

THE FORGOTTEN FERGUSON

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Four years after Michael Brown was shot by police, the neighborhood where he was killed still feels left behind

By **Tracy Jan** Photos by **Jahi Chikwendiu** Video by **Lee Powell** June 21, 2018



FERGUSON, Mo. — When Starbucks opened here in 2016, politicians celebrated, predicting that the coffee chain would revitalize a city marred by violent protests over Michael Brown's killing two years earlier.

Other corporations jumped in with multimillion-dollar commitments to help rebuild the majority-black town that became a global symbol of racial and economic inequality.

concentrated in the more prosperous — and whiter — parts of town, bypassing the predominantly black southeast neighborhood where Brown was fatally shot by a police officer while walking to his grandmother's home.

The investments, rather than easing the economic gap, have deepened that divide.

“This is the forgotten Ferguson,” said Francesca Griffin, a St. Louis native who moved to the inner-ring suburb 13 years ago for the more-affordable home prices. “Time and time again, West Florissant Avenue just gets left out. And people are losing hope.”

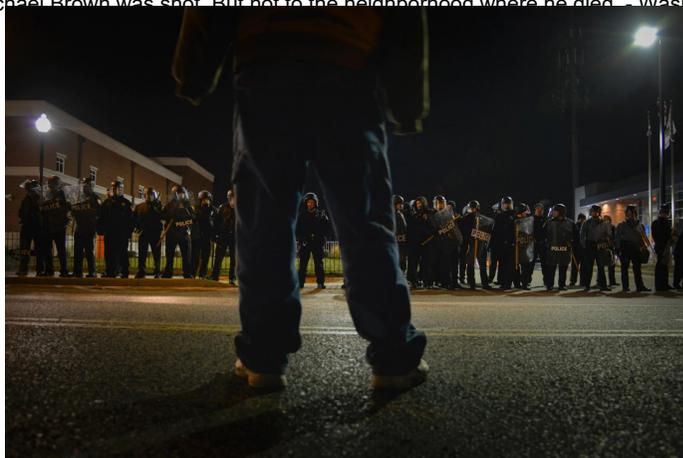
The growing disparity is the result of decisions, large and small, that capture the difficulties of overcoming a legacy of racial segregation, economic exclusion and political disenfranchisement.

In Ferguson's case, obstacles have included a corporate mind-set willing to take on only so much risk, a seeming lack of political will and a disadvantaged community's inability to promote its own interests.

Of the more than \$36 million in bricks-and-mortar development that poured into the city after 2014, only \$2.4 million — for a job training center — has directly benefited this isolated pocket of Ferguson, according to an analysis of building-permit data provided by the city.

“Right now, it's still a vision of the riots. There hasn't been a transformation to show a vision of the future.”

Joshura Davis, who has owned an insurance company and a home-health-care service in Ferguson for nearly 30 years.

