Community engagement builds bridges to combat health inequities

Gabriela Nagy, PhD

Forced Removal of Indigenous Communities

Prior to the 1830s, the area that we now know as Milwaukee was belonged to Fox, Sauk, Ottawa, Ojibwe and—most numerous of all—Potawatomi. In the 1830s, a wave of settlers from the east, most of them born in New York and New England, pushed out the Indigenous communities and planted a city.

European Migration

By the 1860s, Milwaukee became the most German big city in America, but Irish, Scandinavian, and Czech families were present in large numbers of well. Industrial expansion attracted immigrants from southern and eastern Europe in the later 1800s. Polish were the city's second-largest ethnic community by 1900, and a host of other groups joined them, including Italian, Greek, Jewish, Slovak, Serbian, Croatian, and Slovenian.

Source: Milwaukee PBS, n.d. "People of Milwaukee"

The Great Migration

1905 to 1935 was a significant period of migration into Milwaukee by African Americans. World War I changed the landscape for African-Americans, and hinted at opportunity in the North. The war decreased the heavy concentration in the South by opening up industrial jobs in the urban manufacturing centers in Northern cities. This migration largely followed the railroad tracks which led to Chicago, Cleveland, Detroit and Milwaukee. Between 1916 and 1918, nearly 400,000 African Americans, or about 500 a day, rode the railroads north to escape southern prejudice and find strong-paying jobs. Before World War II, African Americans constituted just 1.5 percent of Milwaukee's population. By 1950 this number had risen to 3.5 percent, still a minority but an increase illustrative of the growing presence of African Americans in Milwaukee.

Source: City of Milwaukee, 2023 "Bronzeville"

Guest Worker Programs

The Spanish-speaking communities of Wisconsin date back to 1910. People of Mexican heritage began to settle here after the Mexican Revolution. Many others came throughout the 1900s to work in various farming and manufacturing industries (e.g., guest worker programs). The Great Depression caused many of them to lose employment and return home.

The first known group of Puerto Ricans came to Wisconsin in the 1940s. Many came to earn money to bring back to their native Puerto Rico. Most of these workers found jobs in tanneries, foundries, and factories.

During World War II, there was an increased need for food and agricultural workers. The Emergency Farm Labor Program of 1943, also known as the Bracero Treaty, allowed for temporary employment migration from foreign countries to the United States.

Since then, other Hispanic/Latino groups migrated to the state in search of economic opportunities or political asylum.

Source: Wisconsin Department of Health Services, 2022 "Hispanic/Latinos in Wisconsin: History"

1930s Milwaukee

A 1938 map of Milwaukee depicts how the Home Owners' Loan Corporation graded neighborhoods in Milwaukee.
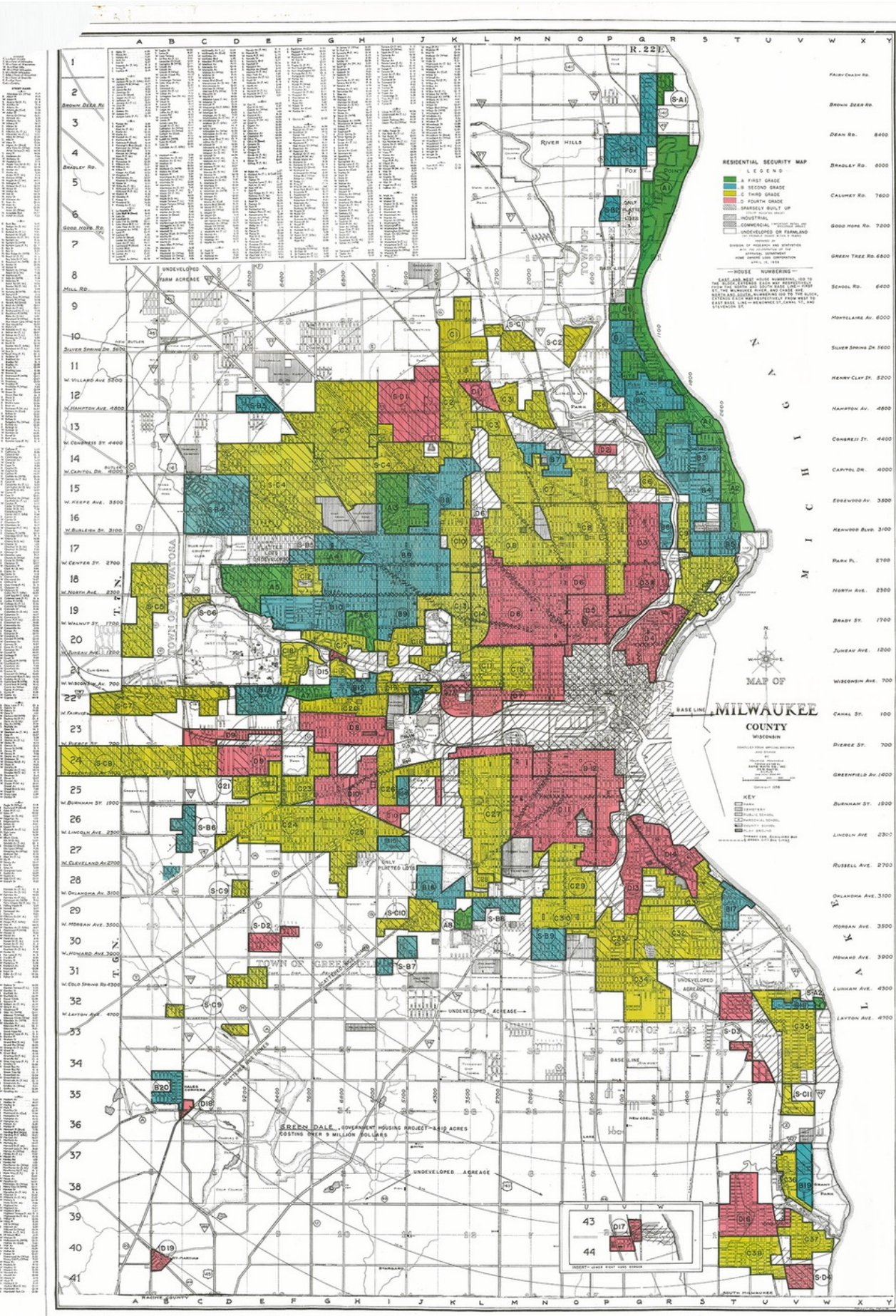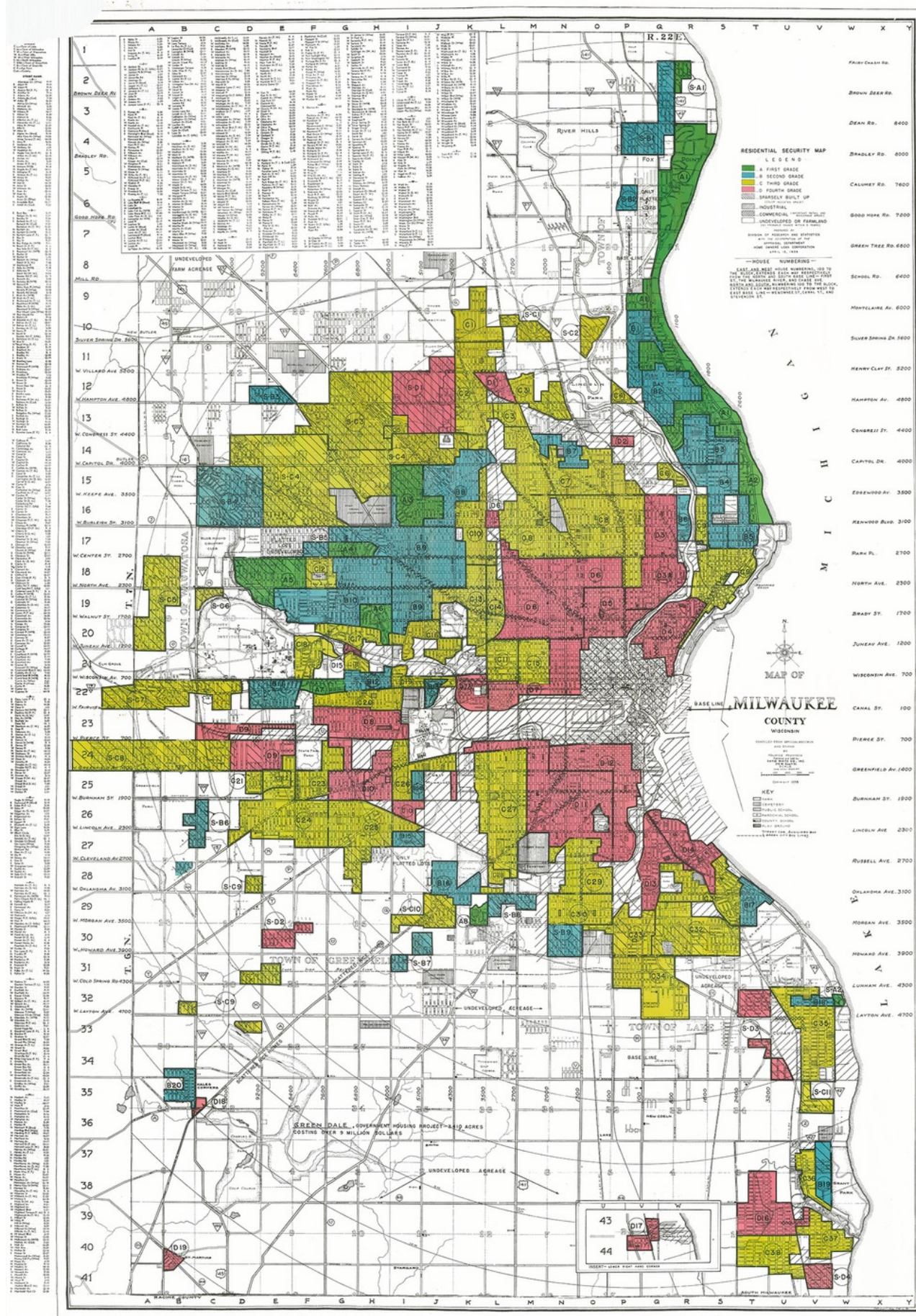Image Source: National Archives

