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Minorities lagging in length, quality of life

Health study finds racial gaps in all age groups

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Minorities in Wisconsin are lagging behind in both length and quality of life, as racial health disparities across all life stages reflect troubling differences, a new study by the University of Wisconsin Population Health Institute shows.

According to the "Health of Wisconsin Report Card" - the first study to address overall health disparities across different age groups - Wisconsin is "failing in terms of the health of several of its subgroups," including minorities and less-educated residents.

"This is a clear call to action," said Patrick Remington, a University of Wisconsin-Madison professor of medicine, who co-wrote the study with physician David Kindig and researcher Bridget Booske.

The researchers used mortality rates to assign grades measuring longevity and health-related quality of life to infants, children, working-age and older adults. The study also measured health disparities by race, gender, educational attainment and geography.

Mortality rates for African-American and American Indian residents were substantially higher - sometimes two to three times higher - than for non-Hispanic whites in every age category.

The study, which was released Wednesday, also highlighted racial differences in infant mortality. The

rate for African-Americans, at 17.6 deaths per 1,000 live births, was more than three times the rate for whites. The American Indian infant mortality rate was second highest among ethnic groups in the state.

Remington called the rates "absolutely unacceptable."

Kindig added: "We have been particularly focusing on the African-American infant mortality rates. We know that that's bad, and we have big challenges there."

According to the state Department of Health and Family Services, Wisconsin in 1981 had the country's third-lowest infant mortality rate for African-Americans. By 2002, Wisconsin was ranked 40th of 40 reporting states.

From 2003 to 2005, 77% of African-American infant deaths in the state occurred in Milwaukee, according to the department.

Bevan Baker, Milwaukee's health commissioner, said that improving the health of Milwaukee County would require a long-term commitment. Root causes of unequal access to health care, such as poverty, race relations and housing, must be addressed, he said.

"This will not happen overnight," Baker said.

Cause for concern

Local and state officials are very concerned about the infant mortality crisis, said health officer Sheri Johnson of the Department of Health and Family Services. Last month, Johnson led a town hall meeting in Racine County highlighting infant mortality and discussing policy solutions. The annual meetings are part of a state initiative to improve birth outcomes for racial and ethnic groups through education and outreach.

Johnson added that while the state is working to address race-based health disparity, "realistically, it is not at all likely that we will have eliminated racial disparities in any of the major health status areas by 2010."

Barbara Stoddard of the Great Lakes Inter-Tribal Council said that for many American Indians, improved access to health care is a pressing need. American Indians face many barriers to health care, including a shortage of health care providers in rural Wisconsin and lack of transportation for families that can't afford cars, said Stoddard, who directs a federally funded project that provides nursing and health support services to more than 1,000 American Indians.

"People live many, many miles away from clinics and hospitals. Sometimes families just don't have the resources that they need," Stoddard said.

In Wisconsin, the study noted, health disparities between racial and ethnic groups were so high that the differences within the state encompassed the highest and lowest scoring states in the nation.

The UW study used data from a number of state and national sources, including the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the National Center for Health Statistics and the Wisconsin Department of Health and Family Services.

*On JSOnline A link to the Health of Wisconsin Report Card is at www.jsonline.com/links JSOnline.com
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