

# Truth & Repair: The History of Structural Racism in New Jersey

## 2023-2024 Research Recap

### ***Background***

Since 2019, the New Jersey department of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF), the nation's largest health philanthropy with headquarters in Princeton, NJ, has developed a strategic approach to promoting a "Culture of Health" among all New Jersey residents, animated by a mission to address the needs of those residents historically marginalized or harmed by structural racism or other forms of oppression. The release of the 2019 report, [\*Building a Culture of Health: A Policy Roadmap to Help All New Jerseyans Live Their Healthiest Lives\*](#), provided a blueprint that aligned with RWJF's national objectives and priorities, offering a powerful policy approach to support investment in health and well-being in New Jersey. The NJ team has engaged several different audiences, including grassroots organizations, to better understand the landscape and potential entry points for a new strategy. In implementing this strategy, the NJ team is framing its work in the context of holistic, place-based strategy, racial equity/justice orientation, and liberatory consciousness. RWJF is at a key inflection point, especially in the context of an uncertain political landscape. As a result, this project is also informed by a [\*Truth, Repair and Transformation \(TRT\) process\*](#), which builds on the Foundation's work to address the root causes of health disparities "by more explicitly focusing on truth-telling, repair, and accountability as necessary conditions for sustaining change."

These different perspectives are woven into the NJ department's efforts to address the conditions that contribute to structural racism and other forms of oppression and their impacts on health equity. In doing so, exploring root causes as well as understanding the history and impacts of structural racism in the state is crucial. Undertaking such an effort will likely generate ambivalence and even hostility. Nevertheless, there is a compelling rationale for conducting such an inquiry: the history of New Jersey is a microcosm of the U.S., highlighting the prevalence of structural racism, its effects on health equity, and possibilities for repair.

In 2023, we applied for and received a one-year planning grant from RWJF to begin developing an approach to studying the history of structural racism and its effects on communal health outcomes in New Jersey. During this initial phase, we convened a steering committee of New Jersey-based scholars, established connections with local cultural institutions, and developed a framework for undertaking cross-institutional, community-based historical research. After two years and a pilot program (see below), we've begun the implementation phase supported by a three-year grant from the Foundation. Over the next several months, we will be conducting our Summer 2025 research cycle, convening an advisory board of historians and public health scholars, and outreaching to those individuals and institutions whose work can support our own and vice versa.

### ***The Structure of Truth & Repair***

The primary objectives of Truth & Repair are to

- Establish a model of interdisciplinary community-engaged historical research that explores the impacts of structural racism on the health conditions of marginalized communities in New Jersey and the development of health inequities across the state.

- Explore the role of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and Johnson & Johnson in the history of structural racism and health inequities in New Jersey.
- Empower students and community members to strengthen cultural institutions and organizations through community-engaged historical research.
- Engage community leaders, cultural workers, policymakers, educators, philanthropic foundations, and non-profits in the state on how to address structural racism and promote equitable health outcomes for all New Jerseyans, including investments in social infrastructure.

We ultimately strive to support marginalized and cultural institutions with historically-informed, fact-based research and scholarship that promote equitable health outcomes for all New Jerseyans.

To accomplish this goal, we partner with cultural institutions and organizations across the state that preserve and produce historical records—historical societies, libraries, archives, museums, park services, community centers, oral history collectives, etc.—or use history to inform their efforts redressing the effects of structural racism in their communities. These institutions provide the historical knowledge and materials necessary to define the unique characteristics and impacts of structural racism in New Jersey. In return, we:

**Co-design research projects.** We ask cultural institutions and organizations what projects they need help starting or completing that align with our mission and one or more of our three themes:

- *Social Infrastructure* studies the effects of urban renewal, highway construction, and other metropolitan and regional redevelopment projects on communal health.
- *Health Care Systems* documents the role of medical education and access in marginalized communities, including the impacts of hospital and clinic closures, grassroots organizing against closures, and the development of mutual aid networks.
- *Historical Equity* develops strategies to support the state's under-resourced cultural institutions and organizations that preserve the histories of marginalized New Jerseyans.

Projects can range from surveying documents in a church's archive or researching an historic neighborhood to digitizing newspaper articles and photos to complement a virtual collection of oral history interviews. For each project, we help define the goals, timeline, and workflow.

**Conduct community-engaged historical research.** Once we've defined a project, student researchers from universities and colleges across the state and post-doctoral research associates collaborate with our partners and historians from the community to achieve the projects' aims, using qualitative and quantitative research methods rooted in the principles of community-engaged research. With permission from our partners, student researchers are encouraged to produce academic papers, journalistic articles, virtual maps and walking tours, documentaries, podcasts, and other works based on their research. All research and research products are shared with our community partners and their patrons.

