

# Social Work Research

AT THE UNIVERSITY OF PITTSBURGH

FY 2024/2025

**GROUNDING**

IN COMMUNITY

**CHALLENGING**

OPPRESSIVE SYSTEMS

**REIMAGINING**

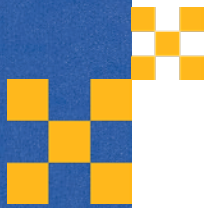
PRACTICE & POLICY



University of  
Pittsburgh

School of Social Work





# TRANSFORMING OUR WORLD, OUR FUTURE, OURSELVES.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

### RESEARCH FOCI AT PITT

- 5 Promoting Child and Family Wellbeing
- 6 Innovations in Mental Health
- 7 Supporting Healthy Aging
- 7 Improving Health and Health Care
- 8 Dismantling Racism and Addressing Disparities
- 9 Understanding and Challenging Intersectional Oppression
- 9 Creating Thriving Communities

### DRIVING INNOVATION AND COLLABORATION IN SOCIAL WORK RESEARCH

- 11 Research Collaboratives
- 12 Racial Equity Consciousness Institute Secures \$5M NIH Grant to Propel Innovative Research
- 13 The ReCAST Study: Building Stronger Neighborhoods Through Collective Efficacy and Community Empowerment
- 15 Dr. James Huguley's work aims to support Black students and parents at home and in school
- 16 Mental Health Interventions Meeting People Where They Are in the Community
- 18 Centering Youth and Technology: Dr. Jaime Booth's Unique Approach to Research
- 19 Dr. Quinton Cotton Brings New Expertise in Gerontology, Caregivers, and Culturally Responsive Interventions
- 20 Pittsburgh Wage Study Shows Role of Data in Driving Policy Change
- 22 Dr. Fengyan Tang Brings Focus to Aging Chinese Immigrants' Health
- 23 Dr. Kyaien Conner Works to Reshape Mental Health Care for Communities of Color

## DEAR FRIENDS AND COLLEAGUES,

**For over a hundred years, the School of Social Work at the University of Pittsburgh has been a national leader in conducting scholarship grounded in community, challenging oppressive systems, and reimagining practice and policy.**



In this publication, I am excited to share an overview of how our faculty have advanced this work in the last year. Across a range of practice areas, Pitt's School of Social Work faculty and doctoral students are conducting critical, rigorous, and boundary-pushing research that seeks to contribute to individual and collective well-being. At the University of Pittsburgh, we understand that this important work cannot be done without centering community voices and addressing racist and oppressive systems that continue to restrict opportunities for some. This is evident throughout our faculty research—be it, Dr. Hugley's Parenting While Black intervention, Drs. Engel, Goodkind, and Shook's Wage Study or Drs. Wallace, Moon, Jones, and Durham's CHURCH project. Pitt Faculty's research consistently addresses systems of oppression and builds culturally grounded interventions that support existing strengths. Our commitment to conducting research grounded in the community can be seen across most of our faculty's research, exemplified in Drs. Goodkind and Shook's NIJ-funded research project evaluating the impact of Caring Connections on the disproportionality of youth incarceration or Drs. Ohmer and Jacobs's ReCAST Project, designed to build collective efficacy in neighborhoods. Pitt faculty's commitment to critical, rigorous and community-engaged research continues to produce excellent social work scholarship that is moving the field forward.

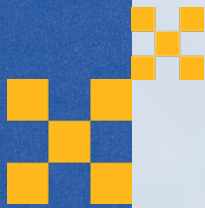
Some exciting things are happening at Pitt that I want to highlight. Under the new direction of Dr. Kyaien Conner, and building on late Dean Larry Davis's legacy, the Center on Race and Social Problems continues to advance research that identifies and addresses the role of racism in social problems and promotes the quality of life of all Americans. Not only have CRSP researchers recently secured over \$5 million dollars for race-related research, but the center is also working to support a robust network of race-related centers and scholars both at the University of Pittsburgh and nationally. In addition to our strong research centers, we have established four faculty-initiated research collaboratives for the first time this year in Public Social Work, Human Flourishing, Healthy Aging, and Care Work. These collaboratives were designed to be flexible and support faculty innovation, and I am excited about the work they are already beginning to accomplish.

Since becoming ADR in 2023, I have had the privilege of working with my colleagues at the University of Pittsburgh to continue to build and collaboratively expand our research and its impact. In this publication, you will read stories about some excellent research that my colleagues at the University of Pittsburgh are conducting, but this is not exhaustive. Our robust research portfolio has resulted in 18 new awards in 2024 and over \$21.8 million dollars in annual research expenditures from the ACF, NIH, NIJ, NSF, DOE, and CDC, in addition to many local foundations and state contracts. Across all our research projects, Pitt faculty's seeks to provide evidence for new models of social work practice and rigorous research that can be used to shift policy, ensuring real-world impact. If you would like to see more of the excellent work that our faculty are doing, be sure to visit [socialwork.pitt.edu/research](https://socialwork.pitt.edu/research). I look forward to all that we will accomplish in the new year.

**Jaime Booth, PhD**

Associate Dean of Research  
University of Pittsburgh School of Social Work





# RESEARCH FOCI AT PITT

Grounded in Community,  
Challenging Oppressive Systems,  
Reimagining Practice & Policy

FY2024–FY2025

PROMOTING CHILD AND FAMILY WELLBEING

INNOVATIONS IN MENTAL HEALTH

SUPPORTING HEALTHY AGING

IMPROVING HEALTH AND HEALTH CARE

DISMANTLING RACISM AND ADDRESSING DISPARITIES

UNDERSTANDING AND CHALLENGING INTERSECTIONAL OPPRESSION

CREATING THRIVING COMMUNITIES

## PROMOTING CHILD AND FAMILY WELLBEING

| RESEARCH GRANTS       |   | FUNDER  |
|-----------------------|---|---|
| <b>Helen Cahalane</b> | Child Welfare Education and Research Programs   | <i>Pennsylvania Department of Human Services, Office of Children, Youth and Families (in partnership with the federal Administration for Children and Families)</i> |
| <b>Helen Cahalane</b> | Child Welfare Resource Center (CWRC)  | <i>Pennsylvania Department of Human Services, Office of Children, Youth and Families (in partnership with the federal Administration for Children and Families)</i> |
| <b>Helen Cahalane</b> | Allegheny County Department of Human Services Training Program and Student Internships.   | <i>Allegheny County Department of Human Services, Office of Children, Youth and Families</i>  |
| <b>Betsy Farmer</b>   | Project SEEKS, Social Work for Social and Emotional Learning  | <i>Allegheny Intermediate Unit/CDC</i>  |
| <b>Sara Goodkind</b>  | Creating Caring Connections for Youth: Evaluation of a Countywide Pre-Arrest Diversion Initiative to Reduce Racial/Ethnic Disparities           | <i>National Institute of Justice</i>  |
| <b>James Huguley</b>  | Just Discipline Project (JDP): Reducing Racial Disparities and Promoting Positive School Climate  | <i>University of Chicago/ Department of Education</i>   |
| <b>James Huguley</b>  | Parenting While Black, Train the Trainer Model  | <i>PittEI3 (Equitable, Inclusive, Innovation and Incubation)</i>  |
| <b>Ron Idoko</b>      | Children, Philosophy, and Race  | <i>Office of Child Development's Frank &amp; Theresa Caplan Fund for Early Childhood Development &amp; Education</i>  |
| <b>Leah Jacobs</b>    | Can Law Enforcement Training Address Racial and Ethnic Disproportionality? An Experimental Evaluation of Effective Youth Interactions           | <i>National Institute of Justice</i>  |
| <b>Daniel Lee</b>     | Navigation and Parent Peer Support to Promote Access and Retention of Children in Mental Health Services  | <i>University of Colorado/National Institute of Mental Health</i>   |
| <b>Deborah Moon</b>   | Community-based Prevention Model Enhancing Safety and Well-being for Ohio's Children and Family   | <i>Ohio State University/ Administration for Children and Family</i>  |
| <b>Deborah Moon</b>   | Caregiver Relational Responsiveness (RR): An Understudied Fidelity Construct as a Mechanism to Increase Protective Factors Against Maltreatment | <i>Centers for Disease Control and Prevention</i>   |
| <b>Marlo Perry</b>    | Quality Improvement Center for Workforce Analytics (QIC-WA)   | <i>Children's Bureau</i>  |
| <b>Mary Rauktis</b>   | Evaluating Together Facing the Challenge  | <i>Omni Family Services</i>   |

