How can we save lives—and save money—in St. Louis?

INVEST IN ECONOMIC AND EDUCATIONAL OPPORTUNITY

By Jason Purnell, PhD, MPH

There is growing awareness that the conditions in which people live, learn, work, and play have a strong impact on their health. In fact, policies that address factors like education could have a bigger influence on health than all medical advances combined. They may also help to prevent early death, giving families and communities more years of life to enjoy.

There is good news. Our community has come together to increase access to health care for its vulnerable citizens, and in the past ten years we’ve seen improvements in health among St. Louis residents. For example, overall death rates have decreased. However, there is still cause for concern because some people bear a greater burden of disease and death. The graph on the right shows that the death rate among African Americans is higher than that of Whites.

Death rates among St. Louis residents of all ages

Rates are age-adjusted using the US 2000 standard population. Source: Death MICA, Missouri Department of Health and Senior Services
Differences In Education And Poverty

There are also differences in rates of education levels and poverty. But when most people think about health—and the ultimate health outcome of death—they rarely put these differences together. We are used to thinking of the leading causes of death in terms of specific diseases like cancer or heart disease. And we typically think preventing death and disease is a problem for doctors, pills, and medical treatments to solve.

New research methods allow us to estimate the number of deaths that are caused by factors like low levels of education and poverty. Using data on African Americans from St. Louis City and County, and a formula based on decades of the best research into social factors and mortality, we can estimate that 280 deaths were due to poverty and 237 were due to having less than a high school education in 2011.*

---

**Highest level of education among St. Louis residents 25 and older**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>High School or Less</th>
<th>Some College or More</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>African Americans</td>
<td><img src="image1.png" alt="Graph" /></td>
<td><img src="image2.png" alt="Graph" /></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Whites</td>
<td><img src="image3.png" alt="Graph" /></td>
<td><img src="image4.png" alt="Graph" /></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source: 2009-2011 American Community Survey 3-Year Estimates

**Percent of St. Louis residents living below the poverty level**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Poverty Level</th>
<th>Whites</th>
<th>African Americans</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0%</td>
<td><img src="image5.png" alt="Graph" /></td>
<td><img src="image6.png" alt="Graph" /></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source: 2009-2011 American Community Survey 3-Year Estimates

---

**280 DEATHS DUE TO POVERTY**

**237 DEATHS DUE TO LESS THAN HIGH SCHOOL EDUCATION**

**COMBINED THE NUMBER OF DEATHS COULD FILL ABOUT 7 METROLINK CARS**

**THE ESTIMATED COST OF THIS LOSS OF LIFE IS APPROXIMATELY $3.3 BILLION**

---

Early deaths due to limited economic and educational opportunity affect us all. The estimated cost of this loss of life is approximately $3.3 billion.* This is just part of the cost of failing to effectively invest in human potential, which threatens our global competitiveness and everyone’s quality of life.

There are no pills or medical treatments for poverty and lack of education. But there are policies and programs that can improve both. Access to quality medical care is essential to improving the health and well-being of African Americans, but the health sector cannot do it alone. It will require coordinated, regional efforts across multiple sectors, including government, education, nonprofits, and the business community.
Here Are The Steps We Can Take Right Now:

1. **Invest in quality early childhood development for all children.**

   The impact of early childhood investments on educational, economic, and health outcomes is substantial. Every $1 invested in early childhood returns $7 of benefit for society according to the National Institute for Early Childhood Education Research. And in addition to better educational outcomes, children who participate in high quality early childhood programs have better health behaviors and health outcomes as adults than those who do not.

   **Well-designed programs include:**
   > Small classes and qualified teachers
   > Significant time spent on instruction and support that prepares children for school
   > School-family partnerships and a focus on effective parenting
   > An emphasis on social and emotional development
   > A focus on the health and mental health of children and their families

   There are already several examples of high quality early childhood programming in St. Louis. For instance, the SouthSide Early Childhood Center is recognized by experts in the field for its integrated and holistic approach to the development of young children and focus on collaboration with families and community partners. Exemplary home visitation program are offered by Nurses for Newborns, Parents as Teachers, the St. Louis Maternal, Child and Family Health Coalition, and the St. Louis County Department of Health’s “Building Blocks” program.

2. **Help low-to-moderate income families create economic opportunities.**

   Children who have savings in their names are up to 7 times more likely to attend college. And growing up in a low-income household can have lasting effects on health well into adulthood.

   We can encourage families to save money by providing incentives and supports. A great deal of research has already gone into demonstrating that savings programs like Child Development Accounts and Individual Development Accounts can help reduce poverty and give families hope for the future.

   A powerful St. Louis example is the Promise Account program that is part of Beyond Housing, Inc.’s 24:1 initiative in the Normandy School District. Through the generosity of a private donor, every kindergartner in the Normandy School District receives $500 in a college savings account.

Targeted investments would include:

> Reversing the nearly $10 million in cuts to early childhood programs in the state budget
> Implementing a continuous quality improvement process with accountability measures
> Relaxing eligibility requirements and improving the level of child care subsidies for low-income families
> Expanding home visitation services that cover the prenatal through early childhood period.

To Find Out More Click Below
For more information on the power of early childhood investments
To learn more about SouthSide Early Childhood Center
Targeted investments would include:

> Making college savings accounts universally available for children at birth
> Making financial advice and services easily accessible to families at all income levels

Working together, we can help to improve health and to save lives—

FOR THE SAKE OF ALL.

This is the first in a series of five briefs prepared by a team of researchers at Washington University and Saint Louis University. The data and recommendations discussed in the briefs will be explored in-depth in the forthcoming report, “For the Sake of All: A Report on the Health and Well-Being of African Americans in St. Louis.”

Next brief: High School Dropout and Health

*See appendix for a detailed description of how these estimates were obtained.

## Resources


