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WHAT LIES BENEATH HEALTH EQUITY IN KANSAS CITY, MO

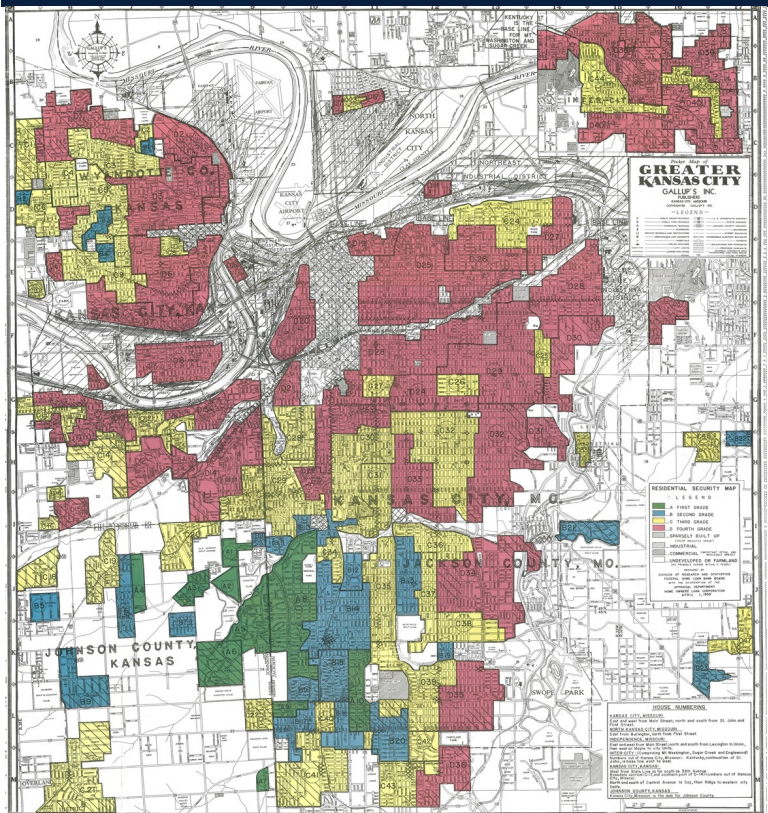
Note: This article is the first in a series that will examine structural & institutionalized racism in Kansas City, Missouri. We will consider all aspects, from policy to access points for health care, and how they function to this day under the weight of unrecognized institutionalized bias.

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



Above: 1940 Homeowners Loan Corporation “Security Map”, later deemed an instrument of redlining practices.

Source: Robert K. Nelson, LadDale Wiling, Richard Marciano, Nathan Connolly, et al. “Mapping Inequality”, American Panorama, ed. Robert K. Nelson and Edward L. Ayers, accessed October 23, 2016, <https://dsl.richmond.edu/panorama/redlining/#loc=10/39.0630/-94.5450&opacity=0.8&text=about&city=greater-kansas-city-mo>

“IT IS HEARTBREAKING AND UNACCEPTABLE THAT OUR CITY REMAINS AS SEGREGATED AS IT IS. AS WE STRIVE TO IMPROVE THE QUALITY OF LIFE FOR ALL KANSAS CITIANS, WE CAN NEVER FORGET THE ROLE RACIST POLICIES HAVE PLAYED IN OUR HISTORY AND MUST FIGHT TO TEAR DOWN OBSTACLES TO EQUALITY.

WHILE STATE SANCTIONED RACIST POLICIES HAVE SUBSIDED, WE ARE ONLY NOW BEGINNING TO DEAL WITH THEIR CONSEQUENCES. THEY CONTINUE TO DEVASTATE OUR COMMUNITIES AND NEGATIVELY IMPACT THE QUALITY OF LIFE IN THE URBAN CORE.

-QUINTON LUCAS, CITY COUNCILMAN, 3RD DISTRICT AT-LARGE

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 were no longer considered victims of 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 exam-

ple, 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].

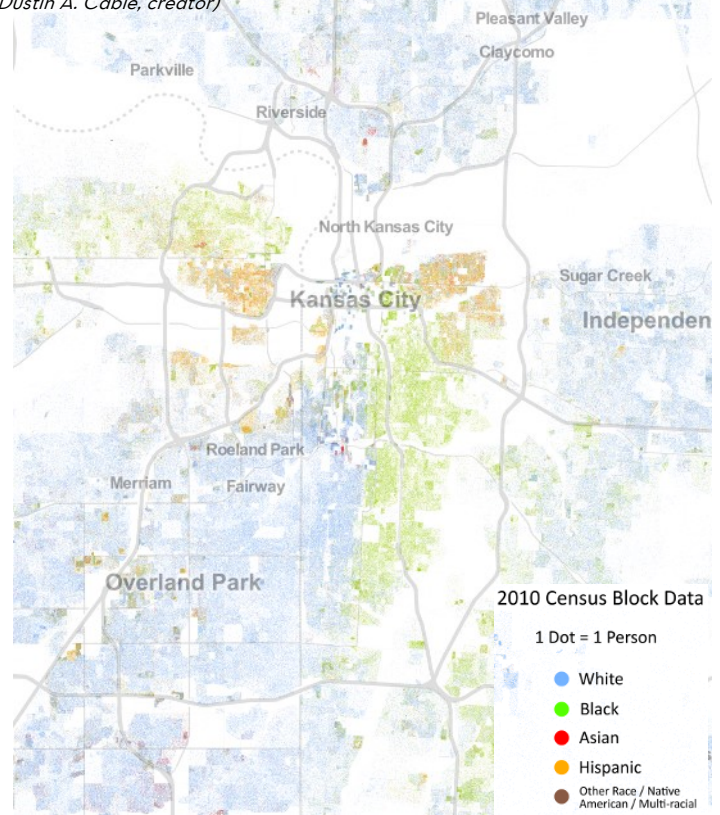
The influence of developers like Nichols became increasingly apparent in the 1950s. As

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.

RACIAL DOT MAP, KANSAS CITY METRO

Image Copyright, 2013, Weldon Cooper Center for Public Service, Rector and Visitors of the University of Virginia (Dustin A. Cable, creator)



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.

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TABLE 1. SELECTED CHARACTERISTICS OF RESIDENTS LIVING IN LIFE EXPECTANCY RANGES, KCMO 2010-2014

LIFE EXPECTANCY RANGE	PERCENT NON-WHITE	PERCENT BELOW POVERTY LEVEL*	MEDIAN FAMILY INCOME*
81-83 years	16.2	5.8	\$97,382
73-79 years	34.7	10.6	\$59,701
70-72 years	83.6	37.5	\$30,470

*2010-2014 American Community Survey 5-year estimates

FIGURE 1. LIFE EXPECTANCY BY ZIP CODE, KCMO 2010-2014

