

National Negro Health Week and Civil Rights

Proposal and Goals

In 1906, W.E.B. DuBois wrote, "With improved sanitary conditions, improved education, and better economic opportunities, the mortality of the race may and probably will steadily decrease until it becomes normal."¹ Jim Crow segregation and racial discrimination affected the health of African Americans. Racism and segregation laws resulted in many black neighborhoods being poorly developed and experiencing unsanitary conditions. In 1913, the death rate among African Americans was 24 per 1,000, while a recorded 450,000 Southern Negroes reported being seriously ill all of the time.² African American intellectuals, community activists, and everyday people discussed the importance of educating the community to combat the public health crisis brought on by Jim Crow laws and discrimination. This education went beyond academic pursuits, and health care became a central focus in ensuring the survival of the community. This project investigates the National Negro Health Week (NNHW) campaign from its formation in 1915 through its transformation in 1951 to the National Public Health Week. Spearheaded in 1915 by Booker T. Washington and other prominent figures at Howard University, National Negro Health Week was initially conceived after Booker T. Washington observed the Negro Organization Society of Virginia conduct a successful campaign to clean up black communities. Washington recognized the possibilities of the campaign on a national scale and proclaimed April 11-17 as National Negro Health Week in 1915. This project seeks to analyze both the initial formation of the campaign and its evolution in its thirty-five years of existence to understand how the programs promoted by NNHW significantly contributed to and improved African-American lives and public health within the context of the pre-1950s modern Civil Rights Movement. This will provide insight into the most pressing public health conditions facing African Americans during the era of Jim Crow, the strategies employed by African Americans and their allies to combat these conditions, and some of their lasting legacies. The conclusion to this project will be a draft of an article-length manuscript covering the conception, application, historical significance, and civil rights implications of National Negro Health Week.

Methodology

Three research questions guide this project. First, how did the enactment of NNHW affect African Americans and the communities they lived in? What public health improvements were publicized and celebrated by black community leaders as a result of the programs supported by National Negro Health Week? Second, in what ways did NNHW change over the years? This will help us to understand how the public health needs of the African American community changed over three decades. Third, how did NNHW build bridges between black and white Americans, and how did these bridges help shift the US into the Civil Rights Movement? To help answer these questions, I will examine two main primary source collections. The first is the

¹ W.E.B. DuBois, *The Health and Physique of the Negro American*, (Atlanta University Press, 1906).

² Roscoe C. Brown, "The National Negro Health Week Movement," *The Journal of Negro Education*, 1937.

promotional pamphlets of National Negro Health Week which have been digitized from 1931-1950 and are available through the University of North Carolina - Greensboro digital archive. These pamphlets contain the details of NNHW every year of the program and provide a way to analyze how the week directly worked to aid African American public health from year to year. The pamphlets will also provide information about the public health problems African Americans faced and attempted to address during the annual program. The second main primary source collection is the ProQuest Historic Black Newspaper database, which is available through Leatherby Libraries. This database contains nine different nationally distributed and regionally focused black newspapers, such as the *Chicago Defender*, *Atlanta Daily World*, and *Los Angeles Sentinel*. Reading the newspaper articles, public opinion pieces, and advertisements from the weeks in which NNHW occurred, we can get a picture of how the press discussed NNHW and how the public received and debated public health concerns. Additional primary sources that may be reviewed include *The Crisis* (the NAACP magazine), *The Opportunity* (the magazine of the National Urban League), and articles from journals such as *The Journal of Negro Education*. These materials provide first-hand accounts of the public health and civil rights debates among black activists, intellectuals, and educators. They also provide valuable insight into the relationship between black activists, their allies, and the public health community.

The primary source materials will be supplemented with secondary source research on the history and legacies of public health, racism, and civil rights activism. Research by scholars such as Vanessa Northington Gamble and monographs such as *Health Issues in the Black Community* will be useful in understanding contemporary debates on public health, racism, and civil rights.³ They reveal the importance of the NNHW campaign and its legacies to black health and civil rights activism.

Proposed Timeline:

My faculty mentor, Dr. Threat, and I plan to meet three times a week in person for one hour to check in and discuss research findings and analysis. Further conversations will take place as needed.

Week 1 - Focus on reading and analyzing the pamphlets on the UNC Greensboro database to get a sense of how NNHW changed over time. Here, I am interested in comparing and contrasting the goals of NNHW every year to understand some of the successes and failures of the programs from one year to the next. This will help me understand the campaign's trajectory. My goal for Week 1 is to summarize the most important aspects of the NNHW programs, such as recurring goals, improvements, cooperation with allies and organizations, and overall success according to any final reports available in the pamphlets. Initially, I plan to analyze the pamphlets of

³ Vanessa Northington Gamble, *Making A Place for Ourselves: The Black Hospital Movement, 1920-1945* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995) and Ronald L. Braithwaite, et al., *Health Issues in the Black Community* (Jossey-Bass, 2009).

alternating years, but ideally, and if time allows, every year's pamphlet will be reviewed and analyzed.

Week 2 - My plan for Week 2 is to review black newspapers published between April 11-17. I plan to focus on newspaper articles from 1913 to 1915 to cover the foundational years of the campaign. Then, I will review the newspaper articles published in alternating years between 1931 and 1950 to cover a broad span of the campaign. In reading the articles published in newspapers from the time period, my hope is to understand public discourse on the NNHW program, black health, and civil rights activism.

Week 3 - Will be used to review any additional primary sources and secondary source materials. In evaluating these sources, I will begin to tie together the programs of NNHW (pamphlets), with public opinions of the programs (newspapers), and finally, the opinions of scholars on the connections between the campaign and civil rights and public health activism. Week 3 will also be the time to begin outlining my article's main points and drafting my working thesis based on my conclusions from the research.

Week 4 - I will finish analyzing the secondary sources and will use the information from those sources to tie together the project. Throughout the entire four weeks, additions will be made to the draft article that details the project and the findings. At the end of Week 4, I aim to have an initial working draft of what will eventually be an article of 6,000-9,000 words in length that I can submit for peer review later. My presentation at the faculty retreat will also be put together in Week 4.

Benefits

As a pre-med sophomore at Chapman majoring in Biochemistry and Molecular Biology and minoring in history, I wanted a project that would provide me the opportunity to research both topics. By studying the history of public health in the US, I can tie medicine and history into one project. My initial interest in African-American public health was sparked while visiting a relative who worked in the ER at the University of Chicago Hospital. There, I met Dr. Pratt, who conducts clinics for poor and underserved communities in Chicago, teaching them emergency preparedness. His work highlights the lingering impacts of the NNHW campaign on public health and shows that there is still work to be done. By studying the history of public health experiences of African Americans, this project provides me with an opportunity to learn about the diverse history of the field I intend to pursue. I think that obtaining this knowledge on the history of public health, especially regarding marginalized people, provides me with a wider lens through which to look at the career I desire and understand the communities of people I may be working with. Additionally, participating in this research experience and learning how to conduct my own research project enhances my undergraduate educational experience, may afford further research opportunities, and will support my post-graduate goal of attending medical school.