

An Annotated Bibliography on Research That Explores Black Families' Participation in Healthy Marriage and Relationship Education, Economic Stability, and Positive Mental Health

Tia Dickerson*, Elvis Gyan*, Mindy E. Scott, Ria Shelton, and Lisa Kim

*equal contributors

Introduction

This annotated bibliography provides healthy marriage and relationship education (HMRE) practitioners and researchers with a summary of the research conducted to date on the effectiveness of HMRE programs for Black^a couples. Specifically, it has two goals:

1. Identify studies of HMRE programs and their participants that examine economic stability and mental health as predictors or outcomes of Black couples' relationships.
2. Describe other basic research questions that have been explored using data from HMRE programs with Black participants.

The annotated bibliography also provides key reflections and recommendations for future research and practice.

Broadly, many Black Americans value romantic partnerships, marriage, and children, and many Black couples and children can and do thrive across diverse types of family structures.¹ HMRE research and practice should prioritize Black families' inherent cultural and familial strengths while also acknowledging the role of socially structured oppression and racial discrimination that affect the intersecting experiences of family formation,

^a Throughout the Introduction, Background, and Reflections sections, we use the term Black to be inclusive of people who are Black but may have been born outside the United States or who otherwise do not identify as African or American. However, elsewhere in this annotated bibliography, we use the term African American when that is the language used in the research being cited.



MAST CENTER RESEARCH

The Marriage Strengthening Research and Dissemination Center (MAST Center) conducts research on marriage and romantic relationships in the U.S. and healthy marriage and relationship education (HMRE) programs designed to strengthen these relationships. This research aims to identify critical research gaps, generate new knowledge, and help programs more effectively serve the individuals and families with whom they work. MAST Center research is concentrated in two areas:

- **Relationship Patterns & Trends.** Population-based research to better understand trends, predictors, dynamics, and outcomes of marriage and relationships in the United States.
- **Program Implementation & Evaluation.** Research that helps build knowledge about what works in HMRE programming, for whom, and in what context.

economic success, and mental health among Black families. The studies included in this annotated bibliography describe a range of HMRE programs, with a focus on program design, implementation, and outcomes for Black families. By using this resource, HMRE researchers and practitioners will be better positioned to access and apply research-based guidance for supporting Black families through HMRE.

Background

While most adults in the United States eventually get married, researchers and practitioners have given a great deal of attention to how patterns of marriage and family formation differ by race and ethnicity, as well as by socioeconomic status.² Research on marriages among Black couples for example, tends to highlight Black peoples' reduced likelihood to ever marry,^{3,4} as well as the increased instability in their unions once married relative to their White counterparts.² However, it is important to acknowledge that many Black marriages are successful, and it's valuable to take a more strengths-based approach to support strong, happy, and enduring marriages and relationships among Black families.⁵

We also consider the historical and structural factors that contribute to the marginalization of Black men and women, and which influence their likelihood of marriage and marital stability.^{6,7,8} The majority of Black individuals desire marriage⁹ but factors such as mass incarceration, unequal job opportunities, racial segregation, and discrimination can uniquely shape Black people's relationship expectations, opportunities, and outcomes through multiple processes; these factors are also important determinants of both their likelihood to marry and the stability of their marriages once formed.^{10,11,12,13}

Economic barriers imposed by structural racism play a critical role in shaping Black couples' opportunities for marriage and marital stability.^{14,15,16} For example, the negative economic consequences of incarceration are particularly strong for Black families due to discrimination within the criminal legal system.¹⁴ When an individual has a criminal record, it allows for legal discrimination in employment, constraining Black men's ability to provide financial support to their families.^{17,18} Yet finances and economic stability are important determinants of Black men's likelihood to marry,¹⁹ and of the stability and strength of marriages among Black couples.^{20,21}

Economic stability is important to relationship stability, in part because it contributes to reduced stress and positive mental health,^{22,23} which in turn support healthy relationships.²² Black people's increased exposure to stress has been linked to experiences with racial discrimination.^{24,25,26} For example, research has revealed that experiences with racism negatively affect mental health in Black persons.^{27,28} Similarly, in a study of Black families, Murry et al. (2001) found that self-reported experiences of discrimination increased depressive symptoms in wives, which led to negative marital interactions.²⁹ Finally, Kerr et al. (2018) found that African American fathers that perceived more frequent racial discrimination in their daily lives reported poorer relationship quality.³⁰ Despite these encounters with racism and discrimination, Black families still thrive, in part due to the support and resources provided by family members and social networks that help individuals and couples cope with and survive racist and hostile environments.³¹

These findings represent the complex ways in which structural racism affects Black couples through multiple overlapping processes that influence their economic stability, stress, and mental health, and—in turn—their relationship quality and stability. The findings also highlight sources of resiliency and strength within Black families and Black communities and the important role of healthy relationships. HMRE programs have the potential to address these intersecting processes; although they generally focus on improving relationship quality and stability by building skills such as communication and conflict management, some programs also focus on improving couples' economic stability.^{32,33} In addition, HMRE programs may aim to improve health outcomes, including psychological well-being, a component of mental health.³⁴ Although federal funding limits HMRE programs' ability to offer mental health treatment, practitioner referrals can be an important part of the resources provided. However, limited attention has been paid to how HMRE programs for Black couples—in addition to the associated research and evaluation conducted with Black participants in HMRE programs—contribute to our understanding of Black marriages and relationships.

Methodology of Annotated Bibliography

To identify the articles and resources included in this annotated bibliography, we began by searching academic and gray literature (e.g., program evaluation reports and government documents) via PSYC INFO, Family and Society Studies Worldwide, and Google Scholar. We limited our searches to studies published over the span of a decade, from 2012 to 2022, and within the United States. The literature search focused on research about HMRE programs serving Black couples. Key phrases such as “HMRE programs and African Americans/Black couples” were used. Given our interest in Black families’ economic stability and mental health outcomes, we prioritized additional search terms such as “HMRE programs and mental health outcomes” and “mental health outcomes and economic stability.” We examined the reference sections of the initially reviewed resources to identify additional documents. To gather additional literature not retrieved from these databases, we also searched for reports published through the Administration for Children and Families and focused on federal HMRE research and evaluation.

A total of 58 studies were identified. We then narrowed our list to include studies with samples that consisted of approximately 50 percent Black study participants.^b Ultimately, 21 studies met our criteria^c: one curriculum overview, three outcome/impact evaluations, two implementation studies, and 15 descriptive studies. Approximately one third of these studies focused on HMRE and economic stability, and less than one fifth focused on mental health outcomes. The studies were based on nine programs delivered in one or two communities across four states.