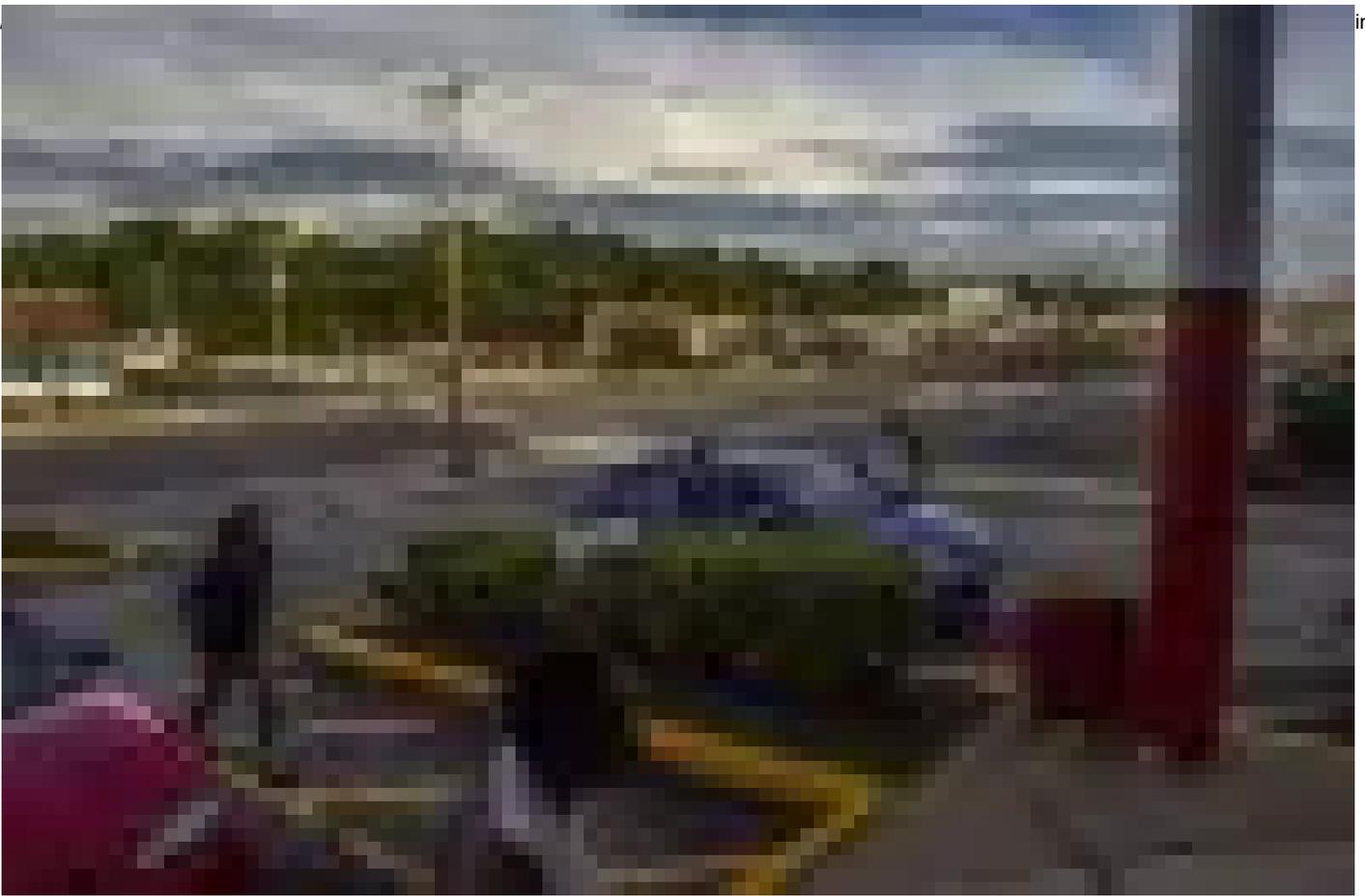


LEFT: A weathered memorial sits at the corner of West Florissant and Ferguson avenues on May 28 in Ferguson. **RIGHT:** Area businesses were damaged during violent protests after the 2014 fatal shooting of Michael Brown.

“Nobody has presented to me any forensic evidence that shows that the stock of a household in black Ferguson has been improved since the death of Mike Brown,” said Adolphus Pruitt, president of the St. Louis NAACP. “At the end of the day, where is the significant transformation of the lives of the people who live in that part of Ferguson, who suffered the most during all of this?”

It’s easy to see where the money did go: South Florissant Road runs through the heart of Ferguson’s historic downtown on the west side, close to stately Victorians with wraparound porches. Since 2014, new investment has bolstered this pedestrian-friendly “main street,” now lined with restaurants, loft apartments, a cigar lounge — steps from City Hall, the police department and the public library.

Parallel to that in southeast Ferguson, West Florissant Avenue traverses a half-mile stretch of liquor, fast-food and beauty supply stores and a vacant lot where businesses had been torched. The commercial strip services a neighborhood dominated by five sprawling apartment complexes, as well as modest single-family homes.