## INNOVATIONS IN MENTAL HEALTH

| RESEARCH GRANTS                 |  | FUNDER  |
|---------------------------------|--|---|
| <b>Christina Babusci</b>        | Cultural Influences on the Treatment and Engagement of Serious Mental Illness  | <i>CRSP/RISE-MH Pilot</i>   |
| <b>Aliya Durham</b>             | Partnering with Black Mental Health Providers  | <i>CRSP/RISE-MH Pilot</i>   |
| <b>Shaun Eack</b>               | Adolescent Brain Maturation and Psychopathology  | <i>National Institute of Mental Health</i>  |
| <b>Shaun Eack</b>               | Cognitive Enhancement for Persistent Negative Symptoms in Schizophrenia  | <i>National Institute of Mental Health</i>  |
| <b>Shaun Eack</b>               | Change Sensitive Measurement of Adult Functional Outcomes in Developmental Disabilities  | <i>Eunice Kennedy Shriver National Institute of Child Health and Human Development</i>            |
| <b>Shaun Eack</b>               | Implementation of Cognitive Enhancement Therapy, Washington County Behavioral Health   | <i>AMI, Inc.</i>  |
| <b>Shaun Eack</b>               | Understand and Compare Cognitive Enhancement and Social Skill Effectiveness in Schizophrenia   | <i>Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Center/ Patient-Centered Outcomes Research Institute (PCORI)</i> |
| <b>Shaun Eack and Nev Jones</b> | Neural Mechanisms of Anticholinergic Burden in Mid-to Late Life Schizophrenia Spectrum Illness   | <i>National Institute of Mental Health</i>  |
| <b>Shaun Eack</b>               | Accelerated Neuromodulation of Prefrontal Circuitry during Clozapine Treatment   | <i>National Institute of Mental Health</i>  |
| <b>Shaun Eack</b>               | Mental Health in Autistic Adults: An RDoC Approach   | <i>National Institute of Mental Health</i>  |
| <b>Victor Figuereo</b>          | Multiple Dimensions of Race and Colorblind Racial Ideology: Understanding Pathways to Afro Latinx Mental Health  | <i>Pitt SSW Pilot</i>   |
| <b>Catherine Greeno</b>         | Unpacking Racial Disparities in the Involuntary Psychiatric Commitment of Youth and Young Adults in Allegheny County   | <i>Pitt Momentum 23</i>   |
| <b>Leah Jacobs</b>              | Mobile Crisis Worker Decision Making and Intervention Deployment: Characteristics and Influences   | <i>SSW Internal Florence Stier</i>  |
| <b>Nev Jones</b>                | A Qualitative Investigation of Work-related Decision Making Among SSI Recipients   | <i>California State University Sacramento/ Social Security Administration</i>                     |
| <b>Nev Jones</b>                | Optimizing Disability Benefit Decisions and Outcomes in First Episode Psychosis  | <i>University of Maryland/National Institute of Mental Health</i>                                 |
| <b>Nev Jones</b>                | A Service User Informed Study of Certified Community Behavioral Health Center (CCBHC) Implementation and Impact in New York State  | <i>RAND/National Institute of Mental Health</i>   |
| <b>Nev Jones</b>                |  | <i>New York State Office of Mental Health</i>   |
| <b>Nev Jones</b>                | Harnessing a Two-State FEP LHS to Optimize CSC Engagement and Prevent Disengagement in CSC   | <i>University of Maryland/ National Institute of Mental Health</i>                                |
| <b>Nev Jones</b>                | Developing Measures to Advance Quality in Mental Health Care Services  | <i>RAND/ National Institute of Mental Health</i>  |
| <b>Deborah Moon</b>             | Renew Your Mind: A Feasibility Study to Disseminate Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) Techniques through Black Churches to Promote Positive Mental Health of African American Populations | <i>CRSP/RISE-MH Pilot</i>   |
| <b>Mary Rauktis</b>             | Assessing the Mental Health of Veterinarians and Social Work Response  | <i>Medvet Corporation</i>   |



## SUPPORTING HEALTHY AGING

| RESEARCH GRANTS       |   | FUNDER   |
|-----------------------|---|--|
| <b>Kyaien Conner</b>  | Enhancing the Care Transitions Intervention with Peer Support to Reduce Disparities   | <i>Patient-Centered Outcomes Research Institute (PCORI)</i>                                |
| <b>Kyaien Conner</b>  | Advanced Research Institute (ARI) in Mental Health and Aging  | <i>National Institutes of Health</i>   |
| <b>Kyaien Conner</b>  | 3/3 Lay-delivered Behavioral Activation in Senior Centers   | <i>University of South Florida/ National Institutes of Health</i>                          |
| <b>Quinton Cotton</b> | Qualitative Research to Quantify Exposures to Racism among Older Adults   | <i>University of Minnesota/ National Institutes of Health National Institute on Aging</i>  |
| <b>Quinton Cotton</b> | PorchLight Cultural Adaptation  | <i>University of Minnesota / National Institutes of Health National Institute on Aging</i> |
| <b>Quinton Cotton</b> | Improving Outcomes for Family Caregivers and Older Adults with Complex Conditions: The Adult Day Service Plus Program   | <i>University of Minnesota/ National Institutes of Health National Institute on Aging</i>  |
| <b>Rafael Engel</b>   | Medicaid Research Support for Allegheny County  | <i>Allegheny County Department of Human Services</i>                                       |
| <b>Daniel Lee</b>     | Evaluating Age Friendly Greater Pittsburgh  | <i>Age Friendly Greater Pittsburgh</i>   |
| <b>Fengyan Tang</b>   | Preventing Cognitive Decline and Dementia Among Older Chinese Immigrants: The Role of Activity, Engagement, Immigration Experience, and Neighborhood Environments | <i>NIH/National Institute on Aging</i>   |

