Systemic Racism in Saint Louis

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**Purpose:** The purpose of my paper is to demonstrate how systemic racism in Saint Louis has impacted African-Americans in the city today.

**Scope:** The research contained in this paper is primarily based on segregation in regards to schooling and housing, but contains background information about the experiences of African-Americans in Saint Louis as well as information about unemployment figures and poverty levels. The paper also covers aspects of public transportation, the environmental health effects and attitudes of African-Americans toward police.

**Literature Review:**

A preservation plan for St. Louis part 1: Historic contexts. (n.d.) Retrieved from <https://www.stlouis-mo.gov/government/departments/planning/cultural-resources/preservation-plan/Part-I-African-American-Experience.cfm>

This article is important to my paper in that it is produced by the Missouri government itself and helps paint the picture of the African-American experience in Saint Louis.

Cambria, N., Fehler, P., Purnell, J.Q. , Schmidt, B. Segregation in St. Louis: Dismantling the Divide. St. Louis, MO: Washington University in St. Louis.

This study is produced by a group of leading scholars in Saint Louis in the field of political science and the subject of segregation in Saint Louis. The study is very long and explores Saint Louis segregation deeply. Many of the statistics used within the paper come from this study as well as many of the graph images used in the accompanying presentation.

Brown, M*.* (2019). *An examination of disingenuous deeds by St. Louis public schools, 1945* –1*983.* St. Louis, Missouri: University of Missouri– St. Louis.

This article is relevant to this paper because its written by a black St. Louis professor who has seen firsthand the “disingenuous deeds” practiced by the St. Louis public school system. This article contains a large amount of data from a large span of time on the actions taken by the public school system to run a deliberately segregated system.

Farley, J.E. (1989, Nov 29). *Black-white segregation of the city of St. Louis: a 1988 update.* Edwardsville, Illinois: Regional Research & Development Services, Southern Illinois University at Edwardsville.

This scientific study written by an Illinois professor of sociology details areas of St. Louis where black-white segregation is the most obvious and examines the immigration trends in and out of these areas over time. The study includes many visual representations of this data as it was available up until the time of publication in 1989. This study is relevant for this paper because it shows actual visual representations of the data available to show the stark impact of deep-seeded white-black segregation.

Goodwin, J. D. (2019, Aug 31). Report outlines ‘environmental racism’ in St. Louis. Retrieved from <https://news.stlpublicradio.org/post/report-outlines-environmental-racism-st-louis#stream/0>

This article by STL Public Radio outlines a report by Washington University that highlights a “pattern of health indicators” that indicate predominantly black areas of the city are at higher health risk than predominantly white areas. The article is relevant to the paper in that it presents particularly disparate comparisons between black and white children in Saint Louis, with the former making 10.8 times more ER visits relating to asthma and other breathing concerns. This article is also relevant to the topic because it demonstrates how environmental factors effect black areas more than white areas and are a biproduct of unequal housing opportunities.

Graham, D. (2016). *Learning from Ferguson: African-American attitudes towards community policing in St. Louis.* Retrieved from <http://irl.umsl.edu/thesis/282>

This Master’s thesis collects quantitative data to represent the general attitude of African-Americans in Saint Louis as it pertains to their feelings about political and social prejudices as well as local police patrolling their neighborhood. In general, the thesis finds African-Americans in Saint Louis don’t have much faith in their local police and are fearful and suspicious of them and feel they are frequently prejudiced against.

The thesis supports my paper in that it shows the negative effects that institutional racism can have on a person’s mental well-being and trust in authority.

Jaco, C. (2018, Dec 3). Indictments suggest St. Louis police are violent, racist, and unconstitutional. Retrieved from <http://www.stlamerican.com/news/columnists/charles_jaco/indictments-suggest-st-louis-police-are-violent-racist-and-unconstitutional/article_f9f21462-f724-11e8-8783-c3533eb3163d.html>

This article supports my paper because it shows evidence of Saint Louis police’s disproportionate targeting and mistreatment of African-Americans. The article is more relevant because it comes from a Saint Louis publication.

Judd, D. R. (1997). *The role of governing policies in promote residential segregation in the St. Louis metropolitan area.* Saint Louis, MO: The Journal of Negro Education.

This article, written by an UMSL professor in the department of political science, details how local, state and federal governments have worsened, or at the very least allowed, residential segregation to take place in Saint Louis. The article is relevant to my paper in that it details “Liddell v. Board of Education”, a key part of my paper and presentation.