Customers pass in and out of Sam's Meat Market on West Florissant Avenue in May. The liquor store reopened in 2015 after being looted and burned following Brown's death.

“Driving up and down West Florissant, you get the cold, uncomfortable feeling of the past, like nothing has changed — because nothing has changed,” said Joshura Davis, who has owned an insurance company and a home-health-care service in the neighborhood for nearly 30 years.

The sole sign of progress is the job training center run by the Urban League, built on the site of the QuikTrip gas station burned down by protesters.

Residents say they want more: access to affordable fresh food, restaurants, retail stores, a park, sidewalks and streets free of potholes.

“Once the dust settled, I looked around and went, ‘None of this is any better,’ ” said Felicia Pulliam, who served on an independent commission appointed by the governor to examine racial inequality in Ferguson. “It’s

Starbucks and other corporations came to Ferguson after Michael Brown was shot. But not to the neighborhood where he died. - Washin...
really a matter of leadership and the old guard perpetuating the same
practices that got us to the uprising.”



Nader Abde, 32, helps customers at Sam's Meat Market.

On a recent morning, an elderly woman with a cane trudged into Sam's Meat Market — a liquor store that also sells meat — and waved a \$1 bill at the cashier for a nip of vodka. Others had walked across four lanes of traffic on West Florissant Avenue for lottery tickets and cigarettes.

Nader Abde, the 32-year-old shop owner who grew up in the Canfield Green apartments across the street, lamented the slow trickle of customers. Half the neighborhood, it seemed to him, had moved out after the protests.

“That's all we're known for,” Abde said. “Businesses are afraid to invest.”



Kids ride by the patch of pavement where 18-year-old Michael Brown was shot by Officer Darren Wilson on Aug. 9, 2014.

A STIGMA REMAINS

Canfield Drive runs off West Florissant Avenue and winds into the neighborhood where, on Aug. 9, 2014, Officer Darren Wilson stopped Brown for jaywalking and, after a scuffle, shot and killed the unarmed 18-year-old. Wilson was not indicted.

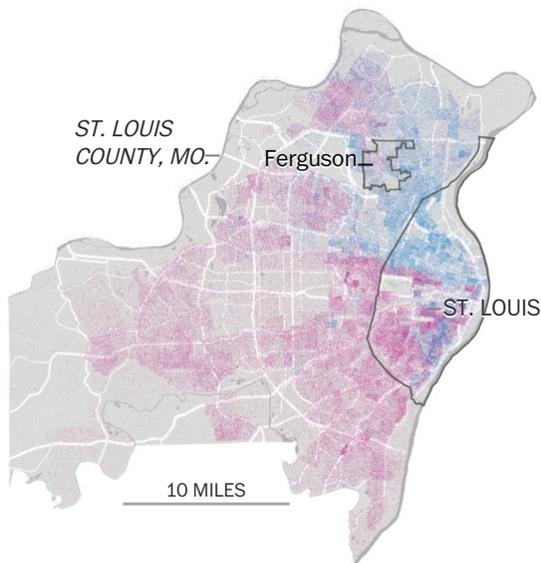
For nearly a year after the protests started, West Florissant remained strewn with the charred rubble of buildings — even as the downtown was being fixed up, residents and business owners recalled.

“Part of the reason people did not feel encouraged to come back here and rebuild it is because the place looked like Syria,” said Chris Phillips, a 37-year-old filmmaker who moved into the Canfield Green apartments in 2005.

Once a white sundown community that mandated African American domestic workers leave town by sunset, now two-thirds of Ferguson's 21,000 residents are black.