A New Deal-era housing policy

In an effort to promote economic recovery during the Great Depression, the U.S. government implemented several policies throughout the 1930s. One major policy was the National Housing Act of 1934 which created the Federal Housing Administration. One primary goal of these efforts was to slow down the rate of housing foreclosures, which were rampant as Americans struggled to find and keep jobs during the economic depths of the Depression.

During this time, the FHA worked with the Home Owners' Loan Corporation, a government-sponsored lending agency known as HOLC that issued bonds to refinance mortgages for homeowners struggling to keep up. HOLC also created "residential security" maps that identified specific neighborhoods as high or low risk for investment. These maps were used by bank and finance entities in making lending and other investment decisions.

Source: Foltman et al., 2019 "How Redlining Continues To Shape Racial Segregation In Milwaukee"
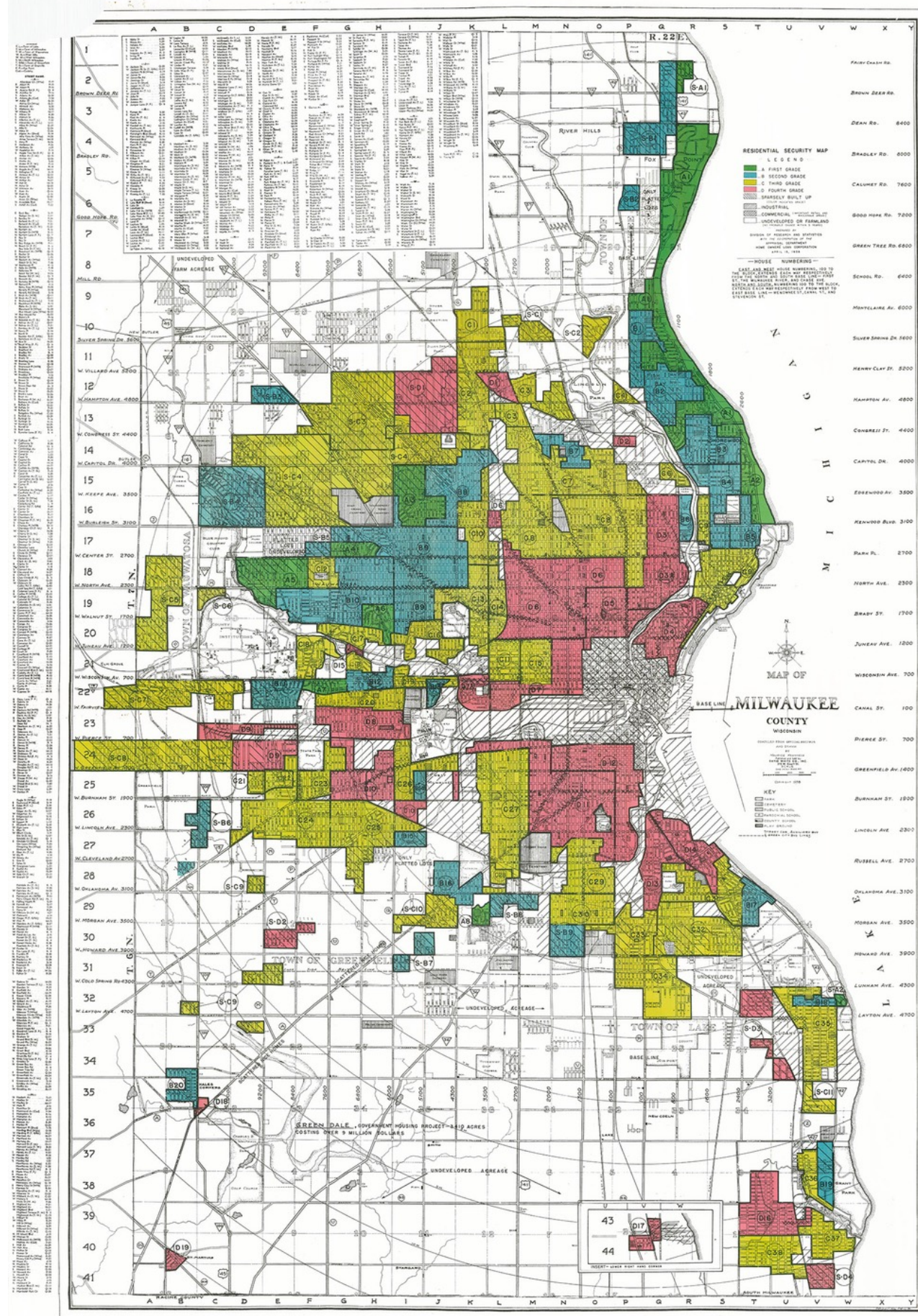
A 1938 map of Milwaukee depicts how the Home Owners' Loan Corporation graded neighborhoods in Milwaukee.
Image Source: National Archives

The "best" areas were given a **grade of A** and coded green, and were deemed to be exemplary neighborhoods for lenders. They were ideal in that the neighborhoods were structurally sound, visually appealing and composed of exclusively white residents.

For example, the assessor of Washington Highlands in the suburb of Wauwatosa rated this subdivision an A based on its status as a "highly restricted and exclusive area." He noted that the area had a controlling building committee "which permits a wide latitude of discrimination in accepting residents into the neighborhood."

