Prompt Inquiry
a project of the Ishmael Policy Institute

WORKING PAPER NO. 2026-09 LEGACY CITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Kansas City Didn't Escape St. Louis's Decline. It Annexed Around It.

St. Louis has been locked inside the same 62 square miles since 1876. Kansas City annexed its way to five times that. Inside the boundary it kept until 1947, Kansas City lost more than half its people after 1950, much as St. Louis did. The difference in the headline numbers is mostly the land.

RESEARCH QUESTION

Inside the boundary it kept until 1947, did Kansas City decline much as St. Louis did, so that annexation explains most of the difference between the two cities' headline numbers?

Prompted and verified by **Patrick Ishmael**, Founding Prompter, for Prompt Inquiry, a project of the Ishmael Policy Institute. Drafted with AI assistance (Claude and Mia; review by Mack) under the prompter's direction.

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ABOUT THIS PAPER

Research brief

RESEARCH QUESTION

Inside the boundary it kept until 1947, did Kansas City decline much as St. Louis did, so that annexation explains most of the difference between the two cities' headline numbers?

METHOD AND SOURCES

The study's "How the numbers were built" section explains the boundary reconstruction and the poverty estimate; "Gaps and cautions" lists the limits. Sources are listed in full, with links where available, at the end of the study.

STARTING VIEW

In his words, from the study's "How this started" note: "My hypothesis is that if Kansas City was restricted to only the land footprint available to it at a particular point in time 100 or more years ago, it would share the same poverty and population problems of St Louis. Annexation and expansion of tax base geographically papers over the fundamental problems by capturing what would otherwise have been a KC suburb."

OPENING PROMPT

Not saved as a prompt at the time. The study's own account of how it started gives the question: "Patrick asked whether Kansas City's ability to annex land is the real reason it grew while St. Louis shrank."

AI TOOLS AND VERIFICATION

Primary agents. Claude (Claude by Anthropic): research, analysis, figures and drafting; **Mia** (Muse by Meta): research brief, coordination and checks.

Contributing agents. Mack (Grok by xAI): independent review of the draft.

Verification: the prompter is responsible for verifying the evidence this study rests on. Its sources and data are published so any reader can check the findings.

CORRECTIONS

C1 November 26, 2026. In section 2, "the fourth-largest US city in 1920" was replaced with "the sixth-largest US city in 1920 (fourth in 1910)" (US Census Bureau, Working Paper 27, Table 14 (1910); Table 15 (1920)). In section 2, "that is the steepest percentage loss of any US city that had 100,000 people in 1950" was replaced with "that is one of the steepest percentage losses of any US city that had 100,000 people in 1950; only Detroit's, at 65.4%, was steeper. On the 2025 estimate, St. Louis is down 67.5%" (US Census Bureau, Working Paper 27, Table 18 (1950: Detroit 1,849,568); US Census Bureau, QuickFacts: Detroit city, Michigan (2020 census: 639,111)).

HOW THIS STARTED

Patrick asked whether Kansas City's ability to annex land is the real reason it grew while St. Louis shrank. In his words: "My hypothesis is that if Kansas City was restricted to only the land footprint available to it at a particular point in time 100 or more years ago, it would share the same poverty and population problems of St Louis. Annexation and expansion of tax base geographically papers over the fundamental problems by capturing what would otherwise have been a KC suburb." He asked for the idea to be tested, not assumed. Section 6 does that.

HOW THIS STUDY WAS MADE

Patrick Ishmael prompted this study and verified it. Claude drafted it and ran the analysis under his direction. The research was gathered by Mia, an AI agent, from census tables, Kansas City's annexation records, Dion Thompson-Davoli's reconstruction of the old core's population, and academic and policy work; a second AI agent reviewed it and caught several errors, which are corrected here. Before building the page, Claude checked a sample against the originals: the old-boundary population figures and their caveats in Thompson-Davoli's analysis, St. Louis's census and QuickFacts figures, the 1950 census counts for both cities, Strong Towns' figures on the 1946–1964 annexations, and the Missouri Constitution's rule for changing St. Louis's boundary. Claude also counted the old core's 2020 population independently from Census block data (section 2). The ZIP-code poverty estimate, vacancy rates, east-of-Troost and life-expectancy figures, metro-area counts and the school-district history were read from their sources for the research in November 2026 and rechecked against their sources on November 26, 2026, except Demographia's 1950 metro-area totals and the nine ZIP-code poverty rates taken from ZipAtlas and similar compilations, which were not rechecked. Those rates can differ from the Nash Report's by three to four points for the same ZIP code.

The question

In 1950 St. Louis had 857,000 people and Kansas City 457,000. By 2020 St. Louis had 302,000, and Kansas City had 508,000. On those numbers, Kansas City is the success and St. Louis the cautionary tale.

