

# Ferguson Is About Us Too: A Call to Explore Our Communities

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On August 9, Michael Brown, a college-bound black male, was fatally shot by a white police officer in the streets of Ferguson, Missouri. The news of Brown's death spread quickly throughout this small suburban municipality. Later that evening, citizens organized protests and vigils at the Ferguson police department seeking information and answers. With few details released to the public, frustration mounted, eventually leading to consecutive nights of confrontations between citizens and police. For several days, jarring images of tear gas, militarized police, and unrest in Ferguson flickered on screens across the world. Ostensibly, these images made it easy to fixate on Ferguson as a community in turmoil.

However, beyond the spectacle of confrontation, this civic uprising had many more dimensions that were often unseen. For example, citizens gathered daily on sidewalks along the epicenters of the events—West Florissant Avenue and Canfield Drive—exercising their civic responsibility to demand justice when injustice was apparent. The sounds of car horns blaring in support, or of feet marching together down a closed thoroughfare and shouts of “no justice, no peace,” reaffirmed the righteousness of the cause. Local artists used their influence and mediums to communicate the exasperation of a community.<sup>1</sup> Religious leaders in Ferguson led prayer vigils, provided forums for citizens to express anger and frustration, and served as peacemakers in tense moments, standing between crowds and police in riot gear.<sup>2</sup> And when police closed neighborhoods in Ferguson as a containment effort to fend off protests (effectively quarantining citizens from basic health-care services or being able to shop for groceries), neighbors looked after neighbors.<sup>3</sup> Today, citizens continue to attempt to redress the wounds exposed by the uprising in Ferguson. Antonio French,

the St. Louis city alderman who gained national recognition for broadcasting the events in Ferguson in real time through Twitter and Vine, set up HealSTL,<sup>4</sup> an organization with the purpose of turning this moment into a more sustainable movement of empathy, understanding, and action.

While we can see Ferguson in terms of its experience of tense nights between citizens and police, the expressions of the citizen, artist, community leader, and neighbor speak to the reality that this “event” was about more than riots and tear gas. Undoubtedly, what brought Ferguson to the national consciousness—the death of a young black male and the uprising that followed—provides an opportunity to explore important issues such as stereotyping in our society, the role of protests and demonstrations in civic life, and the ways in which traditional and social media help construct the narratives of critical events. However, at the root of these inquiries lies a tacit assumption that Ferguson was somehow extraordinary—that the flashpoint itself is what deserves to be interrogated. Yet, if we consider Ferguson in its totality through the eyes of its citizens, we can

see that there was nothing extraordinary about what shaped the circumstances of these civic expressions. As with all uprisings, the discrete acts of citizenship in Ferguson were mediated by the intersection of social forces. These are the forces that influenced the character of Ferguson, and the study of these forces can potentially provide the most poignant lessons.

The citizens voicing their discontent with the local government's response to Michael Brown's death were not just asking for justice for Michael's family, but for redress for an unjust series of decisions that have segregated this community by race and class. It is the accumulation of these decisions that have made it easy for one part of St. Louis to look one way while many St. Louisians suffer from a lack of affordable housing of quality, an absence of living wages, and decades of disinvestment in their neighborhoods.<sup>5</sup>

The events in Ferguson serve as a reminder that calls for justice are often calls to redress the subtlety of other forms of social injury. On April 5, 1968, the day after Martin Luther King, Jr., was assassinated, presidential candidate Robert F. Kennedy gave his famous speech on “The Mindless Menace of Violence in America” to the Cleveland, Ohio City Club:

For there is another kind of violence, slower but just as deadly, destructive as the shot or the bomb in the night. This is the violence of institutions; indifference and inaction and slow decay. This is



A demonstration in Orlando, Fla., on August 16th, 2014, affirming that the issues raised by events in Ferguson affect all of us.

(AP photo/  
Alex Menendez)

the violence that afflicts the poor, that poisons relations between men because their skin has different colors. This is a slow destruction of a child by hunger, and schools without books and homes without heat in the winter.

This is the breaking of a man's spirit by denying him the chance to stand as a father and as a man among other men. And this too afflicts us all...When you teach a man to hate and fear his brother, when you teach that those who differ from you threaten your freedom or your job or your family, then you also learn to confront others not as fellow citizens but as enemies—to be met not with cooperation but with conquest, to be subjugated and mastered.

Our lives are too short and the work to be done too great to let this spirit flourish any longer in our land. Of course, we cannot vanish it with a program, nor with a resolution.