When Washington Highlands was developed in 1919, the property deeds of the development specified that "at no time shall the land included in Washington Highlands or any part thereof, or any building thereon be purchased, owned, leased or occupied by any person other than of white race." This restriction remained in place until it was made illegal during the Civil Rights Era.
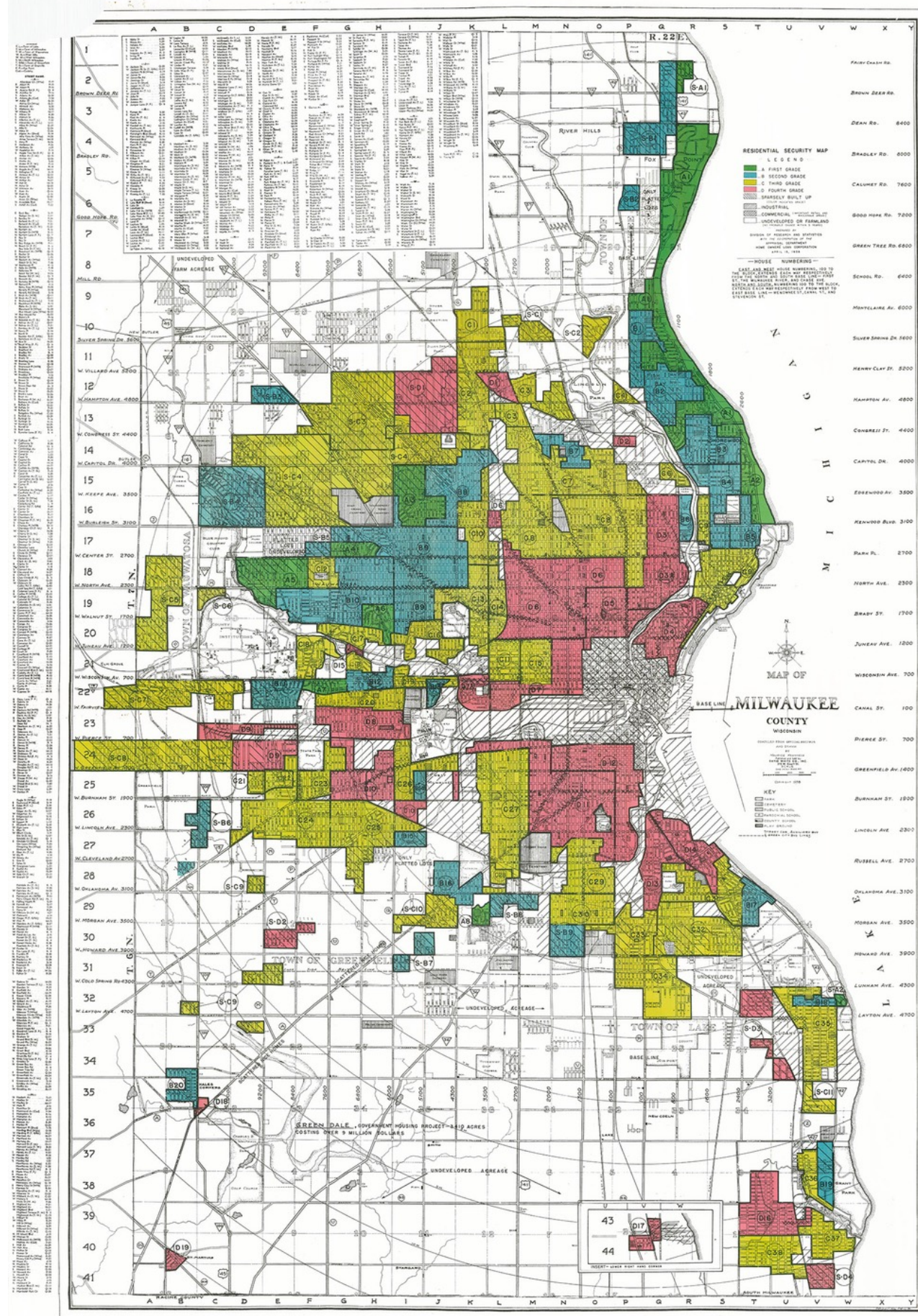
Source: Foltman et al., 2019 "How Redlining Continues To Shape Racial Segregation In Milwaukee"

A 1938 map of Milwaukee depicts how the Home Owners' Loan Corporation graded neighborhoods in Milwaukee.
Image Source: National Archives

Areas coded blue, or **grade B**, were deemed "still desirable." These spaces were often older but still worthy of investment. Lenox Heights, located next to Wauwatosa, was graded blue, with 1938 notes that indicated it was a "spotty area — one of the older sections of West Milwaukee with a substantial population." The assessor noted that there was a mix of fine homes and lower-class residences, but that it was well-maintained. As with green rated neighborhoods, there were no African Americans living in this area, and only a few foreign-born families.

Source: Foltman et al., 2019 "How Redlining Continues To Shape Racial Segregation In Milwaukee"
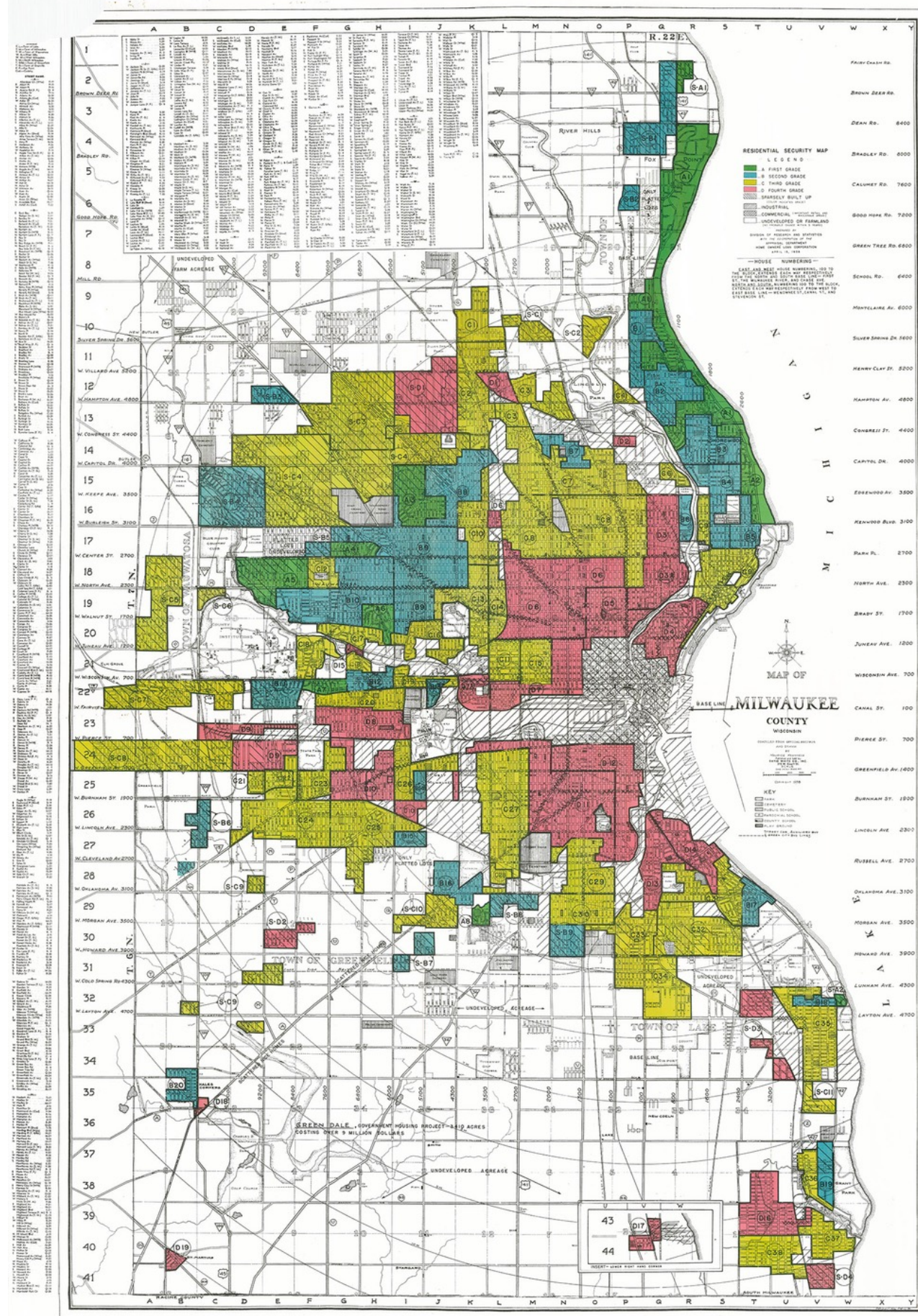
A 1938 map of Milwaukee depicts how the Home Owners' Loan Corporation graded neighborhoods in Milwaukee.
Image Source: National Archives

"Definitely declining" areas received **grades of C**, coded yellow. Homebuyers were thought of as unstable purchasers, and investors often proceeded with caution. In 1938 Milwaukee, yellow neighborhoods were the most common type. Arlington Heights, Franklin Heights, Williamsburg Heights and Borchert Field were all graded yellow in that year. In the 2010s, these neighborhoods, located on the city's north side, are notably populated by African Americans, but at the time of the assessment they included no black residents.