But the two cities did not play by the same rules. Both had grown to fill about 60 square miles, roughly the reach of a half-hour streetcar ride (section 1). St. Louis separated from its county in 1876 and has been stuck with that boundary ever since. Kansas City broke out of its streetcar-sized footprint after World War II and kept annexing. A conclusion many people have reached, by different routes, is that this, more than anything else, explains the difference: hold Kansas City to the boundary it had a century ago, and it would look like St. Louis, with the same shrinking population and the same concentrated poverty. Annexation, in this view, lets a city count as its own the growth that would otherwise have happened in separate suburbs.

The argument has many contributors. Urban researchers argued as early as the 1990s that cities able to annex look healthier on paper than hemmed-in ones.

Patrick's own work first pointed toward it in 2013. A six-part Show-Me Institute series, "The Smallness of the Potentially 'Hip' Core," used Brookings Institution research to compare the two cities by distance from their downtowns. Both followed the same pattern in jobs and people: modest gains downtown, losses in the rings around it, and growth 10 to 35 miles out. The center of Kansas City was already showing St. Louis's problems. Most of those figures counted jobs, though, not the people living in the old core. Patrick made the argument outright in later years, including at the 2023 hearing described below. The heavy lifting was done by Kansas City urbanist Dion Thompson-Davoli, who reached the same conclusion independently and, in 2025, measured the population loss directly. In "A Hidden Collapse," he fitted census data to Kansas City's old boundary and found it had lost 56% of its people since 1950.

As far as the research for this study could find, no formal study has made this comparison. The general pattern is well established, but Thompson-Davoli's appears to be the only computation of the old core's population. The closest formal work, a paper Kaan Cankat and Allison Green presented at the National Bureau of Economic Research in 2025, applies the same inside-the-old-boundary method to five other cities, but not to Kansas City or St. Louis. Its results look much like this study's: from 1940 to 1990, Dallas and Oklahoma City lost 25% and 30% of their people inside their 1940 limits, not far from the losses in Boston and Detroit, which could not annex, and the authors conclude that "naive comparisons of city populations mask true underlying trends."

Policymakers have been slower to see it. At a 2023 Missouri House committee hearing on the earnings tax, held in Kansas City, a St. Louis legislator pointed to the new buildings around the hearing site as a sign of Kansas City's success. Patrick, testifying for the Show-Me Institute, answered that underneath them, inside Kansas City's old footprint, the city was in the same situation as St. Louis.

This study tests that idea. Among other things, it verifies Thompson-Davoli's finding with an independent count of 2020 census blocks inside the old boundary, which shows a 55% loss. It also compares the two cities' land, population and poverty; asks where each region's growth went; and looks at what annexation could and could not have changed. Two terms recur. The *old core* or *pre-1947 boundary* is the roughly 60 square miles Kansas City covered from 1909 to 1946. *Annexation* is a city taking neighboring land into its limits.

What we found

The argument is largely right on population and, on the best available estimate, on poverty. Inside its pre-1947 boundary, Kansas City lost about 55% of its people from 1950 to 2020 by this study's own count, confirming Dion Thompson-Davoli's reconstruction (56%), on the same scale as St. Louis's 65%, and all of the city's net growth since then is on annexed land. "Papers over" is only partly right: annexation hid the decline, but it also kept a tax base inside the city, and it could not have stopped a decline driven by forces it never touched, including school districts it never annexed.

−55%
population change inside Kansas City's pre-1947 boundary, 1950 to 2020: about 430,500 to 195,600, by this study's count of 2020 census blocks. It confirms Dion Thompson-Davoli's KCisms reconstruction, −56% to 2022. St. Louis: −65%, 1950 to 2020.

+286,000
people added on land Kansas City annexed after 1946, through 2020: more than all of the city's net growth of 51,500 since 1950.

5.1×
Kansas City's land area against St. Louis's today: 314.7 square miles against 61.7. In 1920 they were almost the same size.

23–25%
estimated poverty rate inside Kansas City's old core, from ZIP-code data, against 20.6% in St. Louis and 14.6% for Kansas City as a whole.

12+
school districts inside today's Kansas City. The city annexed land but not schools, and its own district collapsed much as St. Louis's did.

1.43m vs 1.48m
growth outside each city's old limits since 1950, counting Kansas City's annexed land as suburb: nearly the same.

Seen from inside the old lines, the two cities' stories converge. St. Louis lost about 555,000 people; old Kansas City lost about 243,000 by Thompson-Davoli's 1950–2022 estimate (about 234,900 by this study's own 2020 count), from a peak half as dense. The poorest part of old Kansas City, east of Troost Avenue, had a poverty rate of about 36%. What separates the cities is mainly that Kansas City's map kept growing to take in new, mostly prosperous neighborhoods in the Northland and south Jackson County, and St. Louis's could not.

1 · TWO BOUNDARIES

One city frozen in 1876, one that kept moving

St. Louis. On August 22, 1876, St. Louis voters approved separating the city from St. Louis County, under the home-rule provisions of Missouri's new 1875 constitution. The vote was close and disputed; it was confirmed after a recount and a court fight that ran into 1877. St. Louis became an independent city, in no county, and its charter fixed its boundary at about 61 square miles, out to what is now Skinker Boulevard. As a Washington University law professor later put it, "When they drew this line they thought they had enough room for 100 years. By 1904… they had reached their limits."

