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Blacks' health risks greater

Studies reveal troubling costs of segregation

By Ron French / The Detroit News

Joyce Heard and Beth Breidenstein both live in Detroit. Both live in middle-class neighborhoods. Both are professionals.

But Heard has a higher risk of high blood pressure. Her children are more likely to be born with a low birth weight. She is more likely to be a single mother and, if she has sons, they are more likely to die at an early age.

Both live in the nation's most segregated metropolitan area, but Heard suffers more severe health risks because of the color of her skin.

Heard is black. Breidenstein is white.

Segregation hurts blacks more than whites, even when they are neighbors.

Even in impoverished neighborhoods of Detroit, where it would seem likely that all would suffer equally, blacks pay a heavier price, according to the findings of numerous studies.

For example:

* Black men who live in Detroit, Gary, Ind., and other highly segregated metro areas have a mortality rate more than double that of black men in the nation's least segregated metro areas. In other words, the chance of a black man dying in any given year increases as segregation increases. That is true even when poverty is taken into account, said professor Kevin Hart of the University of Rochester. The mortality rate of whites is unaffected by segregation.

* The chances of a black woman giving birth to a child that has a dangerous low-birth weight increase as segregation increases. The odds for white women aren't affected by segregation.

"Black Americans suffer higher rates of homicide, suicide, infant mortality and age-adjusted mortality," said Ingrid Gould Ellen, assistant professor at the Wagner School of Public Service at New York University. "It's very troubling."

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