

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

## 2024-2025 Research Recap

### Introduction

In 2023, *Truth & Repair: The History of Structural Racism in New Jersey* applied for and received a one-year planning grant from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF), the nation's largest health philanthropy with headquarters in Princeton, NJ, to develop an approach to studying the history of structural racism and its effects on communal health outcomes in New Jersey. Our study would build on that of Foundation's New Jersey Department. Since 2019, the Department 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 and 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 to support investment in health and well-being in New Jersey. The NJ team has engaged several audiences to better understand the landscape and potential entry points for a new strategy, a [\*Truth, Repair and Transformation \(TRT\) process\*](#), that advances 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."

During the initial phase of the study, the steering committee established connections with scholarly and cultural institutions in the state to begin developing a framework for cross-institutional, community-based historical research. In the summer of 2024, sixteen graduate and undergraduate researchers launched the study's data collection efforts, combing through archives and public health data for stories and stats that have helped refine the study's investigative questions and plot future directions.

After a year of planning and piloting, Truth & Repair received a three-year grant in March 2025 from the Foundation to embark on this new model of scholarship, and as of August 23, completed its first round of research projects. The following report summarizes our methods, structure, and first year of research from September 2024 to August 2025.

### Methods and Structure

The primary objectives of Truth & Repair are to

- Establish a model of interdisciplinary, community-engaged research that explores the impacts of structural racism on the health of marginalized communities in New Jersey and the development of health inequities between different communities in 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.

We ultimately strive to support the production of historically-informed 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 produce, preserve, interpret, and share historical records that inform their efforts redressing the effects of structural racism in their scholarship and 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 developing that align with our mission and one or more of our three themes:

- *Social Infrastructure* studies the effects of urban renewal, highway construction, park 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 these closures, the use of home remedies, 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 and timelines.

**Conduct community-engaged historical research.** Once we've defined a project, student researchers from Rutgers, Saint Peter's, and Princeton Universities and postdoctoral senior research specialists 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 plan to 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. In doing so, we hope to encourage the state’s many cultural institutions and organizations to connect and collaborate.

#### *Steering Committee*

Alison Isenberg, Ph.D., History, Princeton University  
John Johnson Jr., Ph.D., History, Saint Peter’s University  
Dawne Mouzon, Ph.D., M.P.H., Sociology, Rutgers University–New Brunswick  
Beverly Mills, Founder, Stoutsburg Sourland African American Museum  
Elaine Buck, Founder, Stoutsburg Sourland African American Museum  
Kendra Boyd, Ph.D., History, Rutgers University–Camden  
Tania Boster, Ph.D., Program for Community-Engaged Scholarship, Princeton University

#### *Administration*

Jacquelyn Walsh, Princeton Mellon Initiative in Architecture, Urbanism & the Humanities,  
Princeton University  
Skyler Gordon, Ph.D., History, Princeton University

#### *Affiliated Scholars*

Christina Jackson, Ph.D., Sociology and Africana Studies, Rutgers University–Camden

### **Winter/Spring 2025**

During Winter and Spring 2025, four research assistants joined Truth & Repair to advance two ongoing projects: digitizing the New Jersey Southern Black Migration Oral History Project at the New Jersey State Archives (NJSA) and documenting the history of hospital closures in New Jersey. Princeton undergraduates Anika Sekar, Trixie Okoye, and Zehma Herring helped NJSA archivists digitize the audio recordings and transcripts of oral histories narrated by African Americans who settled in New Jersey during the Great Migration. The Archive plans to upload all or most of the oral histories to NJSA’s Digital Repository. Herring also 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.

In partnership with Princeton's Program for Community-Engaged Scholarship and the New Jersey Alliance for Clinical and Translational Science (NJ ACTS), Princeton undergraduate Janah Richardson worked with Beth Zakcohen and Tom Ankner of the Newark Public Library's Charles F. Cummings New Jersey Information Center to document the closing of the Margaret Hague Hospital in the 1970s—the financial justifications for the Hospital's closing, community protests against the closing, and closure's consequences on communal health. Richardson discussed her experience with Tom Garlinghouse of NJ ACTS in an article for Princeton's Department of Molecular Biology published earlier this year. You can find the article [here](#).

### Summer 2025 Research Cycle

From June 10 to August 23, Truth & Repair organized our second summer research cycle. A twenty-three-member cohort of new and returning students worked at our four research hubs located at five scholarly and cultural institutions in North, Central and South Jersey. This network provides the organizational structure to monitor student-community research across these varied institutions, maintain close connections with community partners in the area, host meetings with current and potential partners, and outreach to local cultural institutions and organizations. Each hub is led by one or more steering committee members and assigned four-to-five students, all responsible for creating and conducting historical research on regional and statewide topics developed with local community partners.

