

A Road to Nowhere:  
Interstate Highways and Racialized  
Space in Omaha, Nebraska

Juliet Silberstein  
Amherst College

# Background on Interstates and Segregation

- Interstate Highway Act 1956-
  - 90:10 federal/state funding scheme
- Already segregated housing –
  - Federal Housing Association, Home Owners Loan Association, G.I. Bill
- Thesis: interstates cemented segregation
- GIS- interstates dictated how people utilized space



Omaha depicted in Futurama exhibit at the 1939 World Fair

# Omaha's Interstates and Freeways



- Mid-sized city
- Moderate minority population
- Already segregated starting during WW I
  - European Immigrant ethnic enclave
  - African American community
- Largest U.S. meat packing industry 1955-1969

# Omaha's Interstates and Freeways

---

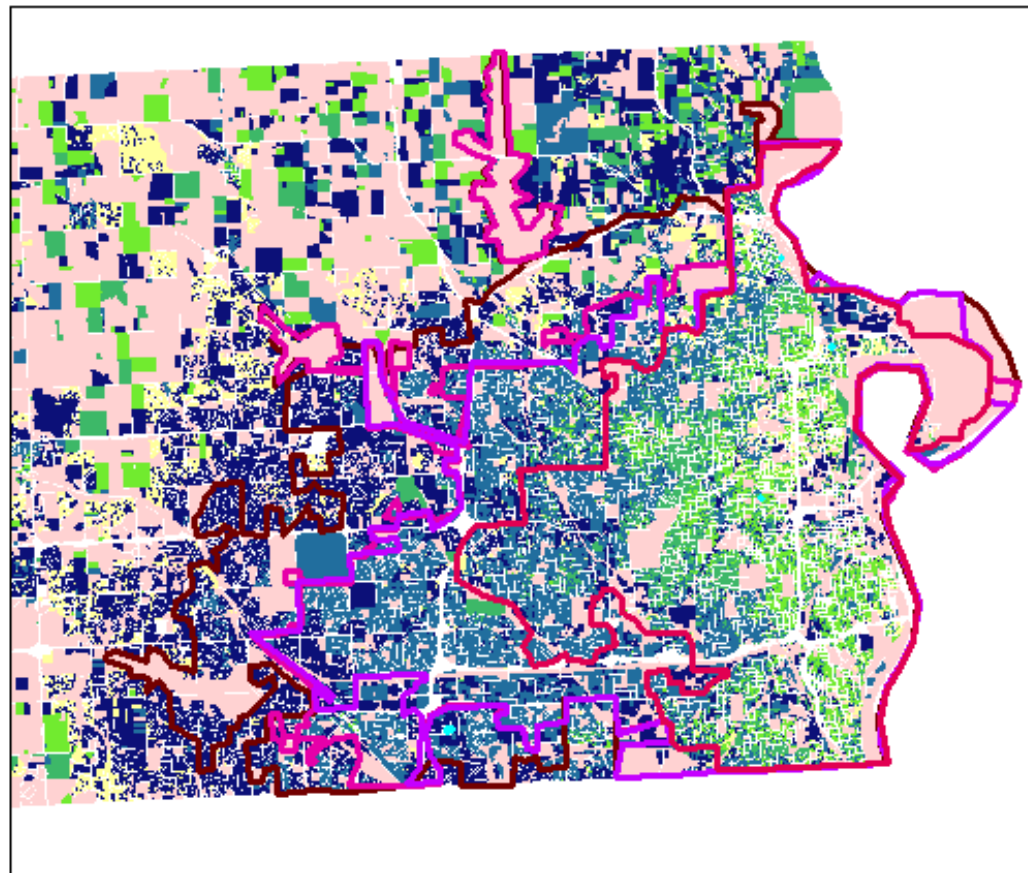
- Two failed opposition movements:
  - European immigrant community
  - African American neighborhood
- One successful opposition movement:
  - White, middle-class suburban Omaha

# Use of GIS

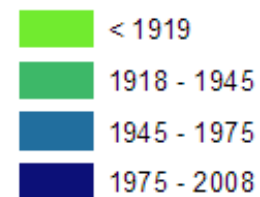
---

- First, I examined historical records
  - examples) newspaper archives; health records; oral histories
  - politicians and residents reaction to Omaha's interstates.
- GIS answered the questions surrounding space
  - Where did people move?
  - What effect did the route have on minorities?
  - Who moved to suburbia?
  - What pattern did people move in?