Lang, C. (2009). *Grassroots at the gateway: class politics and black freedom struggle in St. Louis, 1936-75.* Ann Arbor, Michigan: University of Michigan Press.

This book is written by a long-time Saint Louis resident and black historian. The book is relevant to the paper as a cornerstone to demonstrate the deep-seeded segregationist policies in Saint Louis.

Racette, R. (2016). *Another 40 years of inequity: two-tier schooling as the lasting legacy of desegregation policy in St. Louis, Missouri.* St. Louis, Missouri: University of Missouri–St. Louis.

This dissertation is written by a black educator in Saint Louis and details how the magnet school program in Saint Louis is a failure and has led to the problem of a “two-tiered school system”. This unique problem is a key component of my argument that Saint Louis education policies for African-Americans is flawed.

Saint Louis (Mo.) Board of Education. (1995). *Desegregation and policy statement: board of education of the city of St. Louis.* Saint Louis, Missouri: Board of Education.

This document, made public by the Saint Louis Board of Education, includes discussion outlining the well-known problem of segregation in Saint Louis, specifically where it concerns the quality and desegregation of schools and the linked issues of discriminatory housing practices and sought to make policies to remedy the problems. This document is relevant to my paper in that it shows that the Saint Louis BoE was aware of the problem proposed by my argument.

Threlfall, J.M. (2016, Sep 25). Parenting in the Shadow of Ferguson: Racial socialization practices in context. Retrieved from <https://journals-sagepub-com.ezproxy.umsl.edu/doi/full/10.1177/0044118X16670280?utm_source=summon&utm_medium=discovery-provider>

This study shows the emotional stress that African-Americans endure as a consequence of their being disproportionately killed by police. It examines both parents and their children and in doing so reveals many unique perspectives. This study supports my paper by providing perspective from Saint Louis African-Americans themselves.

Wright, J.A. (1994). *Discovering African-American St. Louis: a guide to historic sites.* St. Louis, Missouri: Missouri Historical Society Press.

This book is a compilation of historical buildings and sites that were built and/or influenced by African-Americans in Saint Louis. The book is organized geographically and includes schools, memorial sites, community centers and much more. It’s largely a chronicle of Black triumph in the face of racism and adversity but necessarily has to detail those examples of adversity through St. Louis history. This book is relevant to my paper because it provides background examples of the impact African-Americans have had on the city of Saint Louis,

Racism has been and still is a driving force in the infrastructure and policy-making in Saint Louis since the city’s inception. In this paper, I will make the case that white-black racism has had a lasting impact on Saint Louis and how this unfortunately qualifies racism a Saint Louis “institution”. The areas where the problem is most prevalent, and thus will be the bulk of this paper’s content, are the linked subjects of housing and education. In each case, the opportunities available to African-Americans as compared to white Saint Louisans are unequal and unfair if not outright segregated. Tied into both of these issues are the problems associated with environmental racism, a disadvantage or adverse effect of living in a particular area that has been designated for African-Americans. This is an example of “de facto” segregation, which is maintaining a segregated system within the guise of the law (Brown, 2019).

I will then explore how this has affected African-Americans in modern Saint Louis in terms of their general feeling towards local police and government as well as how this state of being has affected them emotionally, psychologically and culturally. This claim will be supported by evidence that Saint Louis police have abused their power to target African-Americans disproportionately more than whites in the Saint Louis area.

The beginning section of this paper will be background information, followed by the separate but linked problems of housing and schooling segregation as the main aspects of Saint Louis institutional racism.

As a border state adjacent to Confederate territories, Missouri was a conflicted and contentious space. Free African-Americans and slaves walked the same streets. Until 1865, when slavery was abolished on a national level, it was illegal for blacks to even learn to read or write. Right up until this time, Missouri was a major hub for slavery auctions, given its proximity to the Mississippi River and central location in the United States. “Free” blacks had to acquire a special license simply to live within the city limits and were banned from any form of voting rights or education.

