Community engagement builds bridges to combat health inequities

Gabriela Nagy, PhD
Forced Removal of Indigenous Communities
Prior to the 1830s, the area that we now know as Milwaukee was belonged to Fox, Sauk, Ottawa, Ojibwe and—most numerous of all—Potawatomi. In the 1830s, a wave of settlers from the east, most of them born in New York and New England, pushed out the Indigenous communities and planted a city.

European Migration
By the 1860s, Milwaukee became the most German big city in America, but Irish, Scandinavian, and Czech families were present in large numbers of well. Industrial expansion attracted immigrants from southern and eastern Europe in the later 1800s. Polish were the city’s second-largest ethnic community by 1900, and a host of other groups joined them, including Italian, Greek, Jewish, Slovak, Serbian, Croatian, and Slovenian.

Source: Milwaukee PBS, n.d. “People of Milwaukee”
The Great Migration
1905 to 1935 was a significant period of migration into Milwaukee by African Americans. World War I changed the landscape for African-Americans, and hinted at opportunity in the North. The war decreased the heavy concentration in the South by opening up industrial jobs in the urban manufacturing centers in Northern cities. This migration largely followed the railroad tracks which led to Chicago, Cleveland, Detroit and Milwaukee. Between 1916 and 1918, nearly 400,000 African Americans, or about 500 a day, rode the railroads north to escape southern prejudice and find strong-paying jobs. Before World War II, African Americans constituted just 1.5 percent of Milwaukee’s population. By 1950 this number had risen to 3.5 percent, still a minority but an increase illustrative of the growing presence of African Americans in Milwaukee.

Source: City of Milwaukee, 2023 “Bronzeville”
Guest Worker Programs
The Spanish-speaking communities of Wisconsin date back to 1910. People of Mexican heritage began to settle here after the Mexican Revolution. Many others came throughout the 1900s to work in various farming and manufacturing industries (e.g., guest worker programs). The Great Depression caused many of them to lose employment and return home.

The first known group of Puerto Ricans came to Wisconsin in the 1940s. Many came to earn money to bring back to their native Puerto Rico. Most of these workers found jobs in tanneries, foundries, and factories.

During World War II, there was an increased need for food and agricultural workers. The Emergency Farm Labor Program of 1943, also known as the Bracero Treaty, allowed for temporary employment migration from foreign countries to the United States.

Since then, other Hispanic/Latino groups migrated to the state in search of economic opportunities or political asylum.

Source: Wisconsin Department of Health Services, 2022 “Hispanic/Latinos in Wisconsin: History”
A New Deal-era housing policy

In an effort to promote economic recovery during the Great Depression, the U.S. government implemented several policies throughout the 1930s. One major policy was the National Housing Act of 1934 which created the Federal Housing Administration. One primary goal of these efforts was to slow down the rate of housing foreclosures, which were rampant as Americans struggled to find and keep jobs during the economic depths of the Depression.

During this time, the FHA worked with the Home Owners’ Loan Corporation, a government-sponsored lending agency known as HOLC that issued bonds to refinance mortgages for homeowners struggling to keep up. HOLC also created "residential security" maps that identified specific neighborhoods as high or low risk for investment. These maps were used by bank and finance entities in making lending and other investment decisions.

Source: Foltman et al., 2019 “How Redlining Continues To Shape Racial Segregation In Milwaukee”
The "best" areas were given a grade of A and coded green, and were deemed to be exemplary neighborhoods for lenders. They were ideal in that the neighborhoods were structurally sound, visually appealing and composed of exclusively white residents.

For example, the assessor of Washington Highlands in the suburb of Wauwatosa rated this subdivision an A based on its status as a "highly restricted and exclusive area." He noted that the area had a controlling building committee "which permits a wide latitude of discrimination in accepting residents into the neighborhood."

When Washington Highlands was developed in 1919, the property deeds of the development specified that "at no time shall the land included in Washington Highlands or any part thereof, or any building thereon be purchased, owned, leased or occupied by any person other than of white race." This restriction remained in place until it was made illegal during the Civil Rights Era.

