

Situating the Voice and Experiences of Black Women in Greater Pittsburgh



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BACKGROUND

The BWPA arose out of the founder and director's, **Rochelle Jackson**, 20+ years of public policy advocacy for social and economic justice combined with her lived experience as a Black woman and single mother of four children in the Greater Pittsburgh region. Historically, Black women have served as the epicenter of family in American culture. During the height of the slave trade, many Black females served their masters as cooks, maids and wet nurses. It is estimated that one-third of the 15 million people who were deported from Africa during the Transatlantic Slave Trade were women.¹ After the abolition of slavery, black women continued to bear the burden as the backbone of family. Black men's role as the head of the household had effectively been eradicated. Today, nearly 70% of all black households are led by women.² In addition, Black women are faced with earning lower wages, economic instability, expanding income inequality and less overall wealth. Black women's labor market position is the result of employer practices and government policies that disadvantaged Black women relative to white women and men. Negative representations of Black womanhood have reinforced these discriminatory practices and policies.³

Compared to all other women, Black women have always had the highest participation in labor market but the lowest overall earning power. As early as 1880, 35.4% of married Black women and 73.3% of single Black women were considered members of the labor force compared with only 7.3% of married white women and 23.8% of single white women.⁴ Today, over 60% of Black women participate in the labor market compared to 53% of white women. However, white women who work are much more likely to hold higher paying management or professional occupations (over 45%) than Black women (only 36%).⁵ Black women are still more likely to make up lower paying service industry or production positions.⁶ Differences in these levels of participation

¹ <https://www.un.org/en/events/slaveryremembranceday/2015/index.shtml>

² Women of color are also much more likely than white women to be raising children while unmarried, even though white women make up the majority of unmarried mothers. In 2016, for example, 40 percent of all births in the United States were to unmarried mothers. This included 17 percent of births to Asian or Pacific Islander women, 29 percent to non-Hispanic white women, 53 percent to Hispanic women, 66 percent to American Indian or Alaskan native women, and 70 percent of births to non-Hispanic black women.

³ <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/women/reports/2019/05/10/469739/breadwinning-mothers-continue-u-s-norm/>

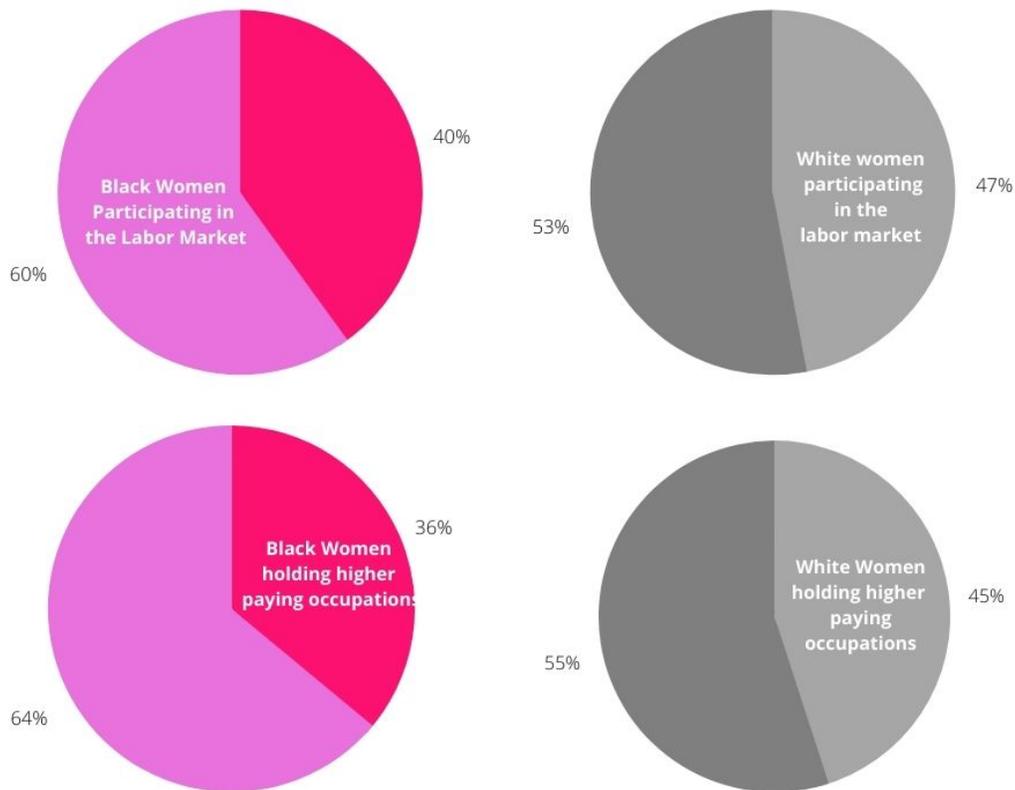
⁴ <https://www.epi.org/blog/black-womens-labor-market-history-reveals-deep-seated-race-and-gender-discrimination/>