The Dred Scott case in Missouri was a landmark Supreme Court decision that set a precedent that “blacks had no rights under the constitution which white people needed to respect”. (A preservation plan, n.d.) The entire affair was an ugly and ridiculous goose chase that culminated in an ironic and tragic result. Dred Scott was a slave that was brought to Saint Louis by his owner, Peter Blow, and later sold to a man named Emerson. Emerson brought Scott to a free state where Dred Scott married a free black woman. Sometime later, Emerson moved back to Saint Louis, with his wife and slaves in tow. Then, Emerson died. He left all his property, including his slaves, to his widow. It was at this point in 1846 that Dred Scott sued for his freedom on the grounds that he had been to a free state and married a freed black woman. This first trial did not end in his favor. A second trial in 1850 did rule in Scott’s favor, although that decision was overturned just two years later and Dred Scott was returned to slavery to a man named Sandford who had subsequently purchased Scott from Emerson’s widow. Scott spent the next five years in slavery while the Supreme Court deliberated, finally coming to rule against Scott in 1857. Sanford then sold Scott back to the Blow family and Taylor Blow legally freed the Scotts from slavery, also in 1857. This good fortune would be short-lived for Scott, who died in 1858, having been a free man for less than a year.

The ending of slavery saw the rise of the Ku Klux Klan and other hate groups in the South which prompted newly freed blacks there to flee northward, many completely penniless. Chief among their reasons for asylum in the North were that since the Union troops had gone back north to begin rebuilding, there wouldn’t be anyone to stop pro-slavery southerners from infringing on their rights and returning them to slavery. One of the first cities that they would have come across in the North would be Saint Louis so many black migrants settled there. This mass migration brought about the “Exodusters”, a large movement of blacks from the south making an exodus to the North, which they believed to be the “promised land” (Lang, 2009).

Saint Louis local black leadership feared that the influx of poor blacks would become a financial drain on the local African-American economy. It was also feared that the large migration of poor, uneducated blacks would serve to confirm stereotypes that black people were inferior. Along these lines, the local black leadership sought to raise as much money as possible, as quickly as possible, to move these migrants out of Saint Louis (Lang, 2009).

The next large spike in African-American Saint Louis population occurred during the first World War. Black workers filled the void created by the local workforce going to war and the black population rose by 41% in Saint Louis (Wright, 1994).

During the war, African-Americans were able to establish their own segregated fraternal organizations and black community churches. On a trip to Saint Louis in the 1960’s, Martin Luther King Jr. remarked that “the church remained the most segregated institution in America.” (A preservation plan, n.d.). The church certainly isn’t the only segregated institution in Saint Louis.

Despite the decision made in “Liddell v. Board of Education” in 1980, there is still distinct and obvious evidence of the effects that housing segregation has had on Saint Louis. “Liddell v. Board of Education” was a court case in which the Saint Louis Board of Education claimed that previous policies to desegregate Saint Louis’ schools and neighborhoods had not helped to reduce the problem and had in fact made segregation worse. (Judd, 1997). The court ordered the United States, the state of Missouri, the city of Saint Louis and the Board of Education to make sure new housing plans were put in place that would help reduce segregation, particularly in the school system. Judd argues in 1997 that the federally assisted housing programs in Saint Louis yields the same effects as it did before the court decision was supposed to change policy. Though there had been policy changes at the federal level, local government has remained resistant to racial integration in the Saint Louis area. Judd says that though both local and federal governments have attempted to institute improvements in their housing policies, local Saint Louis government had failed to enact any such legislation and that the problem of segregation still persisted in 1997.

This sentiment is echoed in a 1995 document produced and made public by the Missouri Board of Education titled “Desegregation Report and Policy Statement: Board of Education of the City of Saint Louis”. This report plainly acknowledges the existence of racism in Saint Louis schools and points to segregated neighborhoods as the main cause. The predominantly-black areas of Saint Louis are the homes of the worse schools; an effect that was a result of institutional racism. Among the objectives of this Board of Education meeting were to increase the schooling options for children in Saint Louis by allowing parents to have more of a choice where their child attends school as well as removing a policy that prioritized new magnet schools be built in the county instead of the city. The BoE wanted to review and evaluate all current educational programs and try to eliminate any policies they found to be ineffective or wasteful. They continued their long-standing plea to the District Court that the City and County merge their vocational education programs, to no avail. The BoE sought to eliminate mandatory reassignments of students to different schools for the purpose of racial balance. Ironically, part of this policy proposed changing the previous mandatory racial mix in magnet schools from 55%/ 45% white and black students to 40%/60% in favor of African-American students. The main goals of this Desegregation Report were to “increase student learning” and “encourage integrated neighborhoods”. Failing that though, the number one concern was to “maintain at least the present level of integration” (Board of Education, 1995). Clearly this has had mixed results.

