



## Social Mobility

### The Necessary Focus of St. Louis Investment in Black Males

SEAN JOE AND ROBERT MOTLEY

The tragic killing of Michael Brown on August 9, 2014, at the hand of Darren Wilson, a Ferguson, Missouri, police officer, further highlighted the long-standing disparities in health, education, employment, and overall well-being disproportionately burdening Black boys and young men in the St. Louis region (city and county). Since Brown's death, we have observed a continuous environment of civil unrest and weakened confidence in the region's welfare and economic future. An examination of reports and media discussions following the incidents in Ferguson reveal actions that have rightly centered on attending to structural determinants, racism, and equity (U.S. Department of Justice, 2015). Notably absent, however, was a central focus on the economic opportunity and overall well-being of Black boys and young men in the St. Louis region.

Black boys and young men are among the most vulnerable in America's social-economic structure (Bentley-Edwards, Thomas, & Stevenson, 2013; Chetty & Hendren, 2015; Chetty, Hendren, Jones, & Porter, 2018). Arguably, Black males often experience little economic opportunity, resulting in their more precarious and persistently poor upward mobility patterns. Consequently, the males and the St. Louis region are challenged by the cost and consequences of rising crime, an overburdened emergency medical care system, and underfunded public education. To achieve regional transformation in equity, as suggested by the HomeGrown STL initiative, local data is needed to guide and evaluate strategic coordination, planning and investments in Black male development. Therefore, this report examines decennial trends in social mobility among Black males ages 18 to

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***Excellent  
Scholarship  
is a Prerequisite  
for Social Change***

—Sean Joe

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The Race and Opportunity Lab examines race, opportunity, and social mobility with an emphasis on informing policies, interventions, and intra-professional practice.

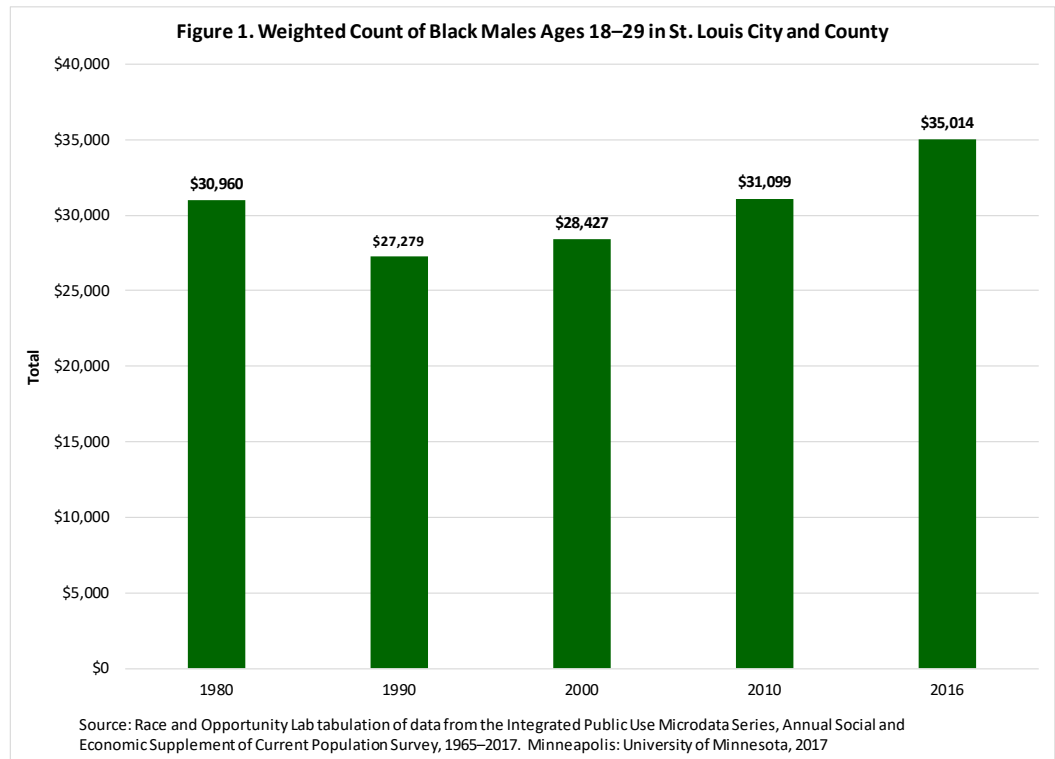


Black boys and young men are among the most vulnerable in America's social economic structure.