⁵ *ibid*

⁶ <https://www.bls.gov/opub/reports/womens-databook/2019/home.htm>

⁷ *ibid*

were not only due to societal expectations but also due to the precarious labor market positions of black men. Therefore, Black women have a long history of working longer and harder than white women but for less pay, benefits, and promotions than that of white women - only earning 54 cents for every dollar earned by white male workers compared to 78 cents for white women. Low wage workers, many of whom are Black women, are less likely to have key employee benefits and often are forced to use more of their income to maintain their households.



Reference: <https://www.bls.gov/opub/reports/womens-databook/2019/home.htm>

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white male workers compared to 78 cents for white women.”

The disparities that exist for Black women do not only exist in employment but in healthcare as well. American women die in childbirth at a higher rate than in any other developed country, while non-Hispanic Black women are more than 3 times more likely to have a maternal death than white women in the United States.⁷ Overall pregnancy related mortality in the United States occurs at an average rate of 17.2 deaths per 100,000 live births. However, that number jumps to 43.5/100,000 for non-Hispanic Black women and decreases to 12.7/100,000 for non-Hispanic white women and 11/100,000 for Hispanic women. Non-Hispanic Black women are also significantly more likely to have a severe maternal morbidity (SMM) event at the time of delivery. For every maternal death there are 70 cases of SMM events that are considered “near misses.” These events can have long-term or short-term consequences to a woman’s health. Over the past 20 years, cases of SMM have increased by over 200%, while cases disproportionately affect Black women. One study found Black women experienced SMM at a rate 2.1 times greater than that of white women.⁸ Search engines, social media, financial institutions, insurance companies, education and the health care industry are all using digital algorithms to discriminate against Black women.

⁷ <https://www.ajmc.com/view/racial-disparities-persist-in-maternal-morbidity-mortality-and-infant-health>

⁸ *ibid*

Pregnancy-related mortality in the USA per 100,000 live births



Reference: <https://www.ajmc.com/view/racial-disparities-persist-in-maternal-morbidity-mortality-and-infant-health>

Economic and health care disparities are issues facing Black women nationally but seem to be plaguing local Black women in the Greater Pittsburgh region as well. Recently, there has been local research identifying why these issues seem to be so pronounced in our region. The Gender Equity Commission (GEC) was established by local ordinance in late 2016. The GEC is part of a national coalition known as the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW). The mission of the GEC is to achieve equity for women and girls in the City of Pittsburgh. The vision is a future in which everyone in the City of Pittsburgh regardless of gender identity or expression, is safe in all spaces, empowered to achieve their full potential, and no longer faces structural or institutional barriers to economic, social, and political equity.⁹

The study reveals that Pittsburgh is the least livable city for Black women second only to Black men. One of the key indicators of the GEC study to determine the index of ranked livability is the physical and mental well-being of

⁹ Howell, Junia, Sara Goodkind, Leah Jacobs, Dominique Branson and Elizabeth Miller. 2019. "Pittsburgh's Inequality across Gender and Race." *Gender Analysis White Papers*. City of Pittsburgh's Gender Equity Commission.

its residents.¹⁰ According to study authors, “well-being can be measured in a plethora of ways including (but not limited to) the absence of disease or infirmity, physical fitness, emotional stress, and access to healthcare.” For Black women in the City of Pittsburgh, these key indicators are among those that are most likely violated.

The basis of this study coupled with the lived experience of Black women in the region was the catalyst of the Black Women’s Policy Agenda (BWPA). The founder of the BWPA, Rochelle Jackson, is the former director of Femisphere at The Women and Girls Foundation (Pittsburgh, PA). Her work with Femisphere focused on single mothers struggling with poverty in the Pittsburgh region and was based on multiple reports published by The Women and Girls Foundation.¹¹ The data of these studies show that single mothers are the largest group of individuals impacted by poverty (driven by economic and healthcare disparities) in the region. A closer examination of the data bares out that Black women are disproportionately affected by these disparities.

GOALS

The goal of the BWPA is to shift the focus of advocacy and systems for Black women in Pittsburgh for the first time. Specifically, the BWPA seeks to:

- Build a coalition for long term mobilization and systems change
- Enact public policies that improve economic opportunity and quality of employment for black women
- Promote quality of life policies to secure health justice, affordable healthcare, raising minimum wage, etc.
- Promote the adoption of work/family and equity policies for Black women and girls
- Develop national, state, and local campaigns

¹⁰ ibid

¹¹ <https://wgfpa.org/Femisphere-Phase-One-Presentation-September-2016-combined-3.pdf> and <https://pittsburghfoundation.org/sites/default/files/Single%20Women%20Report%202019%20-%20The%20Pittsburgh%20Foundation.pdf>.