North Jersey	Central Jersey	South Jersey	Statewide
Department of History, St. Peter's	Department of History, Princeton—SSAAM	Department of History, University–Camden	Department of Sociology, Rutgers University–New Brunswick
John Johnson, Jr.	Alison Isenberg, Elaine Buck, and Beverly Mills	Kendra Boyd and Christina Jackson	Dawne Mouzon
Newark, Plainfield, and Jersey City	Trenton and Greater Mercer County	Camden, Atlantic City, and surrounding municipalities	Statewide

The North Jersey Hub focused on surveying oral history collections, newspaper, and subject archives, and assisting archives with related projects. Research areas included the impacts of urban renewal, highway construction, and hospital closures in Essex, Hudson,

and Union counties. Dr. Johnson, Assistant Professor of History at Saint Peter's, served as hub leaders.

The Central Jersey Hub focused on making a major oral history collection available to the public, assisting archives with related projects, database and archival research into historical sites and individuals, and building a new oral history collective among community partners. Dr. Alison Isenberg, Professor of History at Princeton and Beverly Mills and Elaine Buck, founders of the Stoutsburg Sourland African American Museum, served as hub leaders. Partners included the New Jersey State Archives, the Trentonian Room at the Trenton Free Public Library, the Stoutsburg Sourland African American Museum, the Rescue Mission of Trenton, and 120 East State.

The South Jersey Hub focused on conducting oral histories, processing and digitizing oral history collections, surveying newspaper and subject archives, and assisting archives with relevant projects. Research areas included Black healthcare networks and mutual aid; pollution and environmental racism; and redlining, housing discrimination, and segregation in South Jersey. Dr. Kendra Boyd, Assistant Professor of History at Rutgers–Camden, served as hub leader alongside Dr. Christina Jackson, Assistant Professor of Sociology and Africana Studies at Rutgers–Camden. Partners included the Lawnside Historical Society, Rowan University Archives, and the Black Camden Oral History Project.

The Statewide Hub focused on health data sets to trace and capture the impact of structural policies on health outcomes for marginalized communities in the state. The students conducted library archival research, extracted qualitative and quantitative data from historical library databases including the New Jersey Health Statistics from 1877 to 2000, the New Jersey State Health Assessment Database, and U.S. Small Area Life Expectancy Estimates & Project, and created complementary maps using census data and GIS software. Dr. Dawne Mouzon, Associate Professor of Sociology at Rutgers–New Brunswick, served as hub leader.

### *Research Workshops*

During the first two months of the summer research cycle, Truth & Repair hosted four one-hour research workshops for the student researchers to learn how to find and use sources and data relevant to the projects and themes of Truth & Repair. We invited librarians and archivists from our partner institutions to present over Zoom on a range of topics, including

- How to find and read twentieth-century newspapers published in New Jersey, led by Steven Knowlton, the librarian for History and African American Studies at Princeton;
- Public health databases related to New Jersey, led by Yingting Zhang, the Research Services Librarian at the Robert Wood Johnson Library of the Health Sciences and Adjunct Assistant Professor in the Department of Medicine of the Robert Wood Johnson Medical School at Rutgers;

- Using the Sinclair New Jersey Collection, the largest, most comprehensive collection of New Jersey materials in the state, led by Christine Lutz, the New Jersey Regional Librarian and Head of Public Services in the Special Collections and University Archives at Rutgers–New Brunswick.
- How to access the physical and digital holdings at the New Jersey State Archive, led by Catherine Medich and John Bozzard, reference librarians at the Archives; and
- Archival sources on New Jersey, Essex County, and Newark available through the Charles F. Cummings New Jersey Information Center at the Newark Public Library Center, led by Beth Zakcohen, a librarian with the Center.

These workshops are intended not only to share techniques for locating and interpreting relevant sources, but also to connect different communities of historical practitioners. As state residents, permanent and temporary, students can meet, teach, and learn from the civil servants and scholars who support these recording-keeping institutions. The presenters, in turn, can understand how different users access their repositories and use the archival records in their research. We hope these workshops help support this network for producing, preserving, and interpreting records about marginalized communities in New Jersey.

### *End-of-Summer Convening*

On Saturday, August 23, Truth & Repair hosted an end-of-summer convening at the Carl A. Fields Center for Equality + Cultural Understanding in Princeton, NJ. Students had the opportunity to share their research with their hub leaders and community partners, as well as university and community historians, local librarians and archivists, secondary and post-secondary educators, multimedia artists and community activists. Princeton Campus Dining catered dinner following the presentations.

Our student researchers presented the following projects. Information about the students and copies of the presentations are appended:

Julio Santos created a database of functioning and closed hospitals in Hudson, Bergen, and Passaic Counties using archived newspapers and other materials at the Priscilla Garner Main Library in Jersey City.