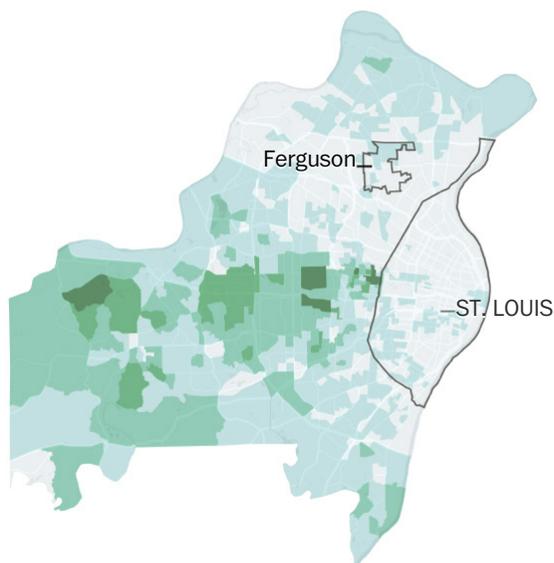
Population distribution by race

● White ● Black



Median household income

\$0 \$50k \$100k \$150k \$200k \$250k



Income from the past 12 months

Sources: U.S. census ACS 5-year estimates and Maps4News/HERE

Median family income in the densely populated southeast is approximately \$25,000 a year, compared with \$42,000 for Ferguson as a whole, according to an analysis of 2016 Census Bureau data by Rise Community Development. More than 40 percent of households in some parts live in poverty. Nearly a fifth of working residents don't own cars.

Poverty has been rising over the past decade, since building owners used state and federal tax credits to convert two apartment complexes to low-income housing — a decision that makes it difficult to attract developers.

“They think if you open anything in that area, it’s going to be vandalized or robbed,” said Justin Hansford, a Howard University law professor who taught economic justice at Saint Louis University School of Law when Brown was killed. He says city officials should have done more to draw investors. “The same people who are calling the shots and creating the development are intentionally deciding not to develop that corner of Ferguson.”



Chris Phillips, 37, a filmmaker from the area, overlooks the spot where Brown was killed.

Ferguson was simply ahead of the game, having formed a self-taxing special district in the 1980s that spurred development and made it easier to rebound after the unrest.

The city council in 2015 granted a local developer \$848,000 to build a pizzeria and loft apartments, using a subsidy program for downtown businesses that was designed to reverse urban blight. But West Florissant has yet to begin the long process that would make it eligible for such incentives.

“The West Florissant community wasn’t as organized,” said De’Carlon Seewood, Ferguson’s city manager.

In 2016, the city passed a sales tax to pay for road repairs and upgrades to business properties. But state law prohibits the money from being used for retail development outside of a downtown or historic district.

The West Florissant commercial strip is also handicapped by geography, with the Ferguson stretch sandwiched between two other cities with their own zoning and planning priorities.

The neighborhood was dealt a further blow in March, when the U.S. Transportation Department rejected a grant proposal to plant trees, repave roads and add sidewalks, crosswalks and streetlights.

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owners — but he also realizes that developers are wary. “You don’t want to toss money into something that’s not going to be sustainable,” he said.

It’s not just businesses that are hesitant to move into the neighborhood.

Randy Lipton, a real estate developer whose family has owned the Canfield Green apartment complex for four decades, said the vacancy rate jumped from just over 10 percent to 75 percent in the year after Brown was killed.

That prompted him to start accepting Section 8 vouchers for rents starting at \$515 a month.



LEFT: Children play at Forestwood Park in Ferguson. Without a complete sidewalk along Ferguson Avenue between the park and the nearby Park Ridge Apartments, kids often walk to the park along the side of the road. **RIGHT:** Young men play pickup basketball in the parking lot of Oakmont Townhomes in Ferguson. Oakmont is one of five large apartment complexes in southeast Ferguson.

But the 400-unit Canfield Green development remains half-empty.

“There’s still a stigma attached to our apartments because he was shot in Canfield Green on a street called Canfield Drive,” Lipton said.

Frustrated by the slow pace of change, Lipton offered to donate two acres of land to the city for a playground, splash park and garden. The city planning commission rejected the offer, citing its inability to maintain the grounds.