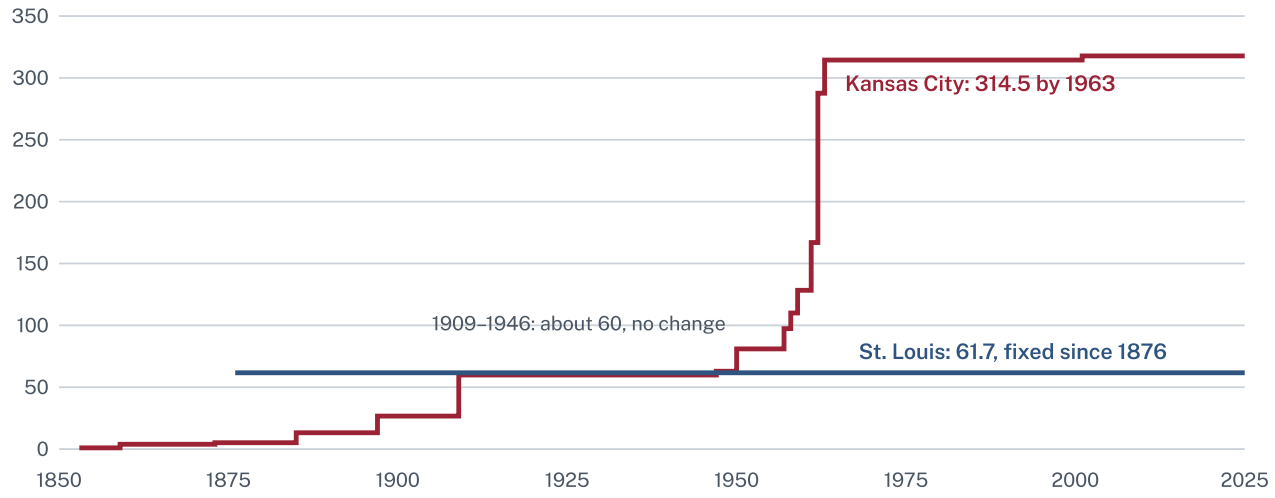
"Cannot annex" needs one qualification. No law singles out St. Louis. Missouri cities annex contiguous, unincorporated land, and St. Louis has none next to it: it is bounded by the Mississippi River and by incorporated suburbs, of which St. Louis County now has 87. The Missouri Constitution allows the city to annex county territory, to rejoin the county or to merge with it, but only through a plan drafted by a city–county board of freeholders and approved by voters in both the city and the county. Every such attempt has failed, most recently the statewide "Better Together" plan withdrawn in 2019. In practice, the barrier is the constitution plus the lack of open land.

Kansas City. Kansas City worked under the same state law but had unincorporated land around it in Jackson, Clay, Platte and Cass counties, and leaders who wanted it. The city reached about 60 square miles in 1909 and then did not move its boundary for nearly forty years, while its population doubled. After the war, city manager L. P. Cookingham led a deliberate program "to avoid being constrained by surrounding suburbs"; Mayor H. Roe Bartle said Kansas City "cannot be hemmed in." The city crossed the Missouri River in 1950, took in Hickman Mills in 1961, reached into Platte County in 1962 for what became Kansas City International Airport, and stopped at 314.5 square miles in 1963.

FIGURE 1

Land area, 1850 to today

Square miles of land inside each city's boundary. Kansas City: cumulative land area after each annexation, from the city Planning and Development Department's September 2001 table, "Current and Past Estimates of the Land Area of Individual Annexations and of the Total Land Area of Kansas City, Missouri" (current-estimate column). St. Louis: Census Bureau land area, inside a boundary unchanged since 1876.



Reading it: for forty years the two cities were nearly the same size on the map. Then Kansas City quintupled in sixteen years. Most of what it added was farmland and thinly settled county.

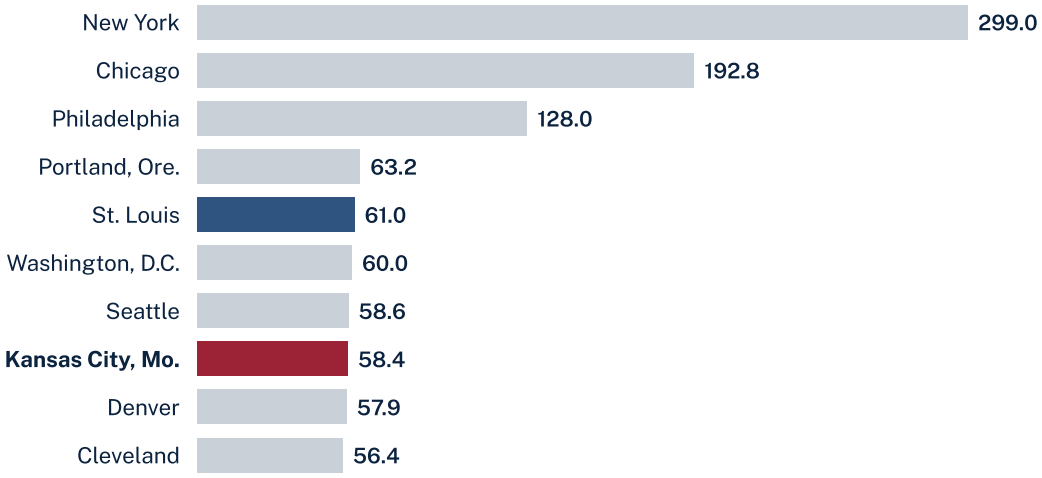
Kansas City could annex only on the Missouri side. Johnson County, Kansas, home to some of the region's richest suburbs, was always beyond reach.

