

# Pitt School of Social Work **Research Collaborations**

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University of  
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# Letter from the Dean

## Dear Friends and colleagues,

It has been a very exciting and productive year here — deciding what to highlight seems to get harder every year, as our externally funded and high-impact research continues to soar! I am extremely excited to watch junior faculty jump-starting their programs of research, mid-career faculty hitting their stride and finding their niches, and senior faculty finding ways to make an impact with their long-term interests in both the academic and policy/practice spheres. And, through it all, we're focused on where we, as a school and a collective, have an opportunity to really "move the needle" in critical areas.

In this annual roundup, we highlight work that covers a wide range of topics — to try to capture the broad range of topics being addressed in our school. We cover projects being done by some of our longest-standing and most consistently productive researchers as well as by appointment stream faculty who have chosen to make time for research because they see issues that need to be addressed, and they choose to dive in. As I look back across this year, I am extremely energized by what I see: faculty increasing submissions for large-scale external funding — and being incredibly successful in it; collaborations within the school and with colleagues across the university, country, and world; and a concerted focus on impact — on how our research can build from and influence the world around us. I'm particularly excited about various strands of truly community-engaged work that are amplifying the voices of "lived experience" in community violence, youth perceptions, racial equity, and mental health. And I am excited to see people be excited — by their own work and that of their colleagues!

In this volume, we showcase some updates on faculty who have appeared in our annual reviews before — this time focusing on interesting new directions and



projects. For example: Ray Engel's work in conjunction with Age-Friendly Greater Pittsburgh; Jay Hughley's work beyond schools to focus on *Parenting While Black*; Shaun Eack's work in Cognitive Enhancement Therapy and new possibilities for adults on the autism spectrum. We also highlight some work by our newest faculty member — Kya Conner (new Director of the Center on Race and Social Problems, Donald M. Henderson Endowed Chair, and Associate Dean of Justice, Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion) — focusing on work that she and colleagues have been doing around destigmatizing mental health in the Black community.

I hope that you find this brief set of highlights intriguing — and that they will encourage you to delve into the broader scope of our faculty's work. In my view, one of the indicators of a great school of social work is its ability to intertwine cutting-edge research with world-class academics all with a focus on larger-world impact. With each passing year, I am continually energized and awed by my colleagues here at Pitt for their ability to bring this all together to create a truly transformative environment, community, and school!

I look forward to the possibility of expanding our collaborations, partnerships, and impact — please get in touch and follow us on our website ([socialwork.pitt.edu](https://socialwork.pitt.edu)) and our social media accounts.

Onward with purpose,

Betsy Farmer  
Dean

## ReCAST: Preventing Violence by Building Stronger Communities



*Associate Professor  
Mary Ohmer*

**Building on her 30 years of experience leading community-level organizing projects, Associate Professor Mary Ohmer has seen the results of collective efficacy strategies to lower crime, violence, and juvenile delinquency.**

She says: “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.”

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. Over 1600 incidents of non-fatal violence among youth occur daily, and homicide is the third leading cause of death among all youth and the leading cause of death among African American youth. In Pittsburgh, the homicide rate among young Black men is 36 times higher than the national average.

Ohmer is co-principal investigator with the ReCAST study (*Resiliency in Communities after Stress and Trauma*), and she is leading a cluster randomized controlled study to test the results of a collective efficacy intervention in 20 Pittsburgh neighborhoods. ReCAST is a large-scale longitudinal study with partners and funding at the local and federal levels, including Allegheny County Human Services, the Pittsburgh Study, the Department of Medicine at Pitt, the School of Social Work at Pitt, Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration ([SAMSA](#)), and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention ([CDC](#)).

ReCAST co-investigator, Assistant Professor Leah Jacobs, suggests that building collective efficacy in disadvantaged neighborhoods is a timely solution. “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.” She points out that punitive interventions are not investments in communities but instead are additional sources of stress and trauma.

Both Ohmer and Jacobs understand the importance of leveraging existing community-based organizations (CBOs) to foster youth leadership and intergenerational collaboration as a powerful anti-violence strategy. Jacobs points out that the ReCAST study is happening at a time when awareness of the need for alternatives to punitive responses has reached the federal level, with grant funds available to rigorously test strategies like collective efficacy versus overreliance on law enforcement.

