

# FACTORS THAT LEAD TO DISPARITIES IN SWIMMING

Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together on the Side of the Pool?

*Factors That Lead to Disparities in Swimming Participation*

Seth Weidmann

Carthage College

## Author Note

Seth Weidmann, Department of Athletics, Carthage College

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Seth Weidmann,

Department of Athletics, Carthage College, Kenosha, WI 53140

Contact: [sweidmann@carthage.edu](mailto:sweidmann@carthage.edu)

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## FACTORS THAT LEAD TO DISPARITIES IN SWIMMING

### **Abstract**

Earlier research on drowning disparities between White and minority Americans suggest that embedded values can lead to lack of attention and access to aquatic activities. The purpose of this study was to identify advertising and outreach methods that attracted underrepresented families in two Midwestern cities to participate in swimming programs. The researcher investigated how cultural values, family values and media may lead to whether a family chooses swimming and where they choose to participate in lessons.

The related literature of aquatics and youth sports does shed light on some of the values that may contribute to swimming participation. There is a long history of discriminatory practices related to swimming and water access in the United States. Economic and exclusivity barriers play a role in who swims and who does not. Media and outreach also affect what populations participate. What is missing is an understanding of these findings through the lens of a qualitative study.

The present study used a qualitative research design involving open-ended interviews. This design was selected because quantitative studies have not been able to adequately answer how certain values might lead many African Americans to not learn to swim, and hence to drown at higher rates than their White peers. The participants were African American and mixed-race parents from medium-sized cities in northeastern Illinois and southeastern Wisconsin. The results of this study point to three main approaches that could be utilized for communities to tackle the issue of swimming disparity. Ideas for further research are also discussed.

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### Chapter One

#### Introduction

Swimming in the United States has long been divided along social lines. For example, through the early twentieth century, mixed bathing between genders was prohibited. Obscenity laws required bulky swimming attire for women that covered the body from head to toe. These restrictions made learning to swim nearly impossible for girls and women. In the nineteenth century in American cities, ordinances banning public swimming and bathing were passed. These ordinances specifically targeted immigrant working-class men and boys. This population had brought a long history of public bathing and swimming with them from their countries of origin. It was also a population which could not afford baths in their homes or admission to private bath houses (Wiltse, 2007).

While gender and class were two important social factors that kept certain populations from accessing pools and open water in the United States, a third factor was even more insidious. Like so many inequities, it was America's original sin that laid the groundwork for race to become the reason for the most glaring disparity in swimming participation (Wiltse, 2014). While slavery, followed by Jim Crow, made swimming all but impossible for Black Americans in the South, cities in the North did not make things much easier. In the rare instance that cities did build pools in African American neighborhoods, they tended to be wading pools. To this day, most predominantly Black neighborhoods are either "pool deserts" or only have facilities that are shallow-depth, making it difficult to learn how to swim (Ito, 2014).

These events illustrate the long history of swimming segregation in the United States. At first glance, this is not so unique compared to so many of our institutions and pastimes throughout the United States. The difference is that swimming plays a unique role within our

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culture. There are at least three levels to swimming in contemporary society. At the top level, swimming is a premier sport (at least every four years) in which some of the best athletes in the world compete. Below that, swimming is a recreational activity, used both for pleasure and fitness. At the most basic level, swimming is a survival skill. In addition to these different levels of swimming there is also an entire aquatics industry that employs tens of thousands of people in the United States. There is a certain amount of cultural capital and economic capital that is out of reach for large populations of Americans.

Cultural capital is having assets that give us social mobility. The author's experience of working within the aquatics industry for their entire adult life is out of reach for people who are not exposed to swimming at a relatively young age. Many recreational activities, family vacations, summer camps and first jobs, such as lifeguarding, are not possible for children and families that have no water safety education or swimming skills.

### **Statement of the Problem**

According to USA Swimming Foundation statistics, 40% of Caucasian children have little or no swimming ability, compared to 60% of Latino children and 70% of African American children. Drowning is the second leading cause of death for children ages 1-19. African American males aged 10-19 are 14 times more likely to drown than European American males (Weiss, 2010). Swimming lessons are not the norm for children in underrepresented populations. Even when swimming lessons are accessible, there are both overt and covert conflicting messages embedded into water safety education for African Americans, along with a history of negative treatment of Black Americans in pools across the country (Wiltse, 2007). Examples of overt messages embedded in water safety education include predominantly White children and adults featured on marketing materials and in-class materials. Examples of covert messages are

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the experiences and knowledge that is taken for granted by people who are early and regular participants in aquatic activities. These can be as basic as knowing where pools are and when they are open. It can also include knowledge such as what to wear, how to walk on a pool deck and how deep the water might be at different ends of a pool.

