

Racial Disparities in Health Outcomes in Kansas City, Missouri

UMKC Internal Medicine Society

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Condition

Health disparities

Minority Health Indicators, KCMO Department of Health, June 2008

- **Report covers a 15 year period – all populations saw improvements in many health indicators but virtually no closing of the gap for most disparities**
- **Disparity ratios for Non-Hispanic Blacks, mortality indicators**
 - **All deaths = 1.46**
 - **Cardiovascular disease = 1.56**
 - **Cancer = 1.38**
 - **Diabetes = 2.93**
 - **Infectious disease = 1.49**
 - **HIV = 2.21**
 - **Homicide = 8.16**
 - **Infant mortality = 2.3**
- **“The community will need to focus on the ‘causes of the causes’ – the fundamental structures of the social hierarchy and the socially determined structures these conditions create in which people grow, live, work and age – the social determinants of health.”**

Other disparities in outcomes in Kansas City

- **Crime**
- **Education**
- **Employment**
- **Income**
- **Basic municipal services**

Criteria

- **Not the natural order of things**
- **Municipal services: variable inputs – similar outcomes**

Cause

- **Institutional racism**
 - **Spivak and Lester**
 - **White privilege is invisible to well-meaning white people**
 - **Confronting well-meaning white people is rude**

Solutions

- **Speak truth to power – gently**
 - **The park board speech – and the reaction to it.**

But there’s a dark side to this legacy. As local historian Sherry Lamb Schirmer revealed in her book *A City Divided*, Kessler saw the city’s elites as the real beneficiaries of his parks system. He said that his parks system would give “a permanent residence character to *certain* sections of the city, and will determine for a long time to come, if not permanently, the best and most valuable residence property.” □

□

Indeed, The Paseo, which passes right by this park and which was Kessler’s loveliest boulevard, was deliberately routed through certain neighborhoods for the express purpose displacing their African-American residents.

□ □

This culture of elitism and community divisiveness has persisted throughout the history of the Parks Board. The commissioners have often been chosen from among the city’s wealthiest. In fact, the reason the Parks Board is separate from the City management structure at City Hall is because the City’s elites wanted it to be free from the influence of regular folks. □

- **New Tools**
- **Light rail and regional transit**
- **□ Smart with the money**
 - **Funding for the zoo or funding for cops**
 - **Posnanski, “a Mayor who wants to destroy the zoo.”**
 - **Using the health levy funds wisely**
 - **Specify a clear public purpose**
 - **Reducing disparities in health outcomes**
 - **Focus on prevention**
 - **Use performance based contracts**
 - **Accountability for results**

Reducing disparities in health outcomes in Kansas City is a political problem. Politics is the process by which we contend with each other to

determine which of our values we will make real. If we want changes in outcomes, we must confront and contend.