There is also strong evidence to suggest that the implementation of magnet schools in predominantly black areas of Saint Louis had poor results themselves. Magnet schools, or “selective enrollment schools”, actually contribute to systemic racism in these areas, according to a dissertation by the University of Missouri-St. Louis (Racette, 2016). Racette argues that the introduction of these magnet schools in predominantly black areas was perpetuated by the court decision “Brown v. Board of Education” in 1954, which was intended to reduce segregation by giving African-Americans more options for their children’s schooling. The addition of these schools created a “two-tier school system” (Racette, 2016), in which resources have been allocated disproportionately in favor of magnet schools and leaving neighborhood, or “open-enrollment”, schools in even worse shape than they were before. Racette also says that the magnet school program was a failure in terms of desegregating students as more black parents were opting to send their children to send their children to better schools further away from the city and very few white parents were sending their children to city magnet schools (Racette, 2016). The magnet school program has only served to deepen the divide between public schools and this second tier of school they had created.

Saint Louis remains one of the top ten most highly segregated metropolitan regions in the United States (Cambria, N., Fehler, P., Purnell, J.Q. , Schmidt, B., n.d.). From 1900 to 1970, the percentage of African-Americans who lived in the central city of Saint Louis grew from 6.2% to 40.9% (Cambria, N., Fehler, P., Purnell, J.Q. , Schmidt, B., n.d.). Over time the area experienced varying bouts of “white flight”, a mass exodus of white people out of the neighborhood which resulted in disinvestment in the neighborhood and general decay. White flight can also influence white homebuyers away from buying homes in diverse areas. Between the years of 1980 and 1988, the areas that had been exclusively white played host to a small percentage of African-Americans joining the populace. However, those areas that were at least 80% black stayed exactly the same (Farley, 1989). The Farley report goes on to demonstrate the stagnation in white-black migration and reports worsening segregation between the years 1980 and1988 (Farley, 1989).

Research compiled in 2017 involving housing preferences in Saint Louis produced an alarming result. The research involved asking white and black residents in the Saint Louis area about who they would prefer live in their neighborhoods. Generally, African-Americans answered that they preferred a 50/50 mix in black/white residency in their neighborhood. Whites that were interviewed, however, answered that they would prefer no more than 20% of their neighbors be black (Cambria, N., Fehler, P., Purnell, J.Q. , Schmidt, B., n.d.).

A 2014 comparison of two area codes in close proximity to each other is a stark representation of the segregation in the Saint Louis area. The area codes 63105 (Clayton) and 63106 (JeffVanderLou) are only ten miles apart but are defined by massive differences in terms of the affluence in the area and the racial composition of its populace.

Clayton is a predominantly white area; 78% white, 14% other and only 9% black. This area code boasts a low 4% unemployment rate and only 7% of its populace fall under the poverty line. The median household income is a respectable $90,000 a year. The people there can expect to live to the ripe old age of 85, the area code’s average life expectancy. (Cambria, N., Fehler, P., Purnell, J.Q. , Schmidt, B., n.d.).

Despite being less than ten miles away, the statistics in 63106 are much different. The racial composition in this area code is 95% African-American, 3% other and only 2% white. The unemployment rate in 63106 is 24% and 54% of its residents are considered below the poverty line. The median household yearly is only $15,000, hardly enough to feed a family with. The life expectancy in 63106 is much lower; only 67 years old. (Cambria, N., Fehler, P., Purnell, J.Q. , Schmidt, B., n.d.).

When examining unemployment rates from a 2016 figure with the city and the county combined, the average of 5.7% unemployment is well above the national rate of 4.1% unemployment. However, when broken down between white and black Saint Louis residents, it is apparent that African-Americans in Saint Louis are at a clear disadvantage. Among the white population in Saint Louis, only 3.3% are unemployed. This is slightly lower than the national rate amongst white Americans, at 3.6%. The unemployment rate for black Saint Louisans however is 11.5%, far above the national rate for black Americans of 7.3% unemployment (Cambria, N., Fehler, P., Purnell, J.Q. , Schmidt, B., n.d.).

A large factor and contributor to these trends are the poor maintenance of public transportation to these predominantly black Saint Louis communities. The public transportation in the city of Saint Louis and the county are cordoned to their specific areas and there is very low volume between the two regions. (Cambria, N., Fehler, P., Purnell, J.Q. , Schmidt, B., n.d.).This prevents African-Americans from low income areas to have access to areas where there is greater job opportunity. This is in exception to one small area that sees high transit in Valley Park. The area is characterized by affordable housing, better performing schools and moderately low poverty levels. This would seem to be a unique improvement to the segregation problem, but this project has since become a cautionary tale, as placing the affordable housing there came with its own set of problems. The area had very little in terms of infrastructure and public transportation, with the nearest bus station being more than a mile away in most cases.