But we can perhaps remember—even if only for a time—that those who live with us are our brothers, that they share with us the same short movement of life, that they seek—as we do—nothing but the chance to live out their lives in purpose and happiness.<sup>6</sup>

Ferguson represents not only the injustice of a life needlessly lost, but also the injustice of the slower violence Kennedy outlines in his speech—the violence of social abandonment. So, how do we teach community? How do we teach that Ferguson isn't just about Ferguson but that it's about us too?

Our charge in social studies education is to prepare students to examine the forces that shape their lives. Ferguson provides an opportunity for social studies teachers to interrogate their own communities. What are the historical, political, economic, and geographic influences that define who we are? How do these influences manifest themselves in our civic spaces? If we apply the tools of

inquiry in social studies to our communities, we may see that we share many of the same complicated contingencies that gave rise to the civic expressions in the streets of Ferguson.

### **A Region Beset by Racial Tension**

The events in Ferguson are intimately tied to the history of race relations in the greater St. Louis region. At the turn of the twentieth century, the city of St. Louis was a destination for many Southern blacks searching for factory jobs in the North. In the following years, the city's steady growth of blacks was met with white flight and discriminatory practices such as housing covenants that restricted the use and sale of property to black families. Suburbs located just outside of the city limits, such as Ferguson, thrived as proximal enclaves that used the same restrictive racially discriminatory housing practices. Although the Supreme Court in *Shelley v. Kramer*, a 1948 case involving the sale of a St. Louis home with a racial housing covenant, declared the practice unconstitutional, other de

jure practices in the region continued to persist. For example, until 1968, the streets in Ferguson were barricaded or would dead end before reaching neighboring Kinloch, the oldest black town in Missouri, that boasted at the time one third of the area's black population.<sup>7</sup>

In the decades since, municipalities proximal to the city like Ferguson have experienced the same flight they once accommodated (see <http://mapping.decline.lib.uiowa.edu/map/>). As a result, Ferguson has undergone a significant demographic shift. While the population of Ferguson has hovered around 22,000 since 1990, the percentage of white and black residents has dramatically reversed from 25% black in 1990 to more than 60% black in 2010. Despite this new demographic reality, the governance and power structures in Ferguson remain mostly white. The mayor, police force, school board, and city council in Ferguson are not demographic proxies for the majority of the citizens they serve.

Much of this representative asymmetry is influenced by low voter turnout. In the most recent municipal election, for example, whites in Ferguson were three times more likely to vote than blacks.<sup>8</sup> However, a simple tally serves as an improper depiction of the expression of citizenship in Ferguson. Much of the political disillusionment within the black community in Ferguson is borne from the legacy of racism that limited and continues to limit social and economic progress. An 80 percent poverty rate among blacks in Ferguson reflects in part the existence of low-income housing, which most St. Louis municipalities prohibit through zoning laws. The poor are disproportionately black, so the effect is comparable to being quarantined into certain communities and complexes. This kind of rental residential pattern in Ferguson does not cultivate deep political roots in the community, which helps explain some of the low voting patterns.

Beyond the representation issue, the legacy of racism is further entrenched in the strained relationship that black residents of Ferguson have with the

almost all-white police force. As has been widely reported,<sup>9</sup> Ferguson police stop and detain blacks at a higher rate, despite the fact that searches of black residents result in the discovery of contraband 21.7 percent of the time while searches of white residents results in the discovery of contraband 34 percent of the time. Moreover, in the latest year on record, law enforcement in Ferguson issued over 32,000 arrest warrants in a community of less than 22,000.<sup>10</sup> A report by the ArchCity defenders, a not-for-profit group dedicated to defending the poor in St. Louis, captures the devastating effects of these practices on the Ferguson community:

by disproportionately stopping, charging and fining the poor and minorities, by closing the Courts to the public, and by incarcerating people for the failure to pay fines, these policies unintentionally push the poor further into poverty...<sup>11</sup>

While our communities may not exhibit these exact manifestations of the legacy of racism, we live in a society where we have constructed and acted upon racial categories historically, politically, geographically, and economically. Our everyday social environment contains many of the consequences of this legacy. Although the context may change, the legacy remains, regardless of where we live. Below, we use the realities found in St. Louis and Ferguson to share ideas, resources, and questions that can be used to interrogate the communities where we serve our students.

### Mapping Race in Our Communities

*Does physical distance between different racial groups in my community perpetuate social division?*

Direct inquiries into the geography of our groups can provide succinct information about the tacit patterns that govern our daily habits. Investigating our spatial surroundings can deepen our under-

standing of our neighborhoods and help raise questions about the significance of these patterns. Exploring the racial composition of our communities in our classrooms can help students visualize the dynamics of race and housing. One tool that can assist in this visualization is the Racial Dot Map ([www.coopercenter.org/demographics/Racial-Dot-Map](http://www.coopercenter.org/demographics/Racial-Dot-Map)), a project of the Weldon Cooper Center for Public Service at the University of Virginia that “provides an accessible visualization of geographic distribution, population density, and racial diversity of the American people in every neighborhood in the entire country.”<sup>12</sup> Another mapping tool is [www.city-data.com](http://www.city-data.com), which generates city maps based on the most recent census data. Data such as race density, medium household income, and poverty rates are color coded by census parcel providing detailed information on neighborhoods.

