

## Black Women's Health: A Synthesis of Health Research Relevant to Black Nova Scotians\*

People of African descent settled in Nova Scotia in the early 1600s. However, the research and literature in various domains, including health, have virtually ignored this population. One consequence of their absence in mainstream health literature is marginal representation of their issues in the research and policy making arenas. This often results in a lack of understanding of the historical and racial contexts that influence the health of Blacks living in Nova Scotia.

The research presented in this report is a synthesis of literature relevant to the health of Nova Scotia's Black population. The goal was to promote an understanding of the current state of knowledge about the health of Nova Scotians of African descent and to identify ways of enhancing the health and well-being of Black women and their families. The project was conducted as a partnership initiative between the Health Association of African Canadians (formerly the Black Women's Health Network) and the Maritime Centre of Excellence for Women's Health. It used a synthesis research methodology to review and analyze past research relevant to Black health and to consult researchers to ascertain specific gaps and health issues within the Nova Scotian Black community.

The literature referenced in the report comes from local research reports, Canadian studies and African American literature on those conditions that disproportionately affect people of African descent. Information

was also gathered through consultations with community researchers and academics interested in this area of research. A two-day workshop was used as a forum to raise awareness of the issues and the determinants of health, and to validate the preliminary research findings as well as to identify strategies for addressing these issues. The report includes the workshop proceedings. Recommendations for future initiatives on Black health in Nova Scotia were also developed at the workshop.

### Findings

The information collected during this study was grouped into four major themes: access to health services, preventive health issues, behavior and lifestyle, and health status.

**Access to health services:** Access or, more accurately, lack of access, to health care services includes physical location of services and transportation, limited research, lack of knowledge by professionals, under-representation of people of African descent in health professions, racism, cultural insensitivity, and language barriers.

**Preventive health:** Issues include physical health examinations, perinatal health care and birth outcomes, employment and environmental conditions. The under-utilization of routine preventive health assessments such as Pap smears, breasts self-exams, mammograms and routine physical examinations among Black women accounts for the late diagnosis of diseases like breast cancer in this population.

**Behavior and lifestyle:** The choices Black women make in exercise, nutrition, smoking, alcohol consumption and use of illicit drugs can negatively or positively influence their health. The prevalence of these lifestyle choices have been known to vary along racial lines. However, research has not adequately examined the contextual factors that account for these disparities.

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**Health status:** Canadian studies exploring health issues within the context of race, gender, and ethnicity are limited in number. However, available literature from other jurisdictions demonstrates that certain health conditions affect Black women disproportionately, in particular diabetes mellitus, cardiovascular diseases, cerebrovascular diseases, cancer, HIV/AIDS, lupus, sickle cell disorder, and sarcoidosis. Each of these conditions is examined in turn.

## Recommendations

Key messages articulated throughout the literature review, workshop and the report lead to recommendations in four areas: policy, education, research and community capacity building.

### Policy

- Identify provincial and federal data “gaps” on the health of Black Nova Scotians.
- Harmonize and integrate existing federal and provincial data on race, ethnicity and gender.
- Develop multi-cultural health, anti-racism and equal opportunity policies for provincial public health institutions.
- Develop a provincial strategic health investment program and establish targeted screening programs, management and support services that emphasizes the conditions that disproportionately affect the Black population.
- Provide equitable funding for health initiatives, research, programs, and services in Black communities.

### Education

- Incorporate cultural competency training as core aspect of health professions and medical schools.
- Increase the recruitment and retention of a culturally-diverse student population.

- Provide trained interpreters in health care delivery institutions.

### Research

- Research recruitment and retention of marginalized groups in the health care delivery professions.
- Encourage multidisciplinary Black health research.
- Build and disseminate evidence-based knowledge about Black health and social and economic inclusion.
- Support research on race as a determinant of health.

### Community Capacity Building

- Facilitate health education workshops in African Nova Scotian communities and develop community research skills.
- Facilitate the establishment of an organization or network that will advocate for and help Black Nova Scotians to overcome some of the barriers to equitable health services.
- Collaborate with local organizations and pursue strategic partnerships and networking opportunities.

As demonstrated in the research findings from other jurisdictions discussed in this report, race, culture, gender and ethnicity are important determinants of health which are often interrelated. However, in Canada and particularly Nova Scotia, these factors are not routinely considered in either health policy or health research. It is important that steps be taken to incorporate diversity at all levels of government and society.

The findings identified in this report provide a clear understanding of the health needs and status of African Nova Scotians and should lead to improved health outcomes for African Nova Scotian women and their families.

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