Why about 60 square miles. Both cities sat at about 60 square miles, St. Louis by law and Kansas City by choice from 1909 to 1946. Is that a national pattern, a size beyond which a city became inefficient?

FIGURE 2

Land area of large cities, 1920

Square miles, from the Census Bureau's Working Paper 27 (1998), Table 15.



Reading it: about 60 square miles was common for second-tier cities of the streetcar era. The largest cities were much bigger, so it was not a ceiling.

The short answer is that it is neither a rule nor a coincidence. It is about how far people could travel. People have long accepted roughly a half-hour trip each way to work. On foot that defines a city about 2 miles across, a little over 3 square miles. On a streetcar it is about 8 miles across, or about 50 square miles; add rivers, irregular lines and a few annexed villages and you reach 55 to 65. Both cities had filled their streetcar radius by the early 1900s. Beyond it, serving outlying land meant stretching water, sewer, roads, police and fire over more miles per taxpayer. The car changed that, and in the 1950s Kansas City broke out of the streetcar footprint while St. Louis could not. Researchers who study local government find no single efficient size, and very large annexing cities have their own costs in serving thinly settled land.

2 · POPULATION

Both old cities emptied out

St. Louis, the sixth-largest US city in 1920 (fourth in 1910),[C1] peaked at 856,796 in 1950 and has lost population in every census since: 12.5% in the 1950s, 17.0% in the 1960s, 27.2% in the 1970s (Census Working Paper 27, Tables 20–21) and smaller losses each decade after. By 2020 it had 301,578, down 64.8%; the 2025 estimate is 278,144. By census figures, that is one of the steepest percentage losses of any US city that had 100,000 people in 1950; only Detroit's, at 65.4%, was steeper. On the 2025 estimate, St. Louis is down 67.5%.[C1]

Kansas City's whole-city count reached 507,087 in 1970 (Census Working Paper 27, Table 20), fell to 435,146 in 1990 and recovered to 508,090 in 2020, about 11% above 1950. That is the number in the headlines. It mixes two very different places:

FIGURE 3

Where Kansas City's growth came from, 1950 to 2020

Change in population, thousands, 1950 to 2020. The core uses Thompson-Davoli's 1950 figure and this study's own 2020 count from census blocks.



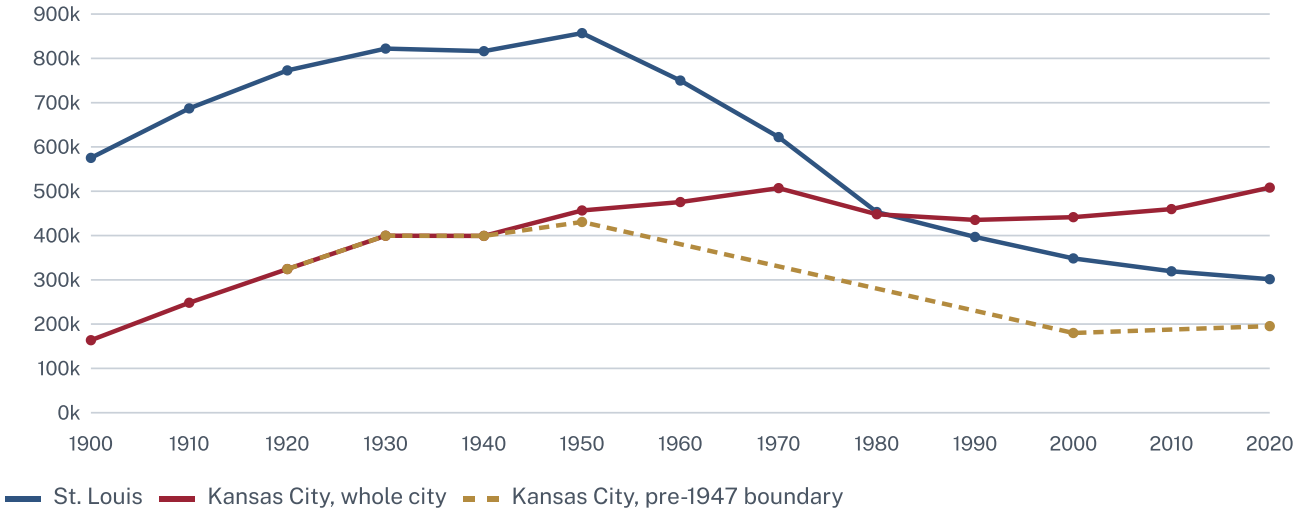
Reading it: all of Kansas City's net growth since 1950, and more, is on land it annexed. The core's loss and the annexed land's gain are about the same size.

