Plenary Session 6
A Social Determinant of Health: Linking the Relationship Between Marital Status and Health Outcomes

Moderator/Panelists: Carlis V. Williams, Regional Administrator, ACF Region IV, Atlanta, GA

Presenters: Karen D. Lincoln, Ph.D., MSW, MA, Assistant Professor, University of Southern California, Los Angeles, CA
Debbie Barrington, Ph.D., MPH, Assistant Professor, Mailman School of Public Health, Columbia University, New York, NY

This Plenary session presented two cutting edge research projects that link African American marital status and health outcomes for adults and children. Dr. Karen Lincoln’s study, *Stress, Marital Satisfaction, and Psychological Distress Among African Americans*, illustrated how financial strain and discrimination create problems for African Americans. Her study showed that:

a) Financial strain and discrimination negatively impact the quality of marriage among African American couples

b) Outside home experiences (both negative and positive) affected the home environment

c) Stressors experienced outside the home environment worsen the effects of stressors being experienced in the home

d) Marital satisfaction has a protective effect on mental health of African American couples

e) Marital satisfaction buffers the impacts of financial strain and discrimination on the mental health of African American married couples

Dr. Debbie Barrington’s study, *Increasing Protection of Marriage on Infant Low Birth Weight Across Two Generations of African-American Women* revealed why it’s critical to monitor the disparity in low birth weight [LBW] between Black and White babies. LBW is a major predictor of infant mortality and is associated with other health problems (cerebral palsy, seizure disorders, mental retardation, and others.) Her study showed:
(a) Consistent LBW disparity between black and white babies with the black babies carrying the highest burden of LBW;

(b) Highest educated Black mothers have higher rate of LBW babies than the lowest educated White mothers;

(c) Married mothers from first generation have 16% lower risks of having LBW babies compared to unmarried mothers;

(d) Married mothers from second generation have 55% lower risks of having LBW babies compared to unmarried mothers.

(e) Women that were married when they gave birth and had mothers that were married when they were born, had the lowest risk of having LBW babies.

She concluded that marriage was a protective factor against LBW for second generation African American women. While the study has limitations, further research on cohabitation and characteristics of male partners/husbands should be conducted for insights on their impacts on birth outcomes, particularly LBW.