## IMPROVING HEALTH AND HEALTH CARE

| RESEARCH GRANTS       |  | FUNDER   |
|-----------------------|--|--|
| <b>Rachel Gartner</b> | Telling Our Story: Engaging Narrative to Support Trans-Affirming Care in College Health and Counseling Centers | <i>The Opportunity Fund</i>  |
| <b>Daniel Rosen</b>   | Behavioral Health Workforce Education and Training (BHWET) Program   | <i>Health Resources and Services Administration</i>                                |
| <b>Daniel Rosen</b>   | Center for Integrated Health Care Delivery and Prevention Program  | <i>University of Pittsburgh Medical Center</i>                                     |
| <b>Mary Rauktis</b>   | Improving Access to Health Care for Humans and Animals   | <i>Scaife Foundation and Allegheny Health Network</i>                              |
| <b>Ronald Idoko</b>   | Network of the National Library of Medicine (NNLM) All of Us Program Center                                    | <i>National Institutes of Health</i>   |
| <b>Emil Smith</b>     | Mixed-methods Study for Identifying Intervention Points in Healthcare Delivery for Trans Adults                | <i>Clinical and Translational Science Institute/ National Institutes of Health</i> |

## DISMANTLING RACISM AND ADDRESSING DISPARITIES

| RESEARCH GRANTS         |  | FUNDER   |
|-------------------------|--|--|
| <b>Kyaien Conner</b>    | Advancing Race-Based Research at the University of Pittsburgh  | <i>Pitt Momentum 2024</i>  |
| <b>Kyaien Conner</b>    | Enhancing the Care Transitions Intervention with Peer Support to Reduce Disparities  | <i>Patient-Centered Outcomes Research Institute (PCORI)</i>  |
| <b>Quinton Cotton</b>   | Qualitative Research to Quantify Exposures to Racism among Older Adults  | <i>University of Minnesota/ National Institutes of Health National Institute on Aging</i>                            |
| <b>Quinton Cotton</b>   | PorchLight Cultural Adaptation   | <i>University of Minnesota / National Institutes of Health National Institute on Aging</i>                           |
| <b>Aliya Durham</b>     | Partnering with Black Mental health Providers  | <i>CRSP/RISE-MH Pilot</i>  |
| <b>Victor Figuereo</b>  | Multiple Dimensions of Race and Colorblind Racial Ideology: Understanding Pathways to Afro Latinx Mental Health  | <i>Pitt SSW Pilot</i>  |
| <b>Sara Goodkind</b>    | Creating Caring Connections for Youth: Evaluation of a Countywide Pre-arrest Diversion Project   | <i>National Institute of Justice</i>   |
| <b>Catherine Greeno</b> | Unpacking Racial Disparities in the Involuntary Psychiatric Commitment of Youth and Young Adults in Allegheny County   | <i>Pitt Momentum 23</i>  |
| <b>James Huguley</b>    | Collaborative Research: Black Girls as AI Technology   | <i>National Science Foundation</i>   |
| <b>James Huguley</b>    | A Scalable Ecosystem to Support Racial Justice in AI Education   | <i>National Science Foundation</i>   |
| <b>James Huguley</b>    | Just Discipline, Regional Impact Model   | <i>The Heinz Endowments</i>  |
| <b>James Huguley</b>    | Restorative Practice Professional Developments and Supports Impact Study   | <i>Aliquippa School District</i>   |
| <b>James Huguley</b>    | Just Discipline Project (JDP): Reducing Racial Disparities and Promoting Positive School Climate   | <i>University of Chicago/ Department of Education</i>  |
| <b>James Huguley</b>    | Just Discipline SIRCh Model Implementation   | <i>Richard King Mellon Foundation</i>  |
| <b>James Huguley</b>    | Just Discipline and Effective Restorative Practices: Using Design Innovations and Implementation Science as Catalysts for Sustainable School Transformation                                | <i>US. Department of Education</i>   |
| <b>James Huguley</b>    | Parenting While Black, Train the Trainer Model   | <i>PittEI3 (Equitable, Inclusive, Innovation and Incubation)</i>   |
| <b>Ron Idoko</b>        | Promoting Inclusive Excellence   | <i>National Institute of General Medical Science</i>   |
| <b>Ron Idoko</b>        | Children, Philosophy, and Race   | <i>Office of Child Development's Frank &amp; Theresa Caplan Fund for Early Childhood Development &amp; Education</i> |
| <b>Leah Jacobs</b>      | Can Law Enforcement Training Address Racial and Ethnic Disproportionality? An Experimental Evaluation of Effective Youth Interactions  | <i>National Institute of Justice</i>   |
| <b>Deborah Moon</b>     | Renew Your Mind: A Feasibility Study to Disseminate Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) Techniques through Black Churches to Promote Positive Mental Health of African American Populations | <i>CRSP/RISE-MH Pilot</i>  |
| <b>Marlo Perry</b>      | Supporting Superwomen: Emotional Labor, Gendered Racial Microaggressions, and the Superwomen Schema in Black Female Child Welfare Professionals  | <i>CRSP Pilot</i>  |

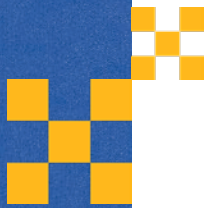


## UNDERSTANDING AND CHALLENGING INTERSECTIONAL OPPRESSION

| RESEARCH GRANTS          |  | FUNDER   |
|--------------------------|--|--|
| <b>Christina Babusci</b> | Cultural Influences on the Treatment and Engagement of Serious Mental Illness  | <i>CRSP/RISE-MH Pilot</i>  |
| <b>Rachel Gartner</b>    | Telling Our Story: Engaging Narrative to Support Trans-Affirming Care in College Health and Counseling Centers   | <i>The Opportunity Fund</i>  |
| <b>Rachel Gartner</b>    | Reducing Alcohol Involved Sexual Violence in Higher Education (RAISE)  | <i>National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism</i>                          |
| <b>Rachel Gartner</b>    | Sexual Misconduct Prevention and Survivor Support  | <i>University of Pittsburgh – Pitt Seed 2.0</i>                                    |
| <b>Nev Jones</b>         | Evaluating Assisted Outpatient Treatment (AOT) in New York State   | <i>New York State Office of Mental Health</i>                                      |
| <b>Nev Jones</b>         | Harnessing a Two-State First Episode Psychosis Learning Healthcare System to Optimize Engagement and Prevent Disengagement in Coordinated Specialty Care | <i>National Institute of Mental Health</i>   |
| <b>Nev Jones</b>         | A Qualitative Investigation of Work-related Decision Making Among SSI Recipients   | <i>Social Security Administration RDRC Program.</i>                                |
| <b>Nev Jones</b>         | Optimizing Disability Benefit Decisions and Outcomes in First Episode Psychosis  | <i>National Institute of Mental Health</i>   |
| <b>Jeffrey Shook</b>     | Guaranteed Income Pilot Evaluation   | <i>United Way</i>  |
| <b>Emil Smith</b>        | Mixed-methods Study for Identifying Intervention Points in Healthcare Delivery for Trans Adults  | <i>Clinical and Translational Science Institute/ National Institutes of Health</i> |