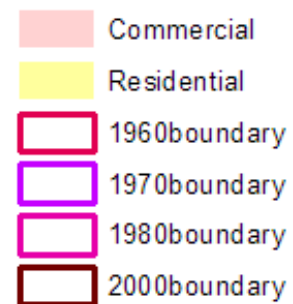
# Omaha Population Movement



## Sprawl Year Built



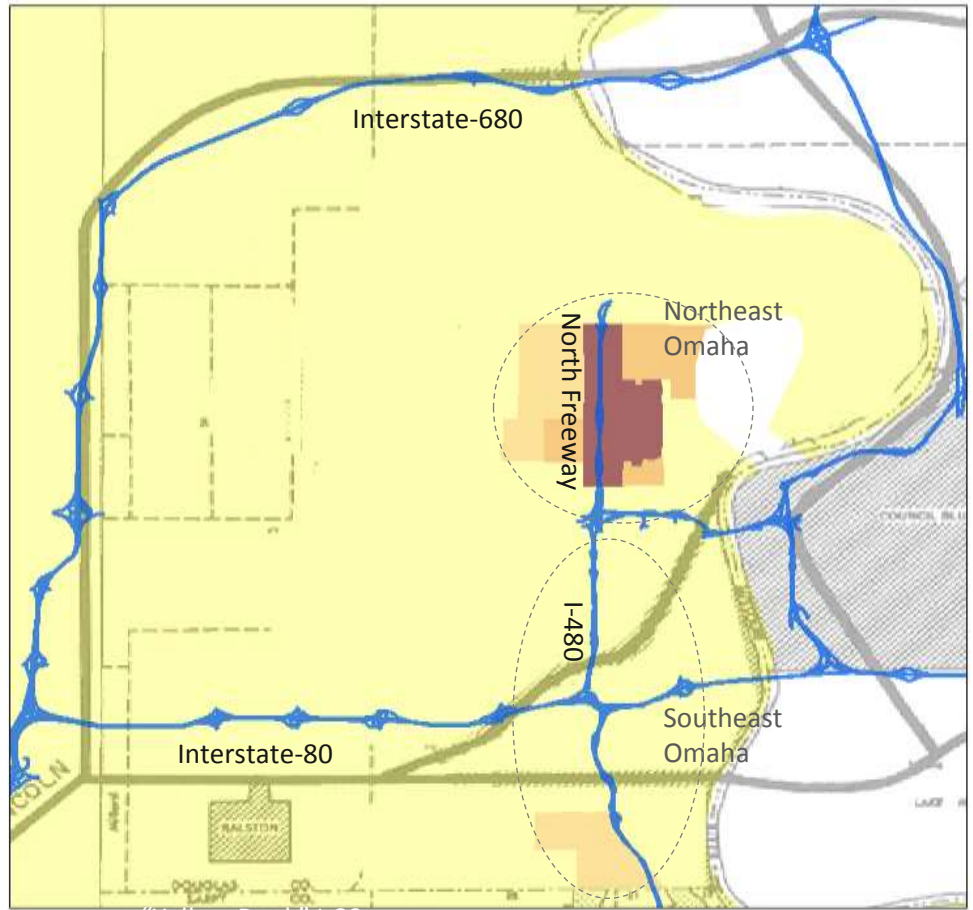
## Property Type



0 2.5 5 10 Miles



# Effects on Omaha's Black Community: Federal Yellow Book Plan 1955 vs. Actual Interstate Route 2000



**Legend**

Interstates and Freeways

1960. Black Population per Square Mile

- <500
- 500-1500
- 1500-5000
- 5000-7000
- >7000

0 1.25 2.5 5 Miles

# Southeast Omaha Resistance to the Interstate 1958-61

---

- 1957- Omaha finalized plan
- 1958- Held unpublicized public hearing in January
- 1959- Opposition
- 1960- Right of way purchase
  - Debt
  - Displacement
  - Changed jobs
  - Shut down one of two main elementary schools
- 1961- Started construction

