusively been within the education sector, yet many obstacles to school completion are the same social determinants as those for health and overall well-being (i.e., racism, poverty, hunger, violence, distress)\textsuperscript{13}. As such, we can no longer be complicit in allowing the social structures that lead to the detriment of public education in Kansas City to continue.

In Kansas City, those with less education are more likely to die younger (see Figure 6) and mothers with less than high school education are less likely to have early and adequate prenatal care, which is associated with babies born with low or very low birthweight (see Figure 7). The interesting nuance when examining these outcomes by race is that whites with less than high school education have slightly higher rates, however, death rates (see Figures 8 & 9) and poor prenatal outcomes dramatically decrease with increasing education (see Figure 10). For Blacks, while these outcomes do decrease, it is at a much lower rate, such that we find disparities widening with increases in education. Essentially, in Kansas City, educated Blacks still have worse outcomes than their White counterparts.

These issues are not the sole responsibility of the Kansas City Public Schools District, nor is it the sole responsibility of those living within the District’s boundaries. As a metropolitan area and a community, we are all impacted when one area lags behind, and it is not simply one’s heath that is hindered. Economic research has shown time and time again that educational achievement is positively linked to a stronger and more robust economy\textsuperscript{14}, higher average wages\textsuperscript{16}, and in-

\begin{figure}[h]
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\includegraphics[width=0.5\textwidth]{Figure6.png}
\caption{Death Rates by Level of Education, KCMO 2011-2015. Source: MO DHSS Death Data.}
\end{figure}

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=0.5\textwidth]{Figure7.png}
\caption{Low Birthweight Rates by Mother’s Level of Education, KCMO 2011-2015. Source: MO DHSS Birth Data.}
\end{figure}

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=0.5\textwidth]{Figure8.png}
\caption{Death Rate by Education Among White Adults 25 Years and Older, KCMO 2011-2015}
\end{figure}
increased social capital. And, while health experts throughout the country have called for policy change that will advance population health through provision of truly equal opportunities to basic services such as quality public education, few policies have ever emerged.

In Kansas City, we can no longer stand by and accept that some school districts will always be more desirable, that charter schools are the only source of quality education south of the Missouri River and north of 85th street, and that working in “good-faith” is enough.

Education is clearly valued by communities and leaders alike in Kansas City; it is time to put that value into action. Policies that drive better educational outcomes, including those with a focus on literacy, can vastly improve an individual’s and a community’s outlook. We must not forget our past, however, when forming these policies, and we must remember the underlying social structures that lead us to our current status in education.

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References