## CREATING THRIVING COMMUNITIES

| RESEARCH GRANTS       |  | FUNDER   |
|-----------------------|--|--|
| <b>Kyaien Conner</b>  | Black Pittsburgh Satisfaction and Retention Study  | <i>Center for Social &amp; Urban Research, University of Pittsburgh, Manners Award</i>                           |
| <b>Rachel Gartner</b> | Reducing Alcohol Involved Sexual Violence in Higher Education (RAISE)  | <i>National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism</i>  |
| <b>Rachel Gartner</b> | Sexual Misconduct Prevention and Survivor Support  | <i>University of Pittsburgh – Pitt Seed 2.0</i>  |
| <b>Sara Goodkin</b>   | Enhancing the Public Health Response to Domestic Violence in the Context of Covid-19                               | <i>Arizona State University/ AmeriCorps</i>  |
| <b>Mary Ohmer</b>     | A Community-centered Collective Efficacy Intervention for Prevention of Community Violence                         | <i>Center for Disease Control and Prevention</i>   |
| <b>Mary Ohmer</b>     | Community Thriving: Enhancing Resiliency of Communities after Stress and Trauma                                    | <i>Allegheny County, Department of Human Services, Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration</i> |
| <b>Mary Ohmer</b>     | Research for Equity and Power  | <i>AmeriCorps</i>  |
| <b>Jeffrey Shook</b>  | Guaranteed Income Pilot Evaluation   | <i>United Way</i>  |
| <b>Jaime Booth</b>    | From Data Literacy to Collective Data Stewardship: Technology-Supported Community-Driven Solutions for Urban Youth | <i>National Science Foundation</i>   |



# DRIVING INNOVATION AND COLLABORATION IN SOCIAL WORK RESEARCH

The University of Pittsburgh's School of Social Work is advancing its research and practice through a series of faculty-initiated collaboratives. These research collaboratives aim to address critical issues in social work by fostering research collaboration among faculty, students, practitioners, and community partners. From public sector advocacy to healthy aging, care work and human flourishing, these initiatives highlight the school's commitment to interdisciplinary research and community engagement.

“ Our faculty are doing such amazing interdisciplinary research across multiple substantive areas but rarely have the time and space to sit and discuss the big ideas that foster innovation in the field. I love the topics that our faculty decided to focus on in this pilot year. They are an excellent representation of where social work is going and what our school is about. ”

---

*Dr. Jaime Booth, associate dean for research and  
associate professor at the School of Social Work*



# RESEARCH COLLABORATIVES

## Public Social Work



Convened by **Dr. Leah Jacobs**, the Public Social Work Research Collaborative (PSWRC) seeks to renew interest in public sector social work and critically assess its role in producing public goods. Social work, a field that spans multiple institutions and sectors, often faces

challenges in accessibility and accountability to the public. This collaborative aims to address foundational questions: Who does social work serve? How does privatization influence the profession? What is the relationship between social work, the state, and the public?

The PSWRC also addresses practical concerns, such as improving public access to social work knowledge and attracting students to public sector careers. By bridging gaps between academia and practice, the collaborative strives to build community, promote advocacy, and enhance the impact of public social work in Pittsburgh and throughout the country.

## Ties that Bind: A Healthy Aging



Led by multiple conveners, including **Beth Mulvaney**, the Ties that Bind: Healthy Aging Research Collaborative is poised to help make Pittsburgh the healthiest place to age in America. The collaborative's mission centers on health equity, innovation, and

intergenerational connections while also emphasizing the importance of community infrastructure and social bonds in fostering healthy aging.

Through partnerships with organizations such as Age-Friendly Greater Pittsburgh, the collaborative will address the social determinants of health and amplify the voices of older adults. Its first-year goals include establishing a structure, conducting an environmental scan, and creating an action plan for research and community engagement. The group is currently looking at the policy proposals of the incoming federal administration to understand their potential impact on older adults and their families and considering how existing research can inform them. By leveraging expertise in intervention science and community-based research, this initiative will serve as a launching pad for impactful aging-related projects

## Human Flourishing



Led by **Dr. Deborah Moon**, the Human Flourishing Research Collaborative, aims to shift the focus from problem-solving to asset building research. Traditional health and human services research often emphasizes deficits, inadvertently reinforcing

stigma. This research collaborative aims to conduct research that breaks that cycle by prioritizing well-being, positive mental health, and flourishing as outcomes. Social work, which is uniquely positioned to lead this effort, seeks to redefine the field by addressing not just what needs fixing, but also what can be built. By advancing research, this collaborative aims to create a framework for research aimed at understanding and fostering human flourishing across diverse communities.

## Care Work



Convened by **Dr. Mary Beth Rauktis**, the Care Work Research Collaborative examines the well-being of caregivers across various fields. From healthcare workers and family caregivers to treatment foster parents and even veterinary professionals, this

collaborative highlights the diverse challenges faced by those in caregiving roles.

Building on past research at the School of Social Work, the collaborative aims to explore intersections of race, gender, and profession to inspire novel solutions. By fostering interdisciplinary dialogue, this initiative seeks to improve physical, mental, and emotional well-being for caregivers and those they serve. Due to the overlap between the Care Work Research Collaborative and the Healthy Aging Research Collaborative, Beth Mulvaney and Mary Rauktis serve on each other's teams respectively and are collaborating to advance this important work.

**These faculty-initiated research collaboratives highlight the School of Social Work's commitment to addressing pressing social issues through pioneering research and collaboration. As these initiatives unfold, they aim to not only affect the academic landscape but also create lasting impacts on the communities they serve.**

## Racial Equity Consciousness Institute Secures \$5M NIH Grant to Propel Innovative Research

The Racial Equity Consciousness Institute (RECI) has taken a significant step forward in addressing systemic racism with a \$5 million grant recently awarded from the National Institutes of Health (NIH). This grant is a collaborative initiative with the University of Pittsburgh Schools of Social Work and Medicine combining expertise to cultivate racial equity in the biomedical field.



Ron Idoko

Founded in 2021 by **Ron Idoko**, associate director of the Center on Race and Social Problems, RECI has emerged as a response to the pervasive and destructive effects of systemic racism on public health. Idoko's vision for RECI was shaped during his time as a program manager at Pitt's Office for Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion, where he developed anti-bias education programs. "What prompted development of RECI was the need to really put people in a position to feel like they could learn how complex and pervasive racism is and just as importantly, learn the concepts of racial equity and how to cultivate it within themselves and within their communities" Idoko says. RECI is now housed under Pitt's Center on Race and Social Problems at the School of Social Work and hosts regular learning community cohorts engaging hundreds of participants in its mission to advance racial equity.

Idoko emphasizes that systemic racism functions like a social virus, deeply embedded in the fabric of institutions and often perpetuated through socialized biases and behaviors and affecting the public health of marginalized communities. RECI seeks to counteract and mitigate these effects by acting as a "vaccine" - promoting awareness and empowering individuals with the tools and knowledge to enact change within their communities and organizations. "To be antiracist is to vaccinate ourselves from the unconscious perpetuation of racism by consciously examining and modifying our socialized thoughts, feelings, and behaviors regarding race and racism. It is to understand that ongoing, collective action is needed to foster equitable opportunities and outcomes for those who have endured long-standing structural and systemic inequities" Idoko states.

