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Low Broadband Rates in Urban, Segregated Pockets Compound Inequities

Madison, Wis. — Digital redlining has compounded issues facing residents of some of the country’s most segregated counties. In places already experiencing poverty, less homeownership, and lower high school completion rates, lack of high-speed internet access means residents have an even tougher time applying for jobs, accessing vital health care services, or logging into a class, according to [County Health Rankings & Roadmaps](#) (CHR&R).

In many urban areas a cycle of disinvestment can be traced to redlining from the 1930s when the federal government created maps that reinforced segregation by rating typically Black and immigrant neighborhoods as risky real estate investments. This disinvestment continues today and includes digital redlining, which occurs when large network providers exclude low-income neighborhoods.

“While high-speed internet is often discussed in the same breath as public utilities, many historically redlined areas that are disproportionately made up of Black residents still lack access to this critically important service,” said CHR&R Co-Director Sheri Johnson. “This is just the latest example of ways in which disinvestment continues to harm communities. There’s a compounding effect because lack of broadband access impacts health and quality of life in so many ways, as we all learned during the pandemic.”

Milwaukee is one of the most segregated places in the country, according to the Rankings’ residential segregation index. Governments and businesses have invested less in neighborhoods that span the northern and central part of this county of nearly 1 million, while those along the lakefront and in the suburbs thrive.

This lack of investment in some neighborhoods has had far reaching consequences still affecting communities today. CHR&R found that census tracts where more than 1

County Health Rankings & Roadmaps

Building a Culture of Health, County by County

in 4 households lack broadband are also largely composed of neighborhoods that were redlined nearly 100 years ago. These same neighborhoods also experience higher child poverty, lower home ownership rates, and fewer adults who have completed high school.

“Lack of broadband access remains a critical issue for people living in rural and urban communities. The push for access in rural communities has resulted in some gains in rural connectivity though more investment is needed. The reality is that many people in urban areas also lack access to broadband,” CHR&R Co-Director Marjory Givens said. “In fact, overall high levels of urban broadband rates have hidden some of the digital divide that exist in areas long affected by residential segregation.”

Digital disadvantages affect all communities with limited broadband availability. These disadvantages become more profound when added on top of the other repercussions of structural racism including limited job opportunities, homeownership barriers and underfunded schools.

“I think this is another symptom of disinvestment in these communities that creates yet another barrier and increases disparities,” said Kirsten Johnson, Commissioner of Health for the City of Milwaukee. “Internet access is a critical part of modern life if you think about things like health care, education and employment. Bridging the digital divide is imperative if we want to make our communities healthier.” Broadband access is associated with improved health outcomes, including lower smoking rates and diabetes cases. Availability also increases access to health care via telemedicine, improves economic stability through telework and increases food access with online grocery shopping.

County Health Rankings & Roadmaps compares the health of nearly every county in the nation. In addition to the county-level data, the program also features [What Works for Health](#), a database of more than 400 evidence-informed strategies communities rated effectiveness and likely impact on health disparities. The Action Center also provides guidance for communities.

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About the County Health Rankings & Roadmaps

The County Health Rankings & Roadmaps is a program of the University of Wisconsin Population Health Institute (UWPHI) supported by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. The Rankings, available at www.countyhealthrankings.org, compares counties within each state on more than 30 health-influencing factors such as housing, education, jobs, and access to quality health care.

About the University of Wisconsin Population Health Institute

The [University of Wisconsin Population Health Institute](http://uwphi.pophealth.wisc.edu) advances health and well-being for all by developing and evaluating interventions and promoting evidence-based approaches to policy and practice at the local, state, and national levels. The Institute works across the full spectrum of factors that contribute to health. A focal point for health and health care dialogue within the University of Wisconsin-Madison and beyond, and a convener of stakeholders, the Institute promotes an exchange of expertise between those in academia and those in the policy and practice arena. The Institute leads the work on the County Health Rankings & Roadmaps and the RWJF Culture of Health Prize. For more information, visit <http://uwphi.pophealth.wisc.edu>