Reflections

This annotated bibliography summarizes articles focused on HMRE programming with an emphasis on engaging Black families. A key goal was to identify the extent to which HMRE programs are tailored to intentionally support Black families, including Black participants’ experiences related to economic stability and mental health, either as part of the program content or as an outcome of participation. Notably, literature on these topics remains quite limited. First, despite still providing information useful to the design and implementation of programs, relatively few of the included studies explicitly focus on Black couples in terms of their design or the research questions explored. Second, although the studies included in this resource focused on a range of outcomes, relatively few focus on outcomes related to economic stability and mental health. This is not surprising given that these are not typical components of more traditional HMRE programs, which generally focus on relationship skills such as communication and conflict management. However, in more recent years, there is increasing recognition in the HMRE field about the value of integrating economic support services into HMRE programs and taking a more comprehensive view of family well-being that considers families’ physical and mental health. Moving forward, we suggest that HMRE research and practice consider the following three recommendations.

1. Prioritize cultural relevance in designing, implementing, and evaluating HMRE programming for Black families.

The limited number of HMRE programs included in the reviewed studies highlights how few programs work intentionally with Black families and emphasizes the need to diversify programming and research. Although all studies had samples in which 50 percent or more of the participants identified as Black, most—excepting research on the African American Strong Relationships and Marriage Strengthening curriculum and the Protecting Strong African American Families program—were not explicit in whether or how they designed their program for Black families.

^b This criterion was based on sample size, not on whether the study/program had specific research questions or analyses designed to specifically address the experiences and outcomes of Black families.

^c 22 studies were originally identified but one study was excluded due to a lack of clearly reported data and findings.

Further, not all studies with a large proportion of Black participants considered the unique strengths and experiences of Black individuals, couples, and families, nor did they acknowledge the role of racism and other historical and structural factors that influence Black families' experiences and opportunities.

Considerations for future research:

- Rather than perpetuate a narrative of challenges and risk among Black families, more research should leverage the unique strengths and assets of Black families that contribute to positive, stable relationships for Black couples. These factors should be considered in a study's motivation, methods, and interpretation of findings.
- Conduct more qualitative and quantitative studies of relationship formation and stability among Black couples across different types of HMRE curricula and in more diverse demographic locations within the United States.
- Conduct culturally responsive and equitable evaluations to assess the effectiveness of more tailored and culturally responsive approaches to HMRE that focus on the unique cultural, social, political, and economic issues that affect Black couples. Such evaluations should also address the diverse experiences and contexts in which Black families live.

Considerations for future HMRE practice:

- Incorporate culturally relevant teaching practices to reach Black families and communities. For example, apply a cultural assets framework that incorporates elements of Black family life, including cultural values, traditions, and practices that shape, sustain, and support Black family life (e.g., extended kin and social networks, optimism, and role flexibility).³¹
- Include more culturally relevant components found to enhance relationship and stability among Black couples. For example, consider faith and prayer, church, kin support, and social support.
- Acknowledge, in programming, the effects of historical racism, discrimination, and societal barriers on marriage among Black couples.

2. Recognize economic hardships as a critical component of union stability.

Economic stability has proven vital to the health of Black couples' relationships. The studies included in this annotated bibliography that focused on economic support for Black couples highlighted the salience of economic stability for healthy relationships.

Considerations for future research:

- Conduct research to document the structural factors that contribute to economic hardship for Black couples, as well as the factors that contribute to economic success and stability.²¹
- Further explore diverse (i.e., SES) samples of Black couples to gain a better understanding of where race and class intersect to inform these couples' experiences and, in turn, their needs.

Considerations for future HMRE practice:

- Make economic supports, financial literacy, career preparedness, and job skills training central to integrated HMRE programming for Black families.

3. Consider mental health as a mechanism for relationship quality and stability.

Some of the studies included in this annotated bibliography assessed psychological distress in participants, but this was not a common outcome. The studies that measured psychological distress often did so in relation to co-parenting. Consistent with the literature on mental health, these studies found that improved mental health (lower psychological distress) was associated with better co-parenting relationships.

Accordingly, not all studies considered external factors (i.e., racism, economic instability, and poverty) and the potential stress associated with these factors among Black couples. Relationship education may ultimately prove futile for couples experiencing significant external stressors if those stressors are not addressed. Assessing participants' levels of psychological distress at the beginning of and throughout the program can provide valuable data to inform HMRE programs and their collaboration with external mental health services for additional support.

Considerations for future research:

- Conduct research to explore how the unique strengths and assets of Black families support psychological well-being among Black couples, and to learn more about promoting those factors effectively to sustain healthy relationships.
- Conduct applied research and evaluation that explore the direct and indirect associations between HMRE program supports and participation and mental health outcomes. Test whether the benefits of HMRE program participation are reduced if partners' mental health and psychological stress are not addressed.

Considerations for future HMRE practice:

- Establish connections and develop partnerships with mental health service providers for referrals and resources for Black families. Also consider Black couples' family and social networks as a source of support that can contribute to improved psychological well-being.
- Establish relationships with civil rights organizations that directly combat racism within systems, institutions, and communities that may contribute to Black couple's stress.
- Use pre/post surveys that include relevant scales to capture mental health or psychological distress levels throughout different stages of program participation.
- Design culturally responsive programs that target Black couples' prime stressors while leveraging the factors that help partners cope with stress, thereby supporting participants' ability to address stress.



Study Summaries

African American Strong Relationships and Marriage Strengthening Curriculum

Dixon, P. (2013). AARMS: The African American relationships and marriage strengthening curriculum for African American relationships courses and programs. *Journal of African American Studies*, 18(3), 337–352. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12111-013-9274-1>

Objective: Despite a focused attention on and increase in premarital and marriage education curricula and programs to support couples, many are not designed specifically for African American couples. The African American Relationships and Marriage Strengthening (AARMS) curriculum was designed to take an African American-centered perspective on relationships and marriage, and consists of a textbook and facilitator guide that centers on 10 core areas: (1) gender; (2) love, attachment, and life cycle changes; (3) African American women; (4) African American men; (5) dating and choosing a partner; (6) sexuality; (7) communication and conflict resolution; (8) diet; (9) finances; and (10) spirituality. The AARMS approach is grounded in the idea that micro and macro factors must be included in relationship and marriage education programs. In the context of AARMS, macro factors include the role of sociohistorical and cultural factors that shape African American relationships and micro factors describe experiences with people and culture. This paper describes the rationale for each component of the AARMS curriculum with the aim of providing a framework and strategy for designing a relationships course tailored to African American couples. It also offers strategies for incorporating other significant components into an African American-specific curriculum.

Methods: There are no methods to report.

Findings: There are no findings to report.

Conclusions/Recommendations: The content covered by AARMS is consistent with research that focuses on factors which promote relationship quality among African American couples. Cultural assets, spirituality, and socioeconomic status are salient factors that, when considered, can be leveraged to increase participant engagement in programming. Additionally, it is important to implement these types of curricula to encourage cultural responsiveness and further the critical analysis of context that shapes relationship formation among African American couples.

Anonymous Healthy Marriage and Relationship Education Programming

Rauer, A. J., Adler-Baeder, F., Lucier-Greer, M., Skuban, E., Ketring, S. A., & Smith, T. (2014). Exploring processes of change in couple relationship education: Predictors of change in relationship quality. *Journal of Family Psychology*, 28(1). <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0035502>

Objective: Although couples relationship education (CRE) program effectiveness has been the focus of much research, there is less known about *how* CRE programs impact participants and *which* groups they impact. Rauer et al. argue the need to ground these programs in theory to inform research and ultimately ensure their long-term success. This study draws on social and behavioral learning theory to evaluate the effects of short-term relationship changes and potential moderators (e.g., race, socioeconomic status, marital status, program attendance, and pretest relationship functioning) in a sample of couples participating in a CRE program.

