

Prenatal to Preschool: The Pandemic's Impact on Mothers and Children, Focusing on Syndemic Effects on Black Families (P2P)

Statement of Problem

The COVID-19 global pandemic has [significantly impacted](#) the health and well-being of adults and children alike. In the U.S., the pandemic has highlighted the fractures in many systems including education, the economy, housing, and health care, widening known racial disparities. The fractures in these systems can be acutely felt by young families, which can have long-lasting health effects considering how important the period just after birth is to the neurodevelopment of a child. [Research suggests](#) that when mothers experience distress, it can have lasting, negative impacts on parent-child interactions, infant/child development, and the mental health of both women and children. These findings become even more important when contextualizing the disparate exposure of Black children and their families to structural racism (an underlying endemic condition) and the COVID-19 pandemic, which taken together have been defined as a syndemic.

Description

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- the mental health of both mothers and children

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Our overarching goal is to deeply characterize the experiences of women and children impacted by the syndemic, filling research gaps that would help us identify specific maternal and environmental factors and mechanisms that critically influence early child development and mental health.

In this video, Dr. Njoroge discusses how this project came to life, the potential impacts of their findings, and what the team hopes to explore next with this dataset.

This multi-methods project consists of three aims, which will longitudinally examine child neurodevelopmental outcomes by early identification of mental health challenges among racially and ethnically diverse mothers.

To identify mothers experiencing distress and psychopathology, we will implement extensive screening of postpartum Black and non-Latinx White (NLW) mothers using a series of questionnaires and clinical psychiatric interviews. This will also help us determine resilience factors and uncover cross-cultural differences that may exist. Fathers or secondary caregivers will complete similar questionnaires, assessing their experiences during the pandemic as well as those of their children and partners.

We will then identify maternal concerns about their child's development and mental health at two developmental time points (24 and 48 months) and assess mother-child interactions on a series of joint play-based tasks. In our final steps, we will conduct qualitative interviews with a sub-sample of Black women to characterize the impact of the syndemic on their mental health, parenting practices, perceptions of their child's early development and trust in the health care system.

Our overarching goal is to deeply characterize the experiences of women and children impacted by the syndemic, filling research gaps that would help us identify specific maternal and environmental factors and mechanisms that critically influence early child development and mental health. We also hope the results from this project will allow for future intervention development.

Next Steps

Identifying women disproportionately impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic and endemic conditions during the peripartum period provides an opportunity to understand the developing child's environment, mother's mental health and parenting experiences. Our long-term goal is to improve infant and young child neurodevelopmental and mental health outcomes by ensuring appropriate, precise and culturally informed interventions.

This project page was last updated in April 2023.

Suggested Citation

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PolicyLab Leads

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Faculty Member

Wanjik? F.M. Njoroge (she/her) is a faculty member at PolicyLab at Children's Hospital of Philadelphia (CHOP), an assistant professor at the University of Pennsylvania Perelman School of Medicine and medical director of the Young Child Clinic at CHOP. Dr. Njoroge is also the program director for the Child and Adolescent Psychiatry Fellowship Training Program in the Department of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences at CHOP. She received her bachelor's at Columbia University and her MD from Baylor College of Medicine. She completed her adult psychiatry residency training at the University of Pennsylvania and child psychiatry fellowship at the Yale Child Study Center (YCSC).

During her time at YCSC, Dr. Njoroge completed postgraduate training programs with the Harris Infant Psychiatry fellowship and a postdoctoral National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH) research fellowship. In addition, she was also a post-doctoral fellow at Yale University's Edward Zigler Center in Child Development and Social Policy and a Solnit fellow in the ZERO TO THREE program based in Washington, D.C. Dr. Njoroge successfully received multiple research development awards from the NIMH and Eunice Shriver National Institute of Child and Human Development, and teaching awards most recently from the University of Pennsylvania School of Medicine.

Her research interests to date have included prevention, promotion and early intervention for young children. In particular, she has a specific focus on investigating the impact of culture on early infant/childhood development, the impact of screening and brief interventions on infant and parent psychosocial domains, and the intersection of culture, race and ethnicity on parenting practices. Her current area of research continues to have a particular focus on infants, very young children and their parents with the goals of identifying parenting stressors, parental attitudes and beliefs, cultural norms, and impact of trauma that may derail optimal development in vulnerable and disenfranchised populations.



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Team

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Kate Wisniewski is a clinical research coordinator at PolicyLab and the Department of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry & Behavioral Sciences at Children's Hospital of Philadelphia (CHOP). She is currently working with Dr. Njoroge on the Prenatal to Preschool (P2P) longitudinal study, which aims to investigate the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on early child development and maternal mental health. Additionally, the project aims to characterize the effects of the syndemic on Black families.

Ms. Wisniewski received her Master of Art in Psychological Sciences with a focus in research from Rutgers University – Camden. While at Rutgers, as a psychology fellow, she worked as a research assistant for the Walter Rand Institute of Public Affairs. Although involved in several projects, she primarily worked to evaluate a social emotional learning program implemented in underfunded southern New Jersey schools as well as evaluating access to and quality of healthcare in Atlantic County for marginalized populations. Prior to receiving her master's degree, she graduated from West Chester University of Pennsylvania with a Bachelor of Science in Psychology. While at West Chester, she worked as a lead undergraduate research assistant for a lab on campus and helped to implement a trauma-based relief program to children who were experiencing post-traumatic stress symptoms.

Her research experiences sparked her interests in social determinants of health, pediatric clinical research, access to health care for marginalized communities and the effect of trauma on family systems.



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Ms. Myers recently received her Master of Public Health degree in Epidemiology with a minor in Biostatistics from Drexel University. While at Drexel, as an Inclusion, Diversity, Equity and Anti-Racism (IDEA) graduate fellow, she helped conduct a systematic review for measurements designed to quantify the concentration of privilege and deprivation across geographic areas such as census tracts and zip codes. Prior to receiving her

MPH, she graduated from the University of Toronto with an honours Bachelor of Science, double majoring in Molecular Genetics and Microbiology and Health & Disease.

Her research experiences sparked her interests in the social determinants of health, knowledge translation and addressing health inequities. In the future, she plans to pursue a PhD in Epidemiology.



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Related Tools & Publications

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[The Impact of the Pandemic on Mothers and Children, with a Focus on Syndemic Effects on Black Families: The "Prenatal to Preschool" Study Protocol](#)

[Article](#)

Jan 2024

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[Understanding Infant and Caregiver Mental Health: What is the Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic and Systemic Racism?](#)

[Blog Post](#)

May 15, 2024

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[A Call To Address The Political Determinants Of Perinatal Mental Health](#)

[Article](#)

Aug 2024

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[Examining the Impact of the Syndemic on Black Birthing Individuals in the USA: A Systematic Review Article](#)

Feb 2025

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[The Influence of Pandemic-Related Worries During Pregnancy on Child Development at 12 Months Article](#)

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