Earlier research on drowning and the disparity between White and minority Americans suggest that embedded values can lead to lack of attention and access to aquatic activities (Ito, 2014). In the case of swimming access, these values can be seen in the lack of deep-water pools being built in predominantly minority communities, the popular media's assumptions of swimming abilities, and the advertising and outreach methods used to recruit underrepresented families to participate in aquatic activities. These and other embedded values have not been researched thoroughly in qualitative studies.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to identify advertising and outreach methods that attracted underrepresented families in two Midwestern cities to participate in swimming programs, and to explore what values may have led those families to seek aquatics education. The researcher investigated how cultural values, family values and media may lead to whether a family chooses swimming and where they choose to participate.

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### Research Questions

1. What motivates some families to put a priority on learning to swim and some to not prioritize swimming?
2. How do families that prioritize swimming lessons choose a location to learn how to swim?
3. How does what people see in media and advertising affect their view of whether swimming is something that they should prioritize?

### Definition of Terms

- Water safety: helps prevent injury and drowning in pools and open water
- Embedded values: ideas that are accepted as truth and become common knowledge
- Cultural capital: social assets of a person that promote social mobility in a society

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### Chapter Two

#### Review of the Literature

The purpose of this study was to identify advertising and outreach methods that attracted underrepresented families in two Midwestern cities to participate in swimming programs, and to explore what values may have led those families to seek aquatics education. The researcher investigated how cultural values, family values and media may lead to whether a family chooses swimming and where they choose to participate.

#### Factors Constraining Swimming Participation

**Discriminatory practices.** Many northern cities have had disparities in water access since the time of their founding (Rohrer, 2010). Race played a large role in who had access to water and who used that access since before the United States was a country. Although it was not a phenomenon specific to Milwaukee or Chicago, those are cities that can be used as examples of swimming segregation (Wiltse, 2014). Early on, Milwaukee saw much segregation around water access that was connected to class. In the nineteenth century, ordinances that banned public swimming and bathing specifically targeted working-class immigrants. According to Wiltse (2007), these laws were written to keep people from entering Lake Michigan or the Milwaukee River during the day or "within sight of any dwelling house, public walk, pier, or other place of business (p. 11)." Ninety miles south in Chicago, segregated water access was closely tied to race. This was clearly seen in the lack of deep-water pools built in predominantly Black communities (Wiltse, 2007).

**Family values.** Research on drowning disparities between White and Black Americans suggests that embedded values can lead to lack of attention and access to aquatic activities (Irwin, Irwin, Martin, & Ross, 2010; Pharr, Irwin, Layne, & Irwin, 2018). For example, parents

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who knew how to swim saw the value in making sure their children could swim as well. All of the parents of non-swimming children were non-swimmers themselves. Other studies have shown awareness around water access for minority communities while still showing a large swimming ability gap between Black and White children (Irwin, Pharr, Layne, & Irwin, 2017). Irwin et al note that it has been over 10 years since a former president of USA Swimming, the national governing body in the United States, urged the organization to seek empirical data to better understand what was influencing low swim participation among underrepresented youth. Even with that heightened awareness, as of 2017, the most recent data shows that the needle has not moved significantly for swimming ability (Irwin et al., 2011; Pharr et al., 2018). This research has primarily been focused on quantitative data. There has also been research on awareness of the racial composition and dynamics among underserved youth and their families (Hartmann & Manning, 2016).

Ito (2014) explains how values can become embedded when they become common knowledge and accepted as truth. DeLuca (2016) discusses an African American mother who had her son in a travel soccer club in which he was the only child of color. She eventually took her son out of the league because she was not comfortable with the majority upper class white families that he and she were socializing with. A number of questions can be raised about how (or to what extent) the racialized structures of the youth sports world are understood and experienced by children of color themselves and their parents. Are these folks aware of these inequities and disparities? Do they see barriers and obstacles? How do they see and experience the different ways they are treated? (Hartmann & Manning, 2016). These pieces are often missing from the research on race and youth sport in the United States. For swimming specifically, some researchers have suggested that participation in swimming among minority

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groups is influenced by social exclusionary practices (Golob, Giles, & Rich, 2013; Ito, 2008).