“It’s very, very discouraging how little has happened here,” Lipton said. “I can’t do things to fix Canfield Green and leave everything else surrounding us the way it is and expect things will change.”

Lipton said he is concerned that corporate interest in Ferguson will dry up without the southeast getting its share.

“The more time that goes by, the more steam you lose from the standpoint of being able to raise money from corporations that want to get behind something when it’s a hot topic,” he said.



Erinn Flowers, center, a student at the St. Louis College of Pharmacy, does homework at a newly built Starbucks on the northern edge of Ferguson. Flowers lives in nearby Riverview but works in Ferguson and uses this coffee shop as a regular study spot. Four years ago, she was among those protesting the death of Michael Brown and the subsequent decision not to charge Officer Darren Wilson.

CORPORATE INVESTMENT'S LIMITED IMPACT

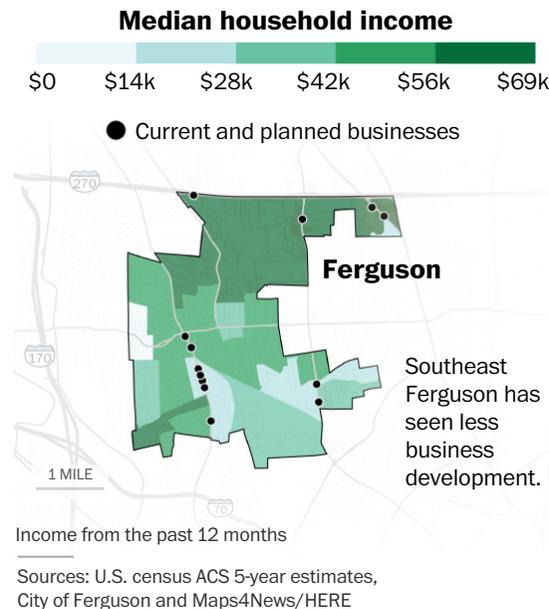
This was not the ripple effect of economic opportunity city officials predicted when Howard Schultz, then Starbucks's chief executive, toured the burned-out buildings and boarded-up storefronts and pledged to invest in the community.

The coffee chain opened a 2,200-square-foot cafe and drive-through in 2016, promising to hire local youth. Starbucks marketed the Ferguson store as a community center, providing free meeting space and hosting quarterly coffees with police. It backed an African American baker whose business was damaged during the unrest, selling her caramel cakes in 32 St. Louis-area stores.

Upon its opening, St. Louis County Council member Hazel Erby said that Starbucks would create “jobs, revitalization, economic opportunities” and restore “community pride.”

But its location by the interstate on the northern edge of town has had little impact on the public-transit-dependent residents of Canfield Green, more than two miles away.

Residents say they rarely, if ever, venture up to the Starbucks.



“Starbucks doesn’t impact me whatsoever,” said Darryl Howard, a retired warehouse supervisor who has lived at Canfield Green for more than 30 years. “I have a very nice coffee maker sitting on my counter.”

None of Starbucks’s 19 sales associates come from that corner of town. But store manager Cordell Lewis said his hires live within a five-mile radius of the store and face their own challenges, including homelessness.

A Starbucks spokeswoman said the location was chosen for its proximity to major retail, such as a Walmart Supercenter and Sam’s Club.

Lured by a 50 percent break on property taxes for 20 years, St. Louis-based health insurer Centene opened a claims-processing center off the interstate two weeks before the Starbucks.

“I wanted all the small businesses to see one of the largest companies in the state making a commitment to Ferguson,” chief executive Michael Neidorff said in a recent interview.

He said the center brought 250 jobs to the area, paying an average salary of \$36,000 a year. He would not say how many of the new employees hail

Neidorff said he was not aware that the neighborhood had been largely left behind in the rush to redevelop the downtown core and northern edge.

“I don’t know that anybody is paying any attention to it,” he said.