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- Develop long term strategies to win on our issues
 - Establish an ongoing working relationship with federal, state, city, and county government as well as relevant commissions
 - Respond to emerging issues that disproportionately affect Black women – creating what is known as a **rapid response**

PURPOSE

The purpose of this paper is to center the social, economic, and healthcare disparities that are disproportionately affecting Black women in the Greater Pittsburgh region. The research contained will situate the Collective Impact Model, which will drive the work of the BWPA.

According to the National Council of Nonprofits, collective impact “describes an intentional way of working together and sharing information for the purpose of solving a complex problem.”¹² This term caught attention originally in 2011 in an article published in the Stanford Social Innovation Review. The authors of this work made a powerful observation early in their work about social problems. They postulate that “the complex nature of most social problems belies the idea that any single program or organization, however, well managed and funded, can singlehandedly create lasting large-scale change.”¹³

COLLECTIVE IMPACT MODEL

The BWPA quickly recognized in the completion of this study and listening sessions that they must create a collective impact initiative for Black women and girls in the Greater Pittsburgh region to address the complex myriad of issues that have relegated the city to be the worst place for Black women and girls to reside. To complete this initiative, the BWPA wants to bring likeminded individuals, organizations, grant makers and even political and business representatives to the table to accomplish the following:

¹² “Collective Impact.” <https://www.councilofnonprofits.org/tools-resources/collective-impact>

¹³ Ibid.

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- The collective group of participants share a vision of change and a commitment to solve a problem by coordinating their work; they agree on **shared goals**.
 - Participants also agree to **measure** or monitor many of the same things, so that they can learn across the initiative and **hold each other accountable**.
 - To be the most effective, the activities of all the participants are coordinated by a "**backbone**," which could be a single organization, a single person, or a steering committee that represents all the participants. The backbone is most often responsible for "building public will" and making sure that the initiative stays focused and moves forward. The backbone also focuses on building a culture that encourages information sharing and candor and doesn't shirk from resolving conflicts so that trusted relations emerge among the participants. Typically, the backbone plays an administrative role such as convening meetings, coordinating data collection, connecting participants with each other, and facilitating the activities of the initiative, and the relationships, so that working together the participants can get past barriers, and are efficient and productive. The backbone may also facilitate or attract financial resources to the initiative.
 - Activities of the initiative are described as "mutually reinforcing" because they are designed to remind all participants that they depend on each other to move the initiative forward. Mutually reinforcing activities ensure that the activities of the participants are aligned; directed towards shared measurement; and are making progress toward common goal(s).
 - Finally, a successful collective impact initiative depends on **resources** to keep it going, and consistent and open
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communication between the participants, so that everyone is informed and stays motivated over time.¹⁴

Through primary source research, survey results and focus groups with Black female Greater Pittsburgh residences, we will show why the BWPA is the key to create a collective impact initiative to improve the viable livability of the Greater Pittsburgh region for Black women and girls. The paper will be broken into four sections: (1) a review of the survey/focus groups questions and results, (2) the specific employment/economic disparities for Black women, (3) the most pressing concerns for Black women in the Greater Pittsburgh region and their connections to the GEC study, (4) the far reaching effects of COVID-19 on livability for Black women and (4) how the BWPA has already begun to develop itself as the necessary backbone organization for this social justice work.

SURVEY OVERVIEW AND DEMOGRAPHICS

The BWPA authored its survey in late 2019. The survey consists of 44 questions - 11 open ended and 33 closed. We received 287 responses with participants spending an average of 13 minutes and 5 seconds completing the survey. Participants were invited after completing the survey to an hour-long focus group where they could openly express their opinions and experiences about the specific items covered on the online survey. 50 of the 287 respondents (or 17%) participated in one of 5 focus groups sponsored by the BWPA. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, these focus groups were completed via ZOOM.