The old-boundary figures come from Thompson-Davoli, who writes the KCisms newsletter, in "A Hidden Collapse" (2025). He fitted census data from the National Historical Geographic Information System to Kansas City's 1909 limits, which held until 1947, and found 430,535 people in 1950 and about 187,902 in 2022, a loss of 242,633, or 56%. It is an independent analysis, not an official count, and his full method is not published, but his figures agree with independent markers. The 1950 census counted 442,825 people in the Jackson County part of Kansas City, which was the old core plus about 2.8 square miles added in 1947, so his 430,535 fits within it. Strong Towns puts about 434,000 people in roughly the same 60 square miles in 1946, and an older estimate has the 1940 city area holding about 180,000 people by 2000. Thompson-Davoli draws the comparison with St. Louis himself: a 56% loss would rank among the steepest of any major US city since 1950, alongside St. Louis, Detroit and Baltimore, yet Kansas City never drew those headlines, because annexation masked the decline without preventing it.

FIGURE 4

Population, 1900 to 2020

Thousands of residents, decennial census. The dashed line is Kansas City inside its pre-1947 boundary: the whole city until 1947, then Dion Thompson-Davoli's reconstruction for 1950, an approximate 2000 figure, and this study's own count from 2020 census blocks. Dots are known values; the dashed line between 1950 and 2000 is not data.



Reading it: the gold line is the one the headline numbers hide. Inside the boundary it held for forty years, Kansas City lost more than half its people, as St. Louis did. Kansas City's whole-city line stays up because the city kept adding land and the people on it.

A second, independent count. To check the figure without relying on it, this study counted the old core again a different way. It rebuilt the 1909–1946 boundary from the 92 census tracts Kansas City was divided into in 1940; because the boundary did not change between 1909 and 1947, those tracts are the old core, and their populations add up exactly to its 1940 census total. It then summed the 2020 Census population of every census block inside that line.

	THOMPSON-DAVOLI (KCISMS)	THIS STUDY
Year	2022 (approximate)	2020
Data	NHGIS census data fitted to the old boundary; exact steps not published	2020 Census full count, summed over 5,257 census blocks
Boundary	His adaptation of the pre-1945 limits	The 92 census tracts Kansas City had in 1940, whose populations add up exactly to the 1940 city total of 399,178; 60.1 square miles including river water
Result	about 187,902	195,605

	THOMPSON-DAVOLI (KCISMS)	THIS STUDY
Change from 1950 (430,535)	−56%	−55%

The two counts use different years, different data and different ways of drawing the line, and they land within about 4% of each other. Moving the line 100 meters in or out changes this study's count by about 1%. Either way, the old core holds well under half the people it did in 1950.

Same scale, somewhat less severe. Old Kansas City's loss (−56%) is smaller than St. Louis's (−65%), and it started from half the density. Inside the old core, the losses were heaviest downtown and on the near east side; one census tract fell from 5,397 people to 515. South-west of Brush Creek, decline mostly reflected smaller households. Freeway building alone displaced at least 12,000 core residents between 1950 and 1980.

	1950	2020
St. Louis	14,046 per sq mi (61.0 sq mi)	4,885
Kansas City, pre-1947 boundary	about 7,200	about 3,270
Kansas City, whole city	5,665 (80.6 sq mi)	about 1,615 (1,603 in 1970)

Two points of history keep the argument in proportion. Kansas City's pre-war growth was real: from 1910 to 1946 its population doubled with no change in its boundary. And the annexations themselves added land far faster than people. From 1946 to 1964 the city's area grew from about 60 to 314 square miles, up 423%, while its population rose from 434,000 to about 486,000, up 12%. The land Kansas City took in was mostly rural or thinly settled; it filled in over the following decades.