A strip of closed businesses along West Florissant Avenue in May.

Emerson Electric, a manufacturing and technology company headquartered blocks from Canfield Green, added a new building on its 207-acre campus after Brown’s death.

The company said it did not seek a property-tax abatement. But Walter Johnson, a professor of African and African American studies at Harvard University who has [examined economic and racial segregation in Ferguson](#), notes that Emerson had earlier benefited from a low assessment value of its property. He said that the low assessment deprived Ferguson of needed tax dollars and that in the aftermath of the protests, the Fortune 500 company had a moral responsibility to the neighborhood on its doorstep.

\$16 million since 2014 to programs benefiting north St. Louis County, such as early-childhood education and college scholarships. That amount includes money redirected to Ferguson from Emerson's regular giving to the United Way.

Johnson said Emerson's gift promotes the idea of "philanthropy as a more appropriate form of corporate citizenship than paying taxes and genuine civic engagement."

"That's a way of establishing corporations as the arbiters of social equality and justice in America," he said.



The Urban League Community Empowerment Center sits on the spot formerly occupied by a torched QuikTrip.

‘WAITING FOR A CHAMPION’

Center on the site of the QuikTrip was supposed to deliver real change to the people who need it the most.

The building, which also houses the Salvation Army, offers a job training program for men, along with a closetful of suits, shoes and ties for those who land interviews.

“The community needs to see something really quickly. They need to see change, to show the community that we are on the rebound,” said Michael P. McMillan, president and chief executive of the St. Louis chapter of the Urban League who raised money from Centene, Emerson, Starbucks and other companies.

Residents welcomed its arrival, but some say they wish the QuikTrip had been rebuilt so they could buy food or medicine late at night. Others say the doors have been locked when they've tried to enter for help with résumés or obtaining their GEDs.



Erica Hooks and Jennings, McCapra's former neighbor at Montreys Gigap Lounge on the South Florissant he died. - Washin...
Road in May. "This is my Cheers," said Hooks, who said she was skeptical about coming to Ferguson "before Mike Brown, during Mike Brown, even after Mike Brown." "Twelve years ago, when I bought my house in Jennings, I would have never bought in Ferguson," she added. "Now, I would."

McMillan said the Urban League is adding space for child-friendly programming and perhaps even a dance studio and banquet hall — a pared-down version of the Ferguson Community Center that opened in the predominantly white part of town one month after Brown was killed.

Also to come along West Florissant Avenue: a Boys & Girls Club on the site of a long-shuttered Ponderosa Steakhouse, as well as a community health clinic, spearheaded by a group of nonprofit organizations.

The other side of town, meanwhile, is slated to get a pediatric clinic, apartments for seniors, a jazz club and more restaurants.

"Everything that draws crowds and commerce is along South Florissant," said Phillips, the filmmaker, citing the weekend farmers market, the summer concerts and the 5K runs downtown, while southeast Ferguson is in "worse condition than it was" before Brown's death.



Vendors and patrons gather at the Ferguson Farmers Market on South Florissant Road in May.

After nearly 13 years, Phillips recently decided to move out of Canfield Green and into a western suburb.

“I did my time,” he said. “The point is not to stay in the hood. It’s to get out.”

Longtime business owners, though, say they cannot afford to give up.

Davis, president of the newly formed West Florissant Business Association, is trying to rebrand the neighborhood as “WestFlo.” Or “Unity Plaza.”

He said the association and city are weighing tax incentives for business development: “I need to remind them that this is Ferguson, too.”

But, so far, he has not been able to shake the stigma.

Small-business revenue, including his own, is down by about 50 percent since 2014.

“We'll still have individuals that say, 'Do I want to go to Ferguson? Do I want to do business there? Who's even there any longer?' ” Davis said. “After the riots, a lot of corporations kind of came in, triaging the area. But everyone is still holding their breath, waiting for a champion to come along.”



Chris Phillips stands in the spot where Brown was killed.

About this story

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