

From Jonathan Kozol, "Life on the Mississippi: East St. Louis, Illinois" in *Savage Inequalities: Children in America's Schools*.

The city is 98 percent black, has no obstetric services, no regular trash collection, and few jobs. . . . The US Department of Housing and Urban Development describes it as "the most distressed small city in America. . . . The city, which by night and day is clouded by the fumes that pour from vents and smokestacks at the Pfizer and Monsanto chemical plants, has one of the highest rates of child asthma in America. . . . Railroad tracks still used to transport hazardous chemicals run through the city. . . . The most recent spill, says the *Post-Dispatch*, "was at the Monsanto Company plant. . . . Nearly 300 gallons of phosphorous trichloride spilled when a railroad tank was overfilled. About 450 residents were taken to St. Mary's hospital. . . . The frequency of the emergencies has caused Monsanto to have a 'standing account' at St. Mary's."

East St. Louis lacks the funds to cope with flooding problems [from the Mississippi River]. . . . The problem is all the worse because the chemical plants in East St. Louis and adjacent towns have for decades been releasing toxins into the sewer system. . . . The dangers of exposure to raw sewage, which backs up repeatedly into homes of residents in East St. Louis, were first noticed in 1989, at a public housing project, Villa Griffin. Raw sewage, says the *Post-Dispatch*, overflowed into a playground just behind the housing project . . . "forming an oozing lake of tainted water." Two schoolgirls, we are told, "experienced hair loss since raw sewage flowed into their homes."

Soil samples tested at residential sites in East St. Louis turn up disturbing quantities of arsenic, mercury, and lead, as well as steroids dumped in previous years by stockyards in the area. Lead levels found in the soil around one family's home, according to lead-poison experts, measure "an astronomical 10,000 parts per million." Five of the children in the building have been poisoned. . . . The poison, says [a health official], "is chipping away at the learning potential of kids whose potential has already been chipped away by their environment." In one apartment complex where particularly high quantities of lead have been detected in the soil 32 children with high levels in their blood have been identified. "I anticipate finding the whole city contaminated," says a health examiner. (7-11)

The problem of the streets in urban areas, as teachers often note, frequently spill over into public schools. In the public schools of East St. Louis, this is literally the case. "Martin Luther King High School," notes the Post-Dispatch, in a story published in the early Spring of 1989, "was evacuated Friday afternoon after sewage flowed into the kitchen." On Monday, the paper continues, "East St. Louis High School was awash in sewage for the second time this year." The school had to be shut because of "fumes and backed up toilets." School is resumed the following morning at the high school, but a few days later the overflow recurs. . . . At Martin Luther King, the parking lot and gym are also flooded. "It's a disaster," says a legislator. "The streets are underwater; gaseous fumes are being emitted from the pipes under the schools," she says, "making people ill" (24).