There may be socially-constructed assumptions of who should and should not participate in water-based activities.

Stereotypes can play a large role in how parents decide what is beneficial for their children and what is not. Stereotypes can permeate into the culture of those being stereotyped. Irwin (2010) quoted an African American mother from Boston as saying, “I don’t want to get stereotypical but for some African American families they don’t like the water and being cold and just like skiing is a sport that Blacks don’t participate in and that has changed over the years. Both of my boys and husband ski and swim” (p. 7). Stereotypes can also play into how individuals view themselves as they grow up. Tatum (2017) notes that, for Black youth, asking ‘Who am I?’ usually includes thinking about ‘What does it mean to be Black?’ (p.132). If an African American youth has grown up hearing and seeing that swimming is not for them, it could be understandable that swimming is not part of their life as a Black American (Tatum, 2017).

**Cultural capital.** Cultural capital consists of personal social assets that promote social mobility in a society. DeLuca (2016) breaks his findings up into economic capital, social capital and cultural capital. Specifically, he notes that, “cultural capital is acquired unconsciously, often through family,” and that, “this capital tends to be recognized in the form of cultural competencies, skills, and abilities” (p. 314). The lack of involvement in many sports and activities can lead to unrealized cultural capital for certain communities in the United States, but this has not been investigated in swimming specifically. Swimming is unique in the youth sports landscape. Although it is certainly a sport that can be competed in at every level, from age group swim clubs to the Olympic and professional level, it is also a leisure activity, life-saving skill and

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route to many careers.

The loss of cultural capital that occurs when certain groups are excluded from aquatic activity is wide-ranging. Certain youth activities like summer camps and birthday parties are exclusive to youth who can swim. Later in life, lucrative adolescent jobs like lifeguarding, camp counseling and swim lesson instruction are out of the question. Careers like aquatic sport coaching and aquatic director positions are certainly out of the reach of individuals who don't have a history around water.

**Economic barriers.** Cost and exclusivity are barriers to many lower-class families, particularly those of color (DeLuca & Andrews, 2016). The demographics of the swimming and tennis clubs that the researchers studied in metropolitan areas also keeps participation numbers low among minority populations. These factors exacerbate the existing barrier of having very few public pools throughout the United States. Some countries, such as the United Kingdom, have swimming as part of the national curriculum. In the United States, the burden is largely placed on parents to get their children to be safe in and around water (Rohrer, 2010).

**Influences of media.** Irwin et al. (2010) pointed to the lack of minority representation in aquatic activities portrayed in movies and television. An African American mom from Boston was interviewed for Irwin's research study. She stated, "It's culture.... I still think it's that and what you see on TV, you see a lot more of Caucasian kids or adults loving the beach, loving the water you know what I mean, being fish-like" (p. 7).

Ito explains that the popular media's assumptions of the swimming abilities of underserved populations can contribute to certain expectations in the real world. In a 1987 interview with Ted Koppel on ABC's "Nightline", baseball executive Al Campanis made a number of uncomfortable remarks. As he was attempting to explain how it was a matter of fact

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that many former Black baseball players may not be cut out for managerial or executive roles, he said, “So, it just might just be -- why are black men, or black people, not good swimmers? Because they don't have the buoyancy” (Weinbaum, 2012).

Fortunately, we have come a long way since 1987. Simone Manuel and Cullen Jones, two recent African American Olympic Champions, have received quite a bit of exposure for their success in the pool (Hall, 2016). They have also assumed the mantle of leaders and partners with organizations aiming to close the swimming gap. As promising as that sounds, there are still challenges to the views of some in very public roles and, most likely, the general public.

In his August 23, 2006 show, Rush Limbaugh referred to the NBC Survivor television series which divided the competitors onto teams by race. He stated that the African Americans are the worst swimmers and used the study by Saluja et al. (2006) to justify that he was not a racist (Brown, 2006). Another example is Tramm Hudson, running at the time for a congressional seat in Florida. He was quoted, “I know from my own experience that Blacks are not the greatest swimmers and sometimes may not even know how to swim” (“Candidate Apologizes for Racial Remark,” 2006). This was an offhand remark for which he apologized; however, these statements demonstrate that it is a commonly held belief.