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**Total Population of Black Males 18–29 years of age**

Figure 1 presents the weighted population counts of the number of Black males 18–29 years of age in St. Louis City and County for the decennial years 1980, 1990, 2000, 2010, and 2016. The young Black male populations ranged from 27,000 to 35,000.



29, and concurrent trends in crime in the St. Louis region.

**A focus on upward mobility**

Focusing on upward mobility allows for a robust and historical examination of the developmen-

tal context in which many Black boys are raised and provides a measurable assessment of their American Dream experiences and the evaluations of regional social interventions.

Upward mobility supports the idea that every generation of Black males will have the oppor-

**35,014**

**Number of Black boys and young men ages 18–29 living in the St. Louis region in 2016.**

This represents a 13% increase since 1980.

**Methods**

Data for this report was sourced from the Integrated Public Use Microdata Series, Annual Social and Economic Supplement of Current Population Survey (2017). This data was used to estimate employment, educational attainment, and personal income outcomes for Black males ages 18 to 29 in the St. Louis region (City and County) by year (1980, 1990, 2000, and 2010). To obtain a representative sample statistic of all Black males 18 to 29 years of age in St. Louis City and County, sample weights were applied to adjust the sample composition of Black males 18 to 29 years of age to be reflective of the population’s composition for each decennial year.

**Employment** is defined as Black male civilians who self-reported doing any work at all for pay or profit, or working at least fifteen hours without pay in a family business or farm, and who did not work during the previous week but acknowledged having a job or business from which they were temporarily absent (e.g., due

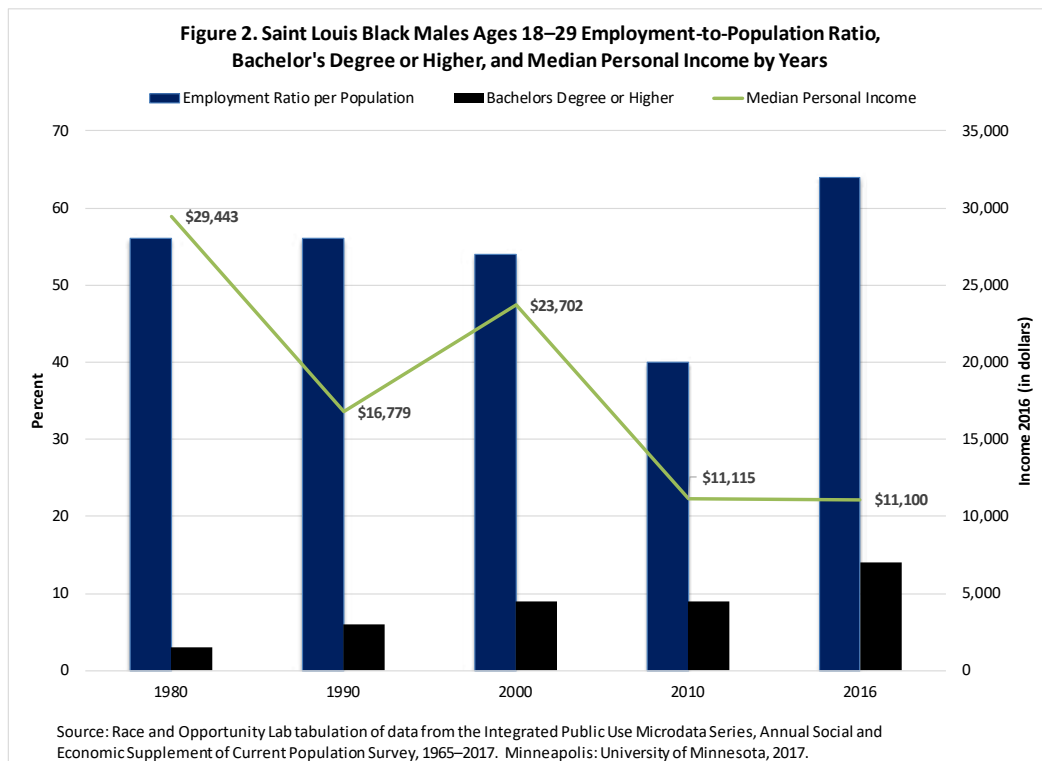
to illness, vacation, bad weather, or labor dispute). **Educational Attainment** is defined as the self-reported highest year of school or degree completed by Black males. **Median Personal Income** is defined as self-reported total pre-tax personal income or losses from all sources for the previous calendar year. The Bureau of Labor Statistics (2017) Consumer Price Index (CPI-U-RS) inflation calculator was used to make adjustment for the median personal income data to reflect 2016 dollars. The CPI-U-RS can serve as a valuable proxy for researchers needing a historical estimate of inflation using current methods. Descriptive analysis was conducted in the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version 22.0 to produce employment, educational attainment, and personal income estimates for Black males ages 18 to 29 in the St. Louis region for 1980, 1990, 2000, and 2010.