At the core of RECI's methodology is the racial equity consciousness framework, which provides participants with a guided process to understand and address the multifaceted nature of racism. This framework combines elements of cognitive behavioral therapy with evidence-based strategies to promote equity-conscious behaviors, such as addressing biases, building empathy and fostering racial healing. RECI's workshops delve into the origins of racial constructs, highlighting their historical and systemic impacts. Participants are equipped with reflective and communicative tools to challenge inequities and embrace racial justice. This approach makes RECI a "timeless framework" for fostering sustained efforts toward equity.





The NIH grant will enable researchers to assess the effectiveness of RECI's training model, as well as other implicit bias interventions, on improving diversity and retention in healthcare settings. The study will focus on how these programs influence attitudes and behaviors that perpetuate racial disparities, particularly in healthcare outcomes for marginalized groups.

A groundbreaking aspect of the research involves the use of functional brain imaging (fMRI) to measure structural brain changes in select participants before and after the interventions. This method will offer insights into how RECI's framework fosters lasting cognitive and behavioral shifts. Participants from 30 institutions across the country will take part in this randomized trial. Key collaborators on the project include Dr. Doris Rubio, director of Pitt's Institute for Clinical Research Education, and Dr. Gretchen White, assistant professor of Medicine, Epidemiology, and Clinical and Translational Science.

Idoko says that he's both humbled and affirmed by the NIH's support through this new grant and is excited to see the impact that this study will have both in the United States and across the globe. He states, "we want to be able to position people across the country and beyond to understand that racism is indeed a solvable problem, and that we can leverage evidence-based strategies [and] data-driven practices to put people in a position to become incredible agents of change in their own community". By combining thoughtful research with actionable strategies, RECI represents a bold step toward dismantling inequities and fostering a culture of racial justice. ●

## The ReCAST Study: Building Stronger Neighborhoods Through Collective Efficacy and Community Empowerment

**Drs. Mary Ohmer and Leah Jacobs** are at the forefront of a groundbreaking initiative to combat youth and community violence and strengthen neighborhoods through the Resiliency in Communities After Stress and Trauma (ReCAST) study. This research project aims to evaluate the effectiveness of a collective efficacy intervention in 10 Pittsburgh neighborhoods over a five-year period, with a focus on empowering communities to address systemic challenges. The study is a cluster randomized control trial to test the effectiveness of the collective efficacy intervention. Five communities are participating in the collective efficacy intervention and 5 control communities are receiving health information sessions. In addition, Ohmer and Jacobs are studying implementation across neighborhoods to assess process and fidelity outcomes.

A key aspect of the ReCAST study is that it is not only evaluating an intervention but employing a gold standard method for establishing a causal relationship between collective efficacy and violence, a randomized controlled trial. For decades, this relationship has not been tested experimentally, leaving researchers unable to confidently state that collective efficacy decreases violence—only that collective efficacy is associated with decreased violence. The study aims to rigorously address this important question.



*Dr. Mary Ohmer*

With over 30 years of experience in community organizing, Ohmer has long recognized the potential of collective efficacy strategies to reduce crime, violence,

and juvenile delinquency. As co-principal investigator with the ReCAST study, she explains, “collective efficacy sounds wonky, but it is a social process that happens when neighbors trust one another, share norms and values, and are willing to intervene to address community problems.” The need for such interventions is critical. Violence in our communities leads to premature death, child maltreatment and neglect, and intergenerational poverty. A strong relationship exists between neighborhood disadvantage and youth violence. Community and youth violence are on the rise in marginalized communities around the Pittsburgh area, and have had devastating health, economic and social consequences. In Pittsburgh, the homicide rate among young Black men is 36 times higher than the national average. Collective efficacy is important because research shows collective efficacy is associated with lower levels of neighborhood level violence and juvenile delinquency, and increased health and wellbeing, including health and mental health.



*Dr. Leah Jacobs*

ReCAST co-investigator Jacobs underscores the importance of moving away from punitive responses to systemic issues, pointing to the broader social and historical context. “In 2020, the police murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis sparked a national awakening to the reality of punitive law enforcement responses to what are historically based social problems of poverty, unemployment and lack of investment in communities and people,” Jacobs explains. She emphasizes that punitive interventions are not investments in communities but instead are additional sources of stress and trauma.

The ReCAST study is guided by a set of core values that include safety, collaboration, equity, mutuality, trustworthiness, transparency, social justice, strength-based capacity-building, and healing-centered engagement aimed at bringing hope to communities. These values are centric in Ohmer and Jacobs’ approach, which leverages partnerships with community-based organizations (CBOs) and community residents to foster youth leadership, intergenerational collaboration, and collective problem-solving.

The ReCAST project builds in phases, starting with capacity building, planning, and training, and advancing to action-oriented solutions through community projects. The initiative also emphasizes active community involvement at every stage, with stipends provided to CBOs and community facilitators, including facilitating the collective efficacy training sessions. These training sessions bring together teens, adults, and elders from each neighborhood to build trust, share perspectives, and develop strategies to address local challenges. Participants establish ground rules for collaboration, overcome initial distrust, and work together to design and implement solutions. They also learn and practice relationship building strategies, active listening, restorative and non-violence strategies for intervening to prevent violence and organizing and advocacy skills to advocate for systemic changes and community resources needed to prevent violence and create safe spaces for youth.

As part of The Pittsburgh Study, the project benefits from a wide range of local and federal partners, including Allegheny County Human Services, the CDC, SAMHSA, and the University of Pittsburgh’s Department of Adolescent Medicine and School of Social Work. This study is also part of The Pittsburgh Study’s Policy and Place Committee, for which Ohmer is the Academic Co-Lead.

An April 2023 PublicSource article highlighted the collective efficacy workshops in Braddock and the West Side city neighborhoods where residents noted a growing sense of unity and optimism. A community partner commented that the work is about “Bringing back the togetherness of the neighborhood. We can be a flourishing community again.” ●



## Dr. James Huguley's work aims to support Black students and parents at home and in school



Dr. James Huguley

**Dr. James Huguley** grew up in a mostly Black and Latinx, economically disadvantaged community, and when he got to college he realized “just how few of us had made it to that point.” As he embarked on his studies in classroom teaching, his goal was to try to support students “coming out of that oppressive space and help them be successful

academically, economically, and really just be able to self-actualize however they might want to, and not have those barriers stop them.” Huguley has carried these early goals with him as he has expanded his research into successful efforts in both restorative practices and parenting support.

When Huguley was attending the Graduate School of Education at Harvard University, he was planning to train to be a school administrator or principal, but he “started to really fall in love with the research, and what we can learn and what we could accomplish by understanding effective, racial justice-oriented programs for youth of color.” When he joined the faculty at the University of Pittsburgh, he worked closely with late Dean Larry Davis and Vice Provost for Faculty Diversity and Development Dr. John Wallace. Huguley recalls, “they were so connected to the work on the ground, they were so in touch with the communities that it was a natural fit, and I found ways to extend my expertise in practice and research to local communities that are like the one I grew up in.”