Source: Foltman et al., 2019 "How Redlining Continues To Shape Racial Segregation In Milwaukee"
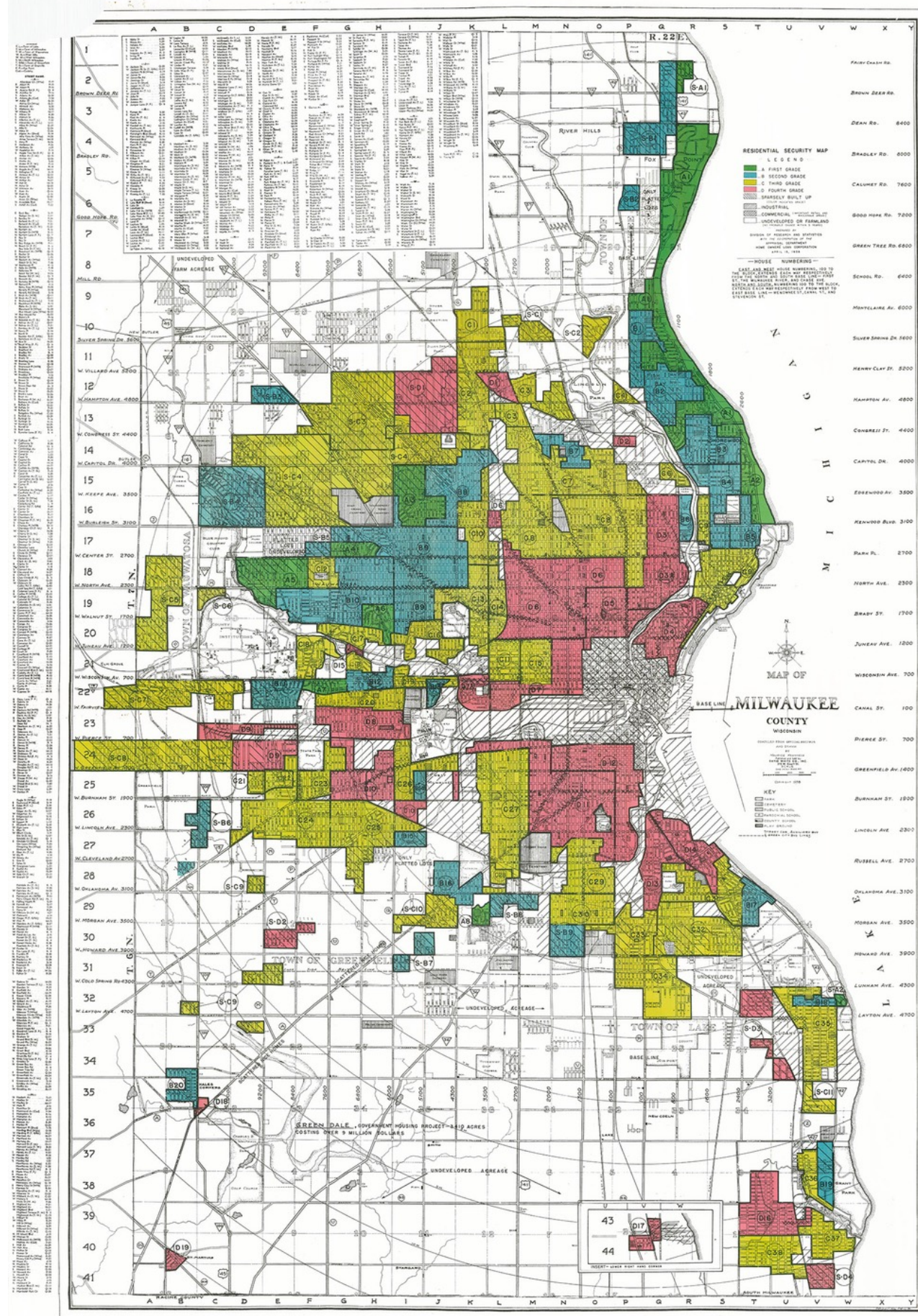
A 1938 map of Milwaukee depicts how the Home Owners' Loan Corporation graded neighborhoods in Milwaukee.
Image Source: National Archives

"Definitely declining" areas received **grades of C**, coded yellow. Homebuyers were thought of as unstable purchasers, and investors often proceeded with caution. In 1938 Milwaukee, yellow neighborhoods were the most common type. Arlington Heights, Franklin Heights, Williamsburg Heights and Borchert Field were all graded yellow in that year. In the 2010s, these neighborhoods, located on the city's north side, are notably populated by African Americans, but at the time of the assessment they included no black residents.

The assessor forecasted a long-term downward trend in property values due to the age of the housing stock and these neighborhoods' location near a railroad line to the west and Union Cemetery in their midst. However, the assessor also predicted that the area would "sustain values for some time chiefly because of the conservative German influence" of the residents. The area was "occupied by wage earners, Germans of the first, second, and third generation predominating overwhelmingly."

Source: Foltman et al., 2019 "How Redlining Continues To Shape Racial Segregation In Milwaukee"

A 1938 map of Milwaukee depicts how the Home Owners' Loan Corporation graded neighborhoods in Milwaukee.
Image Source: National Archives

The worst was **grade D**, coded red, and was the most detrimental in intent and effect. An area categorized as red was tagged with the label "hazardous" for investment. According to the people doing the assessments, these neighborhoods were old and in poor condition and had African American people living there.

In contemporary Milwaukee, the Halyard Park, Hillside and Haymarket neighborhoods, located just north of the city's downtown, were given a red rating. The rating was explained in the assessment with notes: "This is the Negro and slum area of Milwaukee. It is old and very ragged. Besides the colored people, a large number of lower type Jews are moving into the section."

Source: Foltman et al., 2019 "How Redlining Continues To Shape Racial Segregation In Milwaukee"

GRADE A

FORM 8
10-1-37

AREA DESCRIPTION — SECURITY MAP OF MILWAUKEE AREA

1. AREA CHARACTERISTICS:
   a. Description of Terrain. Hilly to rolling; several ravines in area.

   b. Favorable Influences. Highly protected and restricted — adequate transportation — all utilities — adequate schools.

   c. Detrimental Influences. None outstanding.

   d. Percentage of land improved 80 %; e. Trend of desirability next 10-15 yrs. Static

2. INHABITANTS:
   a. Occupation Business, professional, executive ; b. Estimated annual family income $ 3 – 20,000
   c. Foreign-born families 0 %; — predominating; d. Negro 0 ; %
   e. Infiltration of above groups ; f. Relief families None
   g. Population is increasing Yes ; decreasing ; static

3. BUILDINGS:

	PREDOMINATING 100 %	OTHER TYPE %	OTHER TYPE %
a. Type	Singles		
b. Construction	Brick		
c. Average Age	1 – 20 Years	Years	Years
d. Repair	Good		
e. Occupancy	100 %	%	%
f. Home ownership	90 %	%	%
g. Constructed past yr.	8		
h. 1929 Price range	$ 15 – 40,000 100%	$ 100%	$ 100%
i. 1936 Price range	$ 10 – 20,000 87-50 %	$ %	$ %
j. 37-38 Price range	$ 10 – 20,000 67-50 %	$ %	$ %
k. Sales demand	Up to $15,000	$	$
l. Activity	Fair		
m. 1929 Rent range	No rent houses $ 100%	$ 100%	$ 100%
n. Rent range	$ — %	$ %	$ %
o. 37-38 Rent range	$ 85 – 150 %	$ %	$ %
p. Rental demand	$ 100	$	$
q. Activity	Good		

4. AVAILABILITY OF MORTGAGE FUNDS: a. Home purchase Ample ; b. Home building Ample

5. CLARIFYING REMARKS: This is Washington Highlands, a highly restricted and exclusive area, slow in developing but substantial in character. Plans and specifications for new building must be approved by the Washington Highlands Building Committee which permits a wide latitude of discrimination in accepting residents into the neighborhood. That small portion of the area south of Milwaukee Avenue, joined on the east and west by "C" sections, is in a deep ravine. High ground along the southern boundary of this area fronting on Milwaukee Avenue forms a natural barrier so that C-17 on the south offers no adverse influence on this area.

