Segregation and the Decline of African American Neighborhoods in St. Louis

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Driving down Page boulevard, one might catch a glimpse of a series of buildings adorned

with paintings of St. Louis politicians, entrepreneurs and entertainers. Better Family Life, a local

non-profit commissioned artist Christopher Green to paint the portraits for their Beyond the Wall project (Lisenby, 2016). The project aims to beautify abandoned buildings through artwork, and raise the esteem of those living in marginalized neighborhoods (Lisenby, 2016). While the paintings have been well-received by the community, residents still think more can be done. Resident Kim Boyd states: "the murals are better than the ugly boarded up houses, but to be honest, I would much prefer the city to tear them all down and build better housing or rehab them and sell them to members of the same community" (Lisenby, 2016). Boyd shares the same dream of many African American residents in North City, who have watched their neighborhoods decline for years. But in order for this dream to become reality, it is important to identify the source of decline. This paper argues that the steady decline of African American neighborhoods is perpetuated by the abandoned property crisis, but was initially caused by a series of de jure and de facto segregationist policies and practices.

To begin the discussion on how past policies impact current segregation, it is important to define the concepts of de facto and de jure segregation that are widely discussed in the literature. Frankenburg and Taylor note that "the de jure/ de facto distinction emerged to distinguish between statutory segregation and segregation arising from private choice and served to create a class of segregation that was not protected by the law" (189, 2018). In this case de jure segregation means segregation created by law, and de facto is segregation which arises from private choice. Frankenburg and Taylor go on to argue that although de jure segregation was found unconstitutional, de facto segregation persists and is at the root of existing inequality (Frankenburg & Taylor, 2018). On the other hand, author Richard Rothstein contends that de facto segregation even exists (2017). He claims de facto segregation is a myth and prevailing patterns of segregation are all a result of specific policies rather than private decisions. Further,

de facto segregation is often used as a tool by the courts to combat desegregation programs (Rothstein, 2017).

While Rothstein makes a compelling argument against de facto segregation, the term is still important to understand. As Frankenburg and Taylor mentioned, de facto segregation encompasses private choice, but these private choices can still be racially motivated (2018). Instead of claiming de facto segregation is myth, it should be reframed. If the courts viewed de facto segregation with the same severity as de jure segregation, it would lose its power to uphold segregated schools and communities. De facto segregation should be acknowledged, but as a result of de jure segregation. The definition of de facto segregation has been demeaned to downplay patterns of segregation, rather than acknowledge how previous policy has shaped biases which perpetuate these patterns.

While de jure segregation is usually associated with the Jim Crow Era, patterns of segregation emerged long before. In "Racial Segregation Under Slavery" Martin Ruef argues that slavery produced racial segregation during the antebellum period through the residential isolation of slaves and free people of color. While other scholars have argued that there was no need for segregation due to the clearly defined roles under slavery, the study uses the Sequence Index of Segregation to suggest that segregation was actually higher during the antebellum era than postbellum era. In 1880, postbellum, the mean level of residential segregation was 40.5%. However in 1850, antebellum, the mean level of residential segregation was 55% (Ruef, 2021).

Ruef posits his arguments on the racial threat theory which focuses on "punitive attitudes and mobilization against minorities who are seen as a threat to the status of a majority group." Using this theory, Ruef argues that Blacks were segregated from White slave owners and White workers due to the threat of economic competition and slave mobilization. White tradesmen

protested living near free people of color because they often lowered the cost of labor. Whereas, White slaveowners distanced slave quarters from free communities of color and White living quarters fearing that slaves would mobilize and threaten White hegemony. Ruef notes how this parallels modern views that suggest a strong African American presence is often associated with higher crime and economic decline (Ruef, 2021). While Ruef is able to successfully draw parallels between the antebellum period and modern views on the presence of African Americans in White communities, he does not explain how segregation became to be so prevalent after decreasing for a brief period in the postbellum era. This phenomenon is best explained by the brief period of reconstruction and the subsequent emergence of Jim Crow.

The Reconstruction Era was characterized by the integration of Southern States and previously enslaved African Americans into the Union. During this time, the Radicals dominated Missouri politics (Parrish, 1965). They advocated on behalf of extending civil rights to African Americans and creating a strong economic plan to help Missouri recover from the Civil War (Parrish, 1965). Under Radical rule, slavery was formally abolished, African Americans were guaranteed Civil Rights and White civilians that were complicit in acts of rebellion against the Union were disenfranchised (Parrish, 1965). While the government actively worked to integrate African Americans into society, the eventual dissolution of the Radical Party and the emergence of Jim Crow offset this progress in the coming years (Parrish, 1965).

During the Civil War and Reconstruction Era, African Americans challenged segregation in the courts, and were occasionally successful. (Alexander, 2010). However, in 1896 in the case *Plessy v. Ferguson*, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that racial segregation laws did not violate the U.S. Constitutions as long as segregated facilities were created equal (Alexander, 2010). This

ruling reinforced the legitimacy of existing segregationist policy and allowed for new policy to be drafted (Alexander, 2010).