Methods: The sample consisted of 2,824 participants (44% Black; 47% married) who were in a relationship, enrolled in a relationship education class, and completed usable pre- and post-program surveys. Participants completed identical pre- and post-surveys that included 130 items focused on views about

their behaviors, experiences, beliefs, and attitudes about their relationship. Rauer et al. conducted: 1) path analyses to assess the link between changes in relationship behaviors (positive and negative interactions) and commitment and changes in relationship quality, 2) goodness of fit tests to determine the best-fitting model for men and women, and 3) multigroup analyses to test for moderation by race, income, marital status, attendance status (attended with a partner versus alone), and pretest relationship variables (low versus high initial skills and functioning).

Findings: Study results support the theory of behavioral change, which emphasizes the influence that behavioral modifications can have on feelings of commitment and perceptions of relationship quality. Changes in participant behaviors predicted changes in relationship quality indirectly through changes in commitment. Further, increases in positive and affectionate behaviors had a greater impact on positive changes in commitment and relationship quality than reductions in negative behaviors. While all participants derived some benefit from the program, the strength of the program effects were moderated by men's race, income, and relationship functioning at pretest as well as by women's race, marital status, attendance status, and relationship functioning at pretest. Specifically, change in commitment was more associated with relationship quality for White men and women compared to Black men and women.

Conclusion/Recommendations: This study provides insights into the predictors and processes through which CRE programs improve relationship quality, and for whom these programs are most effective. Future studies should examine whether the findings hold true across diverse samples of CRE participants in different settings and contexts.

Building Strong Families

Wood, R. G., Moore, Q., Clarkwest, A., Killewald, A., & Monahan, S. (2012). *The long-term effects of building strong families: A relationship skills education program for unmarried parents*, OPRE Report # 2012-28A, Washington, DC: Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (OPRE).

Objective: Strengthening the relationship between unmarried parents is one potential strategy for promoting the well-being of their children. The Building Strong Families (BSF) project, funded by the Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation (OPRE), was created in 2002 to develop, implement, and test the BSF program across eight organizations around the nation. The BSF program aimed to support unmarried new parents with low incomes (while having a low level of income was not a criterion for participation, the majority of participants earned less than \$15,000 in the 12 months prior to enrollment in the study) in strengthening their relationships to create a stable home environment for their children. This report summarizes outcomes three years after couples applied for the BSF program across three areas: (1) the status and quality of couples' relationships, (2) parenting and father involvement, and (3) child well-being.

Methods: Over 5,000 low income, unmarried couples (around 50% African American; 7% married post-conception) who recently had a child or were expecting a child were randomly assigned to either participate in the BSF program or to a control group that did not participate in the BSF program. Impact analysis was conducted to assess the effect of BSF participation on relationship quality, relationship status, co-parenting relationships, fathers' involvement and parenting behaviors, family stability, economic well-being, and child socio-emotional development. Outcomes were measured approximately 36 months after couples applied for the program.

Findings: Analysis revealed that when data across the eight programs were combined, the BSF program had no effect on couple relationship quality, their likelihood to stay together or get married, or their co-parenting relationships. The BSF program also had no effect on family stability or economic well-being. There was some evidence of minimal reductions in children's behavior problems, but small negative effects on aspects of father involvement. Specifically, BSF fathers were somewhat less likely to spend time with their children and to provide financial support compared with fathers in the control group three years later.

Conclusion/Recommendations: Despite evidence from previous studies that relationship education can positively affect middle income, married couples, this result could not be duplicated in this evaluation. The researchers assert that this disparity might be due to unmarried couples being more hesitant than their married counterparts to utilize skills gained from relationship education programs due to lower levels of trust and commitment. Further, stressors such as economic disadvantage might prevent couples from being able to focus on building relationship skills. Future studies should examine the impact of additional stressors unmarried couples face on relationship skill development.

Amato, P. R. (2014). Does social and economic disadvantage moderate the effects of relationship education on unwed couples? An analysis of data from the 15-month Building Strong Families evaluation. *Family Relations*, 63(3), 343–355. <https://doi.org/10.1111/fare.12069>

Objective: Research shows that couples who face social and economic disadvantages are more likely to face relationship instability. Furthermore, several studies suggest that marriage and healthy relationship programs may benefit those who are at high risk for developing relationship problems. The Building Strong Families (BSF) project involved the development and evaluation of relationship education programs for unmarried new parents with low incomes (the majority of participants earned less than \$15,000 in the year prior to enrolling in the study). This descriptive study examined data from the BSF evaluation to analyze whether social and economic disadvantages moderated the beneficial effects of program participation.

Methods: The analytic sample consisted of 6,535 individuals who participated in the BSF program and were still in a relationship with their BSF partners 15 months after the evaluation started. Amato measured social and economic disadvantage by developing an index based on 11 known social and economic correlates of poor relationship quality and instability, such as educational attainment, socioeconomic status, and receipt of public assistance. In addition, Amato measured relationship outcomes, including relationship status, relationship happiness, support and affection, destructive conflict, constructive conflict, trust, intimate violence, and overall relationship quality. Analyses were based on ordinary least square regression estimates of the impact of being in the treatment group compared with the control group, the effects of cumulative disadvantage on relationship stability and relationship quality, and the interaction between program participation (treatment status) and cumulative disadvantage. Amato also assessed differences in relationship outcomes between mothers and fathers.

Findings: Participation in the BSF program was more effective for couples with low scores on relationship quality at baseline. For three out of the six relationship outcomes (happiness, destructive conflict behavior, trust), there was a statistically significant interaction between the disadvantage index and treatment status. Disadvantage was not as strong a predictor of relationship quality among couples in the treatment group compared to those in the control group. Moderation of treatment effects was more due to the accumulation of multiple risk factors than any individual risk factor.

Conclusions/Recommendations: Findings from this study indicate that couples who face greater social and economic disadvantages can benefit from relationship education. Although couples who are at a greater disadvantage may benefit more from the program, the author recommends against restricting participation in favor of customizing the program to meet the social and economic needs of its participants. Future research should explore the diversity of couples and the factors that influence the success of relationship education programming.



Elevate: Taking Your Relationship to the Next Level and Together We Can

DeMeester, K., Futris, T.G., Richardson, E. W., Simmons, B., & Thompson, J. (2021). *Descriptive evaluation of Elevate and Together We Can in Georgia*. Submitted to the Administration for Children and Families, Office of Family Assistance. Washington, DC.