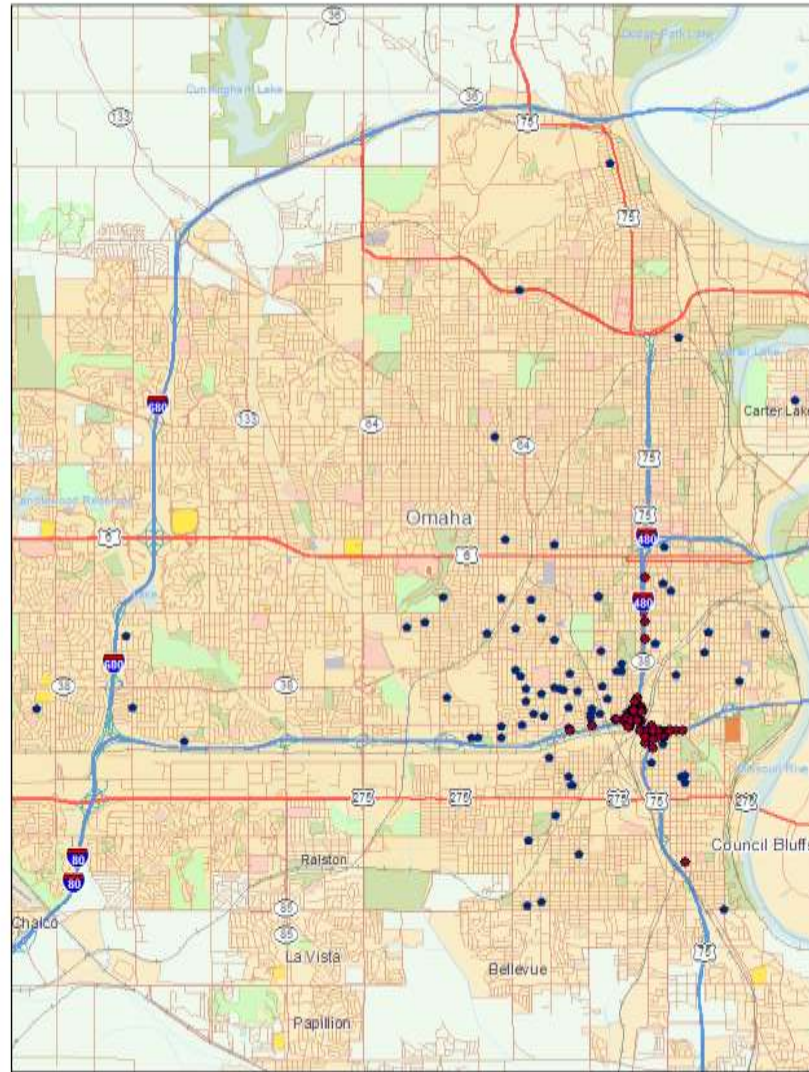


# Methods

---

- Movement of displaced Southeast Omahans
  - 140 names from *Omaha World Herald* articles
  - Looked up names in 1965 directory
    - 20 residents' addresses did not change
    - 35 residents not listed
    - 88 moved
- geo-coding tools on GIS

# Movement of Displaced South Omahans for I-480 Interchange



## Legend

- Condemned Residences
- Homes that Displaced Persons Moved To

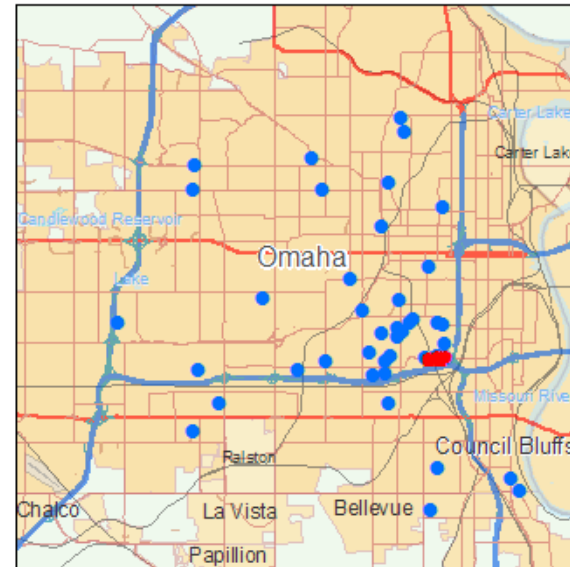
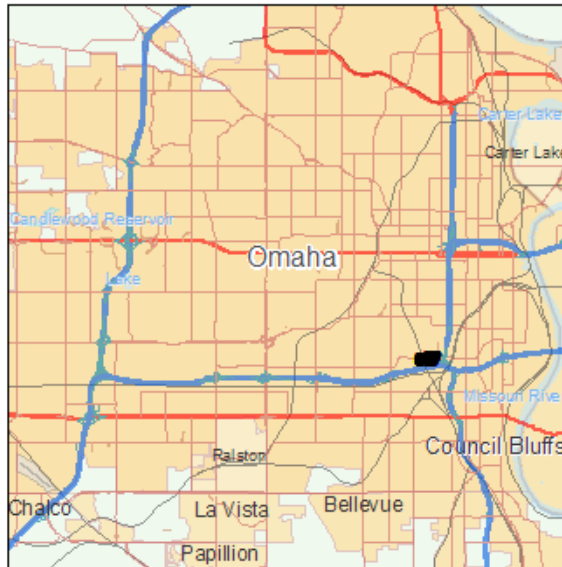
0 0.45 0.9 1.8 Miles  
|-----|-----|-----|