**Note:** Black men ages 18 to 29, including those with no personal income, are included in these estimates.

# 14%

**Number of unemployed Black men ages 18–29 living in the St. Louis region.**

This is double the unemployment rate for the population of 18- to 29-year-olds living in the region.



tunity to live in families with higher income and educational achievement levels than the prior generation. A recent national study reported the unsettling picture that the wealth gap between Black and White families has widened (Chetty, Hendren, Jones, & Porter, 2018). In addition, the children, specifically Black males, of Black families that attain middle-class status are less likely to retain this status or better. Thus, the topic of Black male upward mobility is important to monitor as an indicator of regional economic equity and opportunity.

In St. Louis, there was a notable 12.5% decline in the population between 1980 and 1990, followed by a period of marked increase, peaking at 35,014 in 2016, which represents a change of 26%.

This report examines key social mobility indicators for Black boys and young Black men in the St. Louis region. Such issues include unemployment, poor levels of advanced education, low- living income, and decreased quality of life. Using the FBI Uniform Crime report decennial data, we also examine the trends in homicide ranking for St. Louis among U.S. Metropolitan Statistical Areas with populations of 100,000 or more. Also discussed are short- and long-term sustainable policy solutions to this crisis. The solutions provide a context for the proposed population level intervention, HomeGrown STL, which seeks

to advance the social mobility of approximately 60,000 Black boys and young Black men between the ages of 12 and 29 by the year 2039.

## Discussion

### High Joblessness

Throughout the decades there has been a negative declining trend in the number of Black males who are employed. A 2018 Brookings Institution report reveals that unemployed young Black men have a high likelihood of being jailed, imprisoned, or on parole (Looney & Turner, 2018). Overall, approximately only three of every five Black men in the U.S. are employed. Data from the Current Population Survey show that roughly two out of five young Black men were unemployed during 1980, 1990, and 2000, and three out of five in 2010 (see Figure 2). By 2016, the numbers slightly improved. Approximately one out of five young Black men in St. Louis were unemployed in 2016. Although this is an improvement, it is not impressive when compared to the overall population of individuals 18 to 29 years of age. The overall unemployment rate in St. Louis for individuals ages 18 to 29 is 7.2% compared to 14.4% for young Black men in this age group (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2018).

Studies show that discriminatory hiring practices have not improved in 25 years (Quillian

# \$30

**Average daily income of Black males.**

Since 1980, young Black men have experienced a 178% decline in income.



Improved quality of life improves family life.

