

# Social Development Commission: Launching research project studying structural racism in Milwaukee

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**Milwaukee, Oct. 27, 2022** - The Social Development Commission (SDC) is launching a research project through its newly formed Institute on Poverty and Structural Racism, that will examine the impact of structural racism on Milwaukee's African American community.

The project, named Dismantling Racism Invigorating Equity (D.R.I.V.E.) Together, will be 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 project 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, the Medical College of Wisconsin, 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.

“Our goal with this study is to gather data that illustrates the challenges and needs faced by Milwaukee's African American community, particularly in impoverished neighborhoods,” said Jennifer Harris, research and policy manager at the SDC and who will oversee the Institute on Poverty and Structural Racism. “Ultimately, the data we collect will be used to evaluate how our programming here at the SDC is meeting the African American community's needs in addition to informing elected

leaders how changes to public policy can address challenges faced in the community.”

The project will survey residents of Milwaukee’s inner city to gather information about individual life experiences, their health status, and their living environment. African Americans aged 18 and over, and living in Milwaukee, are welcome to inquire about participating in the research study. Participants will be reimbursed for their time.

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 PI 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.”

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.