Source: Foltman et al., 2019 “How Redlining Continues To Shape Racial Segregation In Milwaukee”
Areas coded blue, or grade B, were deemed "still desirable." These spaces were often older but still worthy of investment. Lenox Heights, located next to Wauwatosa, was graded blue, with 1938 notes that indicated it was a "spotty area — one of the older sections of West Milwaukee with a substantial population." The assessor noted that there was a mix of fine homes and lower-class residences, but that it was well-maintained. As with green rated neighborhoods, there were no African Americans living in this area, and only a few foreign-born families.

Source: Foltman et al., 2019 “How Redlining Continues To Shape Racial Segregation In Milwaukee”
"Definitely declining" areas received grades of C, coded yellow. Homebuyers were thought of as unstable purchasers, and investors often proceeded with caution. In 1938 Milwaukee, yellow neighborhoods were the most common type. Arlington Heights, Franklin Heights, Williamsburg Heights and Borchert Field were all graded yellow in that year. In the 2010s, these neighborhoods, located on the city's north side, are notably populated by African Americans, but at the time of the assessment they included no black residents.

Source: Foltman et al., 2019 “How Redlining Continues To Shape Racial Segregation In Milwaukee”
"Definitely declining" areas received grades of C, coded yellow. Homebuyers were thought of as unstable purchasers, and investors often proceeded with caution. In 1938 Milwaukee, yellow neighborhoods were the most common type. Arlington Heights, Franklin Heights, Williamsburg Heights and Borchert Field were all graded yellow in that year. In the 2010s, these neighborhoods, located on the city’s north side, are notably populated by African Americans, but at the time of the assessment they included no black residents.

The assessor forecasted a long-term downward trend in property values due to the age of the housing stock and these neighborhoods’ location near a railroad line to the west and Union Cemetery in their midst. However, the assessor also predicted that the area would "sustain values for some time chiefly because of the conservative German influence" of the residents. The area was "occupied by wage earners, Germans of the first, second, and third generation predominating overwhelmingly."

Source: Foltman et al., 2019 “How Redlining Continues To Shape Racial Segregation In Milwaukee”
The worst was grade D, coded red, and was the most detrimental in intent and effect. An area categorized as red was tagged with the label "hazardous" for investment. According to the people doing the assessments, these neighborhoods were old and in poor condition and had African American people living there.

In contemporary Milwaukee, the Halyard Park, Hillside and Haymarket neighborhoods, located just north of the city's downtown, were given a red rating. The rating was explained in the assessment with notes: "This is the Negro and slum area of Milwaukee. It is old and very ragged. Besides the colored people, a large number of lower type Jews are moving into the section."

Source: Foltman et al., 2019 “How Redlining Continues To Shape Racial Segregation In Milwaukee”
1. **AREA CHARACTERISTICS:**
   - **Description of Terrain:** Hilly to rolling, several ravines in area.
   - **Favorable Influences:** High elevation, mountain views, good drainage.
   - **Detrimental Influences:** Slopes, ravines, potential flooding.

2. **OWNER INQUIRER:**
   - **Occupation:** Businessman, professional
   - **Estimated annual family income:** $20,000
   - **Occupied by owner occupant:** Yes
   - **Trend of desirability:** Stable

3. **BUILDING:**
   - **Type:** Single family
   - **Construction:** Frame
   - **Age:** 20-25 years
   - **Price range:** $30,000
   - **Sales activity:** Low

4. **PERSONAL INCOME:**
   - **Average income:** $25,000
   - **Trend of desirability:** Stable

5. **AVAILABILITY OF MORTGAGE FUNDS:**
   - **Type of mortgage:** FHA
   - **Trend of desirability:** Stable

6. **NAME AND LOCATION:**
   - **Block:** 1
   - **Street:** Willow Street
   - **Area No.:** 1

---

**GRADE D**

1. **AREA CHARACTERISTICS:**
   - **Description of Terrain:** Level with a pitch north.
   - **Favorable Influences:** All utilities — schools — transportation
   - **Detrimental Influences:** Near busy streets.

