



How Legacies of Urban Racial Segregation Shape Today's Controversies over Police Killings of Black People

Colin Gordon, University of Iowa

As racial tensions smolder in Ferguson, Baltimore, Charlotte, and beyond, it is important to look beyond the episodes of police violence that struck the match in each setting. The deaths of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Freddie Gray in Baltimore, and Keith Lamont Scott in Charlotte punctuate a long history of discrimination and segregation – a legacy that is especially stark in border cities like St. Louis and Baltimore, but present in many other places as well. Legacies of racial segregation ensure that the tinder is dry; that people in affected communities see the death of a young Black man at the hands of the police as a symbol of something much bigger. A close look at St. Louis reveals the dynamics at work.

Racial Segregation in St. Louis

Racial segregation in St. Louis and its suburbs originated in private action but was then sustained, embedded, and reinvented by public policies. In the early and middle decades of the twentieth century, realtors, developers, and white property owners erected elaborate obstacles to Black property ownership and occupancy. These restrictions were, over time, adopted and formalized as ethical obligations for private realtors, lenders, and insurers. They served, too, as organizing principles for local zoning and federal housing policies and as key determinants of value whenever property was taxed or declared “blighted” for redevelopment.

None of this was unique to St. Louis, but for a number of reasons it played out there in a particularly stark and dramatic form. Like most cities in the Midwest, St. Louis faced few geographic obstacles to growth; and the state of Missouri was notoriously lax in exerting any regulatory control over the incorporation of new municipalities. As a border city, St. Louis has always been southern in its race relations and northern in its organization of property – a particularly potent and damaging combination. Furthermore, as a river-based economy, St. Louis suffered deindustrialization and economic decline earlier and more starkly than most peer cities. All of these factors exaggerated both the motives and the opportunities for racial segregation.

Segregation Moves to the Suburbs

Ferguson is, of course, a suburb north of St. Louis proper – so where does it fit into the metropolitan story? Perhaps the best way to answer this question is to focus on four key dynamics that put Blacks at a disadvantage:

- **Decline and disinvestment took hold on the residential north side of St. Louis.** The housing stock of North St. Louis was confined by private restrictions and unprotected by local zoning. It received perilously few of the federal mortgage subsidies that underwrote new housing in the suburbs sprawling west of the city. What is more, although “blight” on the north side was the pretext for urban renewal, the resulting redevelopment and investment went elsewhere.
- **Fragmented governance, local segregation, and federal subsidies produced an uneven patchwork of development.** New housing pressed west of the city, unencumbered by local or state restraints on what we now call “sprawl.” Private development generally preceded municipal incorporation, so that incorporation (and zoning) simply cemented private subdivision patterns and choices – and the racial segregation they were designed to sustain. The resulting municipal organization was remarkably fragmented, with each of those fragments paying a particular role in sustaining and regulating patterns of land use and occupancy. In the inner suburbs of North St. Louis County such as Ferguson, residential development came earlier, the lots and houses were smaller, and land use was less restrictive than in more conventional suburbs.

- **Discrimination and disinvestment yielded a stark (and growing) disparity between Black and white wealth.** Facing systematic discrimination in both private realty and private lending, fewer African-Americans entered the housing market, or they purchased homes later in life or on relatively unfavorable terms. Federal incentives and subsidies sorted opportunity by race – not only for homeownership but also for the intergenerational accumulation of equity and wealth. Additional advantages in access to public services and good schools flowed from advantages in home ownership.
- **Local redevelopment policies displaced African-Americans from longstanding neighborhoods,** decreasing the supply of affordable and accessible housing in many parts of St. Louis city and county, while heightening demand for remaining housing. Urban renewal equated Black occupancy with “blight” and viewed “slum clearance” as its primary goal. The city’s first major projects were accompanied by cynical and haphazard plans for relocated residents. And urban renewal in St. Louis County was pursued as a means of relocating suburban pockets of African American settlement “back” into the city.

The net effect – of systematic segregation, disinvestment, the racial wealth gap, uneven development, and haphazard displacement – was a pattern of population movement beginning in the 1940s marked by “white flight” into St. Louis County and beyond, accompanied by Black movement into North County a generation later. Initially developed and populated by white working class migrants from north St. Louis, inner suburbs like Ferguson became the logical and affordable frontier for Black flight. The fragile line between white and Black occupancy at the city-county line eroded over time, but the north-south divide between Black and white occupancy largely held, so that whites leaving the city or its inner suburbs moved south and west, while Blacks leaving the city (including those leaving failed public housing projects) settled largely in North County.

In broad perspective, the weight of St. Louis’s long history of racial segregation settled on North County after the 1970s – including Ferguson. Left with an older and more modest residential base, Ferguson became home to African Americans with limited prior housing wealth or savings. Patterns and mechanisms of segregation long characteristic of the St. Louis north side both drifted into North County and were re-invented there. And along with housing segregation and limitations came concentrated poverty, constricted economic opportunities, political disenfranchisement, and poor public services. Predatory policing egged on by a pervasive local fiscal crisis was the one public service experienced by many Black residents of Ferguson and similar St. Louis inner suburbs. As we know, this set of conditions set the stage for the death of Michael Brown and ensuing protests against longstanding police practices.