

Report illustrates Dallas' disparities - Data finds southern sector lagging north in economics, education

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It's been called a tale of two cities, the contrast between the northern and southern halves of Dallas.

And new research shows there's a lot of truth to that perception.

The Dallas-based J. McDonald Williams Institute has created a "Wholeness Index" to measure disparities based on 12 factors related to education, housing, economics and crime.

The index documents that large parts of the southern sector have the lowest SAT scores, graduation rates and homeownership rates and the highest rates of poverty and unfit housing in the city.

"We've been very neglected all these years," said Willie Mae Coleman, president of the Bertrand Neighborhood Association in South Dallas, who gave input on the concept for the new measuring tool.

The institute, a research arm of the Foundation for Community Empowerment, will unveil the index at its second annual conference today.

The foundation, which plans to update the information each year, hopes to use the information to work with the city, police department, school district and other community groups on solutions.

"It will be a call to action," said Marcia Page, the foundation's president and chief executive officer.

The findings illustrate many disparities between the southern and northern parts of Dallas:

*SAT scores in 2004 in the southern sector, Oak Lawn and Old East Dallas lagged behind those in other parts of the northern sector, with an average of 766. Far North Dallas had the highest scores with an average of 1098.

*Only 79 percent of public high school students in most of the southern sector graduated within four years. In Far North Dallas, 90 percent of students graduated within that period.

*One in four families in much of the southern sector lived in poverty, defined as an income of \$19,350 a year for a family of four. The northern sector had less poverty.

For each category, a wholeness score is assigned based on how far the city is from being equal in all neighborhoods. The city's overall score was 63.56 out of 100.

Foundation officials note that the southern sector had positive rankings in some areas while parts of the northern sector scored low in others. For example, most of the southern sector had low crime. Dallas' highest-crime areas are concentrated in South Dallas and northwest Dallas west of Interstate 35E.

The findings allow the community to focus on specific parts of the city that need the most help, said James Murdoch, professor of economics and public policy at the University of Texas at Dallas, who served as an adviser to the index project.

"When you really get under the hood, you can focus on where you want to have a concentrated effort and where you would have the biggest payoff," he said.

Many organizations work to solve separate pieces of the problem with programs such as crime-watches or student mentoring. But the foundation hopes to collaborate with community groups to take a broader approach.

"One of the things that has hindered social change is the pockets of change that are all working for good, but don't know about each other," said Timothy M. Bray, the McDonald institute's associate director.

Dallas Police Chief David Kunkle said he supports such collaboration efforts because the highest-crime areas also have other problems such as low-performing schools, high unemployment and a greater share of liquor and pawn stores.

"My view is we cannot arrest our way out of a crime problem," he said.

Addressing disparities is also crucial to Dallas' economic progress, said Marcus Martin, the McDonald institute's director. For example, unfit homes mean a loss of property tax revenue to the city, and non-fatal gunshot wounds cost taxpayers through hospital bills, he said.

David Herman Jr., founder and executive director of the South Dallas arts-in-education agency Preservation LINK, agreed that the disparities found in some communities hinder the city's progress as a whole.

"Any disparity warrants concern and action for everyone," Mr. Herman said. "We're only as strong as the weakest link."

The foundation will discuss the findings at the second annual J. McDonald Williams Institute conference today at the Hilton Anatole hotel.

For more information about the conference, call 469-221-0700 or go to www.regonline.com/williamsinstitute-conference.

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Page: 1B

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