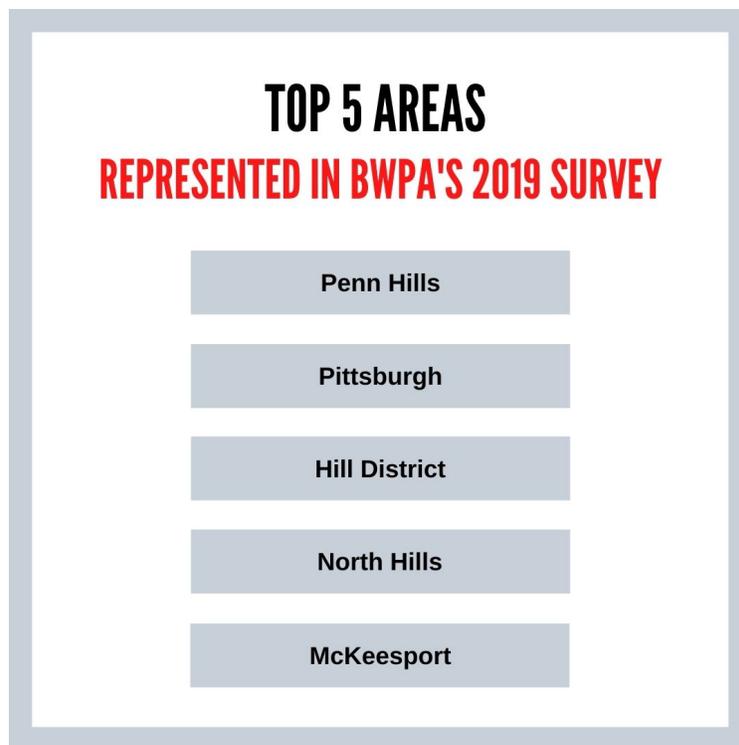
The BWPA felt that it was important to not only author this survey but release the results of this data to the larger community because more often than not, Black women's voices are not amplified - even in research that is supposedly intended to reflect their experience. It was important for the BWPA to start the process of digging behind the numbers - hearing the fears, anxieties, and experiences of the women of color who live in the Greater Pittsburgh region. The theme of the work of the BWPA was to "Listen to Black Women."

One of the things that we quickly learned is that Black women are not used to the autonomy of an open forum such as this online survey and focus

¹⁴ ibid.

groups provided. This (among other factors) may have led to the low participation rate of respondents in the focus group. While those who did participate allowed us a glimpse into the experiences of Black women in Greater Pittsburgh, it is clear that the BWPA has much more work to do in helping Black women see the healing nature of self-reflection and personal ethnography.

Demographically, the top five areas in the region represented among participants are: Penn Hills, Pittsburgh, Hill District, Northside, and McKeesport.¹⁵ 35% (98) of respondents were between the ages of 35 to 44 with the lowest responses (2.44%) coming from participants between 18 to 24 years old. 130 respondents (45.3%) reported themselves as single/never married. 31.1% identify as married and 14.29% identify as divorced.



68.4% percent of respondents reported having between 0 to 2 children. Of the 287 total respondents, 48 (16.67%) report having three kids, 23 (7.99%) report four and 23 (7.98%) report having 5 or more. Age range for participants' children are as follows:

- 0-4 years: 32.33% (86)

¹⁵ Of the top five, McKeesport residents have the lowest median income at \$18, 712 per year (according to data collected in 2019 by the US Census Bureau).

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- 5-9 years: 25.56% (68)
 - 8-12 years: 27.07% (72)
 - 13-17 years: 25.94% (69)
 - 18+ years: 47.74% (127)

The attained education range for participants varied as well. 59.7% (172) of respondents finished either a trade/vocational program, associates, or bachelor's degree. 12.2% (35) reported some high school, high school diploma or GED, while 29.5 (85) reported either completing a master's, professional or doctoral degree.¹⁶

EMPLOYMENT STATUS AND THE WAGE GAP

The employment status of our respondents matches the national data that most women of color are employed at some level (including underemployed or underpaid for level of education attained). 164 respondents (56.9%) are employed full time, 23 (8%) are employed part time and 57 (20%) are self-employed. 52 respondents (18%) are currently unemployed - all but 2% of those are currently seeking new employment. 19 respondents (6.6%) are currently in school, 9 (3.1%) are retired and 13 (4.51%) are unable to work. Of all 287 respondents, 8% (23) reported that they are currently underemployed (or don't have enough paid work or not doing work that makes full use of their skills and abilities) and 6% (17) report that they are underpaid (or are being paid less than what is due for one's work). In the listening sessions, more than half of the respondents reported that while they were employed full time, they are still facing struggles to provide for their families. What is often missed in discussions such as these is that women of color often supplement their income with multiple streams or multiple employment opportunities because many are unable to earn above the poverty line with a low-paying wage, even if it is a full-time job.

Nationally, 11% of all women of color lost work during the pandemic. According to Janelle Jones, Chief Economist for the U.S. Labor Department,

¹⁶ 5.9% or 17 respondents reported in the other category. The vast majority of these responses was some form of "some college but no degree."