Community organizations partnering with the ReCAST research team are provided with a stipend from the grant to support a series of workshops where teens, adults and elders from each neighborhood gather for discussion and training. Working together, they develop ground rules for their interactions and learn to see things from each other’s perspectives, becoming more comfortable with each other and overcoming initial distrust. The ReCAST project builds in phases from capacity building, planning, training, and information-gathering to suggest, choose and implement solutions.

As noted in an [April 2023 PublicSource article](#) which showcased the collective efficacy workshops in two of the participating neighborhoods, Braddock and the West End, a CBO member shared that the work is “Bringing back the togetherness of the neighborhood. We can be a flourishing community again.” ■

## Dismantling Mental Illness Stigma in Communities of Color



While society has started to embrace the conversation around mental health, stigma and disparities surrounding mental health still exist, especially for people of color.

Kyaïen Conner, Pitt's Director of the Center on Race and Social Problems (CRSP), Donald M. Henderson Endowed Chair, and Associate Dean for Justice, Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion, is working hard to dismantle mental illness stigma in communities of color through her research.

Conner recognizes that people of color hesitate to seek treatment for mental health related issues for a variety of reasons.

"Certainly, mistrust is one of the reasons, and some of that comes from actual real experiences that communities of color have had" said Conner. "There's a history of experimentation and there's a history of exploitation."

As part of her work to combat mental health disparities for people of color, Conner actively participates in *This is My Brave*, a national organization that works to empower individuals to put their names and faces on their true stories of recovery from mental illness and addiction while reducing the stigma surrounding mental health.

After the murder of George Floyd in 2020, the former executive director of *This is My Brave* put out a powerful message about the impact this tragedy was having on Black Americans. "She highlighted in a way that I found

really profound regarding how that particular incident was creating a mental health crisis for Americans in general, but in particular for Black Americans who were being asked to go to work the next day to participate in life as if nothing had happened," said Conner.

Conner partnered with *This is My Brave* in 2020 and created a targeted platform for the Black community to share their voice and their stories surrounding the events of George Floyd and their experiences as a person of color in America. "We ended up getting close to 16 and had to make it a two-part series because we had so many people who wanted to share," said Conner.

A pre-post survey study was conducted with all viewers who watched *This is My Brave: Stories from the Black Community* and the research findings were incredibly powerful. "We found significant changes on every single variable that we looked at for all participants. So, people's perception of stigma was reduced. People's social distance was reduced," said Conner. "It was clear that for Black viewers, they were even more impacted by hearing these stories, by hearing them from someone who looked like them."

In addition, Conner conducted a follow up trial in which she randomly assigned individuals to watch *This is My Brave: Stories from the Black Community* or to watch another educationally based program that had nothing to do with mental health for the same period of time. The findings were the same in showing decreased social distance and stigma for participants who watched TIMB. Conner and collaborators published an [article](#) with their initial findings and currently have another under review.

Conner plans to bring *This is My Brave* programming to the University of Pittsburgh and looks forward to continuing the work of creating safe spaces for individuals to voice their stories and experiences and extend the School's ongoing work around the importance of lived experience in research on mental health and mental illness. ■

## Collaborating with Youth on Neighborhood Safety



*Associate Dean  
for Research  
Jaime Booth*

Youth of color disproportionately live in neighborhoods with higher amounts of ambient stressors such as violence and crime. Associate Dean for Research Jaime Booth has been working with youth who live in the Homewood neighborhood in Pittsburgh to conduct cutting-edge research surrounding this issue in an effort to address this disparity.

The SPIN (*Space and People In Neighborhoods*) Project is a National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA) funded project which seeks to engage youth in identifying safe and risky spaces in their neighborhood, to understand the relationship between exposure to these spaces, stress and substance use, and works to increase youth access to safe spaces while addressing spaces that are potentially risky.