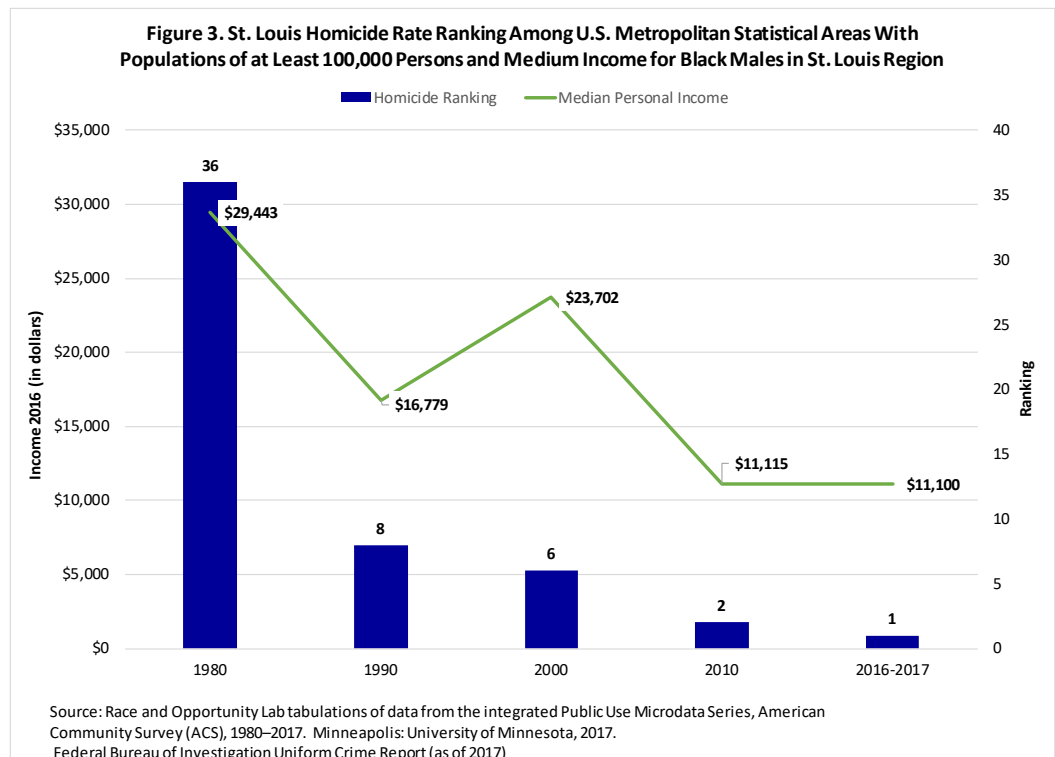
et al., 2017). As jobs are created, vacancies are being filled, but by non-Black males. The unemployment gap between ethnic groups is wide, and causes for the disparities include lack of required higher education, criminal records (disqualifying applicants), and hiring discrimi-

nation. Such disparities promote the economic isolation of young Black men. Unemployment may lead to depression, criminal behavior, inconsistent child support payment patterns, and low well-being, and confine the men and their children into unsafe, low-income neigh-

# No. 1

**St. Louis ranking for homicides per 100,000 persons among U.S. Metropolitan Statistical Areas in 2017.**

Since 1980, St. Louis has experienced a 280% increase in its homicide rates.



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**Leading together,** we can advance the HomeGrown STL strategy to create our own preferred future in which Black males are upwardly mobile, ensuring robust economic development for our region.

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neighborhoods with lack of access to health care, education, jobs, or career resources.

An increase in employment of young Black men earning wages to support a family has a direct impact on the health and economic promotion of this group. Employment and financial independence lead to transitions from a culture of poverty to one of personal stability. A population of employed and employable Black men results in a strong economic region, less crime, and a healthier community overall.

### **Poor College Degree Attainment**

The number of young Black men ages 21 to 29 with a bachelor's degree or higher reached a dismal high of 14% over the five time periods examined (see **Figure 2**). Although more young Black men have attained post-secondary education since 1980, this is well below the regional (41%) and national (42.2%) averages for the total population of individuals 21 to 29 years of age.