# Methods

---

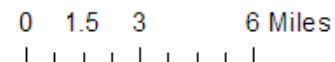
- Effect on neighborhood
  - 1958 *Omaha Phone Directory*
    - Recorded 110 names on three streets that were bisected by interchange
  - 1970 *Omaha Phone Directory*.
    - 45 people moved residences
    - 32 did not move
    - 33 people were not re-listed
  - geo-coding tools

# Migration of South Omahans from 1958 to 1970



## Legend

- 1958 South Omahan Residences
- 1970 South Omahans with Same Address
- 1970 Migrated South Omahans



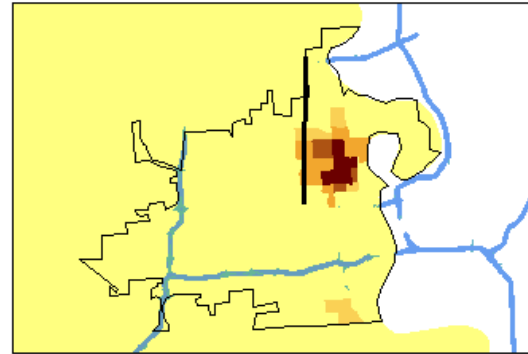
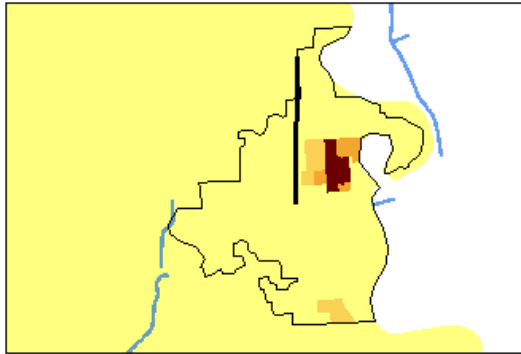
# Sprawl 1961-1971

---

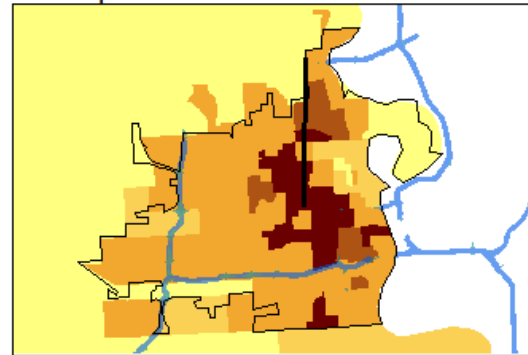
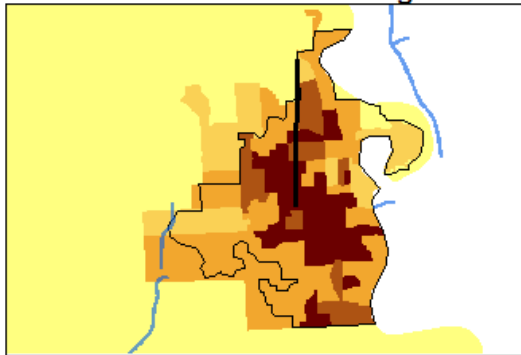
- Construction of east-west (Interstate-80)
  - Started in 1961
  - Completed in 1972
- Decentralization of people and industry
- Demographics- white and middle class
  - Housing discrimination
  - Employment discrimination
  - Federal policies
- Isolated poverty and minorities