**Support and connect cultural institutions and organizations.** We recognize that many of New Jersey's cultural institutions and organizations lack needed equipment and staff. So, we use the historical research to help community partners identify areas for investments from policymakers, philanthropies, non-profits, and universities. We will also write reports and blogposts, host community forums and workshops, advise secondary and post-secondary

curricular development on topics in New Jersey history, and inform recommendations for how to redress the impacts of structural racism on these communities. In doing so, we hope to encourage the state's many cultural institutions and organizations to connect and collaborate.

### *Research Hubs*

To document the history of structural racism for the entire state, we developed a statewide network of research hubs located in one of three geographical areas—North, Central, and South Jersey. This network will provide the organizational structure to monitor student-community research, maintain close connections with regional community partners, host meetings with current and potential partners, and outreach to local cultural institutions and organizations. Each hub is overseen by a hub leader and assigned student researchers, all responsible for creating and conducting historical research on regional and statewide topics developed in collaboration with local community partners.

#### North Jersey Hub

St. Peter's University, Department of History

John Johnson, Jr., Ph.D.

Focus: Newark, Plainfield, and Jersey City

#### Central Jersey Hub

Princeton University, Department of History—Stoutsburg Sourland African American Museum

Alison Isenberg, Ph.D., Elaine Buck, and Beverly Mills

Focus: Trenton and Greater Mercer County

#### South Jersey Hub

Rutgers University-Camden, Department of History

Kendra Boyd, Ph.D.

Focus: Camden, Atlantic City, and surrounding municipalities

#### Statewide Jersey Hub

Rutgers University-New Brunswick, Department of Sociology

Dawne Mouzon, Ph.D., M.P.H.

Focus: Statewide

Major funding for the research study is provided by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, the Princeton Humanities Initiative, and Princeton's Department of History, with additional support from Princeton's Program for Community-Engaged Scholarship.

For more information, visit our website at [www.trnj.org](http://www.trnj.org).

### ***People***

#### *Steering Committee*

[Alison Isenberg, Ph.D.](#), Princeton University (Co-PI), is an historian of the 19th and 20th century U.S. Her areas of expertise include cities; business history; the built environment; public

humanities; and race and gender. She is currently completing a book on uprisings in Trenton, NJ in the aftermath of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s assassination in 1968.

[John Johnson, Jr., Ph.D.](#), Saint Peter's University (Co-PI), is an historian of race, class, culture, and urban geography in the 20th century United States. In particular, he focuses on the impact of federally funded urban renewal programs on the lives of residents of Newark, NJ. He is currently completing a book on the Weequahic Section of Newark, NJ.

[Dawne Mouzon, Ph.D., M.P.H.](#), Rutgers University-New Brunswick, is a medical sociologist with expertise in health and healthcare inequities among racially minoritized populations. She is currently writing a book on the social and historical origins of ethnoracial health inequities in the United States.

[Elaine Buck and Beverly Mills](#), Stoutsburg Sourland African American Museum and Friday Truehart Consultants, will serve as historical consultants and lend their expertise in community-engaged historical research. They will identify and collaborate with NJ historical institutions, assist in identifying how these organizations could build capacity, and offer guidance on exhibitions and other educational programs where organizations share stories of underrepresented populations.

[Tania Boster, Ph.D.](#), Program for Community-Engaged Scholarship (ProCES), Princeton University, brings expertise in academic and community history with experience organizing collaborative history projects and convenings on topics including oral history with displaced communities and hyperlocal historical research to advance racial equity. Through ProCES, she will convene project-specific community-based research training and methods workshops for students and scholars.

[Kendra Boyd, Ph.D.](#), Rutgers University-Camden, is a scholar of African American history whose research focuses on Black business and economic history, urban history, and migration. She is also co-founder of the Black Camden Oral History Project, which aims to preserve the history of African American life and activism in Camden, New Jersey through recorded oral interviews.

#### *Administrative Support*

[Jacquelyn Walsh](#), Princeton Mellon Initiative in Architecture, Urbanism and the Humanities, Princeton University, will provide support for the grant activities and ongoing business and departmental management in collaboration with Princeton University's Department of History.

**Skyler D. Gordon, Princeton University**, earned his Ph.D. in history from Princeton University and has over ten years of experience with coordinating historical and public humanities research projects. He has organized local and statewide public history research projects at both secondary and postsecondary school levels. In his position as project manager, he will coordinate research and daily operations at each of the hubs.

#### ***Summer 2024 Pilot Program***

From July 10 to September 28, 2024, we conducted a summer pilot program with 16 graduate and undergraduate research assistants divided into three teams geographically dispersed across the state, each with a range of statewide and regional research agendas.