Today, Huguley's work in the community has continued with his successful Just Discipline Project (JDP). Funded by the US. Department of Education, The Heinz Endowments, the Richard King Mellon Foundation among others, this innovative project seeks to create a national model of restorative practice programs based in schools. JDP looks at the impact of restorative practices on student disciplinary and academic outcomes; how treatment effects vary by student- and school-level characteristics; the impact of restorative practices on students' engagement and perceptions of school climate; and the barriers to and supports for successful JDP implementation across schools. Results from their efforts have shown lower discipline rates, higher achievement, and better school climate outcomes from teachers and students.



“Our work at Just Discipline really focuses on transformation and restoration in the school institutional space, and how we can rethink our educational approaches in ways that are responsive to historic injustice and that utilize practices that are more aligned with where our kids are coming from,” said Huguley. To date Just Discipline has had promising results in reducing school suspensions and improved academic outcomes. Results of two clinical trials are in process, but early returns show treatment schools outpacing controls schools across the board in discipline, school climate, and academic domains.

Huguley's work has received national attention, including from the White House. In 2022, he was part of a panel hosted by the Institute of Education Sciences (IES) and the White House Initiative on Advancing Educational Equity, Excellence, and Economic Opportunity for Black Americans titled "Supporting Black Students Across the Education Sciences."

Another recent project includes Parenting While Black (PWB), a groundbreaking program that collaborates with community agencies to support black primary caregivers in addressing issues of racial discrimination. PWB offers eight 1.5-hour sessions that include conversations on best practices, engaging activities, and support network-building. The process builds on both research and indigenous, intergenerational knowledge develop toolkits that promote personal and community resilience for Black caregivers and their children. Doctoral candidate Cecily Davis is co-principal investigator and lead facilitator on PWB, and doctoral student Sommer Blair has developed a parallel program for White families to promote antiracist parenting.

DREAMs (Developing Relational, Emotional, and Adaptive Minds) is another initiative from Huguley's team. DREAMs is a trauma-informed, group intervention for 5th - 8th grade students. Doctoral candidate Bianca DeBellis, a trained school social worker as well as a trained schoolteacher, has co-developed and take the lead on this project. Huguley explained: "It's a responsive intervention that helps kids that have faced significant life adversity have positive outcomes in school knowing that they've been harmed by this world, and they don't have all the systems and resources they need to be successful. We try to meet them where they are and help support them in these acute needs—particularly in spaces where schools lack adequate mental health supports and other social supports for students." ●

## Mental Health Interventions Meeting People Where They Are in the Community

Launched in 2019, the CHURCH (Congregations as Healers Uniting to Restore Community Health) project is a cutting-edge research initiative focused on improving mental health for African Americans by building on the existing strengths and resilience within Black faith communities. This project was a natural fit for the current lead researcher and **Dr. Deborah Moon**, who has a background in Implementation Science, Music Therapy, and Cognitive Behavioral Therapy. With many years of experience serving as a leader in ethnic churches, Moon was deeply familiar with the essential role ethnic churches play in the community. Moon was eager to collaborate with Dr. John Wallace, the founder of the CHURCH project and a leading scholar in African American communities' well-being, on "developing a training based on evidence-based mental health interventions to build more capacity for African American faith leaders to provide informal mental health support to their congregation members."



According to the Pew Research Center, three-quarters of African Americans (compared to 49% of whites) say religion is very important in their lives. Additionally, 73% report praying daily, and nearly half (47%) attend religious services at least once a week. Collaborating with Black faith leaders including Jonathon D. Counts, LMSW, DMin, Pastor of Spottswood A.M.E. Zion Church and William R. Glaze, the senior pastor of Bethany Baptist Church, the CHURCH project emphasizes the pivotal role of clergy



and other faith leaders in providing informal mental health support. The initiative aims to enhance the capacity of Black churches by educating faith leaders in Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) in a culturally acceptable manner. The CHURCH project team, which includes Pitt Social Work faculty members Drs. Aliya Durham and Toya Jones as well as Paula Powe in the Department of Psychiatry, has employed innovative methods to culturally tailor CBT by integrating spiritual teachings and sacred music central to Black church experiences. The musical integration was carried out in collaboration with a Black church musician, Rev. Nikki Porter and her music team, who is a professional musician and the minister of music in Eastminster Presbyterian Church. Translating the technical language of CBT into accessible spiritual language familiar to Black faith communities exemplifies efforts to disseminate evidence-based mental health programs to racial and ethnic minority communities.

These accomplishments were achieved through close collaboration among diverse interdisciplinary researchers and community partners, each contributing unique expertise and perspectives essential to the project's success. "The CHURCH Project is benefitting the community in positive ways," shares Pastor Counts. "Mental health treatment has been a taboo topic in many Black churches. Religious jargon such as 'just pray about it' or 'He'll never put more on you than you can bear' is very common. This

intervention and project helps faith leaders to support congregants with a tool to mitigate minor stressors. It benefits a community who is resistant to seeing a therapist to receive support in a space where they are comfortable initially which may open the door to greater interventions."

The team's efforts have culminated in the development of *Renew Your Mind (RYM)*, a CBT-based and spiritually informed mental health training curriculum designed to help African American faith leaders better serve the mental health needs of their congregations. Recently, partnering with Pastor Cynthia Wallace at the Bible Center Church, the CHURCH team implemented *Renew Your Mind* for the first time with faith leaders from ten African American churches in Homewood. The CHURCH team is currently analyzing data regarding *RYM*'s preliminary effects on participants' knowledge of core CBT skills and attitudes toward mental health promotion and treatment. The study also examines faith leaders' perceptions of the acceptability and feasibility of implementing and sustaining *RYM* in Black churches. Ultimately, this initiative seeks to promote positive mental health within African American communities by increasing access to culturally tailored, evidence-based strategies to manage mental distress and integrating spirituality into mental health care. ●





## Centering Youth and Technology: Dr. Jaime Booth's Unique Approach to Research

**Dr. Jaime Booth's** research engages youth and leverages new technology to understand and address the complex role of contexts in Black adolescents' well-being. Booth's work focuses on understanding how neighborhoods and activity spaces contribute to stress and subsequent health disparities and finding ways to create more supportive spaces for youth. "My interest in looking at neighborhoods to understand and address health disparities came from a desire to intervene at a more structural level," she explains, underscoring the importance of focusing on systemic drivers when considering the disparities we observe.



*Dr. Jaime Booth*

Across multiple research projects, her work engages youth as research partners. Reflecting on the role of the Youth Research Advisory Board (YRAB) in The SPIN Project, a National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA) funded project that explores how neighborhood activity spaces affect youth mental health, stress, and

substance use, she shared, "the perspective [youth] bring to the work moves it and shapes it in important ways that I could not possibly without them." She went on to explain, "The SPIN Project's Youth Research Advisory Board (YRAB) was critical to making a lot of implementation and methodological decisions." The YRAB met with Booth once a week for four years starting in 2018 to discuss all aspects of the study, including measures, branding, recruitment and retention, and data analysis. In a 2023 PublicSource article, two members of the Youth Research Advisory Board, Ny'Ela and Ny'Jai Chapman, emphasized the importance of centering youth voices, stating "as adolescents growing into adults, our voices are not often heard; they are more pushed to the side. Even though adults feel like their voices are more important than youths, our voices are just as significant because we are the next generation." Using ecological momentary assessments conducted through an app on cell phones, Booth and her team examine the day-to-day realities of young people living in historically segregated and under-resourced neighborhoods. "We found that both stressful and supportive spaces exist in historically under-resourced neighborhoods and Black youths' interaction with these spaces have an impact on their overall stress levels and the likelihood that they will use marijuana to cope" Booth explains. The findings emphasize the need to address systemic racism and violence in activity spaces while increasing access to supportive environments. These findings, Booth argues, challenge traditional approaches to substance abuse prevention by focusing on changing environments to support youth rather than solely asking individuals to make different choices.