# Movement of Populations Within Omaha

1960 Change in Omaha Black Population 1970



Change in Omaha White Population



## Legend

- 42nd Street
- Primary Limited Access or Interstate
- Omaha Boundary

## Movement of Populations

### Race per Sq. Mile

- <500
- 500-1,500
- 1,500-5,000
- 5,000-7,000
- >7,000

0 2.5 5 10 Miles



# Moran's Index on GIS

- Increase in value indicates clustering
- Decrease indicates dispersion
- Index of 1 = complete segregation
- Whites' Moran's Index
  - fell markedly from 1960 to 1970
  - .58 to .39
- African Americans' Index
  - increased slightly
  - .6 to .62

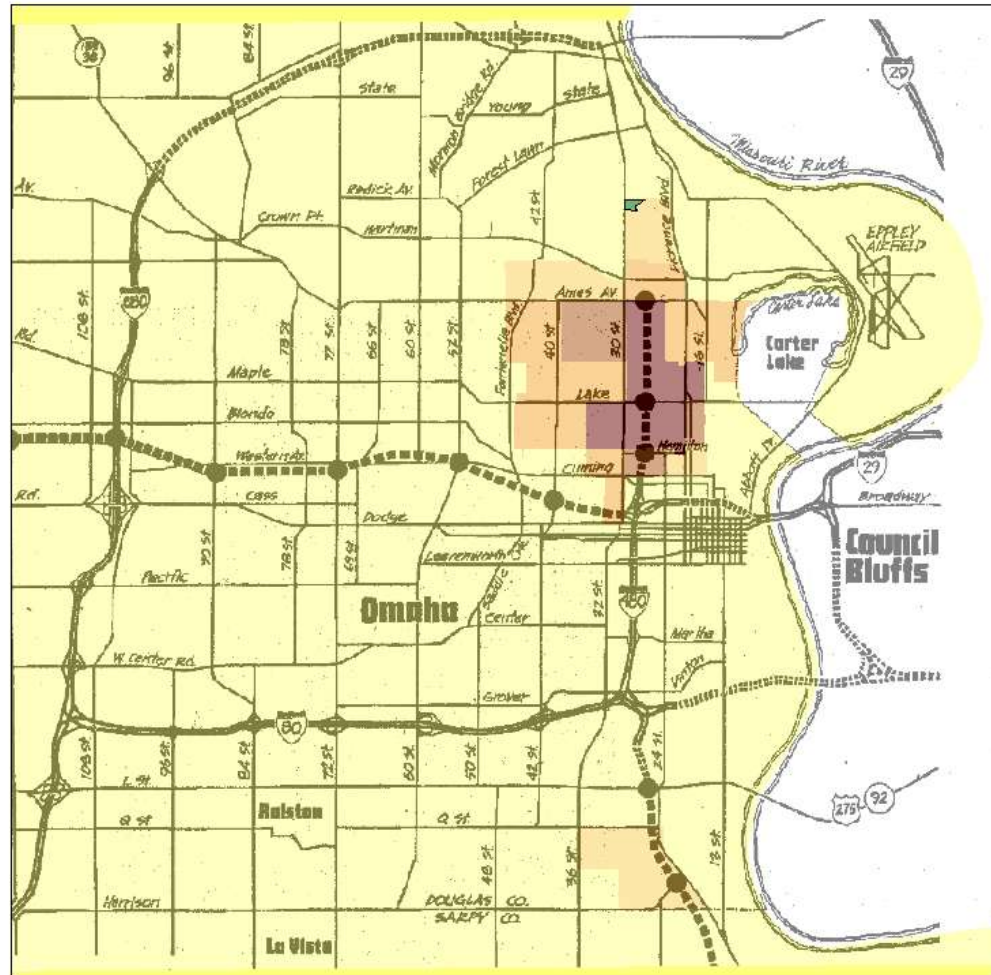
# North Freeway 1966-1988

---

- Occurred after July 3-5, 1966 race riot
  - Three national guard squads
  - 120 arrests
- Omaha changed funding scheme in October 1966
  - Decided to fund completely locally



# Blacks in Path of West and North Freeway Plans 1970



## Legend

- Miller Park
- Population Density
- Blacks/ Sq. Mile
- <500
- 500-1,000
- 1,500-6,000
- 5,000-7,000
- >7,000

0 0.40.8 1.6 Miles

# North Freeway 1966-1988

---

- African Americans lacked political voice
  - At-large voting for 18-member city council and mayor
  - First African American senator 1973; city council member 1981
- Opposition at city meetings
  - Less press coverage; no political backing
- White suburbanites halted West Freeway
  - 1970-Introduced
  - 1972- Eliminated