Objective: Research suggests that healthy romantic and co-parenting relationships are associated with positive parenting and safer, more stable homes for children. The University of Georgia worked in partnership with the Georgia Division of Family and Children Services (DFCS) and other community organizations to implement and evaluate Project F.R.E.E. (Fostering Relationships and Economic Enrichment), which was designed to improve relationships and family stability among families involved in the child welfare system. This report summarizes results from the outcome evaluation of two relationship education curricula used in Project F.R.E.E.—Elevate: Taking Your Relationship to the Next Level and Together We Can (TWC). DeMeester et al. also explored whether participants who completed a supplemental financial literacy program, Discovering Money Solutions (DMS), reported greater improvements in financial outcomes compared to those who did not complete DMS.

Methods: Parents who received social services (Temporary Assistance for Needy Families [TANF], Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Kids [WIC], etc.) or were involved with child protective services and active foster caregivers were recruited between August 2016 and November 2019. Couples were enrolled in an Elevate workshop (n = 264; 47% Black; 56% married) and single parents were enrolled in a TWC workshop (n = 264; 70% Black; 97% unmarried). In addition, 462 parents (47% Black; 40% married) were enrolled in the supplemental DMS programming. Changes in parents and caregivers' relationship functioning, relationship quality and stability, co-parenting quality, parenting stress, financial management practices, financial efficacy, financial distress, and individual and family health both before and after participating in the programs were assessed through multilevel modeling and regression analyses. Moderation analyses were conducted using multilevel modeling.

Findings: Participants reported significant improvements over time in relationship functioning behaviors, relationship quality and stability, co-parenting quality, parenting stress, financial management practices, financial distress, and individual and family health. Improvements on select outcomes among certain samples were moderated by gender, race, marital status, and/or employment status. For example, White non-foster caregiver parents in the Elevate program experienced greater social support for their relationships, on average, compared with non-White parents. However, non-White foster caregivers experienced more positive relationship skills and relationship quality compared to White foster caregivers. Among single parents, White mothers were more likely to report improvements in family harmony compared to non-White mothers. Parents and caregivers that participated in the DMS supplemental training did not experience significant improvement in financial distress or financial self-efficacy over those that participated in either Elevate or TWC alone.

Conclusions/Recommendations: Relationship education has the potential to increase stability for families involved in the child welfare system. Across the board, parents enrolled in Elevate and TWC experienced improvements on most study outcomes. However, findings from the DMS supplement indicate that financial literacy training may not be enough to support families experiencing financial distress. Future programming can employ a more holistic approach, which includes economic stability (i.e., employment support, training for advancement, etc.) as a companion to relationship education. The authors also suggest that more research is needed that accounts jointly for factors that may be confounded with race, income, education, and employment status to fully understand the associations between HMRE program outcomes and race.

In Circle

Bent-Goodley, T. (2017). In Circle: A healthy relationship, domestic violence, and HIV intervention for African American couples. *Journal of Human Behavior in the Social Environment*, 24(2), 105-114. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10911359.2014.848675>

Objective: HMRE interventions tailored towards African American couples are limited. Moreover, African American individuals are disproportionately affected by HIV/AIDS and are more likely to experience domestic violence (DV) compared to White individuals. The In Circle curriculum was developed by and designed for African American couples to enhance knowledge of healthy relationships, reduce exposure to domestic violence, and increase knowledge of HIV risk and protective factors. This descriptive study explored whether African American couples who participated in the In Circle program reported improved knowledge of healthy relationships after completion.

Methods: The sample consisted of 11 couples (22 people; (67% African American; 55% married). Couples were screened for DV prior to program participation and excluded if there was current violence in the relationship. Participants completed self-administered instruments, which included measures on relationship beliefs, domestic violence exposure, mental health status, drug use, behaviors associated with increased risk for HIV, and sociodemographic information prior to the start of the intervention and at the end of the intervention. Pre-and post-test analyses were done to assess change before and after the intervention.

Findings: After completing In Circle, participants demonstrated improvement in positive relationship beliefs, a better understanding of communication, and greater awareness of the value of having a positive self-perception and positive outlook about their relationships. Participants also reported learning to not personalize disagreements and were less likely to believe that individuals of different genders will never understand each other. Finally, participants noted significant improvements in conflict resolution and understanding of the time and effort required to maintain healthy relationships.

Conclusions/Recommendations: Although based on a small sample, this study emphasizes the importance of designing HMRE programs that are culturally sensitive and consider the specific contexts and experiences of the individuals participating in the intervention. Intentional and specific interventions can bring attention to the social, political, and economic issues that uniquely affect African American couples. Addressing disparities in income, employment, and wealth are also important for building and sustaining healthy relationships for African American couples.



Prevention and Relationship Enhancement Program

Owen, J., Chapman, L. K., Quirk, K., Inch, L. J., France, T., & Bergen, C. (2012). Processes of change in relationship education for lower-income African-American couples. *Journal of Couple & Relationship Therapy: Innovations in Clinical and Educational Interventions*, 11(1), 51-68. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15332691.2012.639704>

Objective: Relationship education may be critical to reducing relational risk factors such as poor communication within couples. The Prevention and Relationship Enhancement Program (PREP) is a widely used relationship education tool that takes a two-prong approach to improving relationship stability by: 1) reducing factors and behaviors associated with relationship dissolution (e.g., negative communication) and 2) supporting and enhancing protective factors against relationship dissolution (e.g., feelings of friendship and community support). Recent research on the efficacy and effectiveness of PREP has been conducted with White couples, but there is little known about its effectiveness with African American couples. The purpose of this descriptive study was to investigate whether changes in communication quality and perceptions of social integration were associated with relationship satisfaction and dedication among unmarried African American men and women of low socioeconomic status.

Methods: The sample consisted of 181 African American couples participating in PREP. All couples were unmarried and were either expecting a child or had a child younger than three months. Data from pre- and post-assessments of dedication, relationship satisfaction, positive and negative communication quality, and social integration were analyzed using multilevel modeling. Changes in individual and partners' communication and social integration as predictors of dedication and relationship satisfaction were tested, with gender as a moderator.

Findings: Couples that participated in PREP reported improvements in positive communication techniques and social integration, which were positively associated with their own relationship satisfaction and dedication. Partners' reports of social integration were also positively associated with individuals' dedication. Men reported increased relationship satisfaction when their partners reported increased social integration and decreased negative communication. Women, however, showed no change in relationship satisfaction when men increased their social integration and reported less negative communication.

Conclusions/Recommendations: This study supports prior research linking positive communication and social connectedness to relationship satisfaction and commitment. Given the findings that suggest that men are more affected by changes in their partners' behaviors than are women, the authors provide a useful discussion of gender socialization within African American families and communities.

Quirk, K., Strokoff, J., Owen, J. J., France, T., & Bergen, C. (2014). Relationship education in community settings: Effectiveness with distressed and non-distressed low-income racial minority couples. *Journal of Marital and Family Therapy*, 40(4). <https://doi.org/10.1111/jmft.12080>

Objective: Couple relationship education (CRE) programs have generally been seen as preventative in nature, but some research suggests that couples who face distress can benefit from participating in a relationship education program. The purpose of this descriptive study was to explore the association between relationship distress and relationship outcomes in a w of African American and Hispanic couples who reported experiencing distress and participated in the Prevention and Relationship Enhancement Program (PREP).