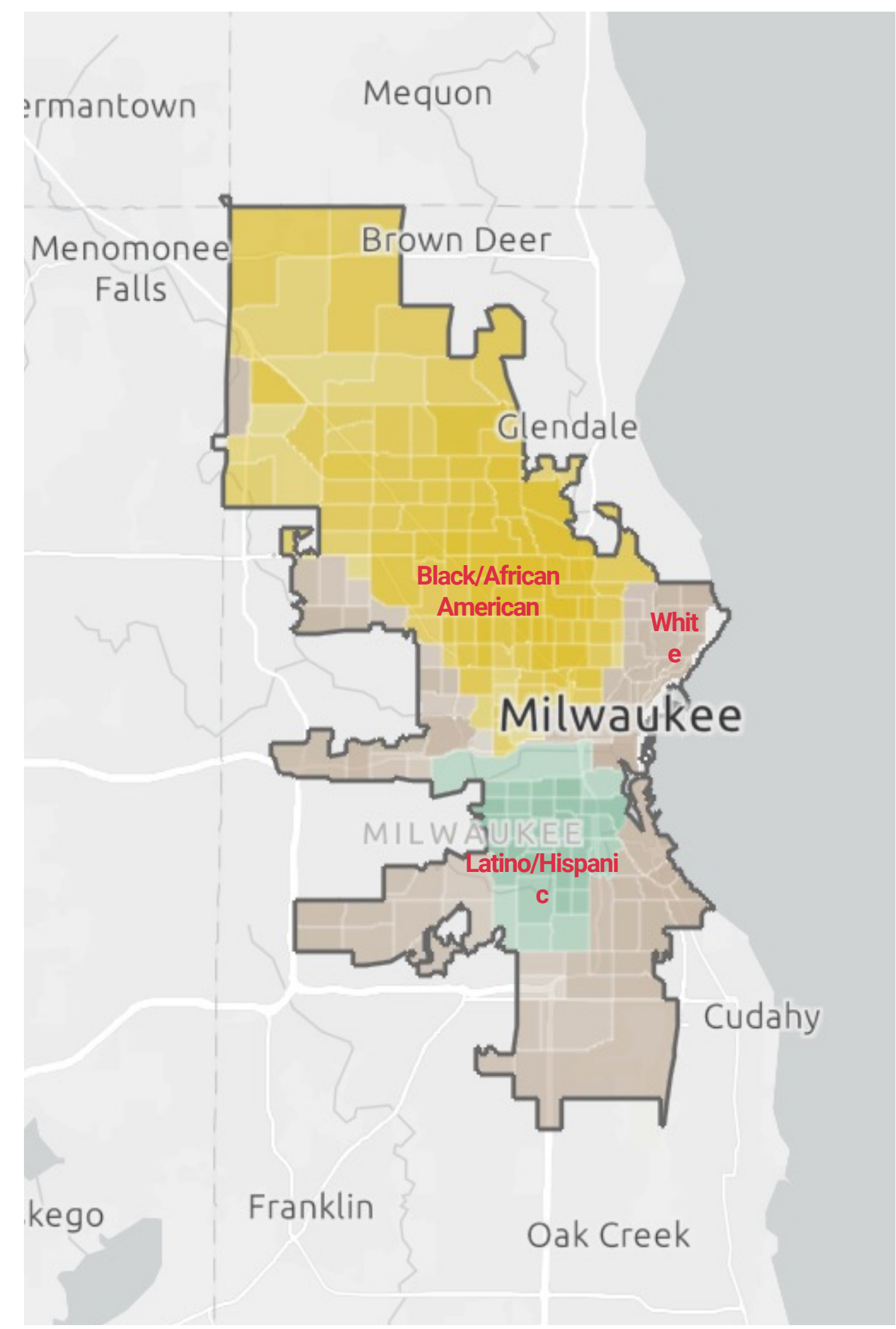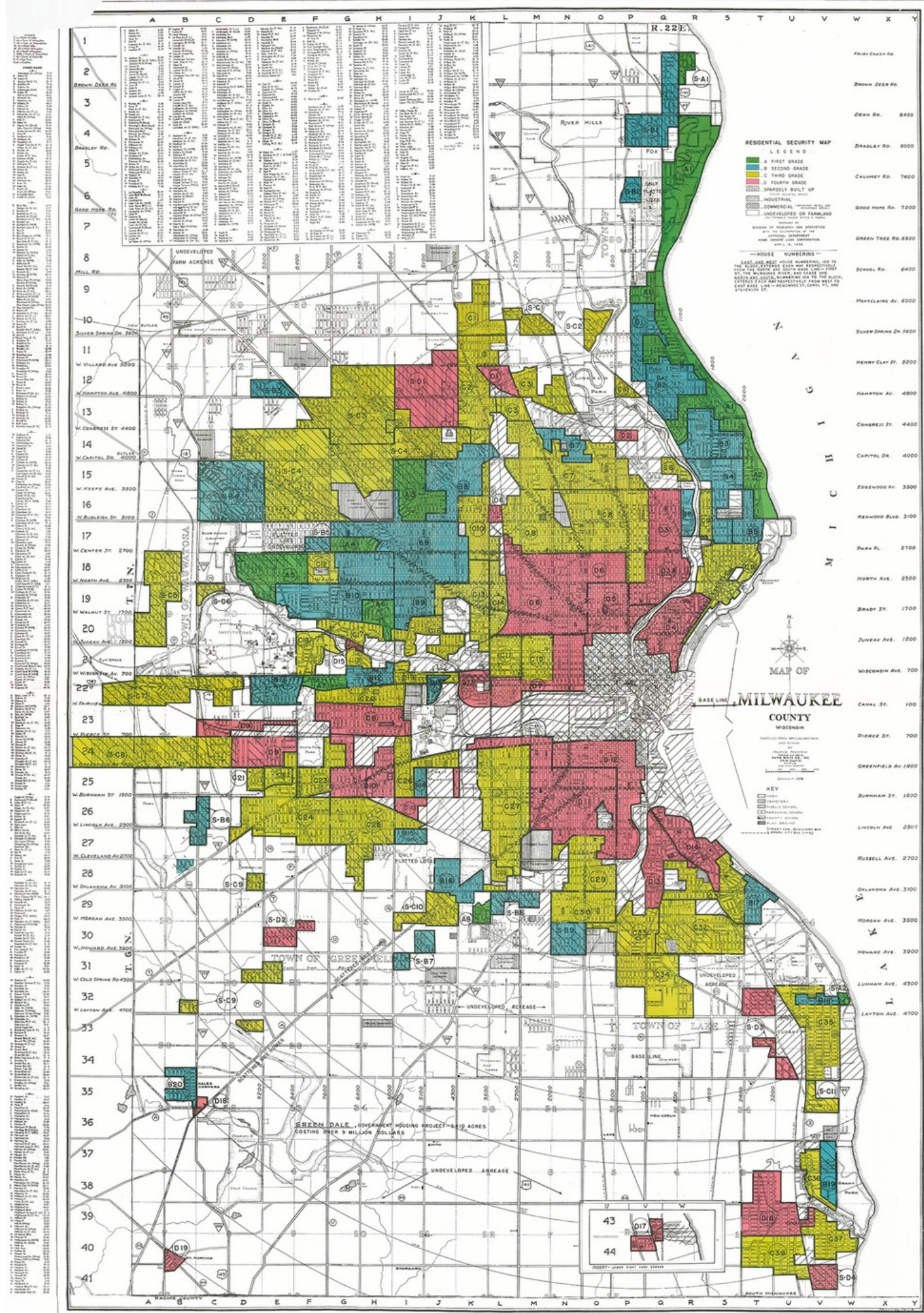6. NAME AND LOCATION MILWAUKEE SECURITY GRADE A AREA NO. 6