“Among demographic groups, Black women experienced the steepest drop in labor force participation and have had the slowest job recovery since January 2020. It took until 2018 for Black women's employment to recover from the Great Recession [of 2008], and now almost all those hard-won gains have been erased.”¹⁷ This clearly reflects much of what we know from national data about employment rates and opportunities among people of color in the United States. At every educational level, Black workers have higher unemployment rates compared to their white counterparts. For example, Black workers with college degrees have unemployment rates similar to that of white workers with just high school diplomas.¹⁸

In addition to lack of employment equity, there is just as large of an issue with networking opportunities for those women of color who are gainfully employed. 60% (170) of participants reported that they have less professional networking opportunities than white counterparts in similar professional roles. Again, we understand that this aligns with anecdotal research about how women of color are many times not promoted to levels of middle and upper management so that they are not able to create and sustain networking opportunities for other women of color in their fields of work. When Black women do succeed in the workplace, they do so without ever fully being accepted by insiders. Many times, managers will praise their work and output privately, but many of these women are not nominated for awards, promotions, or other public recognition.

In 2006, Catalyst developed and implemented only the second report nationally that examined the barriers of women's advancement in the workplace - and the first study specifically examining these processes specifically for women of color. This study entitled, “Connections that Count: The Informal Networks of Women of Color in the United States”, identifies the key barrier as a lack of access to networks of influential colleagues that look like them.¹⁹ In the study, influential colleagues are described as “those who can, because of their level or power within the organization, connect women with information,

¹⁷ “COVID-19 Job Market Wreaks Havoc on Black Women.” <https://www.usnews.com/news/economy/articles/2021-04-15/black-women-suffering-the-most-from-covid-19-job-market-disruption>

¹⁸ *ibid.*

¹⁹ <https://www.catalyst.org/research/connections-that-count-the-informal-networks-of-women-of-color-in-the-united-states/>

resources, or other contacts that can help them advance in their careers.”²⁰

These issues are exacerbated for women of color because they face what is called “double exclusion” in the workplace due not only to their gender but also because of their race.

The employment section of the survey also centered around salary, pay gap and fringe employment benefits. Specifically, participants were asked the following questions:

1. Are you aware of the pay gap [that exists] between Black women and other races?
2. Are you making less money than white co-workers with the same education and experience?
3. As compared to white counterparts, do you receive more, the same or fewer promotional opportunities at your place of employment?
4. Do you have access to paid family and medical leave on your job?
5. Do you have access to sick days at your job?
6. In your current position, are you eligible for items such as bonuses, stock options and/or restrictive stock units?

90% (258) of respondents replied that they are aware of the national pay gap that exists between Black women and other races in the American labor force. It doesn’t take much exposure to news or current research to be aware of these gaps. Nearly 57 years after the passage of the Civil Right Act, we see that equal pay for equal work has still not been realized. In 2019, PayScale analyzed differences in earnings between Caucasians and BIPOC using data from a sample of 1.8 million employees surveyed between January 2017 and February 2019.²¹ Comparing what women of color are paid to what white, non-Hispanic men make demonstrates the enormous economic impact of the double burden of sexism and racism.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ “Black Workers Still Earn Less than their White Counterparts.” <https://www.shrm.org/resourcesandtools/hr-topics/compensation/pages/racial-wage-gaps-persistence-poses-challenge.aspx>

The National Women’s Law Center's calculations, which are based on the U.S. Census Bureau's Current Population Survey for 2016, revealed that when comparing all men and women who work full time, year-round in the U.S., women were paid just 80 cents for every dollar paid to their male counterparts. But the wage gap was even larger when looking specifically at Black women who work full time, year-round—they were paid only 63 cents for every dollar paid to white, non-Hispanic men. This gap, which amounts to a loss of \$22,001 a year, means that Black women have to work more than 19 months - until the very last day of July - to make as much as white, non-Hispanic men did in the previous 12-month calendar year.

“It doesn’t take much exposure to news or current research to be aware of these gaps. Nearly 57 years after the passage of the Civil Right Act, we see that equal pay for equal work has still not been realized.”

Additionally, the NWLC also found that:

- Black women make up 10 percent of the low-wage workforce—jobs that typically pay less than \$11 per hour, or about \$22,880 annually—while they make up just 6.2 percent of the overall workforce.
- Black women's share of the high-wage workforce—jobs that pay more than \$48 per hour, or about \$100,000 annually—is less than half their representation in the overall workforce.²²

In sum, 50% (143) of respondents told us in the survey as well as the listening session that they are currently paid less than their white co-workers with the same education and experience.²³ 172 (60%) respondents report that they have fewer networking opportunities than their white counterparts, 143 (50%) report fewer promotional opportunities than their white counterparts, 150 participants (52%) reported that they do not have access to PFL and 125 (43%) report no

²² Ibid.