Methods: A sample of 362 African American or Hispanic couples (75% African American; 100% married) participated in the study. Couples were randomized to a treatment group that participated in PREP or a control group. Pre- and post-assessments were given to measure changes in the identified variables: dedication, relationship adjustment, and positive and negative communication quality. Couples were categorized into two groups based on responses to preassessment questions: distressed and non-distressed. Multilevel modeling was conducted to examine whether participation in PREP contributed

to improved dedication and commitment through improved communication (i.e., increased positive communication styles and decreased negative communication).

Findings: Both couples with and without distress showed significant changes in behavioral patterns from pre- to post-assessment. As predicted, couples that were categorized as distressed reported lower positive communication and greater negative communication at pre-assessment than couples categorized as non-distressed. However, results indicate that couples in distress experienced greater gains in positive communication and dedication and greater reductions in negative communication than non-distressed couples. Men also showed slightly higher gains than women on all factors.

Conclusions/Recommendations: The findings of this study are consistent with prior research showing couples with and without distress exhibit improvements in communication and dedication through participation in CRE programs. However, further examination is needed to understand whether these gains remain constant over a sustained period. Longitudinal data would be useful to determine whether gains from PREP are temporary. PREP focuses primarily on communication processes that result from distress, rather than distress origins. More information is needed to understand whether skill-building through PREP continues to benefit couples that may not have addressed the issues that caused the stress initially.

Promoting Strong African American Families

Barton, A. W., Beach, S. R., Hurt, T. R., Fincham, F. D., Stanley, S. M., Kogan, S. M., & Brody, G. H. (2015). Determinants and long-term effects of attendance levels in a marital enrichment program for African American couples. *Journal of Marital and Family Therapy, 42*(2), 272–287. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jmft.12126>

Objective: Sustained engagement and retention of participants in healthy relationship or parenting programs have been identified as a challenge by researchers in understanding their effectiveness. To date, most studies exploring the effects of program attendance in marital programs have focused on enrollment or post-program changes. Moreover, these questions have not been examined for programs designed for and implemented with African American couples. This descriptive study examined the effects of attendance levels in the Promoting Strong African American Families (ProSAAF) program, which aims to address the needs of married African American couples with children, on long-term improvements in couple functioning. The authors addressed two research questions: 1) what baseline characteristics help identify couples less likely to sustain attendance in the program and 2) does greater attendance predict more positive outcomes for men and women.

Methods: The sample consisted of 164 couples (100% African American; 87% married) who were assigned to the treatment condition or the control group in a randomized trial of the ProSAAF program. Couples completed online or paper surveys spanning two years following completion of the program. Barton et al. conducted two stages of analysis. At the first stage, multilevel modeling was used to test whether demographic characteristics (income, marriage status, age, education) and individual and couple characteristics (depressive symptoms, relationship satisfaction, relationship commitment) negatively affected session attendance. At the second stage, Barton et al. used actor-partner interdependence modeling with a structural equation modeling approach to test whether attendance predicted changes in participating men and women's outcomes between the start of the program and two years post-intervention (effective communication, relationship commitment, spousal support, and arguing in front of children).

Findings: Findings showed that, for men, increased attendance was significantly associated with long-term improvements across several aspects of couple functioning (i.e., communication, commitment, and, although marginally significant, spousal support) when controlling for baseline levels. On average, individuals attended slightly more than five of the six treatment sessions, and married individuals attended more sessions than cohabitating individuals. Men's depressive symptoms were also associated with lower levels of attendance, and women's levels of education and relationship commitment were associated with higher attendance.

Conclusions/Recommendations: It is vital to provide support within programs to reduce barriers for African Americans to attend program sessions (e.g., providing childcare to couples with children). Findings suggest that men who attend more sessions experience long-term relationship improvements.

This study also found that attendance effects were stronger for men than women. This points to the importance of efforts to engage men throughout programming, especially because they tend to be initially reluctant to attend marital enrichment programs. One limitation of this study was the high attendance rate among treatment individuals and couples. Future studies should evaluate programs with a larger disparity in attendance levels to see if additional factors inhibit sustained attendance.

Barton, A. W., Beach, S. R., Lavner, J. A., Bryant, C. M., Kogan, S. M., & Brody, G. H. (2017). Is communication a mechanism of relationship education effects among rural African Americans? *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 79(5), 1450–1461. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jomf.12416>

Objective: Communication is widely seen as a critical component to couples' relationships and is thus incorporated in nearly all couple relationship programs. However, few scholars have questioned the theoretical foundation and value of communication in relationship education programs. There is limited research to inform this debate, and moreover, there is much less known on programs that serve African American couples with low income. This article describes findings from a study that aimed to explore the positive effects of the Protecting Strong African American Families (ProSAAF) relationship education program on couple communication, relationship satisfaction, and relationship confidence.

Methods: The sample consisted of 344 heterosexual couples (100% African American; 63% married) living in rural, low-income communities in Georgia with an early adolescent child. Couples were randomized to a treatment group that participated in the ProSAAF program or a control group. Using pretest and posttest data, researchers estimated ProSAAF program effects on relationship satisfaction, relationship confidence, and communication using structural equation modeling (SEM).

Findings: Couples who participated in ProSAAF reported significantly improved communication, relationship satisfaction, and relationship confidence. In exploring mechanisms of change, researchers found that program participation significantly improved communication after controlling for confidence and satisfaction, but not vice versa. This suggests the ProSAAF program improved relationship confidence and satisfaction by improving communication.

Conclusions/Recommendations: Findings from this article highlight that programs such as ProSAAF that focus on communication can improve relationship and communication dynamics in the short term, specifically for couples that encounter socioeconomic and racially motivated discrimination. Long term effects on relationship and communication dynamics should be assessed to determine if the effects remain consistent. Future research might consider exploring how other diverse communication behaviors and additional contextual adversity may influence communication and relationship quality.

Barton, A. W., Beach, S. R., Wells, A. C., Ingels, J. B., Corso, P. S., Sperr, M. C., Anderson, T. N., & Brody, G. H. (2018). The Protecting Strong African American Families program: A randomized controlled trial with rural African American couples. *Prevention Science*, 19(7), 904–913. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11121-018-0895-4>

Objective: The Protecting Strong African American Families (ProSAAF) program was developed in response to a lack of tailored couple relationships programming for African American families. Building on findings from previous research that showcase the positive impact of ProSAAF on participants, this descriptive study aimed to explore the long-term effects of the ProSAAF program on couple, co-parenting, and parenting interactions, as well as the mechanisms by which these effects occur.

Methods: The sample consisted of 346 heterosexual families (100% African American; 63% married) who lived in rural, low-income communities in Georgia with an early adolescent child. Couples were randomized

to ProSAAF or a control group. Using pretest and posttest measures and dyadic linear growth curve models, program intervention effects were tested over 17 months. Mechanisms of program impact were measured through path analyses.