GRADE D

FORM 8
10-1-37

AREA DESCRIPTION — SECURITY MAP OF MILWAUKEE AREA

1. AREA CHARACTERISTICS:
   a. Description of Terrain. Level with a pitch north.

   b. Favorable Influences. All utilities — schools — transportation

   c. Detrimental Influences. Negro and slum area — condemnation proceedings going on.

   d. Percentage of land improved 90 %; e. Trend of desirability next 10-15 yrs. Down

2. INHABITANTS:
   a. Occupation Laborers and Ne'er-do-wells ; b. Estimated annual family income $ –
   c. Foreign-born families 25 %; Russian Jews predominating; d. Negro Yes 65 %
   e. Infiltration of Russian Jews ; f. Relief families Many
   g. Population is increasing Yes ; decreasing — ; static —

3. BUILDINGS:

	PREDOMINATING 60 %	OTHER TYPE 30 %	OTHER TYPE 10 %
a. Type	Singles, 4 rm & up	1 – 4 units	Apts. – 6-15 units
b. Construction	Frame	Frame	Brick
c. Average Age	35 –75 Years	30–75 Years	30 Years
d. Repair	Poor	Bad	Fair
e. Occupancy	97 %	97 %	97 %
f. Home ownership	10 %	10 %	5 %
g. Constructed past yr.	None	None	None
h. 1929 Price range	$3000–6500 100%	$4000–8000 100%	$15,000–25,000 100%
i. 1936 Price range	$1800–4800 60-74 %	$3500–6500 87-80 %	$8500–20,000 43-80 %
j. 37-38 Price range	$1800–4800 60-74 %	$3500–6500 87-80 %	$8500–20,000 43-80 %
k. Sales demand	$None	$None	$None
l. Activity	None	None	None
m. 1929 Rent range	$20 – 45 100%	$25 – 45 100%	$ — 100%
n. 1936 Rent range	$15 – 35 75-78 %	$15 – 35 60-87 %	$ %
o. 37-38 Rent range	$15 – 35 75-78 %	$15 – 35 60-87 %	$ %
p. Rental demand	$20 – 30	$20 – 30	$25 – 40
q. Activity	Good	Good	—

4. AVAILABILITY OF MORTGAGE FUNDS: a. Home purchase None ; b. Home building None

5. CLARIFYING REMARKS: This is the Negro and slum area of Milwaukee. It is old and very ragged. Besides the colored people, a large number of lower type Jews are moving into the section. This section housed Milwaukee's wealthiest families seventy years ago.

6. NAME AND LOCATION MILWAUKEE, WIS. SECURITY GRADE D AREA NO. 5

RESIDENTIAL SECURITY MAP
LEGEND

A FIRST GRADE
B SECOND GRADE
C THIRD GRADE
D FOURTH GRADE

MAP OF
MILWAUKEE
COUNTY
WISCONSIN

Black/African American

White

Latino/Hispanic

Why does this matter?

THESE POLICIES HAVE SHAPED THE DEGREE TO WHICH THERE HAS BEEN FINANCIAL, SOCIAL, POLITICAL, ENVIRONMENTAL INVESTMENTS ACROSS DISTINCT NEIGHBORHOODS.

THE (LACK OF INVESTMENT) GIVEN RISE TO A RANGE OF SOCIAL DRIVERS OF HEALTH, FOR EXAMPLE:

- Housing stability; safe housing
- Level of violence in a neighborhood
- The amount of property taxes that support local public schools
- Access to green space; walkability
- Availability of affordable and nutritious food (vs. food desserts)
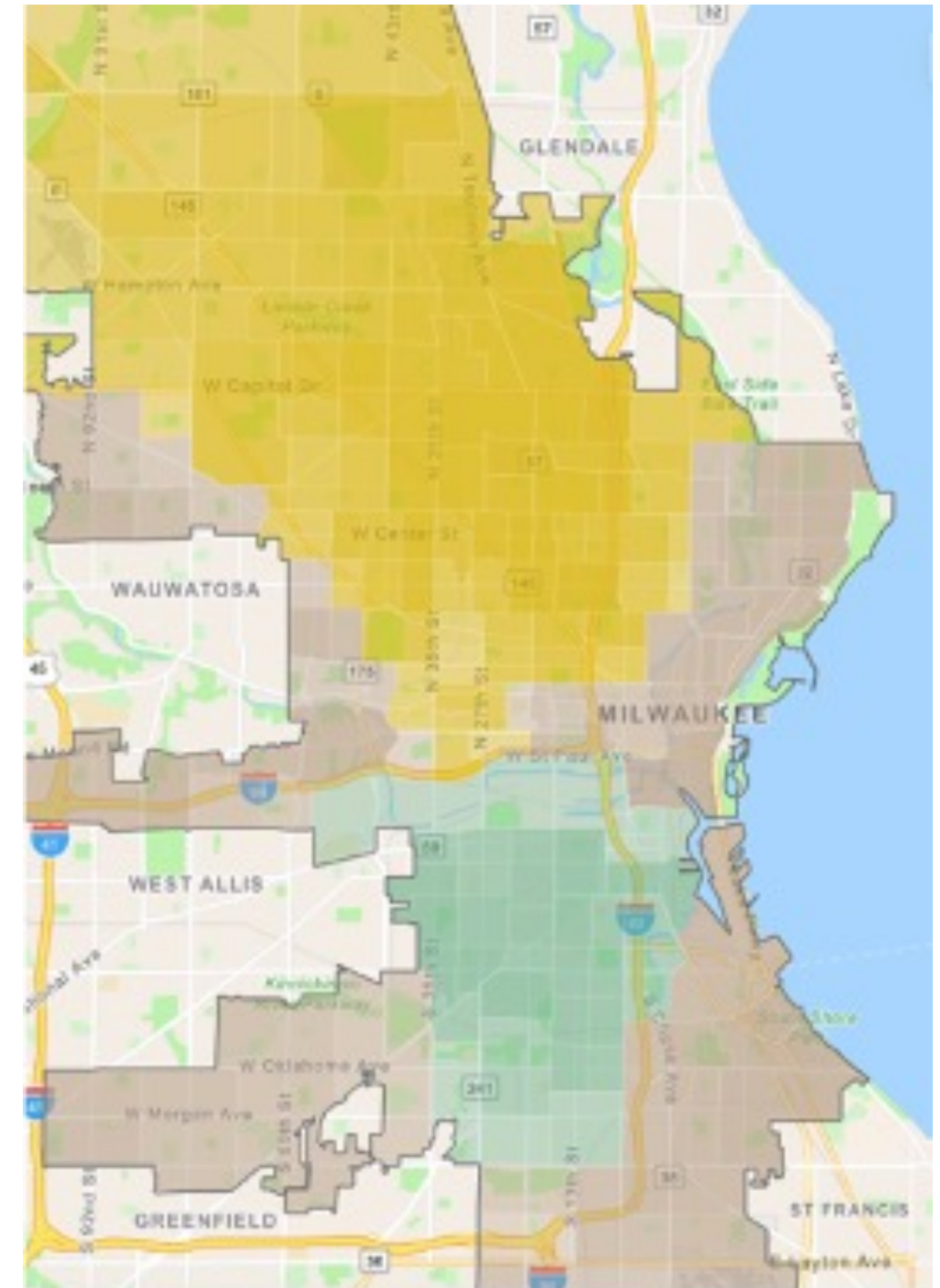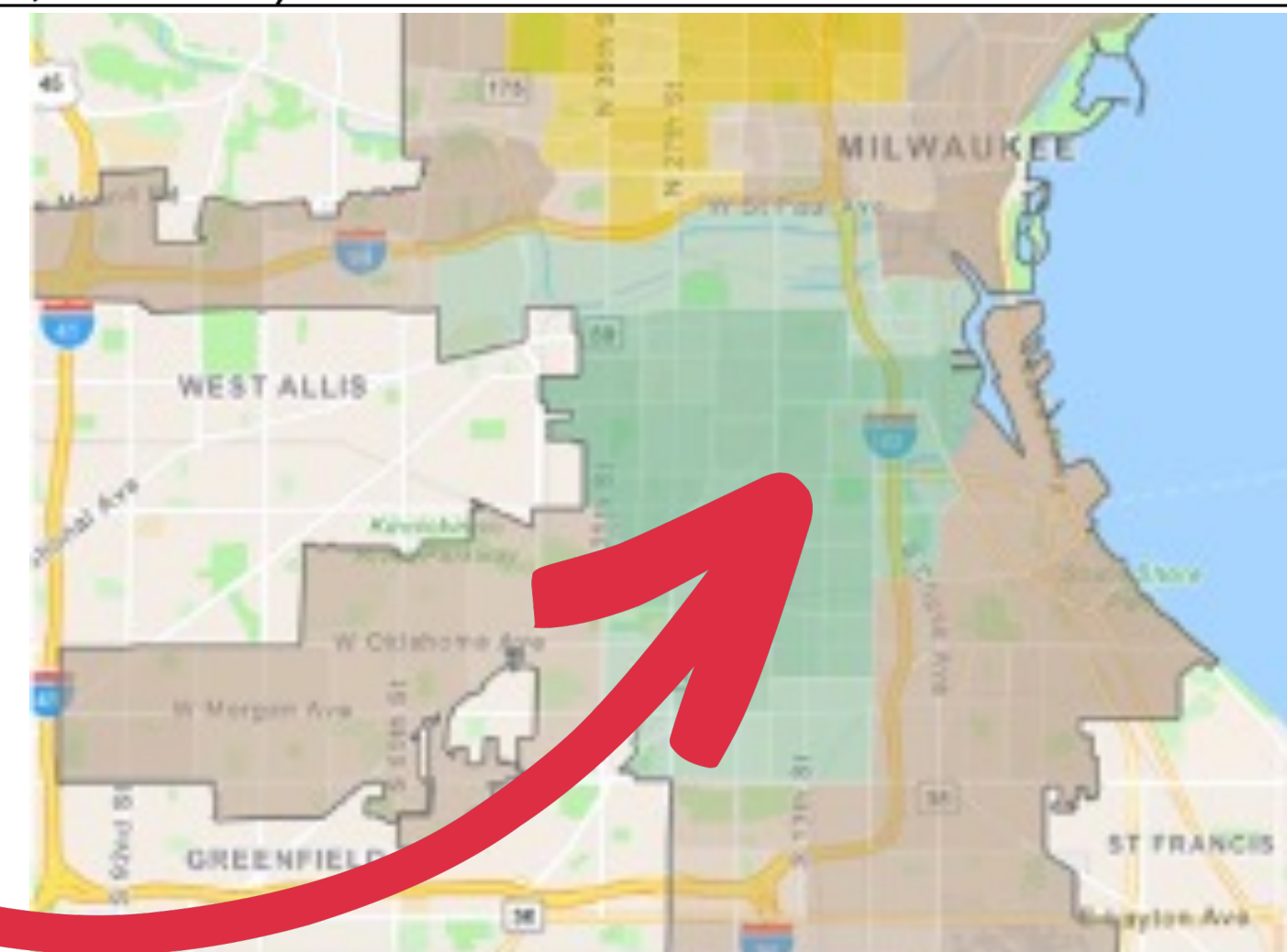- Environmental pollutant exposure