2. **OWNER INQUIRER:**
   - **Occupation:** Businessman
   - **Estimated annual family income:** $20,000
   - **Occupied by owner occupant:** Yes
   - **Trend of desirability:** Stable

3. **BUILDING:**
   - **Type:** Single family
   - **Construction:** Frame
   - **Age:** 20-25 years
   - **Price range:** $30,000
   - **Sales activity:** Low

4. **PERSONAL INCOME:**
   - **Average income:** $25,000
   - **Trend of desirability:** Stable

5. **AVAILABILITY OF MORTGAGE FUNDS:**
   - **Type of mortgage:** FHA
   - **Trend of desirability:** Stable

6. **NAME AND LOCATION:**
   - **Block:** 2
   - **Street:** Maple Street
   - **Area No.:** 2
Why does this matter?

These policies have shaped the degree to which there has been financial, social, political, environmental investments across distinct neighborhoods.

The (lack of investment) given rise to a range of social drivers of health, for example:

- Housing stability; safe housing
- Level of violence in a neighborhood
- The amount of property taxes that support local public schools
- Access to green space; walkability
- Availability of affordable and nutritious food (vs. food desserts)
- Environmental pollutant exposure
Let’s do a deep in some of the most affected Census Tracts.
These conditions are bad for health.

These determinants influence an individual's health status, access to healthcare, and overall well-being in several interconnected ways:

- Adversely influence health behaviors (e.g., coping behaviors that bring about short-term relief, but adverse long-term consequences such as increase substance use)
- Increase chronic disease risk (due to poor nutrition, more sedentary lifestyle, etc)
- Pose barriers to access to health care
- Prolonged stress negatively impacts mental health
Chronic stress is long-term in duration, ongoing, and seemingly everlasting to those that experience it. Root causes of chronic stress may be systemic and environmental.

Ex) Immigrants who are undocumented face chronic stress due to the uncertainty of their legal status. This uncertainty in daily life impedes the possibility of having a well-paying job with a safe work environment, professional advancement, limits educational advancement, causes fear of being around law enforcement, and limits independence (e.g., not being able to have a bank account, unable to have a driver’s license).
These conditions can bring about a range of responses

Psychological
There are several stressors in everyday life and the ability to cope with the perception of threat, abrupt change, or demand varies from individual to individual. Feeling overwhelmed, anxious, tense, helpless, fearful, and confusion all affect the decision-making and perception of the individual’s capacity to emotionally cope with stress.

Physiological
The Hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal (HPA) axis, part of the autonomic nervous system, triggers a "fight or flight" response during stressful situations. This process involves the activation of the sympathetic nervous system, leading to changes in bodily functions, including increased heart rate, muscle tension, and the release of stress hormones like cortisol.
The current healthcare landscape is insufficient and demand outweighs capacity.

In recent years, we have seen an already overburdened health system get to its breaking point because of:

- Surge in (COVID) cases
- Resource shortages
- Staff burnout
- Supply chain disruptions
- Delayed non-COVID care
- Information overload
- Financial strain (e.g., increasing inflation)
Lay worker-delivered interventions hold the promise of eradicating inequities, promoting equal access, and nurturing an inclusive, accessible, and enduring health system for all.
Eradicating inequities requires multipronged approaches
Utilize a socioecological systems framework

Ex) Mental Health Promotion:

**Individual Level:** Provide mental health screenings and therapy services for individuals experiencing mental health issues.

**Interpersonal Level:** Create support groups and peer-led initiatives for individuals with similar mental health challenges.

**Community Level:** Organize mental health awareness campaigns and stress reduction workshops within communities.

**Policy Level:** Advocate for policies that improve access to mental health services, such as mental health parity laws and increased funding for mental health programs.
Work closely with key community partners to understand what their priorities are.

Situate programs within community settings
In an ongoing trial, we are going to roll out a group intervention across different settings and modalities.

**Recruitment:** flyers, word-of-mouth, community festivals, Mexican Consulate, tabling at conferences and community events, tabling at the church, mentioning when we are invited to do community lectures.
Thank you for your time!

Questions?