Findings: Compared to couples in the control condition, families participating in ProSAAF reported stable outcomes as related to effective communication, relationship satisfaction, relationship confidence, partner support, and co-parenting 17 months after baseline.

Additionally, men, who at baseline reported less engagement in parenting practices than women and who received the intervention, reported significant improvement in their parenting. Further analyses suggest the ProSAAF program improved couple, co-parenting, and parenting relationships by improving couple communication.

Conclusions/Recommendations: This study demonstrates the importance of couple-focused prevention programs among African American families who have low incomes and live in rural communities. Program effects on communication led to improved couple, co-parenting and parenting outcomes. However, program costs might be difficult for families that face economic hardship. This highlights a need for future programming to consider ways to make relationship education more accessible for economically disadvantaged populations.

Barton, A. W., Beach, S. R., Bryant, C. M., Lavner, J. A., & Brody, G. H. (2018). Stress spillover, African Americans' couple and health outcomes, and the stress-buffering effect of family-centered prevention. *Journal of Family Psychology*, 32(2), 186–196. <https://doi.org/10.1037/fam0000376>

Objective: Despite robust literature illustrating the associations between contextual stress and marital quality, there is less known on whether preventative relationship programs that are designed to protect relationship well-being from financial hardship positively impact individuals' physical health. This study examined whether participation in the Protecting Strong African American Families (ProSAAF) relationship education program protected couples from the negative effects of financial hardship and racial discrimination and buffered relational and physical health from the negative effects of stress.

Methods: The sample consisted of 346 families (100% African American; 63% married) who lived in rural, low-income communities in Georgia. Couples were randomized to ProSAAF or a control group. Participants were assessed at three time points across 17 months. Path analyses were conducted to measure the effects of financial hardship and everyday experiences of perceived racial discrimination on changes in relationship communication, relationship satisfaction, relationship confidence, depressive symptoms, and self-reported health.

Findings: Control group findings indicated that current financial hardship was associated with decreased effective communication, relationship satisfaction, and relationship confidence. Current financial hardship and racial discrimination were also linked to increased depressive symptoms. Greater relationship confidence and satisfaction predicted positive changes in self-reported health. In support of the hypothesis that ProSAAF protected couples from the negative effects of hardship and racial discrimination, Barton et al. found that greater levels of financial hardship were associated with declines in relationship confidence only among control group couples.

Conclusions/Recommendations: Findings from this article support prior research which asserts that relationship education can mediate the effects of life experience-related stressors. Stressors such as financial hardship and racial discrimination have implications on the physical, mental, and relational well-being of African American families. Future research should assess relationship processes and other additional stressors that may impact well-being.

Lavner, J. A., Barton, A. W., & Beach, S. R. H. (2019). Improving couples' relationship functioning leads to improved coparenting: A randomized controlled trial with rural African American couples. *Behavior Therapy*, 50(6), 1016–1029. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.beth.2018.12.006>

Objective: Evaluations of couple relationship education (CRE) programs have largely focused on exploring improvements across different relational outcomes. Little is known about whether these programs provide benefits for the larger family unit. This descriptive study examined the effects of the Protecting Strong African American Families (ProSAAF) program on changes in co-parenting and relationship functioning, and whether short-term program effects (9 and 17 months after beginning the program) predict long-term program effects (25 months after beginning the program).

Methods: The sample consisted of 346 families (100% African American; 63% married) who lived in rural, low-income communities in Georgia. Couples were randomized to ProSAAF or a control group. Using data collected over two years, Lavner et al. conducted structural equation modeling to analyze the effects of participation in ProSAAF on relationship functioning, effective communication, relationship confidence, relationship satisfaction, perceived partner support, and co-parenting.

Findings: Participation in the ProSAAF program resulted in significant improvements in relationship functioning and co-parenting for the treatment group. The short-term effects of the program on relationship functioning and co-parenting were equivalent. In the long-term, however, only relationship functioning predicted co-parenting, suggesting that participation in ProSAAF had an indirect effect on long-term co-parenting through relationship functioning.

Conclusions/Recommendations: Overall, participation in ProSAAF had a positive effect on relationship functioning and co-parenting, both in the short and long term. These findings support prior literature on how relationship education programs can improve family structures by building couples' relationship skills. Future research could assess specific factors of family-centered prevention programs that might increase family functioning.

Lavner, J. A., Barton, A. W., & Beach, S. R. (2020). Direct and indirect effects of a couple-focused preventive intervention on children's outcomes: A randomized controlled trial with African American families. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*, 88(8), 696–707. <https://doi.org/10.1037/ccp0000589>

Objective: Research highlights that child well-being is linked to their parents' relationship quality. For this reason, increased attention and funding has gone into creating relationship education programs for parents with the goal of improving child well-being. This descriptive study examined the effect of the Protecting Strong African American Families (ProSAAF) relationship education program on children's outcomes (e.g., conduct problems), couple functioning, and parent-child relationships.

Methods: The sample consisted of 346 families (100% African American; 63% Married) living in rural, low-income communities in Georgia. Couples were randomized to ProSAAF or a control group. Couples reported on relationship functioning at baseline and in a 9-month follow-up, as well as on parent-child relationships at a 17-month follow-up. Children reported conduct behavior at a 25-month follow-up. Lavner et al. conducted path analyses to examine the effects on couple functioning, effective communication, relationship confidence, relationship satisfaction, perceived partner support, parent-child relations, and child outcomes (conduct problems, affiliations with deviant peers, substance use, sexual onset, depressive symptoms, self-control).

Findings: Participation in ProSAAF indirectly improved child outcomes two years later through better couple functioning and more positive parent-child relationships. Couples who participated in ProSAAF had better post-intervention couple functioning, which predicted more positive parent-child relationships 17 months after the intervention. Better parent-child relationships at 17 months subsequently predicted lower levels of youth conduct problems, deviant peer affiliation, substance use, lower likelihood of early sexual onset, and better youth self-control at 25 months after the intervention.

Conclusions/Recommendations: The ProSAAF program increased positive child outcomes by improving couple functioning and parent-child relationships. These findings highlight how supporting African American families through relationship education programs can increase the well-being of children. Future research should continue to explore the factors that impact couple functioning and child outcomes across groups with diverse racial and ethnic identities and across levels of socioeconomic advantage and disadvantage.

Lei, M. K., & Beach, S. R. H. (2020). Can we uncouple neighborhood disadvantage and delinquent behaviors? An experimental test of family resilience guided by the social disorganization theory of delinquent behaviors. *Family Process*, 59(4). <https://doi.org/10.1111/famp.12527>

Objective: Family integration can be an important protective factor for youth delinquent behavior. Relationship education programs, such as the Protecting Strong African American Families (ProSAAF) program, have been hypothesized to improve negative outcomes for socially and economically disadvantaged youth through improving family functioning. The purpose of this descriptive study was to assess the role of family integration in rural African American youth's propensity to engage in delinquent behavior through reducing youth exposure to parental conflict.