The maps of most major U.S. cities reveal that many metropolitan areas are divided along racial lines. In St. Louis for example, black communities populate the eastern fringes of the region, while further west, the composition of these communities is predominantly white. Ferguson illustrates a similar pattern of housing segregation. Mostly black communities reside in the southern part of the city, while there are pockets of mostly white neighborhoods in the north. Although living in the same city, this kind of physical division significantly influences the number of opportunities for the different life experiences, perspectives, and ideas of the white and black residents to interact. This housing pattern helps explain why some failed to see Ferguson as a racialized community since the segregation of white and black families into certain parcels created different visions of Ferguson. While the United States has slowly seen more integration in housing patterns, census data reveal that whites continue to live in neighborhoods with low minority representation.<sup>13</sup> Moreover, the growing Hispanic population in many communities across the United States shows similar patterns

**Table 1. Ferguson, Missouri, 2013 Racial Profiling Data**

Key Indicators	Total	White	Black	Hispanic	Asian	Am. Indian	Other
<b>Stops</b>	5384	686	4632	22	12	8	24
<b>Searches</b>	611	47	562	1	0	1	0
<b>Arrests</b>	521	36	483	1	0	1	0
<b>Statewide Population %</b>	N/A	82.76	10.90	2.94	1.71	0.41	1.28
<b>Local Population %</b>	N/A	33.65	63.00	1.10	0.60	0.37	1.29
<b>Disparity Index</b>	N/A	0.38	1.37	0.37	0.37	0.41	0.35
<b>Search Rate</b>	11.35	6.85	12.13	4.55	0.00	12.50	0.00
<b>Contraband Hit Rate</b>	22.59	34.04	21.71	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
<b>Arrest Rate</b>	9.68	5.25	10.43	4.55	0.00	12.50	0.00

**Notes:** Population figures are from the 2010 Census for persons 16 years of age and older who designated a single race. Hispanics may be of any race. "Other" includes persons of mixed race and unknown race.

**Disparity index** = (proportion of stops/proportion of population). A value of 1 represents no disparity; values greater than 1 indicate over-representation, values less than 1 indicate under-representation.

**Search rate** = (searches / stops) X 100

**Contraband Hit Rate** = (searches with contraband found / total searches) X 100.

**Arrest rate** = (arrests / stops) X 100.

Table from the Missouri Attorney General, "Racial Profiling Data 2013"<sup>14</sup>

of housing segregation. Exploring these visual snapshots of the relationship between race, ethnicity, and residence can provide opportunities to engage students in conversations about the influence of geography on our contemporary understandings of race. Developing and unpacking maps of the housing patterns in our communities should also compel students to further explore their communities' zoning ordinances and develop ways to further integrate residents.

#### *Questions for Investigation:*

- What kinds of social, political, and economic divisions by race exist in my community?
- Where are the geographic boundaries between races in our community/area/region?
- What do you know about these boundaries?
- What are the similarities and differences between the white and black neighborhoods in our community?
- How do the residential patterns in my community influence race relations?
- What does physical distance between communities allow us to disregard about our neighbors?

### **Policing Our Communities**

*How should police maintain trust with a community?*

In the earliest of social studies lessons, students learn about the basic functions of police and the invaluable service they provide to residents. Police play an important role in our communities. In fact, police have an indispensable role in sustaining democracy by delivering services that support the protection of rights. However, the ways in which different groups are affected by policing practices significantly influence the level of trust a community has in their police force. As several news outlets reported, many of the black residents in Ferguson were mistrustful of police before the death of Michael Brown. Several stories chronicled the gulf between a majority white police force and a majority black population. However, beyond the problematic issue of a lack of representation in the police force, a long history of adverse experiences between black citizens and police in the United States has also fed into this cycle of mistrust. On his visit to Ferguson, U.S. Attorney General Eric Holder acknowledged the history of this mistrust, "There is a history to this tension, and that history simmers in

more communities than Ferguson.... The national outcry we've seen speaks to a sense of mistrust and mutual suspicion that can take hold in the relationship between law enforcement and certain communities."<sup>15</sup>

The data available from Ferguson illustrates a disproportional search and arrest rate among black residents. The information provided in the Table was found on the website of the Missouri Attorney General, and similar state databases exist on the Internet. Exploring indicators such as stops, searches, and contraband rates provides one way to investigate the relationship between a community and its police force. This kind of information should be used to inform discussions about the important role of police in our society, but also some of the ways in which potential disproportionality reifies the perception of mistrust between police and different demographics in a community. To gain more information beyond the statistics, students should be encouraged to invite members of the law enforcement community into their classrooms to discuss community involvement in policing priorities, forms of accountability between the community and the police, and local



efforts to overcome the history of mistrust between law enforcement and particular demographics.