²³ It is important to point out here that many of our respondents are probably also paid less than their white co-workers with less education and experience. This study doesn't address that many Caucasians are often offered opportunities for promotion even when they don't necessarily have the qualification necessary for the position.

access to sick leave.²⁴ Only 22% (65) of participants responded that they are eligible for fringe employment benefits like stock options, while 77% (219) responded either no or not applicable.

“50% (143) of respondents told us in the survey as well as the listening session that they are currently paid less than their white co-workers with the same education and experience.”

MOST PRESSING CONCERNS/GEC CONNECTIONS

Three questions specifically on the survey center on the City of Pittsburgh’s Gender Equity Commission (GEC) Study mentioned in the introduction of this paper. In review of the study, Pittsburgh was named as one of the worst places for Black people to live based on education, economics, and other related measures.²⁵

Participants in our study were asked if reading similar headlines has impacted their emotional well-being and/or mental health. 175 participants (61%) reported that headlines such as these did have a negative impact on their emotional and/or mental health. Interestingly, 14% (41) of participants reported not reading any specific headlines about Pittsburgh being named as one of the worst cities for Blacks. Some may see this as a lack of exposure or access intentionally. I would like to propose that many of our study participants are part of a growing group of Black women who are choosing not to engage with national or social media regularly as a form of self-preservation so that their mental and emotional well-beings are not damaged.

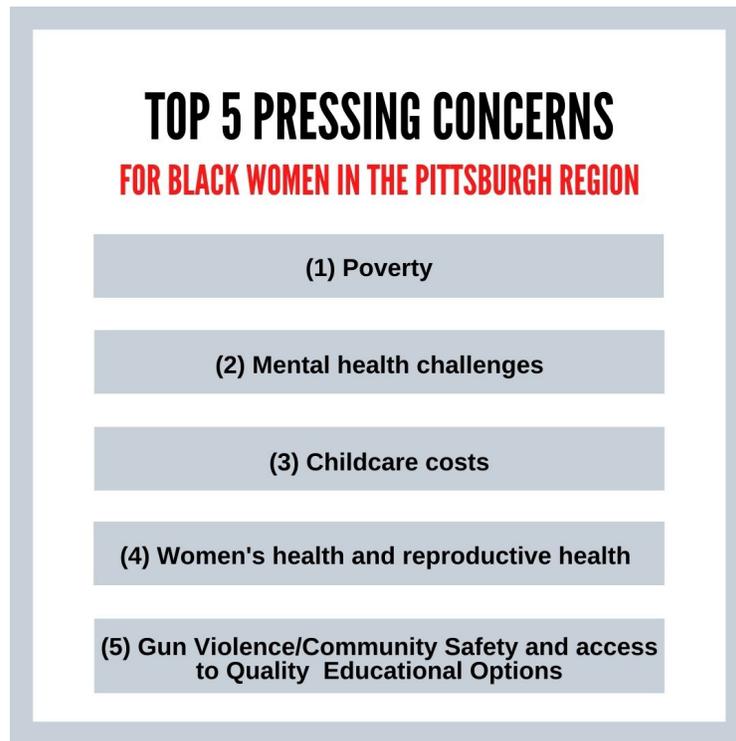
Questions 18 and 19 openly ask participants to identify the most pressing concerns for Black women in the Pittsburgh region. The top five are as follows:

1. Poverty - 41.32% (or 119 participants)
2. Mental Health Challenges - 25% (or 72 participants)

²⁴ Thankfully, 238 participants (83%) report access to quality healthcare.

²⁵ For reference, please read the following: <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2019-09-20/how-pittsburgh-fails-black-women-in-6-charts> and <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2020-01-09/the-best-and-worst-cities-for-black-women>

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3. Childcare Costs - 21.53% (or 62 participants)
 4. Women's Health and Reproductive Health - 18.75% (or 54 participants)
 5. Gun Violence/Community Safety and Access to Quality Educational Options - 16.67% (or 48 participants)



Again, these responses meet the anecdotal findings of the BWPA not only in their focus groups but in informal conversations that the project has been a part of with Black women in the Greater Pittsburgh region outside of this study.