Methods: A sample of 346 African American families (100% African American; 63% married) were randomly assigned to participate in ProSAAF or a control group. Delinquent behaviors were reported by youth at baseline and at a 17-month follow-up. Neighborhood disadvantage was assessed based on median household income, percent unemployed, percent of residents below the poverty threshold, percentage of single-mother families, percent receiving public assistance, and percentage of residents less than age 18. Regression, path modeling, and mediated moderation regression analyses were used to assess whether reducing youth exposure to parental conflict buffered the effect of delinquent behavior, neighborhood disadvantage, residential stability, immigrant concentration, interparental communication, and exposure to conflict on change in youth behaviors.

Findings: Similar to previous studies, results indicated that youth residing in neighborhoods with more disadvantage on average were more at risk of engaging in delinquent behavior. However, youth whose parents were enrolled in ProSAAF experienced reduced exposure to parental conflict through program-related improvements in interparental communication and were less likely to engage in delinquent behavior.

Conclusions/Recommendations: This study extends prior work to demonstrate that neighborhood disadvantage has a negative effect on youth in rural contexts. This study is important in that it utilizes an experimental design to examine the causal relationship between neighborhood disadvantage and delinquency. It further highlights the importance of reducing youth exposure to parental conflict as a protective advantage. Future research should continue to assess additional factors (e.g., geographic location, interpersonal relationships) that might reduce youth delinquent behavior.

Barton, A. W., Lavner, J. A., & Beach, S. R. (2021). Can interventions that strengthen couples' relationships confer additional benefits for their health? A randomized controlled trial with African American couples. *Prevention Science*, 22(3), 386–396. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11121-020-01175-7>

Objective: Many studies on couple and relationship education (CRE) programs have focused on outcomes related to relationship satisfaction and communication. However, positive relationship functioning is also associated with couples' overall health and well-being. This article describes findings from a study that examined the effect of the Protecting Strong African American Families (ProSAAF) program on adults' physical, mental, and behavioral health.

Methods: The sample consisted of 346 families (100% African American; 63% married) who lived in rural, low-income communities in Georgia with an early adolescent child. Couples were randomized to ProSAAF or a control group. This study used data from pre and post-test assessments spanning 25 months after program initiation to measure aspects of couple functioning (effective communication, relationship confidence, relationship satisfaction, perceived partner support) and health outcomes, such as general health, depressive symptoms, sleep problems, and substance use. Direct effects of ProSAAF participation on changes in adult health (physical health, depression, sleep health, and substance use) were assessed using path analyses.

Findings: Participation in ProSAAF was associated with positive indirect effects on several health outcomes, including general health, depressive symptoms, and sleep problems, through improved couple functioning. However, there were no significant direct effects of program participation on health. ProSAAF couples also

reported significant improvements in couple functioning 9 and 17 months after beginning the program, which was associated with improved health outcomes.

Conclusions/Recommendations: Findings from this study suggest the ProSAAF program indirectly affects several health outcomes by improving couple functioning. These indirect effects can be further explored to determine other measures that would help promote improved health outcomes. Future research should examine different aspects of couple functioning to determine which factors are more closely associated with improved health outcomes.

Lavner, J. A., Barton, A. W., Adesogan, O., & Beach, S. R. H. (2021). Family-centered prevention buffers the effect of financial strain on parenting interactions reducing youth conduct problems in African American families. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology, 89*(9). <https://doi.org/10.1037/ccp0000680>

Objective: Systematic structures such as racism and oppression have contributed to high poverty rates for African American families who live in the South. Further, research has found that financial strain can cause an increase in poor relationship functioning and psychological distress as well as a decrease in positive parenting structures and child well-being. The purpose of this descriptive study was to examine whether the Protecting Strong African American Families (ProSAAF) program buffers the negative indirect effects of perceived financial strain on youth conduct problems through protective parent-child interactions.



Methods: A sample of 346 African American couples (100% African American; 63% married) with an early adolescent residing in low-income rural communities participated in the study. Families were randomly assigned to a non-treatment control condition or the ProSAAF program. Data was collected from families in two waves over 9 months. In both waves, parents and youth were asked about perceptions of financial strain and protective parent-child relationships. Youth also reported on their conduct problems in both waves. Moderated mediation regression analyses were used to test whether prevention programs could buffer the negative effects of perceived financial strain on child delinquency through protective parent-child interactions.

Findings: Participation in the ProSAAF program reduced the negative effect of youth perceived financial strain on youth delinquent behaviors through protective parent-child interactions. Participants that were enrolled in ProSAAF and received additional training on effective stress-management techniques displayed increased protective parenting behaviors (i.e., checking in youth, knowing their whereabouts) and thereby decreased youth delinquent behaviors. However, the magnitude of the effects was small, and there was still a direct effect of perceived financial strain on youth conduct problems. Furthermore, there was no significant effect in parental perceptions of financial strain on parent protective interactions.

Conclusions/Recommendations: Family-centered programming provides marginal support to families struggling with financial instability by reducing the stress spillover effects of youth perceived financial strain. Perceptions of financial strain indirectly shaped youth conduct problems. However, the findings of this study highlight the need for further financial interventions to support overall family stability. Lower youth-perceived financial strain improved parent-child interactions, and thereby youth conduct. However, ProSAAF participation did not reduce parent perceived financial strain. Interpersonal interactions among family

members are important, and positive functioning can contribute to improved stability, but are not enough to compensate for the stress-related negative effects of poverty and financial instability.

Lei, M. K., Lavner, J. A., Carter, S. E., Adesogan, O., & Beach, S. R. H. (2021) Relationship intervention indirectly buffers financial strain's effect on biological aging among Black adults. *Journal of Family Psychology*. <https://doi.org/10.1037/fam0000926>

Objective: Research suggests that financial strain can negatively impact health. Black Americans who live in the South have higher rates of financial strain due to historical structural oppression. This study aimed to examine whether supportive couple relationships buffer the negative effects of chronic financial strain on the physical health of Black adults in the rural South. To test these effects, an experimental approach was taken to understand whether participation in the Protecting Strong African American Families (ProSAAF) program improves couple functioning, and in turn, mitigates the effects of chronic financial strain on biological aging.

Methods: A sample of 348 individuals (100% African American; 63% married) were assigned to either a control group or an intervention group enrolled in ProSAAF. Data were collected from participants at baseline and in four follow up waves at 9.4, 17.0, 24.5, and 72 months respectively. Measures included cumulative financial strain, couple functioning, and biological aging. Researchers completed regression and indirect moderation analyses to understand the effects of relationship education on health measures.

Findings: Overall, chronic financial strain predicted poorer health. Participants that experienced excessive financial strain showed evidence of accelerated aging in both treatment and control groups. However, improved couple functioning was not significantly found to buffer the negative effects of financial strain on aging in couples who participated in ProSAAF. Couples who participated in ProSAAF did show improved couple functioning and fewer biological markers for aging than those that did not participate.

Conclusions/ Recommendations: Findings from this article highlight that financial strain can negatively impact the health of marginalized families. In addition, the findings add to prior research which suggests that HMRE programming can be influential in reducing negative health effects caused by social-environmental stressors. Future research should include ethnically and geographically diverse populations as well as explore specific stressors impact the health of Black American families.