The goal of the SPIN project is to “understand how black youth are experiencing space and how that might be contributing to their overall sense of stress and whether or not they’re needing to use substances or using substances to cope with that stress” says Booth. There is a plethora of research on neighborhoods but not a lot of understanding on micro spaces and how youth experience those neighborhoods.

“A lot of substance use prevention says ‘you need to change your behavior’.... rather than thinking about environment,” said Booth. The SPIN project aims to identify both areas of stress and areas of support in the Homewood community and encourage interaction in spaces where youth feel supported.

The Youth Research Advisory Board (YRAB) is a key component of the SPIN project. Booth invited 11 youth from Homewood to comprise the board to collaborate on research efforts and provide insight and feedback. “Both the Youth Research Advisory Board and the participants in the study really enjoyed it,” said Booth. The board structured the incentives for the study, providing a free cellphone for each individual who participated. “Our goal was to recruit 60 [participants] and we were on a waitlist within two weeks,” said Booth. “That was the thing that really got folks excited.”

Booth and the board meet on a weekly basis, go out for food and even traveled to Philadelphia to present their research. “I really wanted to make the space fun,” said Booth. “We created a fun informal space, but weaved into that we learned about measurement, surveys, sampling, all of that stuff, through actually doing the work.”

Booth’s research findings were unexpected based on her conversations she had with the Youth Research Advisory Board about their own experiences in their community spaces. “Some things like walking on the street in their own neighborhood surprised me,” said Booth. “I wouldn’t expect youth to report racial discrimination when walking down the street in a segregated neighborhood with 95% black folks that live there—that was more of a surprising finding.”

Regarding substance abuse and stress, Booth found that collective efficacy impacted the levels of stress and substance abuse. Collective efficacy is the “sense that people in the neighborhood would intervene if something was going wrong or if there was illegal behavior,” said Booth. She found that individuals who felt collective efficacy in their home neighborhood experienced lower stress and less marijuana use.

Booth plans to conduct more qualitative analysis during the next iteration of the study and looks forward to continuing this critical collaborative work. ■

## Parenting While Black: Research Tested Strategies that Support Black Families



*Associate Professor  
James Huguley*

**As noted by Associate Professor Jay Huguley, a Black parent, educator, researcher, and scholar who led development of the *Parenting While Black (PWB)* Project: “There’s no manual for what to expect when you expect racism.”**

PWB is a strengths-based group intervention offering eight 1.5-hour sessions that include short presentations, community building activities and discussions. The process is iterative, incorporating intergenerational knowledge with robust research to build a toolkit that promotes personal and community resilience for Black caregivers.

Huguley goes on to explain, “For black families, stories like that of George Floyd, Trayvon Martin and Tamir Rice do not end when we turn off the television.” He elaborates: “Over the generations, we’ve known thousands of George Floyds. Our sons could be Trayvon or Tamir, our daughters, Breonna Taylor.”

Begun in Greater Pittsburgh as a pilot program which registered over 100 parents, the idea for the project clearly resonated with a black community facing structural and interpersonal racist challenges to the healthy upbringing of their children. After the pilot project, Huguley, his doctoral student, Cecily Davis, and an interdisciplinary team from across the university successfully secured Pitt Innovation Challenge (PInCh) funding to continue and expand the work.

Research has shown that Black parents can effectively support their children by promoting racial pride for Black youth, affirming the fundamental American value of human equality, teaching strategies for coping with discrimination and modeling effective parental involvement in schools.

The project provides a venue for parents and caregivers of Black schoolchildren to meet and share their intergenerational knowledge and learn research-based strategies. The sessions also provide time to process experiences, develop communal supports, and share collective strategies for Black youth success.

For example, the researchers hear from families that Black youth glean positive racial identity cues from famous and historical figures and that these can be augmented with examples from their own family’s history of resilience and overcoming. Because research has shown that it’s important not to downplay or dismiss their children’s experiences of racism, the PWB workshops teach ways a parent can show they are emotionally present for their child. Parents and caregivers also gain knowledge, strength, support, and encouragement through engagement with a peer group, enhancing their own emotional resilience.

What can White allies do to support these efforts? Huguley suggests: advocate for supports for Black families in schools, fight for resources, and talk to your peers to educate them. Learn the history of exploitation and violence that the Black community has endured. Affirm the rights of all marginalized groups.