# North Freeway 1966-1988

---

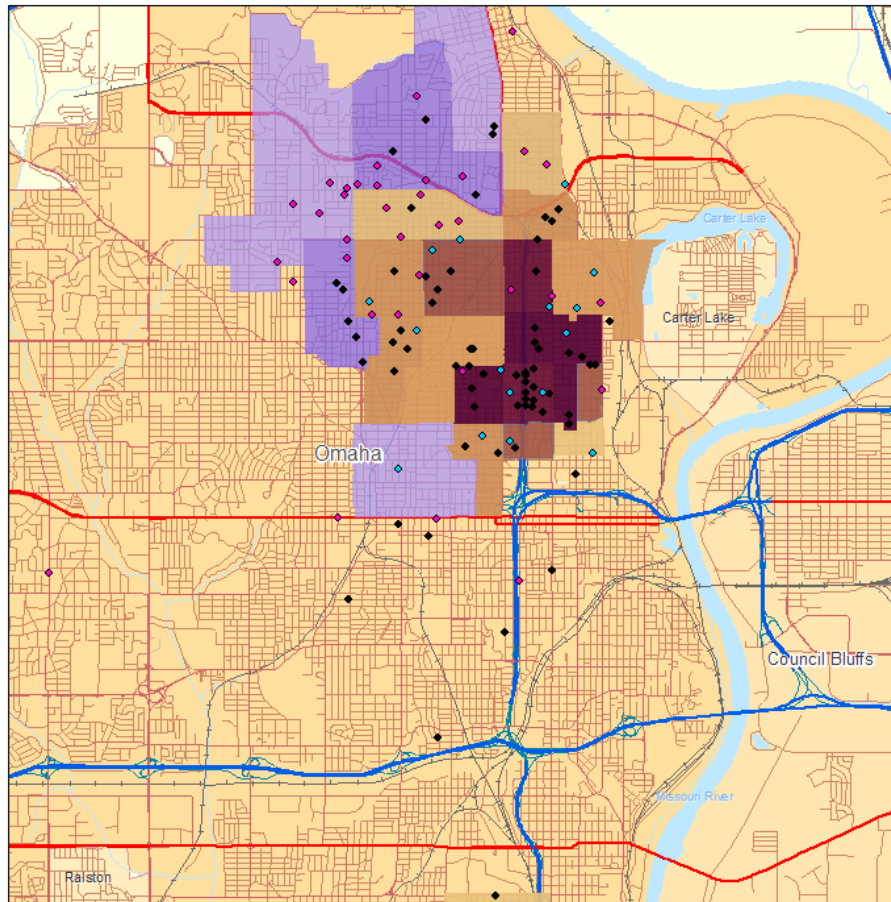
- Continually delayed
- Four displacements occurred
  - 1966 from I-480 to Cuming Street
  - 1968 from Cuming to Hamilton Streets
  - 1970 from Hamilton to Lake Streets
  - 1976-1979 from Lake to Fort Streets
- Interstate- 580 from 1970-1975

# Methods

---

- Looked up streets in freeway path
  - *Omaha Phone Directories*
- Displacement 1968
  - 1965- 25 residents; 1973- relocation
- Displacement 1970
  - 1968- 70 residents; 1973- relocation
- Displacement 1976
  - 1973- 35 residents; 1979- relocation
- Overlaid with African American population density

# Movement of Displaced Northeast Omahans from North Freeway



- ◆ Post-Freeway Addresses from Cumming to Hamilton Corridor
- ◆ Post-Freeway Addresses from Hamilton to Lake Corridor
- ◆ Post-Freeway Addresses from Lake to Ames Corridor

