

ICTR Pilot Award Project: Black Fathers, Equal Partners in Advancing Maternal and Infant Health

Summary of Pilot Award Project Impact:

1. Adoption by community health programs or organizations

Through this project a new partnership was initiated with the African American Breastfeeding Network (AABN). AABN has organized conversations for expectant and new parents to reflect on the ways that fathers are involved and could be further involved in pregnancy, and the support that fathers may need in the transition to parenthood. AABN anticipates that this will become an ongoing focus. AABN is exploring partnerships with father-serving organizations in Milwaukee to make referrals so expectant and new fathers can connect to needed support and services. AABN is also planning to develop a class for fathers on maternal and child health. The AABN leadership and staff participants in this study, learned directly from mothers and fathers about their needs and preferences for father engagement in services, and built capacity to recognize and respond to parents' wishes for fathers to be part of supporting maternal and child health.

The project's team also established a partnership with Fathers Making Progress, a Milwaukee-based nonprofit focused on fatherhood. COA Youth & Family Center collaborated by contributing space and providing childcare during research focus group discussions.

2. Impact on Wisconsin and national policy

The relatively limited conversation about Black family health often does not include the voice of Black fathers beyond the misnomer of absent father. This project's leadership team plans to disseminate study results to policymakers, including through Wisconsin's Prenatal to Five Initiative. Avenues for dissemination to national policymakers will also be explored, including US Representatives Lauren Underwood and Alma Adams who led the Black Maternal Health Momnibus Act of 2020. This research project demonstrates the importance of engaging Black fathers as assets in reducing entrenched disparities and promoting Black maternal, child, and family health.

3. Advancing health equity

The project reported that among Black mothers in their study, interparental relationship quality was positively correlated with psychological health. Among Black fathers in this study, interparental relationship quality helped explain links between fathers' depressive symptoms and father-infant attachment, and between depressive symptoms and fathers' involvement in pregnancy. Further, paternal support was positively correlated with self-assessed overall health, underscoring the potential significance of paternal support and interparental relationship quality as buffers against the adverse effects of disadvantage and discrimination on maternal health and challenges among Black families.

ICTR Resources:

This project was funded by a UW-Madison Institute for Clinical and Translational Research Clinical & Community Outcomes Research (CCOR) pilot award in 2021, through funding from the UW SMPH Wisconsin Partnership Program. The Principal Investigators participated in a Design for Dissemination (D4D) Workshop for ICTR pilot awardees offered by the ICTR D&I Launchpad.

ICTR Pilot Impact Story

Black Fathers, Equal Partners in Advancing Maternal and Infant Health

The Clinical or Population Health Problem

Black infant mortality is higher in Wisconsin than any other state in the nation, and maternal mortality is five times higher among Black women than white women in Wisconsin (Tomlin et al., 2020). Research demonstrates that partner support during pregnancy is associated with positive maternal child health outcomes, and that fathers play a central role in children's health and development— yet fathers are a largely untapped resource for reducing racial disparities in maternal and child health. Further, paternal perinatal mental health impacts parenting, couple and family functioning, and children's health, yet relatively little is known about factors that impact wellbeing in the transition to fatherhood. Addressing racial disparities and improving the health of Black mothers, babies, and families must include the voices of Black fathers as partners, parents, and participants.

Response to the Problem

Black Fathers, Equal Partners in Advancing Maternal and Infant Health

- The Lead Investigators of this project are Dr. Tova Walsh and Dr. Alvin Thomas. Dr. Walsh is an Assistant Professor in the UW-Madison Sandra Rosenbaum School of Social Work, and Chair of its Doctoral Program. Dr. Thomas is an Assistant Professor and Phyllis Northway Faculty Fellow in the UW-Madison School of Human Ecology, Department of Human Development and Family Studies.
- Drs. Walsh and Thomas completed a needs assessment among Black expectant fathers and mothers in Milwaukee, followed by a series of focus groups to gather community input to develop father-inclusive programming to support Black maternal and infant health.
- The project engaged Black mothers and Black fathers, all living in Milwaukee, Wisconsin and expecting a baby and/or parent to an infant.
- The setting for this project was Milwaukee, WI, a metropolitan area that consistently ranks among the worst in the nation on indicators of Black community wellbeing and segregation (Levine 2020), situated within a state with a Black infant mortality rate that is among the worst in the nation (Tomlin et al., 2020).