3 · THE OLD KANSAS CITY TODAY

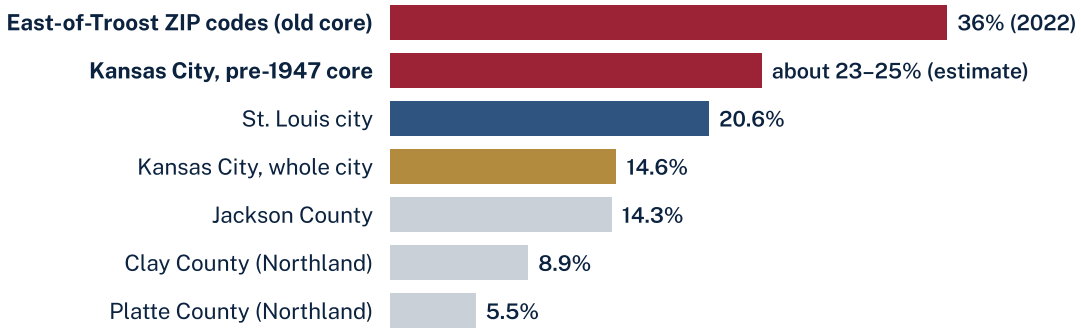
Poverty at least as high as St. Louis's, on the best estimate

No one has published poverty or income figures for Kansas City's exact pre-1947 footprint. That would mean adding up census tract tables inside the old boundary, which was not done for this study. Instead, Mia, an AI agent, built an estimate from 14 ZIP codes that lie mostly inside the old line, covering about 170,000 of its 188,000 residents. It puts poverty at about 24%, and about 23–25% once the uncovered areas are allowed for. Treat it as a range: ZIP codes do not follow the old boundary, and the inputs mix survey years and sources that can disagree by a few points for the same ZIP.

FIGURE 5

Poverty rate, Kansas City and St. Louis

Share of residents below the poverty line, American Community Survey 2020–2024 five-year estimates (QuickFacts), except where noted.



Reading it: the core figure is an estimate built from ZIP codes, not a published number, and its true value could be a couple of points either way. Even so, old Kansas City's poverty looks at least as high as St. Louis's. Counties include suburbs outside Kansas City, so they are only a rough guide to the annexed Northland.

	ST. LOUIS CITY	KANSAS CITY, WHOLE	KANSAS CITY, PRE-1947 CORE
Population	301,578 (2020); 278,144 (2025 est.)	508,090 (2020)	195,605 (2020, census blocks); about 187,900 (2022, Thompson-Davoli)
Poverty	20.6%	14.6%	about 23–25% (ZIP-code estimate)
Median household income	$56,160	$69,166	not computable; east-side ZIPs $33,000–$41,000
Income per person	$41,187	$41,393	–
Housing vacancy (2023)	16.9%	9.9%	not found; concentrated on the east side

The averages hide how divided both cities are. Inside old Kansas City, the east-of-Troost ZIP codes had about 107,000 people at 36% poverty in a 2022 compilation, and individual east-side ZIPs had median household incomes of $33,000 to $41,000. Life expectancy was 67.0 years in ZIP 64132 and 86.3 in 64113, near the Country Club Plaza: a gap of more than 19 years inside the same old boundary. St. Louis has the same divide along Delmar Boulevard. Two whole-city comparisons cut the other way: income per person is almost identical in the two cities, about $41,200 to $41,400, and St. Louis's housing vacancy rate, 16.9%, is far above Kansas City's 9.9%.

4 · WHERE THE SUBURBS WENT

Both regions grew; St. Louis's growth landed outside the city

St. Louis's region did not stop growing. It grew outside the city line, into a county that fractured into dozens of municipalities, many of which incorporated precisely to control their own taxes, zoning and schools and to avoid being absorbed. Kansas City's region grew faster, and on the Missouri side much of the growth landed inside the city because the city had annexed the land first.

THOUSANDS OF PEOPLE	ST. LOUIS	KANSAS CITY
Metro area, 1950	1,893	1,001
Metro area, 2020	2,820 (+49%)	2,192 (+119%)
City's share of metro, 1950 to 2020	45% to 11%	46% to 23%
Growth outside the city limits, 1950–2020	+1,483	+1,140
Same, counting Kansas City's annexed land as suburb	+1,483	about +1,430

On the plain metro figures, St. Louis's suburbs added more people than Kansas City's. But Kansas City's "suburbs" there exclude the annexed land, which gained about 286,000 people. Count that land as the suburb it would otherwise have been, and growth outside each city's old limits is nearly the same, about 1.43 million for Kansas City and 1.48 million for St. Louis. That is the strongest single piece of support for the second half of the argument. Both figures count suburbs across a state line, Kansas for Kansas City and Illinois for St. Louis, but the two regions are not split alike: Kansas City's is divided far more evenly between its two states, so much more of its suburban growth landed where no Missouri city could annex. Johnson County, Kansas, alone added about 547,000 people. Metro definitions change over time, so these are approximate; the Demographia series is used because it holds definitions roughly steady.

The Northland shows what annexation captured. Clay and Platte counties, much of which Kansas City annexed in 1950 and 1962, have poverty rates of 8.9% and 5.5% and median household incomes of about $88,000 and $96,000, against 14.3% and $68,600 in Jackson County. The counties include suburbs outside Kansas City, so they are only a rough guide, but Northland ZIP codes inside the city tell the same story.