Career STREAMS

Friend, D., Zaveri, H., & Feeney, K. (2020). *Implementation of Career STREAMS: An integrated employment and healthy relationship program for young adults*. OPRE Report # 2020-80. Washington, DC: Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

Objective: Many HMRE programs were created to promote child well-being through family stability, often by working with couples to increase parental relationship quality. Career STREAMS, which was developed by the Family and Workforce Centers of America (FWCA) is unique in that it integrates relationship education with pre-employment support. This report describes findings on the development and implementation of Career STREAMS in its first year of operation.

Methods: The majority of the sample were Black individuals (93%) who were not in a romantic relationship (46%). Friend et al. conducted several data collection activities to evaluate Career STREAMS, including semi-structured interviews (n=10), two focus groups (n=10), and session observations. The authors also analyzed performance management data on 207 participants as well as baseline survey results from 412 participants.

Findings: Targeting job seekers with low incomes (below the federal poverty line) can be an effective mechanism for recruiting HMRE participants. Most participants reported being in a romantic relationship with over half reporting that they had children. Thus, HMRE programming (Within My Reach) was relevant to a broad range of participants by developing skills to maintain healthy relationships. Curriculum on

developing healthy relationships and recognizing warning signs were valuable to young participants. Substantial support (transportation, childcare, etc.) was needed for continued participation in the two-week program. Follow-up (booster) programming yielded low participation due to personal commitments and perceptions of it being optional.

Conclusions/Recommendations: HMRE programming has the potential to offer valuable instruction to participants that extends beyond their intimate relationships. Skills learned can be applied in family and career settings. However, in low-income families, finances are a barrier to participation in programming. In this programming substantial support was needed for continued inclusion. This speaks to the larger need for financial support of low-income families. For low-income families, support to meet their basic needs is crucial to family stability. Exploring ways to expand HMRE offerings to include employment and childcare support even beyond program timelines could be beneficial to overall family stability.

Goesling, B., Gross, M., & Lugo-Gil, J. (2022). *Integrating healthy marriage and relationship education into an employment training program: The impacts of Career STREAMS*. OPRE Report #2022-162, Washington, DC: Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

Objective: Recent literature highlights that integrating economic stability services into HMRE programming can increase positive personal, family, and relationship outcomes. However, participants' diverse economic needs and interests often lead to a lack of utilization of economic stability services. The Families Workforce Center of America (FWCA) created Career STREAMS to test an alternative approach of integrating an HMRE program into an existing economic stability service. This report details the process of program implementation and the impact of the program after one year.

Methods: This study included 908 participants, most of whom identified as Black (93%) and were involved in a romantic relationship within the last year (92%). Participants were randomly assigned to a control group that was offered FWCA's traditional employment program or to a treatment group that was offered the Career STREAMS program. Participants completed a baseline survey and follow-up survey 12 months after the completion of the program. The authors also tracked attendance in the Career STREAMS experiment group and pulled wage and employment data for 80 percent of the participants from the National Directory of New Hires. Goesling et al. conducted confirmatory analyses to evaluate participants' economic and relationship outcomes as well as exploratory analyses to compare the impact of the outcomes between the treatment and control groups.

Findings: By integrating HMRE services into one of FWCA's traditional employment programs, the program successfully recruited participants that were interested in both economic and relationship services. Despite reaching the target population for this study, the program had difficulty maintaining participant attendance throughout the program due to participants' diverse economic challenges. Overall, the program did not impact participants' relationship and employment outcomes. Furthermore, the similarities between workplace and relationship skill building meant that there was not significant change in participant outcomes when comparing the Career STREAMS group to participants who attended the FWAC program alone.

Conclusions/Recommendations: Findings suggest that integrating HMRE programming into an existing economic service program is an effective way to reach populations in need of both relationship and economic services. However, low attendance rates indicate that there is a need for programs to provide additional support to reduce economic barriers. Future research should explore how alternative economic service programs that provide stipends or paid employment could affect the impact of integrated HMRE services.

Within My Reach

Sterrett-Hong, E., Antle, B., Nalley, B., & Adams, M. (2018). Changes in couple relationship dynamics among low-income parents in a relationship education program are associated with decreases in their children's mental health symptoms. *Children*, 5(7). <https://doi.org/10.3390/children5070090>

Objective: Intimate partner violence (IPV) is a widespread problem that impacts millions of families and children across the United States. Furthermore, families that are low-income (assessed in this study based on annual family income) are disproportionately impacted by IPV. Relationship education programs can serve as secondary prevention interventions to IPV. The purpose of this descriptive study is to assess the impact of couple relationship education (CRE) program participation, namely Within My Reach (WMR), on increasing parent-relationship dynamics and by proxy child mental health in low-income families.

Methods: The study sample included 347 parents (67% African American) enrolled in WMR. At the start of the programming, participants completed the Conflict Resolution Styles Inventory (CRSI) and again directly after program completion. In addition, relationship dynamics (relationship satisfaction and quality), parent-child relationship quality, and child mental health were measured. Multiple linear regression and mediation analyses were completed to understand the relationship between criterion and outcome variables.

Findings: Findings suggest that participation in the WMR program was associated with a decrease in negative conflict behaviors among adults with low-income. Decreases in conflict behavior amongst adults were also associated with reduced child mental health symptoms. Changes in both negative and positive conflict resolution behaviors were associated with parent-child relationship quality. Parent-child relationship quality was also found to partially mediate the association between couple relationship quality and child mental health symptoms.

Conclusions/Recommendations: WMR may be an effective mechanism for improving both interparent relationships and parent-child relationships. However, small effect sizes indicate that there are additional barriers to positive communication and healthy relationships. Future studies should examine additional barriers that may impede relational improvement. This could provide important insight to improve programming efficacy.

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About the Authors

Tia Dickerson is a former MAST Center Intern and a PhD student in the Department of Sociology and Criminology at Howard University.

Elvis Gyan is a former MAST Center Intern and a PhD student in the Department of Family Science and Human Development at Montclair State University.

Mindy E. Scott is the MAST Center's Principal Investigator and leads the Program Implementation and Evaluation research area. She is a sociologist and family demographer at Child Trends whose primary research interests relate to family formation, family strengthening, responsible fatherhood, and adolescent sexual and reproductive health. Dr. Scott studies the design and implementation of healthy marriage and relationship education programs through several projects focused on youth, parents in complex families, and fathers.

Ria Shelton is a Senior Research Assistant in the Parenting and Family Dynamics research area at Child Trends. Her research interests include racial equity in the health and early childhood spaces, healthy relationship outcomes, sexual and reproductive health and adolescent health and well-being.

Lisa Kim is a Senior Research Analyst in the Parenting and Family Dynamics research area at Child Trends. She has experience leading and supporting qualitative research across a variety of topic areas, including sexual and reproductive health, healthy relationships, fatherhood, and intimate partner violence. Ms. Kim is passionate about improving access to high-quality care for underserved communities and understanding the impact of racial and ethnic inequalities, socioeconomic factors, and systems and policies on health outcomes.

