

Making Dallas Whole - Index is first step to correcting disparities

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Whether in Pleasant Grove or Preston Hollow, Dallas residents seek many of the same things: safe neighborhoods, good schools and affordable housing. Providing basic necessities evenly to all citizens is essential to developing a thriving, whole city.

With that in mind, the J. McDonald Williams Institute set out to answer an important question: How whole is Dallas? The institute created a data-driven index that identifies disparity and considers whether all citizens have comparable opportunities to achieve success and become self-sufficient.

The question is complex. And so is the answer. But the institute, the research arm of the Foundation for Community Empowerment, went far beyond generalities or anecdotes to focus on hard data to provide a nuanced view of Dallas.

The wholeness index assigns scores from 1 to 100 in 12 areas, from middle-class housing to graduation rates to crime rates. A low score suggests significant disparity; higher numbers indicate more similarities across neighborhoods.

Some of the findings are not news flashes - namely, that much of the southern sector fell into the "worst" category for several indicators. But this isn't as simple as North vs. South. For example, parts of the northern sector rated poorly in the crime index, while some southern neighborhoods scored well in owner-occupied housing and voter turnout.

The Williams Institute has worked to connect the dots, showing relationships between indicators and illustrating how significant disparities cost all of us. But creating the wholeness index is not an end unto itself - it's a beginning.

Now, city leaders, school district officials, civic activists and the Williams Institute need to work together to develop an action agenda. Some local leaders will take the first step today when they attend the institute's annual conference, where the wholeness index will be presented.

Many of the problems identified can be addressed through targeted public policies, but stakeholders from different organizations must be willing to work together. To be sure, this is far from the first time that city shortcomings have been under the microscope. Over time, other initiatives have gradually faded from view.

We can't afford to let that happen again. The Williams Institute has provided community leaders with a comprehensive look at Dallas. We're counting on those leaders to take the ball and run with it.

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