Booth's interest in employing new technology in her research is driven by the desire to overcome the limitations of traditional data collection methods used in neighborhood research, which can be costly and static. This has led her to explore the use of tools like social media platforms, mobile ecological momentary assessments that employ virtual geo-fences, and to partner with researchers in information science to co-design mobile and web-based tools to engage youth in neighborhood change. Her data advocacy project, funded by the National Science Foundation (NSF), involves co-designing a web-based platform to help youth learn data literacy by analyzing big data for advocacy and community change. Through interactive roles and curricula, participants learn to identify patterns, understand root causes, and design advocacy campaigns. Reflecting on this project, Booth stated, "In this project, when designing in partnership with the youth, we have found that the data that they work with is really important for engagement. It has to be data that they can place themselves within, that they can resonate with". By co-designing tools with youths and using data that is immediately relevant to them, youth in the project engaged intuitively in learning data literacy and developing advocacy messages on issues that are important to them.

Booth's collaboration with youth and use of technology in her work has led to research that illuminates and aligns with Black youths lived experiences. She highlights how this connection has been dynamic, with youth participants expressing newfound confidence in engaging in research and advocating for systemic change. Through her youth-engaged approach that leverages technology, Booth seeks to work with youth to build evidence for a systemic approach to health promotion and youth-driven approaches to building increased access to supportive spaces in their neighborhood. ●

## Dr. Quinton Cotton Brings New Expertise in Gerontology, Caregivers, and Culturally Responsive Interventions

In 2024, the School of Social Work welcomed **Dr. Quinton Cotton**. With over 20 years of experience spanning clinical practice, macro social work practice, and public health consulting, Cotton brings a wealth of expertise to his new role. His work centers health equity and promotes culturally responsive interventions for marginalized populations, particularly individuals with Alzheimer's disease and related dementias (ADRD) and their caregivers.



*Dr. Quinton Cotton*

Cotton's academic journey includes a PhD in clinical investigation from the University of Wisconsin-Madison, a Master of Science in Social Administration from Case Western Reserve University, and a Bachelor of Arts in sociology and social welfare from Marquette University. He also completed postdoctoral training at the University of Minnesota, where he honed his skills in mixed methods research and behavioral intervention design.

Cotton's program of research is centered on examining the impact of life events, social positions, and social "ISMs" (racism, ageism, ableism) on health outcomes across the life course. His work seeks to dismantle barriers that prevent marginalized populations from accessing optimal care. One of Cotton's key areas of focus is the development and implementation of culturally responsive interventions for ADRD patients and their caregivers. His approach emphasizes community-based solutions and collaborative care models. In addition to his research on ADRD, Cotton

is actively engaged in several health promotion projects that aim to strengthen the capacity of residents and systems through programmatic and policy innovations.

Joining Pitt's School of Social Work marks an exciting new chapter for Cotton.

*"I was drawn to the University of Pittsburgh's School of Social Work because of its unapologetic position that oppression is a root cause of social inequality, and it is a place that truly values research as a strategy for improving the health and quality of life of people in communities."*

Cotton sees significant opportunities to address systemic barriers within the field of social work. As a new member of the Pitt community, he is eager to contribute to the university's mission of advancing social justice and equity. "I am most excited about strengthening connections between social work and the health sciences" Cotton says. "People in communities deserve to experience systems and professionals that work together to address their needs. Pittsburgh is the right size city where an intervention co-designed with the community can be tested, implemented, and make a real difference."

Cotton is also excited to highlight two research projects that he's interested in bringing to Pittsburgh. "The first project will examine mechanisms of social connectivity across the life course" he explains. "The goal of this project is to use community knowledge to engineer a program that meets community-identified needs and connects youth, adults, and older adults." His second project aims to develop a decision-support tool to help families manage care decisions after a diagnosis of dementia and to inform future care decisions. "These research projects are important because everyone deserves to have the opportunities, connections, and resources to be as healthy as possible" Cotton explains. ●

## Pittsburgh Wage Study Shows Role of Data in Driving Policy Change

In 2015, the Pittsburgh Wage Review Committee issued a report on lower-wage hospital workers. This report highlighted the multiple challenges such workers experience such as food insecurity, housing instability, utility cutoffs, and difficulties affording healthcare or medication. The report also highlighted the resilience and resourcefulness as workers navigated the complexities of living paycheck-to-paycheck relying on public benefits or assistance from non-profit groups, and juggling bills to make ends meet. Following this report, the Pittsburgh Wage Study—led by faculty members **Dr. Rafael Engel**, **Sara Goodkind**, and **Jeffrey Shook**, and assisted by former faculty member **Dr. Sandra Wexler**—was initiated to further investigate these issues and the lives of lower-wage workers.



*Dr. Rafael Engel*

"When the Wage Study started, service workers at [the hospital] were making as little as \$8 an hour," said Ben Brewer from SEIU Healthcare Pennsylvania. "Through their careful work describing the impact of low wages on the well-being of these workers, we were able to build a case to increase wages. By 2027, these workers will be guaranteed to make at least \$20 an hour. The role and use of research to advocate for improved wages and working conditions for hospital workers in Pittsburgh has been transformative, not only for individual workers but also for raising standards across our city."

Engel, Goodkind, and Shook were drawn to this research for various reasons. For Engel, the motivation was personal: "My dad died in Vietnam when I was eight, so I grew up in a single-parent household. Even with veterans' benefits and Social Security, I watched my mom struggle."





*Dr. Sara Goodkind*

Goodkind reflected, “This wasn’t really the area I was directly working in before, but over the years as a social work researcher, I’ve seen how poverty and income inequality are at the root of so many challenges we address in social work. This feels like an essential area for us to conduct meaningful and impactful research that can inform policy efforts to address those issues.”

Shook’s practice and research focus on system involvement: “I’ve been thinking about how we can do more upstream work to prevent system involvement. When I sat on the Wage Review Committee, I listened to workers—their stories were powerful. I remember a hospital worker dealing with cancer who couldn’t afford her own care while providing care for others. Stories like these have stayed with me.”

It’s wonderful when researchers see their work influence actual policies, and the Pittsburgh Wage Study has done just that. Dan Frankel, Pennsylvania State Representative, highlighted the importance of one report for policy: “This report tells the story of a huge number of carers and healers who are being forced out of a field they love because they aren’t getting the support they need. As lawmakers, we can’t improve access to high-quality healthcare in Pennsylvania without taking care of our healthcare workers. This should set off alarm bells throughout Harrisburg.”