Population Density 1970

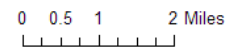
Blacks/Sq. Mile

- <500
- 500-1,500
- 1,500-5,000
- 5,000-7,000
- >7,000

Population Density 1980

Blacks/Sq. Mile

- <500
- 500-1500
- 1500-3000
- 3000-6000
- >5000

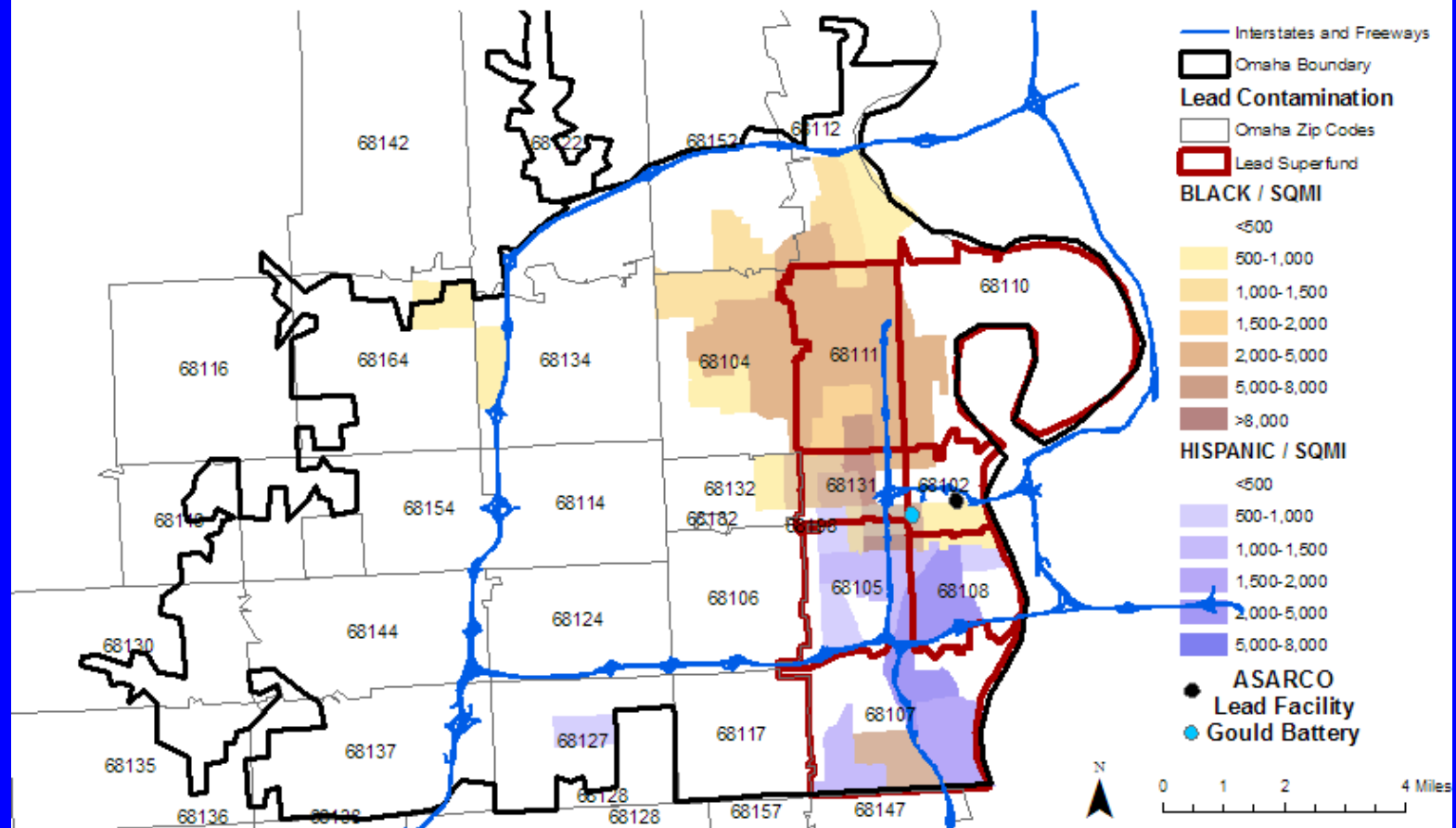


# Long Term Effects

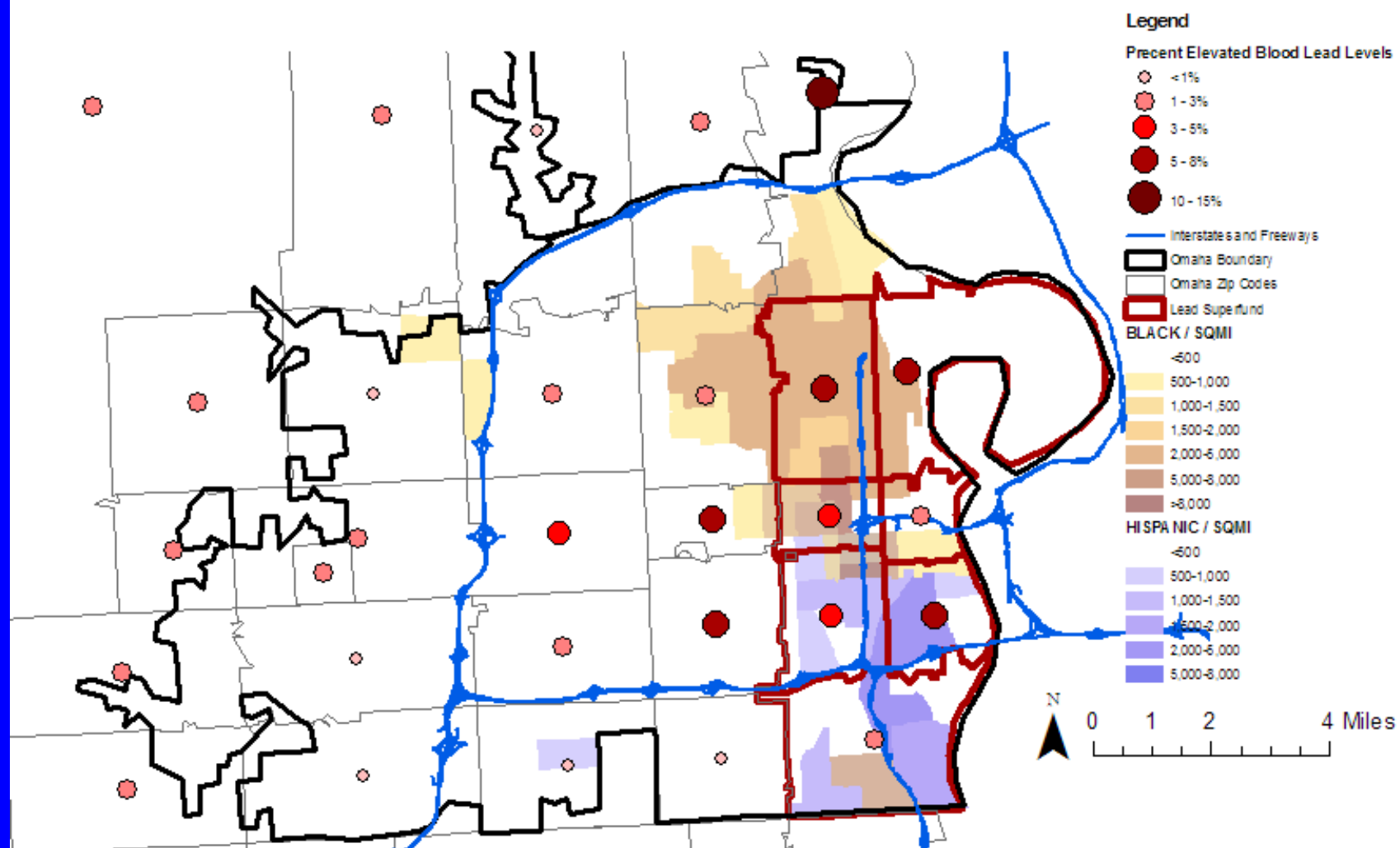
---

- Northeast and Southeast Omaha in 2000
  - 90% minority population; 12% white population
- 2004-poverty rate in 100 largest cities
  - Omaha third highest African American poverty rate
  - Highest African American child poverty rate
- Largest lead Superfund site in the nation
  - 27 square miles all of which lead contaminates
  - 125,880 residents, including 14,117 children under seven

# Omaha Lead Superfund



# Elevated Blood Lead Levels 1997-2008





<b><u>Omaha Health Indicators</u></b>	<b>Omaha Minorities</b>	<b>Omaha Whites</b>	<b>National</b>
Low birth weight (percentage of all births)	10.8%	6.2%	7.3%
Infant mortality (per 1,000 births)	15.1	6.9	7.8
Death from stroke (per 100,000)	42.5	25	26.5
Heart disease (per 100,000 people)	198.4	121.7	139.6
Lung cancer (per 100,000 people)	50.6	39.5	40.0

# Conclusions

---

- Interstates isolated, divided, and oppressed
  - Isolated- minorities and poverty
  - Divided- employment, neighborhoods, schools
  - Oppressed- social and environmental racism
- GIS allowed me to show spatial access to jobs and housing by minorities and whites