- Team 1 focused on making a major oral history collection available to the public, assisting archives with related projects, and database and archival research into historical sites and individuals in Trenton and the Greater Mercer County. Community partners included the New Jersey State Archives, the Trentoniana Room of the Trenton Free Public Library, the Stoutsburg Sourland African American Museum, and several church-based community history initiatives.
- Team 2 focused on surveying oral history collections, newspapers, and subject archives for materials relating to hospital closures, urban renewal, public parks and greenspace, and the HIV/AIDS epidemic in Essex, Hudson, and Union counties. Community partners included the Jersey City Free Public Library, the New Jersey Historical Society, the Plainfield Public Library, and the George F. Smith Library at Rutgers University-Newark.
- Team 3 focused on health data sets to trace and capture the impact of structural policies on health outcomes in marginalized communities. This team conducted library archival research and extracted mostly qualitative data from historical library databases, including the New Jersey Health Statistics from 1877 to 2000; New Jersey State Health Assessment Database; and U.S. Small Area Life Expectancy Estimates & Project.

On September 28, 2024, the researchers presented their work at an end-of-summer convening held at Princeton University. Attendees included our community partners, university and community historians, local librarians and archivists, secondary and post-secondary educators, multimedia artists, and community activists.

During the pilot, our student researchers:

- Created a digital repository of correspondences, newspaper articles, reports, pamphlets, photographs, and other materials from online databases and the Trentoniana Room to document the Carver Center and Shiloh Baptist Church, two institutions located in downtown Trenton with deep ties to the city's African American community. The leadership at Shiloh Baptist hopes to incorporate the research into its downtown revitalization project.
- Consulted on two digital walking tours created by Historic Building Architects, LLC, the firm responsible for restoring the derelict Carver Center into a community center.
- Digitized over 35 audio-recordings and accompanying transcripts from the New Jersey Southern Black Migration Project, a collection of oral histories located at the New Jersey State Archives of African Americans who settled in and around Trenton during the Great Migration of the early twentieth century.
- Created a compendium of health statistics culled from the annual reports of the New Jersey Board/Department of Health from 1877 to 2000.
- Used the Structural Racism Effect Index and the City Health Dashboard, two online databases of health statistics, to map disparities in health outcomes and social determinants of health in Newark, Plainfield, and Jersey City.
- Used materials from the New Jersey Historical Society, the Newark Public Library, and the Plainfield Public Library to document the history of hospital closures in northern New Jersey and responses from predominately African American and Latine communities, including protests and the creation of mutual aid networks.

- Surveyed two oral history collections related to the HIV/AIDS epidemic—the New Jersey AIDS Oral History Project collection at the New Jersey State Archives and the New Jersey AIDS Collection at Rutgers-Newark’s George F. Smith Library—which revealed structural inequalities in HIV/AIDS health care access between the better-resourced North and under-resourced South.
- Used materials at the New Jersey State Archives to document the history of black patients and health care workers at the New Jersey State Village of Epileptics at Skillman, an early mental health facility established in 1898. The research revealed connections between the Institute’s leadership and the early eugenics movement in New Jersey.
- Documented the history of the Trenton Free Public Library system, which has lost all but one of its branches, and created a map of cooling centers in downtown Trenton to show how reopening Trenton’s library branches would increase the number of cooling centers in the city.

### ***T&R Project Highlight: Great Migration Oral History Project***

During the Winter/Spring 2025, we continued our efforts to digitize the New Jersey Southern Black Migration Oral History Project collection. We plan to upload all or most of the oral histories to the NJSA’s [Digital Repository](#). From January to February, two undergraduate students from Princeton University digitized an additional twelve oral histories, recordings and transcripts included. A third student researcher surveyed the unprocessed collection of Giles R. Wright (1935-2009), a renowned historian of African Americans in New Jersey, the inaugural director of the Afro-American History Program at the New Jersey Historical Commission, and organizer of the Oral History Project.

You can find the oral history recordings and transcripts [here](#) or at <https://njsagc.access.preservica.com/portal/en-US/collection/sdb:SO%7C200355c0-311e-4911-8b1f-67f62c1777f6>.

### ***T&R Research Associates***

In order to expand our research capacities over the three-year grant period, build a sustainable, cross-institutional model for community-engaged historical research, and provide post-doctoral graduates opportunities to explore the field of community-engaged research, we have created three research associateships—one parttime position funded by Princeton’s Department of History running from January 2025 to September 2025, and two, two-year research associateships funded by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and the Princeton Humanities Initiative, a new program which supports innovative, interdisciplinary, and collaborative humanities-centered research, teaching, and community engagement at Princeton. The two-year associateships will run from September 2025 to September 2027.

Listings for the 2025-2027 research associateship will be posted to our website and spread through our network of academic and community partners. For more information, please contact Skyler D. Gordon, [sdgordon@princeton.edu](mailto:sdgordon@princeton.edu).

### ***Topics in New Jersey History***

In our effort to expand the history of structural racism and of racialized health inequities in New Jersey, we will include in each report a running list of research topics we hope scholars, educators and students, advocates, and cultural workers explore on their own. If you have any additions to the list, please send them to [sdgordon@princeton.edu](mailto:sdgordon@princeton.edu).