The health effects of this black/white segregation can be extreme and are long-standing. In a report produced by the Interdisciplinary Environment Clinic at Washington University in 2019, it was concluded black Saint Louisans are at a much higher risk for health problems than white Saint Louisans. As of 2015, black children in the Saint Louis area were 10.8 times more likely than white children to develop asthma and also more likely to be hospitalized from complications due to exposure to mold and other air pollutions. Black children are also 2.4 times more likely than white children to test positive for lead in their blood (Goodwin, 2019).

A large portion of these environmental health effects are due to the fact that 90% of Saint Louis’ vacant properties exist in these predominantly black areas. In addition to the physical hazards of these crumbling buildings, many of them contain lead-based paints, asbestos, and other toxic substances that are put into the air. In fact, over 25% of the city’s vacant buildings are in just three neighborhoods that all boast at least 97% black residency: Wells-Goodfellow, JeffVanderLou and Greater Ville. These issues are further complicated because these predominantly black areas are also much more likely to be the site of illegal dumping of trash and hazardous chemicals (Goodwin, 2019).

As the facilitators of Saint Louis policy, policeman and African-Americans in the area have had a tense relationship. African-Americans are targeted by police much more often than their white counterparts. Between 2010 and 2016, Saint Louis had to settle at least 44 cases of wrongful death, excessive force and wrongful imprisonment, resulting in a payout cost of at least 4.7 million to those effected or their families. In the last 11 years, Saint Louis police made arrest in only 46% of murder cases. In seven city neighborhoods in Saint Louis, the police made arrest in less than 1/3 of murder cases. Six of these neighborhoods are predominantly black (Jaco, 2018).

This has, of course, made a general distrust of the Saint Louis police a part of black culture and a part of what black parents taught their children.

In a 2016 study conducted by UMSL, systemic racism and recent events had left African-Americans disillusioned and distrustful of their police and government. The study asked 100 African-American high school students living in Saint Louis several statements and asked them to rank their agreement with the statement on a scale of 1 (strong disagreement) to 5 (strong agreement). When asked if they or their family had ever trusted or befriended the police that patrol their neighborhood, 35% replied saying they had not. 35% of respondents also said they had become even less trusting of the police following the events of Ferguson. A significant portion of the problem with policing appears to come from racism, as 28% agreed that Saint Louis leaders should make sure that the police patrolling black areas should be black themselves. When asked if Barack Obama being America’s first black president had made any difference to the lives of black people in Saint Louis, 45% of those surveyed said Obama had made little or no improvement in their lives. 33% agreed that white police officers are never held accountable when they abuse their power in racist ways. 32% of respondents believed that their local black leaders were being ignored by white politicians, who make the “important decisions in Saint Louis”, demonstrating a distrust of even their local government (Graham, 2016).

Taking all this into account, African-American parents have had to adjust the fundamentals of what they are teaching their children, particularly after the shooting death of Michael Brown by a white police officer. The officer was ultimately acquitted of charges, sparking violent protests in Ferguson. In light of these events, black parents have had to be very clear about the dangers that white policemen could pose to them, particularly to African-American males. A study conducted in Ferguson after Michael Brown’s death identified four coping techniques developed by African-Americans in Saint Louis to combat the adversity of racism directed towards them. In response to the Ferguson riots parents would do one of four things: Be frank about the event in the context of their segregation from whites; teach their young men to avoid any danger, especially associated with the police; they emphasized the dissimilarity of their children from those that had been protesting; and they encouraged their children to overcome Saint Louis systemic racism through personal achievement. All of these strategies are meant to instill a sense of racial pride and self-esteem for black children that are largely discouraged and disenfranchised by the systems put in place against them by a prejudiced Saint Louis government (Threlfall, 2018).

African Americans in Saint Louis have been segregated to specific neighborhoods and schools to the detriment of the black population. This is due to racist housing and schooling policies perpetuated by the federal and local Saint Louis governments. Though attempts have been made on paper to correct these policies, no lasting improvement has been made in this area. To this effect, African-Americans in Saint Louis are disadvantaged and systemic racism in Saint Louis is still prevalent and has made a long-standing impact.