The report *Segregation in St. Louis: Dismantling the Divide* offers specific examples of segregationist policy that was passed in St. Louis after *Plessy v. Ferguson* (Cambria, Fehler & Schmidt, 2018). Zoning laws were one of the first methods introduced to segregate the city. Although first introduced to protect residents from public nuisances such as heavy industry producing noise or pollution, zoning laws were later extended to protect White residents from African Americans. In 1916 the city of St. Louis passed an ordinance that prohibited African Americans from purchasing or renting a house in blocks that were more than 75% white (Cambria et al., 2018). These ordinances were considered unconstitutional by the Supreme Court two years later but white residents found new ways to deter St. Louis's growing African American population from infiltrating their neighborhoods (Cambria, Fehler &Schmidt, 2018).

In *Mapping Decline,* Colin Gordon acknowledges deed restrictions or restrictive covenants as a powerful tool to reinforce segregation. Realtors and homeowners began writing covenants into their deeds that prohibited renting or selling the property to African Americans (2008). In *Citizen Brown: Race, Democracy, and Inequality in the St. Louis suburbs,* Gordon argues that these covenants were supported by two notable events that involved both the local and state government. In 1876 Missouri formalized its rules for local governance which gave cities with a certain population threshold the option of adopting a charter of self-government. In the same year, the city of St. Louis separated from the county. These two events later employed smaller municipalities to form around restrictive covenants in the county. Local governments could choose which neighborhoods to incorporate into their municipalities, often selecting those

with restrictive deed covenants in place to discourage African Americans from infiltrating the community (Gordon, 2019).

Gordon's explanation of how local policy was able to influence segregation exemplifies how de jure and de facto policy interact. While explicit policies that prevented African Americans from moving into predominantly White neighborhoods were outlawed, White municipalities were able to rely on St. Louis' policies regarding self-government to reinforce their personal preferences. This reinforces the idea that although de facto segregation may derive from personal choice, it is often upheld or supported by legitimized policy.

In 1948, the restrictive covenants that shaped many White communities were challenged in the case of *Shelley v. Kramer* (Cambria et al., 2018). J.D. and Ethel Shelley, an African American couple, tried purchasing a home in St. Louis City that had a restrictive covenant that forbade the sale of the property to anyone not "wholly of the Caucasian race" (Cambria et al., 2018, p. 21). The U.S. Supreme Court ruled that courts could not enforce restrictive deed covenants. However, it did not outlaw these covenants between homeowners, allowing municipalities to continue incorporating residents that agreed to uphold them (Cambria et al., 2018).

In addition to local and state government, the literature suggests the federal government also played a key role in reinforcing segregation. In "Insuring Inequality: The Role of the Federal Housing Administration in the Urban Ghettoization of African Americans," John Kimble argues the Fair Housing Act of 1934 and the subsequent creation of the Federal Housing Association (FHA) contributed to the ghettoization of African American communities. The primary role of the FHA was to provide mortgage insurance to lenders to mitigate the risk of loss on loans thereby encouraging banks and private lenders to provide low-cost mortgages. This allowed the

FHA to dictate the terms of home lending. To ensure homebuyers would not default on loans, the FHA adopted a risk-assessment program to determine the viability of lending in certain communities. Kimble argues that the principles of the risk-assessment program were primarily influenced by race. Integrated communities or homogenous African American communities were labeled as "hazardous" and were denied access to low-cost mortgages while homogenous White communities were considered "best" and overwhelmingly approved. The process of this risk-assessment became known as redlining and had lasting effects on the development of Black neighborhoods (Kimble 2007).

After looking at how segregation policy was upheld, Ruef's claim about the persistence of the perceived threat of African Americans from the Antebellum Era proves to be true. The fear that African Americans would bring crime and spur economic decline clearly persisted into the Jim Crow Era and culminated into codified segregation.

Dismantling the Divide addresses some of the effects of this codified segregation. First, the author's note that due to the absence of low-interest mortgages, African Americans were often subjected to higher and predatory interest rates. This discouraged many African Americans from buying homes which prevented them from building wealth through home equity. In addition, the lack of ownership stake in African American communities made it challenging to retain residents and draw investment from businesses. The report compares neighborhoods that were labeled "hazardous" with neighborhoods that were labeled "best" and finds that neighborhoods that were previously labeled hazardous continue to have a higher concentration of minorities in addition to a higher percentage of lower-to-moderate income residents (Cambria et al., 2018).

