

Disparities in Health in America:

Working Toward Social Justice

Linking Community-based Research and Policy: Age at First Mammogram Among African American Women in a Clinical-based Study

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Anita M. Wells, PhD, MA is the W. K. Kellogg Health Scholar in Multidisciplinary Disparities at the School of Community Health and Policy at Morgan State University. She earned her doctorate in Clinical Psychology from Northwestern University Feinberg School of Medicine and completed her clinical internship at the Department of Veterans Affairs, Hines VA Hospital. Her areas of research are health disparities, health promotion, and mental health. Dr. Wells' work is geared toward effectively promoting enduring positive health practices (i.e. healthy diet, exercise, and participation in health screenings) in minority populations, improving public understanding of and support for mental health initiatives, and influencing change in health policy. Her research examines the psychological and social factors that interact to produce health outcomes. Dr. Wells has conducted community based health research with African American populations for 12 years. Her current work includes research with colleagues at the Johns Hopkins University Bloomberg School of Public Health on increasing breast cancer screening among African American women and furthering knowledge of the post-treatment experiences of African American cancer survivors. She also is studying the impact of spirituality on health decision making and health practices. Dr. Wells' other primary line of research focuses on the mental health and well-being of veterans of the Iraq war and their family members.

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Abstract

Linking Community-based Research and Health Policy: Results from a Study
of Age at First Mammogram in African American Women

Background: African American women in the U.S. have the highest breast cancer mortality though not the highest breast cancer incidence. This high mortality rate has been attributed in part to discrepancies in screening between African American women and White women, the group with the highest overall U.S. incidence of the disease. Although this gap in mammography utilization is closing, little is known about what has been and is driving the screening practices of African American women, in particular age at first mammogram. **Methods:** A community-based participatory research approach guided this study. Participants were a community sample of 213 women ages 22 to 89 years from eight African American churches in greater Baltimore, Maryland. We examined the rates of breast cancer screening and investigated the association between various factors and age at first mammogram. **Results:** About 77% of women had ever had a mammogram. Over 40% had their first mammogram before the recommended age of 40, a finding consistent with data from a large national study. Women from the current study who first screened before age 40 had greater odds than women who had never screened of being knowledgeable about screening guidelines, of having received a physician recommendation to screen, and of having three or more female relatives who had been screened. **Discussion:** These findings suggest the importance of reinforcing factors in screening behavior for African American women. These results also have implications for physician training, public health education, technology, and guidelines regarding breast cancer screening. **Conclusions:** Given accuracy problems and associated risks of mammography in younger women and the lack of knowledge regarding screening practices among African American women of all ages, further research regarding the characteristics of young African American women diagnosed with breast cancer as well as the screening practices of all women in this population is warranted.