5 · WHAT ANNEXATION DID AND DID NOT DO

It moved the line, not the forces behind the decline

It did not annex the schools. This is where the argument needs its biggest qualification. In 1957 the Missouri legislature raised the population threshold that would have forced the Kansas City school district to follow the city's new boundaries. The enlarged city ended up containing all or part of more than a dozen school districts, including North Kansas City, Raytown and Hickman Mills, while the Kansas City district, as Thompson-Davoli puts it, "has expanded very little beyond the old city limits." The suburban districts inside the city grew; Kansas City Public Schools went, as the historian John Rury puts it, from being considered "the very best… to perhaps the worst." Schools are the public service most likely to decide whether middle-class families stay, and that service was never annexed. Kansas City captured the suburbs' tax base but not their school systems, so the families who left the old core could stay inside the city and still leave its school district.

The decline had causes on both sides of the line. Researchers point to the same forces in both cities: the loss of industrial jobs; federal mortgage lending that favored new suburbs; expressways; redlining, restrictive covenants and white flight; and suburban school districts. Troost Avenue in Kansas City played the role of the Delmar Divide in St. Louis. In southeast Kansas City, the area east of Troost between Interstate 70, the Blue River and Gregory Boulevard, the white population fell from about 126,000 to 34,000 between 1950 and 1970 while the Black population rose from about 41,000 to 103,000 (Gotham, Table 5.1). None of these forces depended on where the city limit sat. Nor does the earnings tax separate the two: both cities levy 1% on earnings, and both old cores declined on a similar scale.

It was not only cosmetic. A 2025 National Bureau of Economic Research study of large annexations, by Kaan Cankat and Allison Green, found they raised a city's population about 32% and lowered its spending and revenue per resident about 21–22% for nearly a decade, consistent with economies of scale and with little sign of collapsing services. Thompson-Davoli makes the same case for Kansas City in "A Hidden Collapse": the annexed tax base kept the city able to pick up trash, maintain roads and staff police and fire, and spared it a Detroit-style collapse of services. Others argue the opposite: Strong Towns and Urban3 contend that the annexations left Kansas City with more roads and pipes per resident than its tax base can maintain.

The academic debate. David Rusk's *Cities Without Suburbs* (1993) made the general case decades earlier: "elastic" cities that can annex, like Kansas City, capture more of their region's growth and are fiscally healthier than "inelastic" ones like St. Louis, and a 2006 Brookings study found annexation ability strongly associated with bond ratings. His critics answer that much of the pattern is happenstance of region and timing, and note that even elastic cities lost population in their cores. Kansas City fits both sides: it is elastic, and its core still emptied.

Whether annexation made the core's decline worse or better is not known. Annexation may have helped families leave the core while staying in the city, or the annexed tax base may have slowed the decline by keeping services up. Thompson-Davoli leans toward the second but says plainly that "we don't know if the annexations increased or decreased population decline in the old city boundaries."

6 · THE ARGUMENT, TESTED

Right about the numbers, overstated as the whole explanation

PART OF THE ARGUMENT	VERDICT	WHY
Kansas City's growth came from annexation	True, since 1950	All of the net growth, and more, is on land annexed after 1946. Before the war, growth was real filling-in: the population doubled from 1910 to 1946 with no change in the boundary.
Inside its old footprint, Kansas City would share St. Louis's population problem	Largely true	The pre-1947 core lost about 56% of its people after 1950, against 65% in St. Louis: the same scale, somewhat less severe, from a peak half as dense.
…and its poverty problem	Largely true, on an estimate	Core poverty of about 23–25% is similar to or somewhat higher than St. Louis's 20.6%. It rests on a ZIP-code estimate, not a published figure.
Annexation papers over the problem	Partly true	It hid the core's decline from the headline numbers. But it was not only cosmetic: it kept a tax base and services inside the city. And it could not fix the core, because the forces behind the decline worked inside the old line, and the school districts were never annexed.
Overall	Partly true	Annexation is the best single reason the two cities' headline numbers parted ways. It does not explain why either core declined.

The part of the argument that can be measured holds up. Draw Kansas City's line where it sat from 1909 to 1946 and the city looks much like St. Louis: a core that lost more than half its people, with poverty at or above St. Louis's. The growth that made Kansas City look different happened on land St. Louis could never have reached, and in volume it roughly matches the growth that went to St. Louis's separate suburbs.

The part that cannot be measured is the counterfactual. Whether a Kansas City held to 60 square miles would today have exactly St. Louis's problems depends on things this research cannot settle: whether the annexed tax base slowed the core's decline, and how much Kansas City's lower density, faster-growing region and different economy would have helped it anyway. And "papers over" is fair about the headline numbers but not about everything annexation did: it bought a tax base and services, even though it left the core's problems in place.

7 · THE CASE AGAINST

The strongest case that annexation is not the story

This section sets out that case against the argument, using only the facts above.