According to the GEC report, "living in poverty limits access to quality health care and balanced diets, contributing to premature deaths. Poverty also increases stress, constrains children's educational opportunities and more."²⁶ In Pittsburgh, White and Black women are more likely to live in poverty than their male counterparts but the racial disparities on poverty are much larger. Pittsburgh's Black women are twice as likely than white women to live in poverty and over one-third of Pittsburgh's Black women live below the federal poverty

²⁶ Howell, Junia et al. "Pittsburgh's Inequality across Gender and Race." Gender Analysis White Papers. City of Pittsburgh's Gender Equity Commission.

line.²⁷ Not only are Pittsburgh's Black women the highest likely in our region to live in poverty but their poverty rates are higher than Black women in most cities. In fact, Black women in 85 percent of U.S. cities are doing better than Black women in Pittsburgh.²⁸

In addition to poverty, the GEC also examined the physical and mental well-being of its residents. First, it is important to observe that Black women in Pittsburgh are likely to die on average almost nine years prior to white women (69.9 years versus 78.2 years). They are also likely to outlive Black men by only six years (69.9 years versus 63.6 years).

Fetal Morality Rates are another area of physical and mental health deficit for Black women in Pittsburgh. Fetal deaths are two times more likely among Black women than white women in Pittsburgh (18 out of every 1,000 versus 9 out of every 1,000). What is more startling is that fact that Pittsburgh's Black fetal mortality rate is higher than the fetal morality rate in 94% of similar cities in America.²⁹

Despite starting prenatal care earlier than 92% percent of Black women in similar cities and having less gestational health issues, Black women's maternal mortality rates are higher generally. Moreover, the inequality between White and Black morality rates in Pittsburgh is greater than the inequality between White and Black mortality rates in 84% of similar cities.³⁰ Needless to say, while the Pittsburgh GEC study clearly revealed that Pittsburgh is one of worst places for all BIPOC, it clearly seems to affect black women more so than any other gender/ethnicity.

FAR-REACHING CONCERNS OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

Eleven questions on the survey are designated to discussing issues connected to the COVID-19 pandemic. These included if participants knew someone who was diagnosed and/or died of COVID-19, questions regarding food insecurity and the overall effects of school closures on families during the pandemic.

²⁷ Ibid; to measure poverty, the GEC used the 2017 federal poverty statistics to draw their study conclusions.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid.

When asked how often they are stressed about meeting basic needs due to the pandemic, 179 participants (62.3%) answered affirmatively with either “always (7.67%), often (19.51%) or sometimes (35.19%).” 56% of respondents admitted that they have taken on additional jobs during (and since) the pandemic to attempt to become more financially secure. These jobs include independent/contract labor options like UBER, LYFT and Instacart or starting a small business. These employment opportunities were reported to be better options for respondents in the focus groups because of their flexible hours and ability to increase or decrease income or time without jeopardizing the loss of the opportunity.

More than a quarter of the women (27%) reported a heightened food insecurity during (and since) the pandemic. 59 respondents reported that they were able to turn to local organizations to receive assistance such as the Greater Pittsburgh Community Food Bank or lunch distribution programs offered directly from their child’s school district. Despite the increase of religious and community organizations who fought to meet the growing needs of the under and unemployed during the pandemic, 7.2% (21) of respondents reported being unable to obtain enough affordable, nutritious food for themselves and their families during the lockdown. It is important to note here that we are unable to identify if these respondents were already experiencing lack of access and if that access was even more pronounced during the lockdown or if this lack of access was a new phenomenon for these respondents.³¹

69 participants (24.04%) reported an anticipation of being unable to afford their rent at the end of the national moratorium during COVID-19.³² This question specifically uncovers deeper issues of the lack of affordable housing in Pittsburgh and surrounding regions. According to the Habitat for Humanity of Greater Pittsburgh, “the lack of decent, affordable homes has forced tens of thousands of limited-income families to pay well-over 30% of their monthly income on housing. Currently, there is a need of roughly 15,000 affordable homes in our region alone. In addition, someone who works a minimum-wage job would have to work over 80 hours per week to afford a modest, one

³¹ Thankfully, over 73% (or 213) respondents reported that they did not experience food insecurity due to the pandemic or that the questions wasn’t applicable to them.

³² Please note that Question 21 does not ask participants to clarify why they feel that they wouldn’t be able to pay their rent - as in are you currently unemployed due to the pandemic.

bedroom apartment in Pittsburgh”.³³ As a result, many under or unemployed live in substandard conditions or have to make difficult tradeoffs like taking on multiple jobs, not saving for retirement (if even eligible at one of their jobs), accumulating staggering credit card debt or cutting back on healthcare (even if regular treatment is needed).