Currently, the team is focused on publishing more about their work. Several doctoral students who have worked on the project have gone on to continue the work at new institutions and have also published articles related to the Wage Study. So far, there are sixteen peer-reviewed articles and numerous reports and briefs related to the project and more in progress.



*Dr. Jeffrey Shook*

One of the highlights of the project for the team has been giving a voice to those who have often been pushed to the sidelines. “The people are the experts here. The workers are the experts,” said Shook. “They’re the ones who actually know what’s going on. We’ve had so many conversations, interviews, and surveys...so many ways that we’ve collected data, but a lot of times they weren’t given the credibility and legitimacy to speak on these topics or to be respected as experts. So, for me, one of the really powerful aspects of this project is that this helped provide some legitimacy behind their voices, and that it helped.” ●



## Dr. Fengyan Tang Brings Focus to Aging Chinese Immigrants' Health

Social engagement, health outcomes, and the immigrant experience all come together in the research conducted by **Dr. Fengyan Tang**. Her recent work, funded by the National Institute on Aging, focuses on aging Chinese immigrants in the US to examine how social and physical environments impact their health—particularly cognitive health. Tang aims to address health disparities and advance social justice by investigating the intersections of race, ethnicity, gender, social class, and immigration.

"I think health disparities rooted in social determinants of health are an important issue but challenging to address in the U.S.," says Tang. "For example, residential or racial segregation has different impacts on people from various backgrounds. From a minority perspective, it's crucial to know how to be socially integrated and utilize individual and social resources to promote healthy aging. Older immigrants may face challenges of language barriers, cultural differences, and limited social networks. They may not know how to access healthcare and social resources. It's critical to help them connect with the community, neighborhood, and broader society, so they can age in place happily and healthily."



**Dr. Fengyan Tang**

Tang's most recent study titled *Preventing Cognitive Decline and Dementia Among Older Chinese* focuses on older Chinese Americans, a population that is projected to triple from 0.5 million in 2020 to 1.5 million by 2060. Older Chinese Americans face unique

risks for cognitive decline and Alzheimer's Disease and Related Dementias (ADRD), largely driven by structural and social determinants of health, including language and system barriers, acculturative stress, discrimination, and increased social isolation and loneliness. This study investigates various immigration- and neighborhood-related risks and the potentially preventive effects of activity engagement profiles (AEP) on cognitive decline.

The rising burden of ADRD and the rapid growth of older Chinese American population call for the need for population-based health interventions. Guided by community-based participatory research principles, Tang has collaborated with a research team and over 20 community-based organizations and social service agencies in the greater Chicago area in data collection. Specifically, her study aims to:

- Examine individual- and neighborhood-level risk factors of cognitive impairment and decline
- Identify supportive environments that promote healthy cognitive aging
- Evaluate whether activity engagement and other modifiable factors mitigate the risk of cognitive decline.

Findings from this research are expected to inform activity-based intervention strategies for ADRD and the development of supportive environments to promote cognitive health in this understudied population. The analyses revealed that higher levels of social engagement and social support are associated with better initial cognitive functioning. Residing in a neighborhood with higher socioeconomic status may slow cognitive decline over time, and living in a neighborhood with more English-only speakers boosted the protective effects of neighborhood socioeconomic status on cognitive decline.

Tang's upcoming project will compare aging Chinese immigrants in the U.S. with their peers in China. This comparison will explore the structural and social determinants of health to understand how socioeconomic and political contexts shape social stratification and health outcomes. She acknowledges the challenges of obtaining comparable data due to cultural differences. "It's difficult to measure because they're living in different cultures. They have similar genetic factors because they're from the same ethnic group, but the question is whether living in different countries affects their long-term cognitive health—or even overall health. How do environmental and cultural changes impact them?" she asks.

Tang's work underscores the importance of addressing health disparities and supporting aging immigrant populations. ●

## Dr. Kyaïen Conner Works to Reshape Mental Health Care for Communities of Color

**Dr. Kyaïen Conner** has built her career working to transform mental health care for communities of color. At Pitt, she serves as professor, Donald M. Henderson Endowed Chair, director of the Center on Race and Social Problems, and associate dean for justice, equity, diversity and inclusion. Her research centers on innovative approaches to address critical health disparities, focusing on developing culturally responsive interventions that build community capacity and challenge traditional healthcare delivery models. By centering the experiences of African American and Latino/Hispanic populations, Conner's work seeks to fundamentally reshape how mental health support is conceptualized and delivered.



*Dr. Kyaïen Conner*

"My work really focuses on health equity, looking at better understanding and ultimately mitigating barriers to service utilization," Conner explains. Her research journey began through her clinical experiences, where she witnessed the challenges faced by marginalized communities in accessing culturally sensitive mental health support. "I didn't initially see myself as a researcher," she reflects, "but witnessing disparities in access to care made me want to engage in research to better meet the needs of diverse communities."

A key focus of Conner's work is building capacity within communities to address mental health, particularly within communities of color. One innovative approach Conner is pursuing is training lay health workers—people from within the community who may not have formal degrees in social work

or psychology but are trained to provide behavioral health support. These individuals are often called "peer educators" or "promotoras" in Latinx communities. "These are folks that are living in the community, that care about their community, that want to give back and are willing to be trained to provide support services," Conner says. Her research shows that peer support models, like those used in her projects, can support the community's mental health while also reducing the burden on the often-overburdened mental health system.

Conner is also engaged in cutting-edge research projects that aim to address health disparities and promote equity in care delivery. Currently, she is collaborating with the Alzheimer's Disease Research Center (ADRC) on several newly funded initiatives to address barriers to dementia care in older Black communities. "We have a number of research projects...looking at addressing disparities in Alzheimer's disease and related disorders and access to dementia care," Conner shares, noting her excitement for how this work will evolve and expand. In addition to her efforts in Pittsburgh, Conner is finalizing a major project in Florida funded by the Patient-Centered Outcomes Research Institute (PCORI). This study focuses on enhancing a care transitions intervention by incorporating peer support to reduce hospital readmissions and improve quality of life for patients with multiple chronic health conditions and co-occurring mental health diagnoses. "If we find that this intervention works, and that the enhancement with peer support makes it even more impactful...this is an intervention I would look to bring to the University of Pittsburgh," she explains, highlighting her plans to scale the project into a larger multi-site study.

Conner's leadership extends to her role as director of the Center on Race and Social Problems, where she is fostering collaborations among research centers focused on racial equity and social justice fostering collaborations among research centers focused on racial equity and social justice across campus and the country. These efforts include launching joint research initiatives, such as the development of a Racial Equity Collaboratory platform. Additionally, as editor of the journal *Race and Social Problems*, Conner is committed to translating academic findings into accessible formats, including a podcast series that bridges the gap between academic research and community impact. "For me, the most exciting bit is knowing that we are trying to identify pathways to disseminate the research work we're doing ... in a way that's going to have even greater impact in the communities we care about," she says. With a strong commitment to both research and community advocacy, Conner is a leader in the fight for health equity. ●





University of  
**Pittsburgh**

School of Social Work

2101 Cathedral of Learning  
4200 Fifth Avenue  
Pittsburgh, PA 15260

---

**socialwork.pitt.edu**

