

**Barriers to Initiating Early and Continuous Prenatal Care:  
African American women's perceptions of racism  
February 2010**

### Background

Early initiation of prenatal care leads to better birth outcomes. In the City of Milwaukee in 2007, only 74% of African American women initiated prenatal care in the first trimester compared to 85% of White women<sup>1</sup>. The Institute of Medicine (IOM) released a report "Unequal treatment" that noted disparities in the quality of care received by African Americans, charging that both covert and overt racism play a large role in these disparities<sup>2</sup>.

*"Racism don't come with the hospital and the baby and stuff, that's our time of love and joy, we just had our babies, you know. Racism comes out in our daily lives when we're trying to live our lives."*

### Purpose

To examine the presence and nature of racial discrimination in prenatal care.

### Methods

Using a community-based approach, researchers met with leaders at the YWCA of Greater Milwaukee to discuss the potential project. With their input, we designed a descriptive qualitative study utilizing focus groups.

### Population

Approximately 40 African American women with infants who are consumers of YWCA services.

### Timeline

October 2009 - October 2010.

### Current Status

So far, we have interviewed 8 African American women who:

- Over the age of 18 with at least one child in the last year.
- All were single; 6 had an education of 12<sup>th</sup> Grade/GED or less; 2 had some college
- 2 were employed; 6 were unemployed
- 6 were earning under \$10,000/year
- 6 had early, adequate prenatal care; 1 had none
- 7 had Medicaid as insurance; 1 had none
- 7 visited the ER during their pregnancy; 3 of them visited 3 or more times; 2 visited 7 or more times

More project updates will be posted at:

<http://www.cuph.org/projects/barriers-to-prenatal-care/>

### Preliminary Findings

Although focus groups are ongoing, we have identified some very preliminary themes:

- **Use of the Emergency Room (ER) during Pregnancy**

Many women reported using the ER for care because they felt that at the ER they were seen quickly, and that they received better care.

*"Uh uh, I ain't going to no doctor's office, I'm going down here [to the ER], they're going to TELL me what's wrong."*

*"Sometimes you need the ER. Look how many people don't get the right care."*

*"Sometimes the doctor's office don't tell you nothing, you need x-rays and tests. That's why I go to the ER, I KNOW when something's wrong with me."*

*"They got everything right there like the x-ray room..."*

- **Concerns Regarding Perceptions of Poor Care**

Although women did not directly label these experiences as due to racism, they remained concerned about the care they received:

*"They just feel you have to come here, where else are you going to go, so they just want you to deal with it."*

*"I think they look at you like you don't matter. And because you're around here, where else are you going to go."*

- **Experiences of Racist Behavior**

One woman did describe a situation in which she felt the doctor was blatantly racist.

Pregnant, she went to the ER for a bad headache.

*“The doctor kept me waiting in the room for like an hour. When the doctor walked past I asked, ‘how long is you going to be’ and he said there was a lady that just came in that had a stroke. Okay, but there’s more than one doctor up in here though. And he said, ‘Well excuse me Miss Want-To-Be Black Pregnant Lady,’ so I snapped on him and I walked out.”*

#### • Long waits for prenatal care

Many women complained about long waits for prenatal care, sometimes even spending all day at the clinic before they were seen by a doctor:

*“I used to make sure I was off that day or leave early for that day or I would have been late for work.”*

*“They [administrative support staff] will get up when they’re ready to call your name. And then I have to call up the office to let them know I’m here, I’m just waiting for them to put me up in a room.”*

#### • Examples of a good prenatal care visit

Many of the women reported satisfaction with their prenatal care experiences,

*“I always got what I needed. They were always caring and supportive. My doctor always called me, so I stuck with them.”*

*“They always made sure they answered all of my questions.”*

*“They know exactly who I am when I walk through the door.”*

#### • Expectations of Racism

One woman, who sought care outside of downtown Milwaukee to get better care, also expected to encounter racist behavior,

*“I’m just grateful that they’re not looking at me funny cuz you know there aren’t that many black people coming out there or whatever but I don’t get treated differently either.”*

Another woman reported not sleeping in the hospital out of fear for her safety,

*“Hospitals scare me. So I don’t sleep, I just sit up and watch everything they do. Cuz there might be somebody that don’t like you and they just come in there and do something to you while you ain’t paying attention.”*

*“If I feel you are racist, I move around.”*

#### • Responses to poor care

Women reported just tolerating poor care because of the convenience of a local clinic,

*“I just deal with it there [because] I know the doctors there longer.”*

*“I was hoping the baby would come so I wouldn’t have to see him no more.”*

*“Some people have a snotty attitude but I try to overlook it, I don’t pay attention. If you don’t have nothing to do with me, I don’t pay attention. I don’t have too many problems, at least I try not to.”*

#### Sources of Funding and Resources

Children’s Community Health Plan  
Center for Urban Population Health  
YWCA of Greater Milwaukee

#### Project Partners

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#### References

<sup>1</sup>Wisconsin Department of Health Services, DPH, BHIP. Wisconsin Interactive Statistics on Health (WISH) data query system. Retrieved from <http://dhs.wisconsin.gov/wish/>, Infant Mortality Module.

<sup>2</sup>Smedley, B. D., Stith, A. Y. (2002). Unequal treatment: confronting racial and ethnic disparities in health care. Nalson, A.R. (Eds.) Institute of Medicine of the National Academies. Retrieved from <http://www.nap.edu/openbook.php?isbn=030908265X>