Development of Black Fathers, Equal Partners in Advancing Maternal and Infant Health

- Supported by a 2021 Clinical & Community Outcomes Research (CCOR) pilot award from ICTR and the Wisconsin Partnership Program, the research team collaborated with the Executive Director and the Father Engagement Specialist of the African American Breastfeeding Network to develop this project. The project involved true collaboration at every step, from study design to data collection, analysis, manuscript preparation, and dissemination of results. For example, the Executive Director and Father Engagement Specialist of AABN advised on cultural relevance and accessibility to ensure a needs assessment instrument suited to engaging participants typically underrepresented in research.

Results

- 150 Black mothers and fathers participated in the pilot project, recruited in the community by the African American Breastfeeding Network (AABN). 75 Black mothers and 75 Black fathers completed the needs assessment survey, and a subset of survey respondents (N=15) participated in focus group discussions.
- Both mothers and fathers were enthusiastic about study participation and deeply engaged in focus group discussions. Participants noted that the experiences and needs of Black parents during pregnancy and postpartum is a topic that needs more attention. They also acknowledged limited opportunities to connect to others in similar circumstances, and were eager and willing to share their experiences, especially to inform future service provision and enhance support for Black mothers and fathers in the future.
- Findings demonstrate the significance of fathers' supportive behavior toward mothers and co-parent relationship quality as buffers against the adverse effects of disadvantage and discrimination on maternal health. Further, results highlight efforts to challenge racism, including in perinatal healthcare encounters, as an important element of paternal support for Black expectant and new mothers.

Lasting Impact, as reported by the Lead PIs

- To our knowledge, this project is one of the first to center the voices of Black fathers in Wisconsin in conversations related to maternal and infant health. The relatively limited conversation about Black family health often does not include the voice of Black fathers beyond the misnomer of absent father. We find that Black fathers are actively involved during pregnancy, including being present alongside mothers in perinatal healthcare. Both mothers and fathers want fathers to be engaged by healthcare and family service providers, supported as partners and parents, and provided with education and resources to promote the health and wellbeing of mothers, babies, and families.
- This pilot project has led to the African American Breastfeeding Network (AABN) organizing conversations for expectant and new parents to reflect on the ways that fathers are involved and could be further involved in pregnancy, and the support that fathers may need in the transition to parenthood. AABN anticipates that this will become an ongoing focus. AABN is exploring partnerships with father-serving organizations in Milwaukee to make referrals so expectant and new fathers can connect to needed support and services. AABN is also planning to develop a class for fathers on maternal and child health.
- This project has generated tremendous community interest and support, and we look forward to next steps including applying our research findings to design, implement, and evaluate new father-inclusive programming. We will seek R level funding from the National Institutes of Health to pilot test the intervention once proof of concept has been established, and subsequently to

“Fathers play an important role in child and family health and well-being. Black fathers must be recognized and engaged in efforts to address racial disparities and improve the health of Black mothers and babies in Wisconsin.

-Drs. Walsh and
Thomas

conduct a randomized clinical trial to establish the efficacy of the intervention. Ultimately, our goal is to develop a scalable approach to improve family outcomes via inclusion of fathers as an expected and integrated part of perinatal support programs.

- Findings of this pilot have direct implications for policy discourse and can inform strategies to engage Black fathers as assets in reducing entrenched disparities and promoting the health of Black Wisconsin families. We have begun and will continue to prioritize dissemination of study results to key stakeholders like policymakers, including through Wisconsin's Prenatal to Five Initiative, researchers, practitioners, community members, and individual families who share interest in improving mortality and life outcomes for Black babies and families in Wisconsin.

References

- Walsh, T.B., Thomas, A., Quince, H., Buck, J., Tamkin, V., & Blackwell, D. (Under review). Support is every day, in every way: Black fathers' contributions to maternal mental health. *Archives of Women's Mental Health*.
- [AABN and University of Wisconsin-Madison launch new 'Black Fathers Equal Partners' research project](#). The Milwaukee Times. June 24, 2021.
- [Black fathers and infant health: New initiative launched](#). Fox 6 News. June 18, 2021.
- [New UW-Madison initiative focuses on Black fathers and maternal, infant health](#). CBS 58 News. June 18, 2021.