PWB began as a project of the Center on Race and Social Problems’ Race and Youth Development Research Group, which Huguley leads. It realizes one of the center founder Dr. Larry Davis’s core visions: reduce the lag between research and practice to create positive change, personal empowerment, and solve complex social problems. ■

## Making a Region Inclusive for All



*Research associate Daniel Lee helps set up for the Year 1 Celebration of Age-Friendly Neighborhoods at Frick Environmental Center on June 3.*

**Pitt's School of Social Work is in Allegheny County, where 19.7% of people are age 65 or older, compared to 16.8% nationally. So, it made sense for the school to join forces with Age-Friendly Greater Pittsburgh (AFGP), whose mission is to rethink how neighborhoods are built and to help make the region more inclusive of all ages.**

Associate Professor Ray Engel, who coordinates the School's Gerontology Certificate Program and serves as AFGP's director of research, says the idea of making the County accessible for all age groups is an important one.

"It's very consistent with what we do in social work—consistent with our values, our belief set, and the kind of work we do in general," he said.

As a research partner to AFGP, the School is tracking the impact of a robust Action Plan submitted to the World Health Organization Global Network of Age-Friendly Cities and Communities in December 2022. The plan covers a variety of domains—transportation, housing, social participation—and includes Age-Friendly Neighborhoods, which currently is engaged in three Allegheny County neighborhoods: Clairton, Coraopolis, and the Hill District.

Participating residents in each neighborhood decide what projects would help them successfully age-in-place in their communities. With support, they may set up a new shuttle service, a job fair, or a project like one in Clairton where older adults and high school students painted bright planters to be displayed in the town's business district. So far, more than 330 community members have joined in.

"The communities will define what success means and then we determine whether they were indeed successful," said Engel. "We facilitate the conversation."

In addition to helping Pitt students get involved in the projects, Engel and research associate Daniel Lee are conducting focus groups and attending a range of community events. He saw a standing-room-only crowd pack the Clairton Family Center for a night of bingo and karaoke, led by a group of older adults. New neighbors were welcomed. People of all ages chatted with one another. Folks offered to help take care of babies so their parents could play bingo. Teen volunteers tended to people's needs throughout the room.

"In a world where we hear about racial conflicts and intergenerational gaps, the Clairton event was a refreshing moment," said Lee. He says that because the projects are planned and executed by people in the neighborhood, there will be capacity building. And, the hope is that people's impression of the community will change.

"More and more people will be showing up with the sense of membership," he said.

AFGP staff are excited about the collaboration, which also includes the Southwestern Pennsylvania Partnership for Aging. AFGP Executive Director Laura Poskin says the collaborations are helping the program extend its reach.

"We try to not think of everything as a 'challenge,' but instead focus on the opportunities that come with our new demographic reality," she said. "As people with career expertise, buying power, and skills—older adults are one of our few growing natural resources." ■



## Tackling Burnout Among BIPOC Students



Alicia Johnson



Toya Jones



Yodit Betru



Deborah Robinson



Aliya Durham

**Students pursuing an MSW who identify as Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) are experiencing some aspects of burnout more than their white counterparts, especially in the area of feeling effective in their profession.**

That's according to a new study, "Taking off the Cape: Removing the Cloak of Invincibility to Support BIPOC Graduate Students," conducted by five School of Social Work faculty members, who wanted to determine students' stress levels and explore strategies to help them.

The team includes Alicia Johnson, Clinical Assistant Professor and Principal Investigator; Aliya Durham, Director of Community Engagement; Deborah Robinson, Field Assistant Professor; Yodit Betru, Director of the MSW program; and Toya Jones, Director of the BASW Program. They looked at three aspects of burnout—exhaustion, cynicism, and efficacy. Seventy students completed surveys and joined focus groups.

The data revealed:

- Thirty-nine percent of MSW students had full-time jobs; more BIPOC than white students were working full-time and going to school full-time;
- White students felt more effective in their work than the students of color;
- BIPOC students felt they needed to do something to improve their situation, whereas White students put the onus on the system or the structures within the School; and
- Both BIPOC and White students were aware that supports were available but felt too burned out to access them.