Black boys and young men in low-income neighborhoods are less prepared academically for college (Bentley-Edwards, Thomas, & Stevenson, 2013). Although an emphasis on improving elementary school-level reading abilities has a positive impact on high school and college success rates, 34.3% drop out of high school and never make it to college. Those who do pursue higher education are also poorly informed about the application process, costs, choice of a major, and they are more likely to drop out. These Black boys and young men typically attend underperforming grade schools and do not develop good study habits that prepare them for the college environment.

### **Living Income**

Approximately 70% of Blacks in St. Louis City live below the poverty level. Since 1980, young Black men have experienced a 178% decline in income (see **Figure 3**). At \$11,000 per year, this translates roughly to an average living income of \$30 per day. For these men, the daily cost of housing, food, access to health care, and possible child expenses must be divided into two hours of a minimum wage salary of \$15 per hour.

### **Homicides**

Black males ages 18 to 29 in the St. Louis region are also at an elevated risk of being a victim of homicide. For homicide rates among U.S. Metropolitan Statistical Areas with populations of

100,000 or more, St. Louis ranked in the top 10 in 1990, 2000, and 2010, and hit No. 1 in 2017 (see **Figure 3**). Homicide rates in St. Louis were 15.2 per 100,000 persons (1980), 44.6 per 100,000 (1990), 35.6 per 100,000 (2000), 45.1 per 100,000 (2010), and 57.2 per 100,000 in 2017 (FBI Uniform Crime Report Statistics, 2017). Black males account for 73% of firearm homicide victims in St. Louis, and the majority are between 20 and 34 years of age (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2018).

### **Quality of Life**

Cities that can satisfy a company's quality-of-life concerns with regard to housing, health care, education, and recreation can make moving a business a pleasurable process.

Quality of life is the general well-being of individuals and the extent to which they are satisfied with their physical health, family, education, employment and financial status, safety, and living environment. Discrimination and racial inequality have a tremendous negative impact on one's quality of life. Targeted improvements in the health status, education, employment, and personal safety of Black boys and young men promote sustainable outcomes for this group, their families, and communities.

### **Conclusion**

Gaps in intergenerational mobility between Blacks and other ethnic groups largely reflect the poor outcomes for Black men. This report details an urgent need for regional interventions to propel the stagnant social mobility levels of Black males.

Leading together, we can advance the HomeGrown STL strategy to create our own preferred future in which Black males are upwardly mobile, ensuring robust economic development for our region.

## Authors

**Sean Joe, PhD**, Principal Investigator, George Warren Brown School of Social Work, Washington University, St. Louis, Missouri

**Robert Motley, MSW**, Lab Manager, Race and Opportunity Lab, George Warren Brown School of Social Work, Washington University in St. Louis

**The Social Mobility Project** analyzes current and emerging economic inequity issues facing Black boys and young Black men in the St. Louis region. Efforts focus on topics related to how full human capital investment, sound economic opportunity, and social mobility are needed to achieve broad-based regional economic growth and a strong labor market. The research aims to increase understanding of how the regional economy affects the social mobility of Black males and what can be done to vastly improve the upward mobility, housing, education, health, and economic status of Black boys and young Black men in St. Louis.

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# HOME GROWN STL

## About HomeGrown STL

This report is a product of **HomeGrown STL**, a community science project of the Race and Opportunity Lab, within the Center for Social Development at Washington University's Brown School. As a university-based community science intermediary, HomeGrown STL, brings together multisector providers, governmental officials, planning professionals, citizens, and private-sector partners to develop regional and local strategic plans to disrupt fragmented care coordination and to improve the well-being and upward mobility of an entire population of Black males ages 12 to 29 years in specific St. Louis geographic areas within a generation (by 2039).

## Race and Opportunity Lab

Brown School  
Washington University in St. Louis  
1 Brookings Drive  
36 Goldfarb Hall  
St. Louis, MO 63130

Email: [raceandopportunitylab@wustl.edu](mailto:raceandopportunitylab@wustl.edu)

Office: (314) 935-6678

[raceandopportunitylab.wustl.edu](http://raceandopportunitylab.wustl.edu)

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