Table 1. Description of inequities in high-priority Census Tracts

Census Tract	% Latinos (vs. Whites)	Spanish language	% Poverty	Median income	Home ownership	Social vulnerability	% Uninsured	% Disabled
172	79.8% (vs. 13.5%)	76.3%	26.9%	$42,273	47.1%	0.84	28.0%	8.2%
157	79.2% (vs. 9.7%)	70.1%	35.8%	$27,750	37.2%	0.99	22.7%	16.3%
168	78.2% (vs. 7.0%)	72.6%	33.6%	$31,869	35.5%	0.93	28.9%	13.1%
188	77.9% (vs. 10.1%)	71.4%	28.9%	$43,795	45.5%	0.81	26.3%	10.0%
169	75.4% (vs. 11.1%)	74.3%	31.7%	$33,207	21.4%	1.00	28.8%	8.6%
165	75.2% (vs. 11.2%)	61.0%	40.0%	$29,698	28.1%	0.99	24.7%	11.7%
170	75.1% (vs. 13.1%)	61.5%	25.0%	$39,440	35.6%	1.00	18.5%	11.1%
164	78.0% (vs. 7.1%)	77.0%	45.3%	$37,083	27.5%	0.95	38.7%	6.7%

Note. The CDC Social Vulnerability Scale, which is a composite of 16 indicators encompassing socioeconomic status (e.g., below 150% rate, unemployment, no high school diploma), household characteristics (e.g., single parent household, limited English proficiency), racial/ethnic minority status, and housing/transportation type (e.g., crowded living conditions, group living quarters, no vehicle).

Let's do a deep in some of the most affected Census Tracts

These conditions are bad for health.

THESE DETERMINANTS INFLUENCE AN INDIVIDUAL'S HEALTH STATUS, ACCESS TO HEALTHCARE, AND OVERALL WELL-BEING IN SEVERAL INTERCONNECTED WAYS:

- Adversely influence health behaviors (e.g., coping behaviors that bring about short-term relief, but adverse long-term consequences such as increase substance use)
- Increase chronic disease risk (due to poor nutrition, more sedentary lifestyle, etc)
- Pose barriers to access to health care
- Prolonged stress negatively impacts mental health

Chronic stress gets under the skin

Chronic stress is long-term in duration, ongoing, and seemingly everlasting to those that experience it. Root causes of chronic stress may be systemic and environmental.

Ex) Immigrants who are undocumented face chronic stress due to the uncertainty of their legal status. This uncertainty in daily life impedes the possibility of having a well-paying job with safe work environment, professional advancement, limits educational advancement, causes fear of being around law enforcement, and limits independence (e.g., not being able to have a bank account, unable to have a driver's license).

