



ZIP code 53206: Numbers driving change

by: Kathy Quirk



Lois Quinn uses numbers to tell stories.

Quinn, a senior scientist at the University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee’s Employment and Training Institute (ETI), uses data to profile the ebb and flow of poverty, crime, development and hope in one small slice of urban America – ZIP code 53206 in Milwaukee – over 17 years.

ZIP code 53206 – roughly bounded by Capitol Drive on the north, North Avenue on the south, 27th Street on the west and 7th Street on the east – is a predominately black neighborhood and the poorest in Milwaukee, according to the 2000 census. Neighborhood challenges include a high proportion of single-parent families, joblessness, neglected and abused children, crime, drug use, low high school graduation rates and high rates of teen pregnancy.

It is not the only area Quinn studies, but it’s the neighborhood she has studied most consistently and for the longest period, creating a multi-layered portrait of a community. Her work, along with that of colleague John Pawasarat, ETI director, has helped drive changes in public policy and education. She is frequently quoted in national media stories, and her techniques for drilling down into data have been adapted by organizations and researchers across the country.

“A study by Lois M. Quinn dramatizes the suffering of poor urban Americans in 2007 – and exemplifies useful scholarship at an urban public institution,” notes Peter Levine, director of The Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement at the University of Maryland. The same 2007 study “New Indicators of Neighborhood Need in Zipcode 53206,” was also cited in a front-page Chicago Tribune story.

Research that drives change

Finding the numbers that can drive policy change is an overarching theme in her academic career, says Quinn. “It’s creative in a different way. It’s almost all quantitative research, which I love. There’s a value in focusing on places like 53206 because it shows what can work in these neighborhoods and beyond, and it helps eliminate some stereotypes.”

Much of her work is funded by government agencies, foundations and educational institutions, and focuses on technical assistance projects that impact employment and income. The institute’s research helps inform decisions about employment, training, welfare reform, educational policy and worker benefits.

Quinn first started studying ZIP code 53206 in 1991, doing research for the Milwaukee County Department of Health and Human Services and the Children’s Court to find out which middle school students in the area were in danger of ending up in prison. Unfortunately, planned initiatives to help at-risk families remained unfunded, she says, even though the research predictions proved sadly accurate. “We found that two-thirds of the boys coming into Children’s Court in their preteens as abuse and neglect victims returned as delinquents within a few years. Children’s Court judges used the research to argue for more services for this most vulnerable population.”

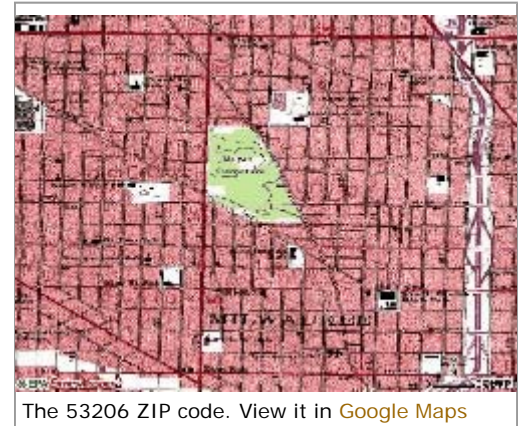
Digging into the data for 53206

In her work, Quinn digs into census data, employment reports, tax return summaries and other databases of information. Her findings spotlight the neighborhood's serious challenges, but also tease out glimmers of hope.

On the positive side, strong families hold the neighborhood together. Quinn's research on the impact of welfare reform on 53206, for example, showed that elimination of Aid for Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) didn't result in a surge in homelessness. "Families took in family members."

Small businesses, including day care centers, are budding, and a solid housing stock forms a bedrock for home ownership, says Quinn. "For a very poor neighborhood, it still looks very good. It looks like a livable neighborhood."

While what is happening in 53206 may not mirror exactly what is happening in other poor, urban areas, positive and negative trends there may eventually play out elsewhere. "I'd say it's a bellwether...the canary in the mine," says Quinn. "It gives us an early warning of what could happen in other neighborhoods."



The 53206 ZIP code. View it in [Google Maps](#)

Prison and subprime mortgages

Quinn's recent research reveals two trends in 53206 that are once more speeding up neighborhood decline and offsetting a few moderate improvements.

"The prison situation is beyond alarming," she says. "Almost two-thirds of men of prime working age [30-34] are or have been in prison. You can't decimate that population without having a huge impact on a neighborhood."

At the same time, an unprecedented increase in unregulated subprime and high-interest loans to neighborhood residents and investors is endangering key neighborhood assets – housing stock and home ownership.

Refinancing to increase personal income was attractive to poorer residents, says Quinn. However, high-interest and subprime lenders issued more than 78 percent of the home loans in a recent year, and more than 60 such lenders were operating in the neighborhood. Defaults on subprime loans are common when adjustable rates begin escalating.

"This is striking at the heart of the community," says Quinn. "If these homes stay vacant, it's a disaster for the neighborhood."

Statistics can drive policy change

Quinn's work and that of the Employment and Training Institute has driven some positive change in 53206 and other urban neighborhoods. A few examples:

A study on income tax filing showed that many neighborhood residents who might be eligible for earned income credit were not filing tax returns. As a result, a local foundation launched a successful campaign that increased tax filings and personal income in the area.

A study of new job opportunities available found that large health care providers were looking for people with a mix of clerical/computer skills and health care knowledge to work in medical settings. "It's a job fit – with benefits – particularly for women in these neighborhoods near major medical centers," says Quinn. As a result of the findings, MATC has developed a proposal to create a hybrid certificate combining clerical and medical terminology skills.

A major study of driver's license revocations and suspensions, based on findings that first showed up in 53206 and other central city ZIP Codes, led to programs to help residents in poor/minority areas regain their licenses, removing a serious barrier to employment. A recent update on those efforts showed that success rates were very high for the first group of 454 clients in the program, with 51 percent regaining driving privileges.

"Some things have been great successes," says Quinn. Even when change isn't immediate, she adds, "we are part of stimulating discussion about some issues that impact the neighborhood, and have had a part in the solution."

Over the years, the Employment and Training Institute has published numerous studies that have influenced public policy, been quoted in the media and even cited in court cases. A list is available at: www.eti.uwm.edu.

Here are a few examples.

[Assessment of 2007 Client Outcomes for the Center for Driver's License Recovery & Employability](#), 2008, by John Pawasarat and Lois M. Quinn.

[Occupational Drill Downs of Training Needs in the Milwaukee Metro Area](#), 2006.

[New Indicators of Neighborhood Need in Zipcode 53206](#).

"Neighborhood Indicators of Employment and Economic Well-Being of Families, Barriers to Employment, and Untapped Opportunities," 2007, by Lois M. Quinn.

[Legal Action of Wisconsin Report on Milwaukee's Housing Crisis:](#)

[Foreclosures, Evictions, and Subprime Lending, 2007](#), by John Pawasarat and Lois M. Quinn.

[Update on the Housing Crisis in ZIP Code 53206, 2007](#), by John Pawasarat and Lois M. Quinn.

[Barriers to Employment: Prison Time, 2007](#), by John Pawasarat.

[The Driver's License Status of the Voting Age Population of Wisconsin, 2005.](#)

[Exposing Urban Legends: The Real Purchasing Power of Central City Neighborhoods,, 2001](#), by John Pawasarat and Lois M. Quinn.

[Removing Transportation Barriers to Employment: Assessing Driver's License and Vehicle Ownership Patterns of Low-Income Populations, 1998](#), by John Pawasarat and Frank Stetzer.

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