

Research project focused on studying structural racism in Milwaukee County

Collaborative effort being led by Social Development Commission.

An important research project studying structural racism in Milwaukee County's African American community is underway.

The project, named D.R.I.V.E Together (Dismantling Racism InVigorating Equity), is being led by the Social Development Commission (SDC) and will include a survey of Milwaukee County residents to gather information about individual life experiences, their health status, and their living environment.

"Our goal with this study—using the National Institute on Minority Health and Disparities Research Framework—is to map out health disparities, overlaying the study participant, neighborhood, and community level impact of systemic racism," said Jennifer Harris, research and policy manager at the SDC. "Ultimately, the data we collect will be used to further enhance programming and strategic partnership; leading us to inform elected leaders on how changes to public policy can address challenges faced in Milwaukee County."

Collaborating Partners

The project is being supported by researchers at the Medical College of Wisconsin (MCW), Marquette University,

and the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee. The two-year project is being funded with a \$200,000 grant from the Advancing a Healthier Wisconsin Endowment.

The research effort is unique in that it has been three years in the making and is the result of ongoing conversations between the SDC and its academic collaborators at Marquette, MCW, and UWM regarding solutions to the traumatic stress commonly found among urban residents in Milwaukee and other cities. Those discussions led to ideas on how to approach the issue more strategically, incorporating efforts to address the structural causes of traumatic stress.



Pictured: Jennifer Harris

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Pictured: Dr. Terri deRoos-Cassini

Structural racism refers to laws, public policy and rules within organizations that result in continued inequality and disadvantage due to race. Milwaukee's history of segregation in housing and education in addition to a criminal justice system that incarcerates African American individuals at disproportionate rates are examples of factors that impact the broader health and well-being of the Black community. The research project will begin to illustrate that impact and seek to identify potential solutions.

"You can't take the person out of the context of their lived experience when treating them," said Dr. Terri deRoos-Cassini, a professor in the Division of Trauma & Acute Care Surgery in the Department of Surgery at the Medical College of Wisconsin, and a principal investigator on the new study. "Not everyone has the same lived experience. If we're going to achieve equity in health outcomes, we need to understand the different environments and different experiences that everyone has in life and the impact those differences have on people and their health."

Institute on Poverty and Structural Racism

The research project will be the first such effort to take place within the SDC's Institute on Poverty and Structural Racism, which will oversee additional research projects in the future. The Institute is a new approach to organizing and implementing the SDC's existing research arm, said Harris, who was named Research and Policy Manager at the SDC in January.

Prior to joining the SDC, Harris served as a member of Milwaukee County's inaugural Office on African American Affairs, leading the operationalization of Milwaukee County's "Declaration of Racism as a Public Health Crisis."

During her tenure at Milwaukee County, Jennifer consulted for municipalities throughout the nation, shaped legislation, designed and led racial equity training for Milwaukee County employees, and spearheaded many enterprise-wide initiatives institutionalizing racial equity.