Although de jure redlining was eventually outlawed, de facto redlining continued to exist as outlined by Fisher and Fox in *The Foreclosure Echo.* Fisher and Fox introduce the term reverse redlining. Reverse redlining is a process in which African Americans were targeted by predatory lenders during the housing bubble precluding the 2008 financial crisis. These predatory lenders often offered African Americans high-interest mortgages or refinancing plans that exceeded the actual value of the home. In "Over the edge: trajectories of African-American middle neighborhoods in St. Louis since 2000" Alan Mallach studies the patterns of predatory lending in St. Louis. (2020). Through his research, Mallach finds that 75% of home mortgages made in North City (a predominant African American sector of the city) middle-income neighborhoods were high-cost mortgages in comparison to 29% in the rest of the city (2020).

Mallach also offers discussion on the effects of predatory lending, focusing on property abandonment and the perpetuation of decline. Mallach concluded that due to the high cost of mortgages, many residents of North City were forced to default on their loans which led to foreclosures and subsequent vacancies. Many of these homes remained vacant and after studying eighteen different census tracts in North City, Mallach found that vacancies increased by 60.7 percent in these communities between the year 2000 and 2015 (2020).

Though it is not as widely discussed, vacancies tend to be are more prevalent in Black communities. In the journal article "The divergent city: unequal and uneven development in St. Louis" Tighe and Ganning further explain how foreclosures and subsequent vacancy tend to affect poorer, minority communities more in St. Louis. They state: "in population decline, the majority White areas of St. Louis converted empty units and lots to larger single-family homes and side yards, maintaining a high quality of life. In majority Black neighborhoods, declining population resulted in a weak localized real estate market and an excess of vacant land and

buildings" (666, Tighe and Ganning, 2015). The authors claim that initiatives to revitalize areas that have been impacted by foreclosures often overlook the racial divide in St. Louis, citing The Neighborhood Stabilization Program as a prime example. The Neighborhood Revitalization Program identified 50 areas of St. Louis that could benefit from the program, whose main goal was to combat the negative effects of concentrated foreclosures on surrounding neighborhoods. Although 50 areas were identified, only 21 were selected for the program, many of which were in South City. This ignored the devastation in North City St. Louis, which at the time had experienced more population decline and had a lower median household income, but a higher African American population (Tighe and Ganning, 2015).

Not addressing these abandoned buildings can have harsh implications for the African American communities they occupy. Tighe and Ganning note that an increase in abandoned properties can lower the property values of nearby homes and increase criminal activity (2015). A study conducted by Galster and Raleigh found that "increasing neighborhood shares of renter households, diminished median family incomes, and falling population densities yield higher rates of violent crime, conceivably by eroding collective efficacy, increasing household and economic and social stress profiles, and generating more vulnerable routine patterns" (389, 2016). Although the study focuses on Detroit, the authors note that these patterns are prominent in other depopulating former industrial cities, such as St. Louis (Galster and Raleigh, 2015).

In addition to increased crime, abandoned properties can also impact both physical and mental health. Revisiting the report *Dismantling the Divide,* the authors note that there are severe health disparities between communities of color and predominantly White communities, exacerbated by community conditions including abandoned property. Abandoned properties can omit certain pollutants into the air, leading to poorer air quality and increasing risk of respiratory

and neurological hazards. In addition, rodents and pests that occupy the properties can move into nearby homes, increasing the risk of transmittable diseases. Asthma is cited as one of the more prominent physical ailments that members of North St. Louis, a predominantly African American neighborhood, experience. Residents are also at risk for anxiety and depression as communities riddled with vacant lots may feel discouraged by their environment and resort to isolation (Cambria et al., 2018).

Lastly, the abandoned properties crisis that disproportionately affects African American communities can lead to a decrease in value of nearby properties and a decrease in property tax revenue essential for funding certain public services. Han cites a study conducted in Philadelphia that found the presence of a vacant property on a block reduces the market value of nearby properties by an average of $6,720. Han supports this with her own study conducted in Baltimore, which finds that abandoned property within 250 feet reduces nearby property values by .87% (2014). Accordino and Johnson argue that such a reduction in property values not only decreases residents' wealth, but an important tax base (2000). As market value decreases, so does a home's assessed value. This forces cities to either raise property taxes on those who still reside in the area, or suffer from reduced tax revenues. A reduction in property tax revenue means less funding for schools, and other public improvements and maintenance (Accordino and Johnson, 2000).

The literature clearly suggests that past government policies have left a lasting impact on African American communities. These policies isolated African American communities from White communities and left them in a state of decline. This decline is exacerbated through the abandoned property crisis, which often leaves neighborhoods subjected to higher rates of crime, lower property values, and increased risk for physical and mental distress. Unfortunately, there

has been very little written about these problems in conjunction. It is important to acknowledge how de facto and de jure segregation have left African American communities disadvantaged, but it is equally important to recognize which factors are perpetuating decline. By addressing the abandoned property crisis, it may be possible to attract investment from a diverse population and remedy the effects of segregation. However, it would be nearly impossible to remedy the effects of segregation in a blighted neighborhood where there is little hope for investment. Connecting the issues of segregation and abandoned housing could be the key to developing more constructive solutions.

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