

Research Spotlight

As a community psychologist by training, Dr. Dawn Witherspoon is passionate about grassroots community engagement in her research. Dr. Witherspoon works with communities to understand how neighborhoods and cultural contexts help to shape diverse families' well-being. She uses a strengths-based approach to identify the positive aspects of neighborhoods that can buffer negative effects of poverty and disadvantage on youth's functioning. To do so, Dr. Witherspoon incorporates both parent and adolescents' perspectives to understand what it means for youth to be a part of their racial-ethnic group and how neighborhoods matter for racial-ethnic identity and experiences with discrimination.



Dawn Witherspoon, Ph.D.

Since arriving at Penn State in 2011, Dr. Witherspoon has created lasting relationships with the Harrisburg, PA community. As Associate Director of PACT and Penn State researcher, she hopes to enhance outreach efforts with families and organizations in Harrisburg. In her efforts, she has formed important connections with the Boys and Girls Club, YMCA, and the Latino Hispanic American Community Center (LHACC) in Harrisburg, PA, which has helped to add multiple perspectives and voices to the table regarding the needs of the broader Harrisburg community. She hopes to continue to bridge and build these relationships, cultivating trust – an integral part of meaningful community-engaged research.

As an active member of PACT, Dr. Witherspoon created the Families, Adolescents, and Neighborhoods in Context (FAN-C) Study, which focused on how the neighborhood context influences family functioning and adolescent well-being in both African American and Latino families. Her research has shown that even though parents and youth live together in the same household, they perceive the problems and strengths of their neighborhoods very differently!

Dr. Witherspoon is also collaborating with Dr. Mayra Bámaca (Associate Professor, Penn State) and Gloria Vázquez Merrick (Executive Director, LHACC) on projects in Harrisburg, including Navigating Environments of Latino Families (NELF) and PLACES/LUGARES. These projects focus on how minority adolescents in a majority-minority community (i.e., a Latino immigrant in a predominately African American community) develop unique ways of navigating and experiencing their neighborhood environments and how these experiences impact parenting practices and youth development.

In sum, Dr. Witherspoon seeks to form strong bonds with diverse communities by conducting studies that contribute to our understanding of how diverse families understand and make meaning of the positive (e.g., connection and cohesion and trust) and negative (problems and fear) aspects of their neighborhoods and how these experiences affect families and youth.