#### *Questions for Investigation:*

- What role do policing practices play in our government?
- What kinds of interactions have you had with police?
- Why is trust in the police necessary in a democracy?
- What trends exist in the policing data in your community?
- How can we enact policing practices that do not disadvantage the poor?
- In what ways can we maintain/improve the relationship between citizens and law enforcement in our community?

### **Representing Our Communities**

*In what ways does my local government represent my community?*

The ability of a government to represent the voices of the people is a foundational principle in a democracy. This maxim is perhaps most critical in local government, which significantly influences the everyday lives of residents through decisions about key services such as schools, fire, police, public works, permits, and zoning. A local government is also, in theory, more responsive to the needs of the community. While numerous kinds of constituencies and interests exist in any given community, this diversity ought to be captured in the various offices that represent citizens in local government.

Ferguson provided a clear case of the ways in which a local government failed to represent the diversity within a community—namely the racial diversity in this majority black town. As noted earlier, Ferguson is a community with asymmetrical racial representation in government. One reason, as also noted, is that the proportion of black voters who turn out in local elections is significantly less than the proportion of white voters. The lack of black representation in Ferguson can also be traced to the private money political system that drives U.S. elections. Financial resources often

dictate the entry and success of candidates for municipal office. However, as Colgate economics professor Jay Mandle explained, the low-income black community of Ferguson illustrates why an electoral process based on private funding can deprive the disproportionately poor of democratic representation:

Ferguson illustrates the way that a political system dependent on private financing marginalizes the poor. Low-income people cannot provide the resources necessary for electoral success. As a result they are deprived of influence. This then means that they come up short in the resources and policies that follow from the political-decision making. Political alienation grows, reinforcing their political marginalization.<sup>16</sup>

Nevertheless, while several positions are elected in local government, critical infrastructure roles such as city manager and school superintendent are appointed, and these appointments ought to reflect communities. In Ferguson, the appointments that flowed from elected positions approximated the racial composition of the elected officials and not of the community.

A systematic exploration of our local government in our classrooms should include investigations into the ways in which the offices of local government represent the diversity within our communities. These offices should not just include elected offices, but also appointed offices such as city manager, zoning boards, and parks and recreation committees. These positions play a critical role in the governance of our local communities. While demographics should be one key consideration, other variables such as the representation of different interests and constituencies (e.g., business, environmental) should also be explored. Similarly, local elections should be an object of inquiry. Students should be guided to question the accessibility of elections to potential

candidates and what deterrents exist for members of the local community to participate in the election process as citizens and candidates.

#### *Questions for Investigation:*

- What kind of diversity exists within my community?
- How do the elected officials reflect the diversity in my community?
- What perspectives are most represented in our local government? What perspectives are least represented?
- In what ways is our local government responsive to the diverse needs of my community?
- What is the voter turnout for local elections in our community?
- Do local election laws and voter registration procedures in our community make it difficult for some parts of the community to vote?

### **Conclusion**

In a town hall meeting conducted on the campus of St. Louis University for teachers looking for ways to teach about Ferguson, one experienced educator shared her fear that Ferguson would simply become another paragraph in the history textbooks. As the curricular gatekeepers in social studies education, we have a responsibility to see that the fear expressed by this educator is not realized. We must keep in mind that the most important lessons from Ferguson are not about the uprising itself, but about the causes of this uprising. Each of the sources above reveal that Ferguson is not just about the death of a young black male, but about what his death represented to this community: the legacy, imprint, and reality of racism in the United States.

According to Beverly Tatum, racism is prejudice plus power. “Racial prejudice when combined with social power—access to social, cultural, and economic sources and decision making—leads to the institutionalization of racist policies and practices.”<sup>17</sup> The patterns and practices in Ferguson speak to the past and

present exercise of prejudice plus power. But, the acts of citizenship by protestors, artists, community leaders, and neighbors in Ferguson serve as reminder to listen more carefully to the ways in which prejudice plus power has been exerted. Hopefully, by interrogating racism more intentionally in our social studies classrooms and directing our inquiries toward our own communities, we will be able to see that we are all, in some way, shape, or form, Ferguson. 🌍

#### Notes

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