

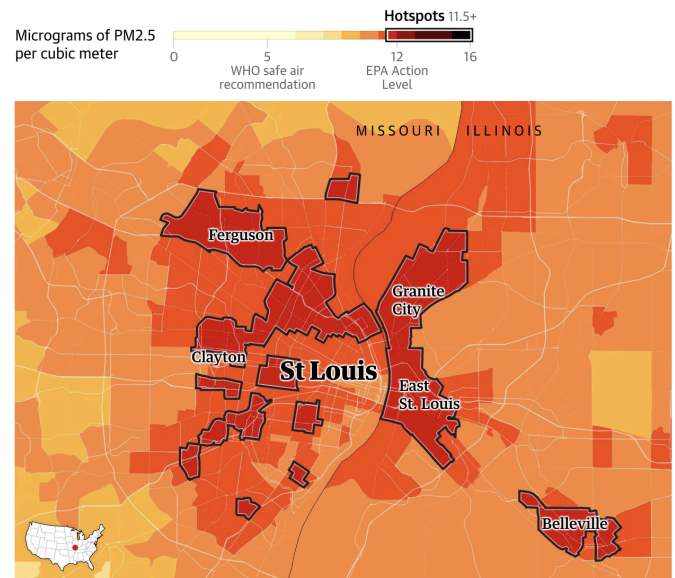
Air Pollution and Segregation St. Louis: The Need for an Intersectional Lens

By: Jaden Southern

Earlier this year, an article by The Guardian on the “10 worst places to live in US for air pollution” cites St. Louis, Missouri as number 7. In the article, a source talks of the number of high polluting power plants in the region including coal burning energy plants responsible, but most notable is this statistic: “the populations in neighborhoods with the highest PM2.5 levels were 52% Black,

compared to 22% for other areas of the same counties.” And while this is certainly shocking for a county that is 57% White and only 28% Black, it’s far less than news to a local pastor in one of these Black neighborhoods; in a call to environmental action, Reverend Rodrick Burton laments about the number of children in his congregation suffering from asthma. The condition affects not only his parishioners, but his wife and children as well.

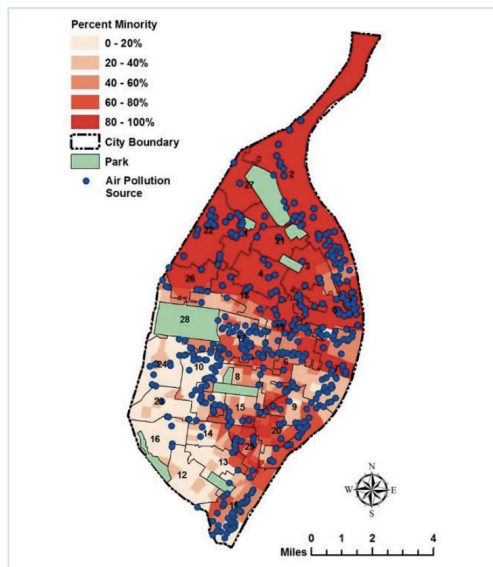
While poor air quality has afflicted a great deal of St. Louis for decades, its Black citizens are feeling the worst of its effects. And this is not by accident. Continuing trends of structural segregation perpetuate many disparities on Black community members. However, while current city planning attempts to identify areas of vulnerability, it is not



Guardian graphic. Sources: Center for Air, Climate and Energy Solutions and US Census Bureau. Note: Data is the average from 2011-15.

addressing the larger systems that created disparities in the first place. For Black St. Louisans to receive justice, this must change.

Air pollution and its impacts on health are widely known. According to the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), smoke and smog from pollution sources like factories, major roadways, rail yards, and industrial facilities can lead to health effects like asthma, reduced lung function, cardiovascular disease, and premature death. In St.



Air pollution sources and percent residents of color by ward

Louis, most of these air pollution sources can be found in neighborhoods of color resulting in heavily disproportionate exposure. Further, many of the areas bordering major highways are majority-black as well. This proximity has already been responsible for a great deal of harm, with the potential to cause more. In St. Louis City, between 2010 - 2015, Black St. Louisans made 8.5 times more emergency room visits than white residents.

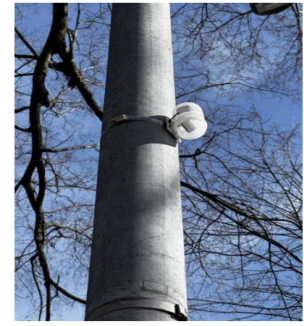
A recent study of the region also found that areas with higher levels of racial isolation of Black communities and economic isolation of poverty had elevated cancer risk due to air toxics, concluding strong evidence of unequal distribution of carcinogenic air toxics in the St. Louis metro.

Importantly, air pollution is only one symptom of larger systemic racism in the city. A history of segregationist policies has created a city rampant with inequity in healthcare, food access, education, work opportunity, and numerous other sectors of life. Today, a clear divide between Black and White neighborhoods – and all of these

inequities – is marked by the famous Delmar Boulevard, sometimes referred to as the Delmar Divide. To the north sits most of the Black population, facing closing grocery stores and unexplained evictions. To the south are the more affluent White neighborhoods where construction is constant. Only in 2015 was source of income legally made a protected class. Continuing segregation, and subsequent divestment in the Black areas of St. Louis has created a debilitating set of cumulative burdens. Poor air quality affects everyone, but Black St. Louisans are facing much more than that.

In regard to air pollution more broadly, as it does impact many parts of the region, the regional government council has taken notice. On their webpage they highlight pollutants of concern and share their plans on air quality improvement as seven counties in the region are not up to EPA 2015 standards, but a scan of the eight 2023 Air Quality Committee Presentations reveals that only two consider the inequity of the issue at all. One, which begins by highlighting the different equity contexts in the region goes on to share its Investment Priority Project which glaringly leaves out the area with the highest rates of asthma, a majority Black part of the region. Additionally, of the 8 air quality monitors in the region, only one is in a majority black neighborhood, and it sits suspiciously close to its southern border. This concern is shared by the writers of a 2019 environmental justice report on St. Louis who claim that there are just too few air pollution monitoring stations to properly compare air pollution between neighborhoods.

Today, many groups in St. Louis are in the fight for climate justice in St. Louis, including Action St. Louis, ArchCity Defenders, Dutchtown South Community Corporation, and others.



Installed samplers; Picture Credit: Yan He, Washington University in St. Louis

Currently, through a partnership between a North County Law Center and Washington University, a total of 20 small ozone monitors have been installed in a few neighborhoods in these communities. Placed in 2022, they already show high concentrations of ozone. Still, while a step in the right direction, far more efforts are needed toward full coverage air quality monitoring in overburdened communities. Also, these groups and their members are a minority, and they don't hold nearly as much power as the government and institutions that could spearhead change. Further, most of the groups are political and civil rights advocates that aren't explicitly focused on environmental issues.

To combat the impacts of air pollution in St. Louis and implement lasting change, solutions must be nuanced in scope, recognizing that this burden is cumulative. Most importantly, they must be created with input from and consent of those most impacted. For immediate responses, community members call for the implementation of sufficient air monitoring stations which can ensure clean air and effective air quality management. In the long run, things like better access to affordable housing, better health care, and investment in the Black community of St. Louis will be critical to a healthy and thriving St. Louis for all of its citizens.

Jaden was born and raised in Florissant, Missouri, a city in north St. Louis.
Having grown up in St. Louis, they were excited to learn more about the issues their
community is facing and what can be done to help