While nearly half of respondents reported that their children have access to adequate technology for educational purposes (like a laptop or tablet), access to reliable WIFI, and adequate academic support from teachers during lockdown, access to reliable childcare and growing child-care costs were cited as one of the biggest hurdles due to COVID. The pandemic simply exacerbated what was a very unstable and problematic system. According to Kate Giammarise, staff writer for WESA, “the COVID-19 pandemic has led to the loss of up to 15,600 child care spots in Allegheny County.”³⁴ These significant losses could push many parents of young children out of the workforce permanently. Giammarise states, “Quality childcare is not only good for kids and families - it is also critical for the economy to function. Even before COVID, the system was broken, with complicated, unsustainable funding models and inequity. COVID has exacerbated these cracks, worsening inequality, forcing workers out of the labor force, and threatening the sector as a whole.”³⁵

Our region was already lacking more than 8600 licensed childcare spots for students under the age of 5 before the COVID crisis. If the COVID economic backlash for women of color in our region takes even half as long as the economic recovery after the Great Recession of 2008, it could be at least until 2026 that our region suffers under the weight of non-adequate childcare.

BWPA’s Collective Impact Goals/Study Recommendations

³³ “Our Area’s Need.” <https://www.habitatpittsburgh.org/why-housing-matters>

³⁴ “Loss of Thousands of Child Care Spots in Allegheny County Will Hurt Parents, Workforce.” <https://www.wesa.fm/economy-business/2020-10-21/study-loss-of-thousands-of-child-care-spots-in-allegheny-county-will-hurt-parents-workforce>

³⁵ *ibid.*

So, what does this study reveal about being a Black Woman in the City of Pittsburgh. The online survey and listening sessions showed us the following:

- Black women in this region not only serve as the backbone of their own family but many times also the backbone of their local neighborhood and larger community. Black women have the highest labor participation rate among all women, even during a global pandemic.
- Even though educational opportunities are regularly attained, those opportunities are more than often not seen in the earning potential of Black women. Again, the unemployment rates of Black women with college education are nearly the same as their white counterparts with just a high school diploma.
- Since employment opportunities and earning potentials are lower than most, median family incomes will generally be lower than a single income in a white household.
- Low wage workers, many of whom who are Black women in this region, are less likely to have key employee benefits like paid family leave, sick days, and retirement accounts (401k or 403b).
- Black women in this region are more likely to experience racism not only in their personal lives but in their professional lives as well. Even though we are disproportionately targeted by discrimination (especially in the workplace), we are the least likely to report it.
- Black women in this region are less likely to be believed by medical professionals when experiencing a health crisis. This makes them more likely to experience a severe morbidity event that will affect their overall lifespan.
- Black women often spend more of their income than any other group to maintain their household (nationally as much as 41%).

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- Black women in this region had less external help/support during the COVID-19 crisis (in areas of childcare, healthcare, etc.).

The most important thing learned in the completion of this study is that the voices of Black women in Greater Pittsburgh must center the work of any initiative that seeks to solve their complex livability issues. As stated earlier, Black women are rarely at the center of the work - meaning that they are rarely offered a seat at the table and consulted about how they would like to see their complex problems addressed. The BWPA has begun the difficult but important work of recognizing that no real large-scale change can happen here in the Greater Pittsburgh region without it becoming the backbone organization through which Black women can come together with shared goals, measures and actions to help Black women move from surviving to thriving.

In order to accomplish this, the BWPA seeks to bring together Black women, other individuals from the broader community, religious and community organizations, grant makers as well as business and governmental leaders who are committed to bringing the needs of Black women in the Greater Pittsburgh region to the forefront. The BWPA has listened to the voices in our region, and they are asking for the following:

- To be CENTERED in policy and research on the issues that directly affect us. This doesn't always mean that we have to continue to recreate programs and opportunities but that we must come together with common thought, combine our resources, develop mutually reinforcing programming and share our successes to develop public support.
- To see the minimum wage raised in all positions to no less than \$15 per hour. This will allow for more economic success by increasing incomes of Black women in the region, making things such as housing and childcare more affordable.
- Provide paid Family Medical Leave for all Black women, no matter the type of job they have.

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- To develop a stronger focus on Black Women’s Maternal Health to help combat the high infant and material morbidity rates. This can be accomplished through extending Medicaid benefits to at least one year postpartum.
 - Make childcare in our region more accessible and affordable as well expand hours of care to include non-traditional hours and weekends.
 - Raise the TANF Cash Grant
 - Increase access to free and reduced cost mental health services.
 - Create workplace protections specifically for Black women to overcome racism in their current (or future) positions.
 - Achieve pay equity for Black women

VISION AND MISSION

VISION: Black women across all identities are centered in policy development that promotes social justice and systems change work with a focus on the intersection of gender and race. Creating synergy that supports our collective work, ultimately shifting Black women and girls from surviving to thriving.

MISSION: Our mission is to promote, support and affect policy change, building on the collective power of Black women in the community and the organizations and initiatives that serve them; to shape and change administrative and legislative policy on a local, state, and federal level through storytelling, research, analysis, and advocacy.

The Black Women’s Policy Agenda, a project of the Black Women’s Policy Center

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