These conditions can bring about a range of responses

Psychological

There are several stressors in everyday life and the ability to cope with the perception of threat, abrupt change, or demand varies from individual to individual. Feeling overwhelmed, anxious, tense, helpless, fearful, and confusion all affect the decision-making and perception of the individual's capacity to emotionally cope with stress.
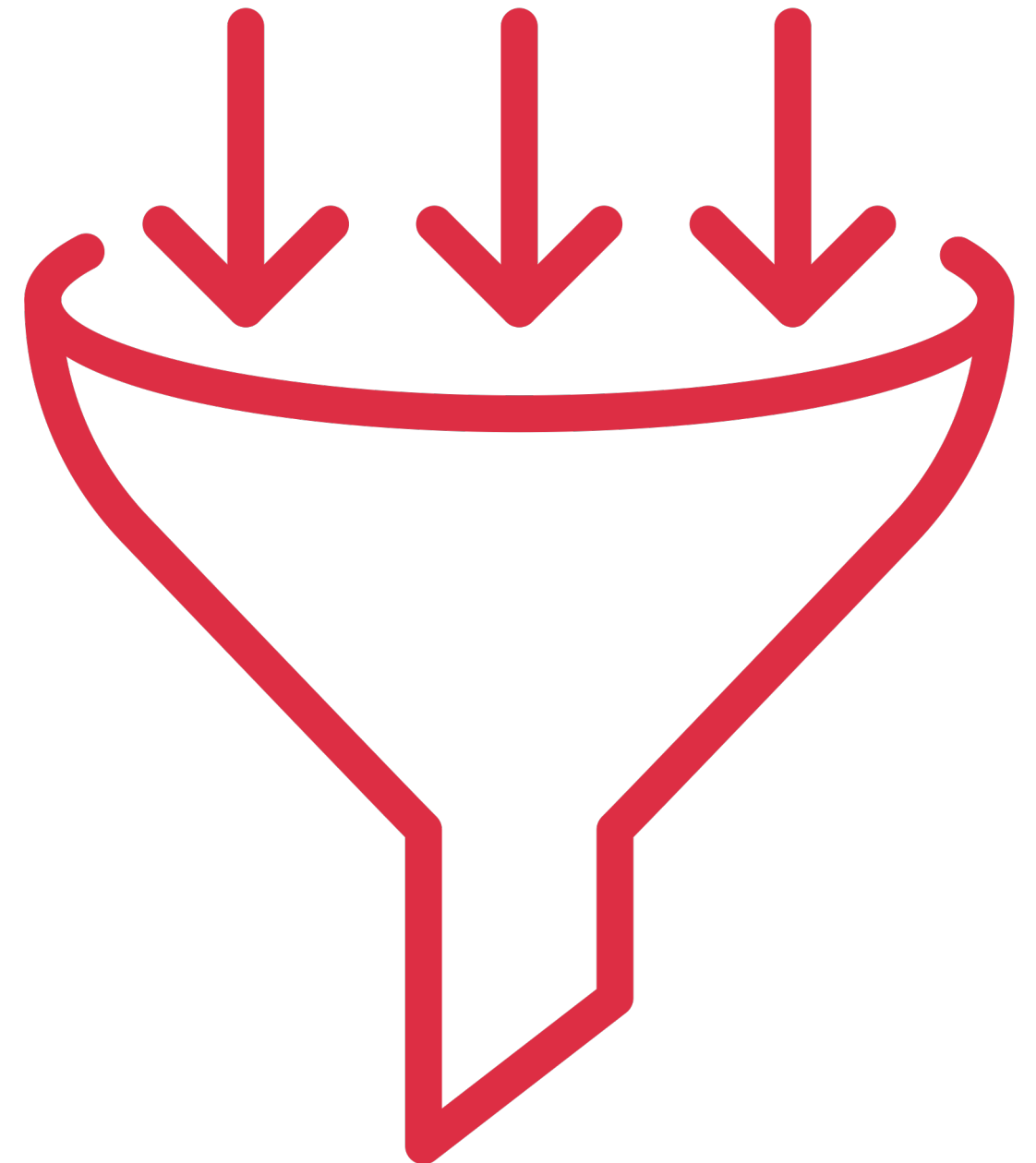
Physiological

The Hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal (HPA) axis, part of the autonomic nervous system, triggers a "fight or flight" response during stressful situations. This process involves the activation of the sympathetic nervous system, leading to changes in bodily functions, including increased heart rate, muscle tension, and the release of stress hormones like cortisol.

The current healthcare landscape is insufficient and demand outweighs capacity

IN RECENT YEARS, WE HAVE SEEN AN ALREADY OVERBURDENED HEALTH SYSTEM GET TO ITS BREAKING POINT BECAUSE OF:

- Surge in (COVID) cases
- Resource shortages
- Staff burnout
- Supply chain disruptions
- Delayed non-COVID care
- Information overload
- Financial strain (e.g., increasing inflation)

Lay worker-delivered interventions hold the promise of eradicating inequities, promoting equal access, and nurturing an inclusive, accessible, and enduring health system for all

Eradicating inequities requires multipronged approaches
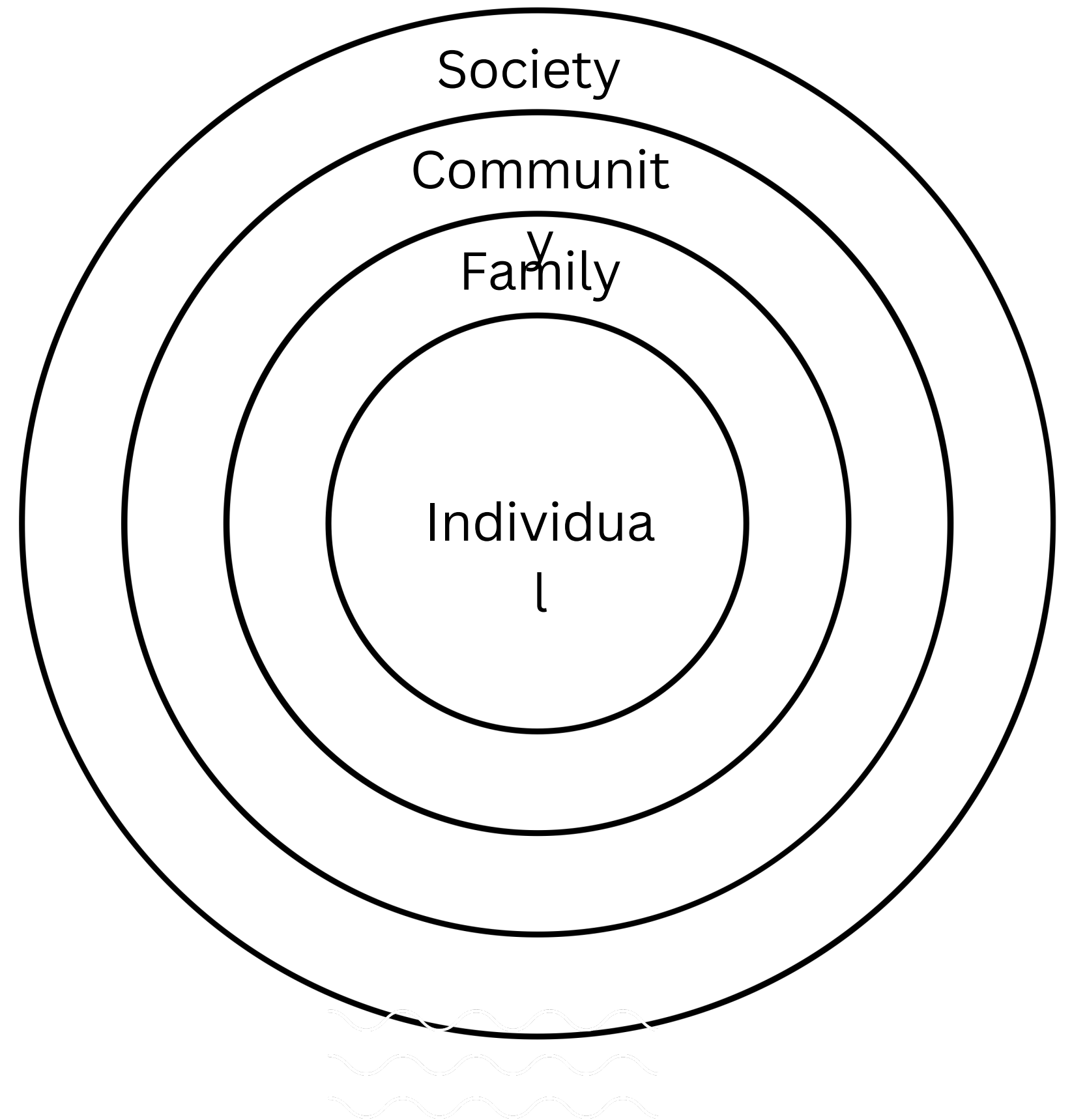
Utilize a socioecological systems framework

Ex) Mental Health Promotion:

Individual Level: Provide mental health screenings and therapy services for individuals experiencing mental health issues.

Interpersonal Level: Create support groups and peer-led initiatives for individuals with similar mental health challenges.

Community Level: Organize mental health awareness campaigns and stress reduction workshops within communities.

Policy Level: Advocate for policies that improve access to mental health services, such as mental health parity laws and increased funding for mental health programs.

Society

Community

Family

Individual

Work closely with key community partners to understand what their priorities are.

Situate programs within community settings

In an ongoing trial, we are going to roll out a group intervention across different settings and modalities

Recruitment: flyers, word-of-mouth, community festivals, Mexican Consulate, tabling at conferences and community events, tabling at the church, mentioning when we are invited to do community lectures

Thank you for your time!

Questions?