"Burnout is an occupational hazard for social workers," explained Johnson.

The idea began percolating when Jones mentioned how exhausted she was after defending her dissertation – more exhausted, she felt, than other members of her cohort. The emerging research team, all female faculty of color, discussed everything on their plates – caring for children and elderly parents, working full-time, working on dissertations, and pursuing their own education while also supporting students. They wondered if the MSW students felt the same burdens.

Johnson said BIPOC students talked about feeling tokenized in classes and how tiring it is to constantly speak out on behalf of Black people or Black college students.

"They feel there are some professors who are not culturally competent, and so they feel the need to speak up. And it can be exhausting – being the representative for the entire Black race," she said. She adds that some of these students feel enormous pressure if they are the first person in their family pursuing a graduate degree or if they are the main family breadwinner.

The researchers now want to collaborate with other Pitt units – the University Counseling Center, the Office for Equity, Diversity and Inclusion, and Disability Resources and Services.

They want to see processes streamlined so that accommodations and supports that are currently available for BASW students can carry over to the MSW program. They want the Counseling Center services made even more accessible. And they want to take a closer look at recruiting more BIPOC students into Pitt's fellowship programs, many of which offer financial support.

What they don't want to see is students of color burning out at a young age and leaving the profession.

"We need clinicians of color in the field," Johnson said. "Clients do better when they have a therapist who they feel understands them. That really is a driving factor for us." ■

## Turning Research into Practice to Help Adults with Autism



While there are many studies on interventions for children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD), there have been few studies on interventions for adults. But that has changed. Following 14 years of ambitious research, a pilot study, and two clinical trials, Shaun Eack, Professor of Social Work and Psychiatry, has determined that a treatment called Cognitive Enhancement Therapy (CET) helps adults with autism work to achieve their goals.

CET involves 60 hours of computer-based training administered to pairs of autistic adults to help improve their attention, memory, and problem-solving. There are also 45 small group sessions, with coaches, to help the adults with social cognitive abilities, such as perspective taking and learning to act wisely in social situations. Participants engage in these computer and group meetings about three hours per week.

Now, thanks to a collaboration with the Center for Autism and Developmental Disorders (CADD) at UPMC, individuals have undergone this 18-month-long cognitive rehabilitation intervention with successful results.

For Eack, it's extremely fulfilling to assist this group – those who are high-functioning, without severe intellectual disabilities. This profile characterizes a significant portion of individuals with ASD.

"It's the group that's verbal, that flies under the radar," said Eack. "They've been largely forgotten, but they have such incredible talents that if they just had some support, imagine what they could do with it."

Eack says these individuals often have normal or high IQs, and while they can be extremely challenged in being cognitively flexible (such as shifting from one task to another), they can excel in other areas, like being able to memorize details and facts, or solving problems in new and unique ways.

Once they have completed the CET treatment program, they have learned valuable skills that they can use in everyday life.

Allen Gregory, who directs the Center for Autism and Developmental Disorders (CADD) Adult Outpatient Clinic, welcomes the therapy and was excited by the results seen in the first cohort. Especially since treatment for adults on the spectrum is so uncommon.

"Pennsylvania is alone in offering services to adults with autism, through the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid funding," he said. "In other states, families and individuals are on their own."

Now, he and Eack are looking forward to assembling the next cohort of 6 to 8 individuals. The fact that CADD is largely focused on more severely affected adults won't deter them. Eack is considering building additional clinics, for people who don't have intellectual disabilities, but still struggle to meet the goals they have set for themselves in adulthood.

That's the group he is passionate about helping.

Said Eack: "If we could just harness the talents these individuals already have, and help them put these talents to good use, they could have more satisfying lives and make really great contributions to the world."

In addition to this work with adults with autism, Eack continues his broader work on CET. In his ongoing study, *Promoting Activity and Cognitive Enrichment in Schizophrenia (PACES)*, participants are receiving either CET or Enriched Supportive Therapy to combat negative symptoms associated with schizophrenia. ■



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