1. **The cores did not fare the same.** Old Kansas City lost 56% of its people; St. Louis lost 65%. Kansas City started at half the density and today has far lower vacancy across the city. Differences that large point to something besides the boundary: a smaller industrial base, a different housing stock, a faster-growing region.
2. **Kansas City's region simply grew faster.** Its metro area more than doubled after 1950; St. Louis's grew by about half. A city in a faster-growing region will look healthier whatever its boundary.
3. **Much of the growth went where no annexation could reach.** Johnson County, Kansas, grew from 62,783 people in 1950 to 609,863 in 2020, nearly twice what Kansas City's annexed land gained. A Missouri city cannot annex across the state line, so there was nothing Kansas City could do to capture that growth, and its old core lost residents to Kansas suburbs much as St. Louis lost them to its county. On that side of the region, Kansas City was as hemmed in as St. Louis.
4. **The mechanism was missing.** The argument says annexation captured what would have become suburbs. But the thing that most makes a suburb a suburb, its school district, stayed separate. Kansas City captured the tax base but not the institution that most shapes where families live.
5. **Even elastic cities emptied their cores.** Rusk's critics show that annexing cities lost core population too, because density fell everywhere after the war. If every core lost people regardless of boundaries, the boundary explains the headline, not the decline.
6. **St. Louis's problem may be fragmentation as much as size.** St. Louis's region grew by nearly 1.5 million people outside the city, into 87 separate municipalities with their own taxes and schools. The barrier is a constitutional process that requires both city and county voters to agree, not a fixed law of geography.
7. **The counterfactual cannot be run.** No one knows whether Kansas City's core would have declined more or less without annexation. An argument

about what a restricted Kansas City "would" look like rests on a comparison no data can make.

What this case does not overturn. It does not touch the core facts: inside the old line, Kansas City lost more than half its people, its poverty is at least as high as St. Louis's on the best estimate, and all of its net growth since 1950 came from annexed land.

8 · WHAT THIS STUDY COULD NOT SETTLE

Gaps and cautions

- **Poverty in the old core is an estimate.** No published figure covers the exact pre-1947 footprint. The 23–25% range comes from 14 ZIP codes that only roughly follow the old line, with mixed survey years and sources. A firm figure would need census tract tables summed inside the 1909 boundary, which was not done.
- **The old-core population is a reconstruction.** The 430,535 and 187,902 figures come from Dion Thompson-Davoli's independent analysis of census data (KCisms, 2025), not an official count, and its full method is not published. It agrees with an older estimate for 2000.
- **Two counts, two years.** Thompson-Davoli's figure is for 2022 and this study's for 2020, built differently; they differ by about 4%. The 1950 starting point in both is his, bounded by the 1950 census.
- **Cause and effect.** Whether annexation sped or slowed the core's decline is unknown.
- **The old boundary's exact size.** Sources give 58.4 square miles (the 1920 census), 59.6 (a 1950 court decision) and 59.80 (the city's 2001 recomputation), and the southern edge is given as 77th or 79th Street. The difference is one to two square miles.
- **Metro figures depend on definitions.** Metro boundaries changed over time; the Demographia series is used because it holds them roughly steady, and growth rates are approximate.
- **Not checked a second time.** Demographia's 1950 metro-area totals and the nine ZIP-code poverty rates taken from ZipAtlas and similar compilations were read from their sources for the research but not rechecked; the ZipAtlas rates can differ from the Nash Report's by three to four points for the same ZIP code. The other research figures named in the front matter were rechecked against their sources on November 26, 2026. The finding that no formal study makes this comparison rests on a search that came up empty, not on proof that none exists.

- **Minor census variants.** Secondary tables differ by a few hundred people for some years; none changes a conclusion.

9 · METHOD

How the numbers were built

Populations are decennial census counts except the old-core figures (Dion Thompson-Davoli's KCisms reconstruction) and the 2025 St. Louis estimate. Poverty, income and per-person income are American Community Survey five-year estimates for 2020–2024 from Census QuickFacts, except the ZIP-code figures, which come from the compilations named in the sources. Land areas for Kansas City's annexations come from the city planning department's 2001 table; land areas and densities for 1920, 1950 and 1970 come from the Census Bureau's Working Paper 27; today's areas from QuickFacts. The annexed-land contribution is the whole city's 1950–2020 change minus the old core's 1950–2020 change, using this study's 2020 block count. The 2020 old-core count sums 2020 Census block populations (TIGER/Line 2020 blocks) whose interior point falls inside the union of Kansas City's 1940 census tracts (NHGIS); an area-weighted version gives the same result within 150 people. Percentages are rounded.

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DISCLOSURES

Disclosures and citation

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Question from Patrick Ishmael, a Clay County resident.

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Patrick Ishmael is the founder of the Ishmael Policy Institute and Prompt Inquiry's Founding Prompter and Editor. He has spent most of his career in and around Missouri public policy. He worked on political campaigns, and from May 2011 to January 2024 he worked at the Show-Me Institute, a Missouri public policy organization, where he wrote on state and local government and testified before Missouri legislative committees. Today he is a financial advisor and a Missouri attorney. He holds honors degrees in finance and political science from Saint Louis University and a law degree from Saint Louis University School of Law. Several of the questions he revisits here began as his own student work there.

This bio is the prompter's disclosure. It is the same on every study he leads.

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