RISE:2016
RESEARCH, INNOVATION AND SCHOLARSHIP EXPO

Undergraduate
Category: Social Sciences, Business and Law
Degree Level: BS in Behavioral Neuroscience
Abstract ID# 1047
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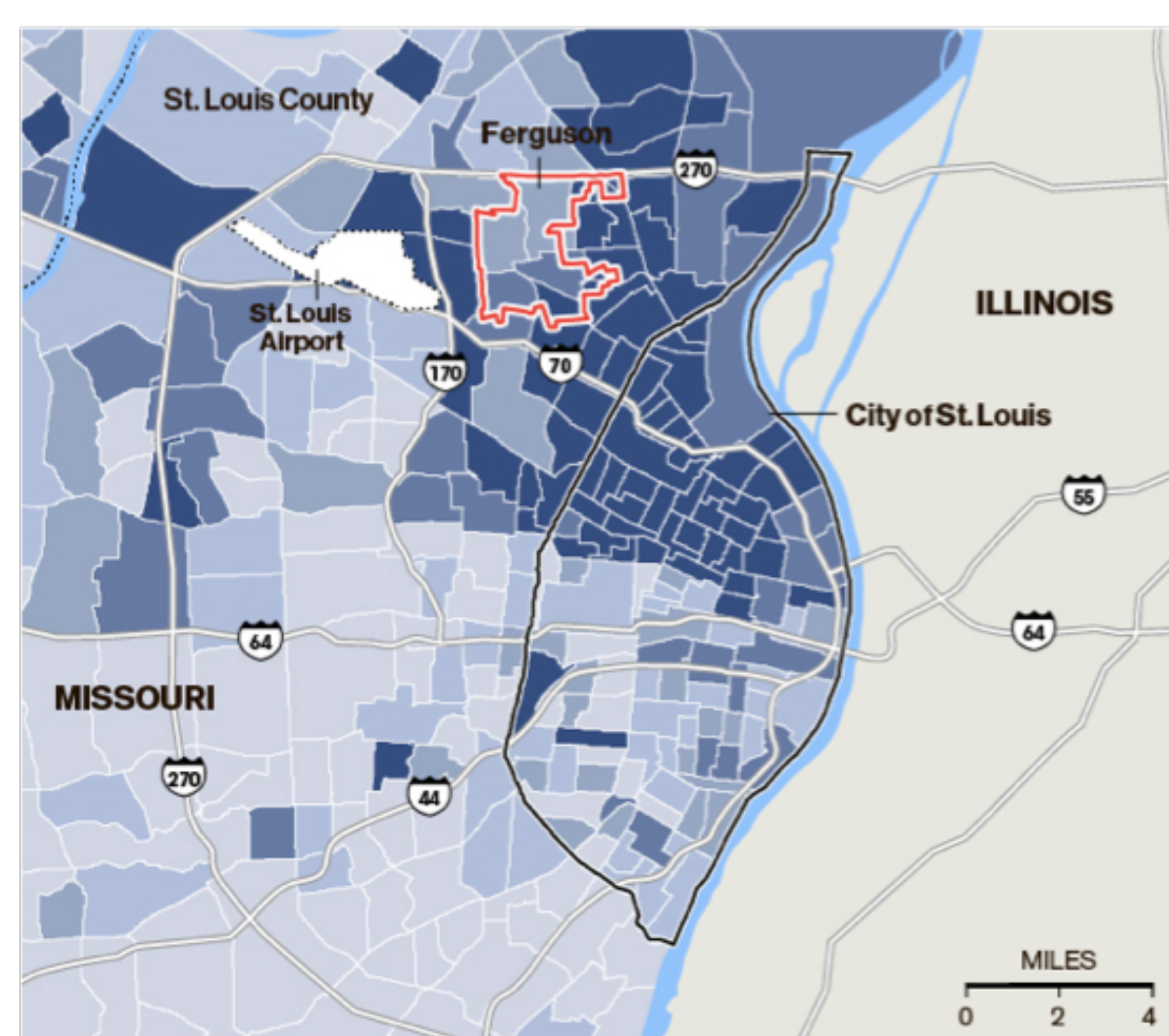# The Black Voices Project

Abstract:

Twelve miles northwest of St. Louis, Missouri is the city of Ferguson, a majorly Black community which has risen to public consequence by the instance of the August 9th 2014 fatal shooting of unarmed black teenager Michael Brown. The death of then 18 year old Brown by Ferguson Police officer Darren Wilson incited public outrage, causing bouts of local civil disorder, community protests, and violent action. The goal of this qualitative research project is to highlight views on policing, protesting, and politics from Black community members in Ferguson and St. Louis, a perspective often excluded from mainstream media discussion. The interviews suggest that engagement with members of the African American community on issues of civil unrest illuminate the driving forces behind protesting as well as a model for effective policing in communities of color.
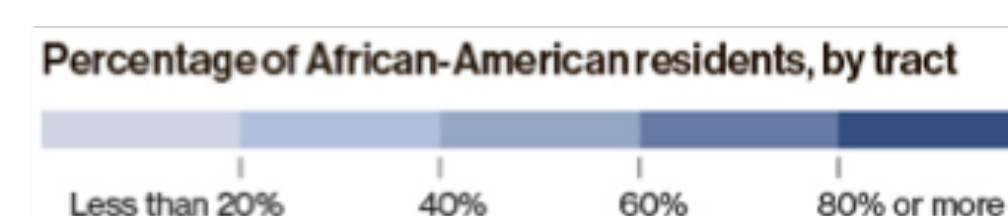
Introduction & Methods:

The Black Voices Project works to challenge media discourse of Ferguson unrest through engaged dialogue with 29 members of the Black community in St. Louis. "Black Voices" include general community members, nonprofit leaders, youth organizers, faith leaders, concerned citizens, students, and young professionals who identify as Black or African American. These interviews were conducted May and June of 2015, the summer following the death of Mike Brown. Interviews were one on one, discussion based, and qualitative in nature. The content centered on the participants' lived experiences as a Black or African American community member in Ferguson or St. Louis, their views on the local and national issue of policing, experience with protesting, and understanding of political representation in the region. This content as well as photos of the participants were used to create a photoblog, TheBlackVoicesProject.com, and an accompanying report by the same name available on this site.

TheBlackVoicesProject.com
Identity. Understanding. Reclamation. Progress.

Ferguson & St. Louis, Missouri, 2010

Percentage of African-American residents, by tract
Less than 20%   40%   60%   80% or more

Results & Discussion:

Policing
- Police brutality has both physical and emotional elements, rooted in excessive force and unconscious bias.
- *A model for effective policing regionally and nationally:*
  - Community based policing where officers live in the communities they work and serve as a resource to residents
  - Address unconscious racial bias through sensitivity training
  - Promote community input in the review, hiring, and firing of officers
  - Addresses larger socioeconomic factors that cause crime, refocusing on the prevention of violence through investment in low-income communities

Protesting
Community members believe Mike Brown's death prompted civil unrest in August and November 2014 for the following reasons:
- *Immediate Aftermath*: Four hours is how long it took for Ferguson and St. Louis Police authorities to remove Mike Brown's body from the street of Canfield Drive. This served as a sign of disrespect and callousness to the community.
- *Social Media*: Twitter and Facebook served a role in prompting the response of civil action, as individuals posted images of the brutal scene, connecting those around the world in outrage against police violence.
- *Location*: Longstanding conflict between police and Ferguson residents of color has been uncovered by the Department of Justice investigation into the force's racially biased ticketing quotas. This as well the socioeconomic inequity between white and black citizens in the region only fueled the anger.

The purpose of 2014 Ferguson protests:
- Served to bring relevant local and national discussion on issues of policing, despite media dramatization of violent action.
- Fostered a sense of dignity and empowerment in the black community.
- Supported youth driven leadership and activism.

Political Representation
Reform:
Community members generally believe in the necessity of having new leaders of color and an electorate that reflects communities racially. An emphasis was also placed on holding politicians accountable to the communities they serve.
Radical Change:
A second school of thought is fostering self-dependence in black communities, limiting reliance on systems of oppression through black entrepreneurship efforts and community based collectives.

Conclusion:

Mainstream media bias in the protesting coverage of Ferguson largely involves limited discussion of historical racial inequity in the region as well as a focus on violent action and looting. Through discussion with members of the black community, an alternative narrative of the 2014 unrest is elucidated. Firstly, comprehensive policing would tackle police brutality through community based policing. Secondly, the death of Mike Brown sparked civil unrest because of the immediate aftermath, social media, and the existing institutional injustices in St. Louis. Finally, a model for future political change lies in reform, diversifying the electorate and holding politicians accountable to the communities they serve and in radical change, investing in alternative systems centered on black community independence. Through distributing this narrative digitally, this research serves to redefine public discourse to include the perspectives of and solutions posed by communities of color.

The Black Voices of Ferguson and St. Louis