Riley De Sol conducted research on the construction of the East-West Freeway from approximately 1950 to 1960, using cities of East Orange and Newark as research loci and the Newark Public Library holdings, online newspaper databases, and governmental reports as sources.

Scott Guning Qi investigated the health impacts of the Newark Bay Extension rail line to the residents living within 1000 meters using the datasets on the risk of cancer.

Elizabeth Eimer helped members of 120 East State in Trenton conduct research on the history of First Presbyterian Church of Trenton as part of the organization's project to transform the more than 300-year-old church into a community and performing arts center.

Ethan Jardim continued his work from last year digitizing the Southern Black Migration Oral History Project. He also used the NJSA oral history collection to create a research "packet" for scholars interested in the histories of health and medicine during New Jersey's Great Migration. The packet includes a database of excerpts pulled from the transcripts that mention "home remedies" and an annotated bibliography on the history of home remedies, public health, and the Great Migration.

Kaitlyn Rich continued her research from last year on the history of the eugenics movement in New Jersey, focusing on the connections between New Jersey's prominent families and movement leaders, institutions, and scholarship in the twentieth century.

Serita Sargent worked with representatives and clients of the Rescue Mission of Trenton, Michael Graves Architects, and The Trenton Project to plan and design a nearby park for unhoused and housed residents in honor of Harlan B. Joseph, a local activist killed by police during the 1968 Trenton uprisings. Sargent developed a bilingual questionnaire<sup>1</sup>, canvassed the neighborhood for feedback from the community, and shared information with Mission clients at a cookout hosted by the Mission. Sargent also helped SSAAM organize an oral history project to document the records of African American elders with ties to the Sourland Mountain region of Central Jersey.

K. Stawasz developed research begun last summer on the history of HIV/AIDS in New Jersey using sources from the New Jersey AIDS Oral History Project collection at the New Jersey State Archives, the New Jersey AIDS Collection at Rutgers-Newark's George F. Smith Library, and the New Jersey Health Statistics from 1877 to 2000 available online.

Allison Jiang, Matthew Zarzecki, Ysabel Frempong, and Md Nurul Hoque created statewide and regional maps using datasets on a wide range of health-related parameters, including demographic trends, redlined and yellow-lined areas, environmental risk factors, "food deserts," healthcare facilities and prevention.

Elie Ackerman helped archivists at Rowan University's University Archives & Special Collections digitize materials from the Color Lines Project Collection, an oral history collection, public dialogue, and performance project centered around the local, state, and national legacy of the Civil Rights Movement. The oral histories discuss various topics related to social determinants of health and structural racism in South New Jersey including policing, redlining, housing discrimination, and racial segregation across education, housing, and employment.

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<sup>1</sup> Julio Santos translated the questionnaire from English to Spanish.

Frempong and Andrea LaBoo worked with Dr. Christina Jackson on the Trenton Housing and Health study which analyzes the connection between redlined neighborhoods in downtown, East, and South Trenton, and discrepancies in housing quality and healthcare access. Using the theories and methods of community-based participatory research, LaBoo and Frempong collected and analyzed relevant scholarship and health data, historical and public health research, fieldnotes, surveys, interviews, and feedback from focus groups.

Dr. Kendra Boyd concluded with a recap of the work undertaken at the South Jersey Hub. Nholvahiwa Cosmas and Niayla Silvera worked with the Lawnside Historical Society on rehousing and preparing their archival materials for public use. Quincy Wansel processed oral histories conducted as part of the Black Camden Oral History Project and surveying other oral history collections for information related to structural racism and the social determinants of health. An emphasis was also placed on finding information about community care and wellbeing initiatives. In line with this theme, Isoke Senghor assisted with researching poor Black mothers' activism in the state regarding access to healthy food, the inadequacy of the welfare system, and their initiative to establish a community-owned cooperative grocery store. And Dr. Boyd researched the medical infrastructure and mutual aid care practices of marginalized communities in southern New Jersey and the broader state.

## **Next Steps**

Over the next several months, we will continue our respective and collective research agendas in partnership with our community partners. We will also:

- Assemble an advisory board of scholars to guide existing research and suggest new areas of study; recommend relevant scholarship and archival materials; peer-review scholarship created by student researchers, community partners and early-career scholars whose work addresses one or more of our themes; and inform recommendations for mitigating racialized health disparities in the state.
- Onboard a cohort of senior research specialists to help coordinate research across the network of research hubs. This will include developing research projects with local community partners, supervising student research assistants placed at partner institutions, and editing and compiling written works based on the research.
- Identify and determine ways to support scholarship related to the themes and mission of Truth & Repair.

*For more information about these projects and the work of Truth & Repair, please visit [trnj.org](https://trnj.org) or contact Skyler D. Gordon, Project Manager, [sdgordon@princeton.edu](mailto:sdgordon@princeton.edu).*