### **Effectiveness of Outreach Programs**

Research suggests that progress has been made in outreach efforts to engage families of color in swimming. A recent study commissioned by the USA Swimming Foundation found a 5-10% improvement in overall swimming ability from their previous findings in 2010 (Irwin et al., 2017). At the same time, that study also concluded that 64% of African American children, 45% of Hispanic children, and 40% of Caucasian children, along with 79% of the children from

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households with incomes less than \$50,000, have low or no swim ability, putting them at increased risk for drowning.

USA Swimming Foundation's "Make a Splash" initiative has granted more than \$4.5 million to swim lesson providers to support free and reduced-cost swimming lessons (USA Swimming Foundation, 2018). After providing grants to 34 swimming schools in 2011, they have grown to recently granting 77 swimming schools with funds to teach underserved children. These are impressive numbers, but still a small drop in the bucket compared to how many children and families have little or no access to water.

Groups and organizations that have historically supported African Americans may need to rally behind this cause (Waller & Norwood, 2011). National and local non-profit organizations have already been doing good work that could be built upon. In fact, this author has seen a very localized program be quite successful in one of the communities that was researched in this present study. Evanston (IL) Swims is a partnership between the YWCA Evanston/North Shore, McGaw YMCA, and School District 65. A survey of Evanston families revealed that just 17 percent of first graders were proficient swimmers. Almost a quarter had no swimming experience -- a basic and vital life skill for any child, especially living in a lakefront community (Patch, 2018). Evanston Swims seeks to remedy that need by providing all second-grade children in Evanston with free water safety instruction and swim lessons. On District 65's early dismissal days once a month, second graders whose families choose to participate in the program are bussed to one of three pools. This is much earlier prevention than what most communities offer, which is either nothing, or a physical education lesson in high school.

While there is not quantifiable data yet as to the impact this program has made in closing the swimming gap, there is anecdotal evidence of more children from diverse backgrounds

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continuing lessons in Evanston. Evanston Swims gives the hosting organizations an opportunity to evaluate the children who need extra support, so they can continue lessons when the year is over. Once the program is finished, full and partial scholarships are available for families who want to continue but cannot afford the cost of swim lessons. Some of these ideas also came up in earlier qualitative research (Irwin et al., 2010). Free lessons, sliding fee scales and incorporating swimming into school curriculum from an early age are all points that have come up through interviews with providers and parents.

### **Chapter Summary**

The related literature of aquatics and youth sports does shed light on some of the values that may contribute to swimming participation. There is a long history of discriminatory practices related to swimming and water access in the United States. There are current factors that constrain swimming participation, including family and cultural values. Economic and exclusivity barriers play a role in who swims and who does not. Media and outreach also affect what populations participate. What is missing is an understanding of these findings through the lens of a qualitative study.

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### Chapter Three

#### Methodology

The purpose of this study was to identify advertising and outreach methods that attracted underrepresented families in two Midwestern cities to participate in swimming programs, and to explore what values may have led those families to seek aquatics education. The researcher investigated how cultural values, family values and media may lead to whether a family chooses swimming and where they choose to participate.

This study used a qualitative research design involving open-ended interviews. This design was selected because quantitative studies have not been able to adequately answer how certain values might lead many African Americans to not learn to swim, and hence to and drown at higher rates than their White peers.

#### Participants

IRB approval was procured before beginning the present study. For privacy purposes, all of the participants in the present study have been listed as Participant, followed by a number. Three of the participants in this study were recruited from the YWCA in a small city north of Chicago. The researcher contacted the aquatics director of the YWCA about whether there would be any parents of African American children who might be interested in being interviewed for a research project. The aquatics director responded with a list of seven names and contact information. The researcher sent an email to all seven of the parents. Responses came from three of the parents willing to be interviewed for the project.

Participant One is an African American woman in her upper-30s. She is married to an African American man, and they have two middle-school aged children. Participant One grew up in a north side neighborhood of Chicago. Her husband grew up in a village next to the city

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where the YWCA is located. They are raising their children in a neighborhood of that same village, which is close to the YWCA. Participant Two is an African American woman in her mid-20s. She is not married. She has three children under the age of 7. Participant Two grew up in the city where the YWCA is located and is raising her children there. Participant Three is a Nigerian American woman in her 40s. She is married to an African American man. They have three children; one in high school, one in middle school and one in elementary school. She grew up in Nigeria before moving to Chicago. She and her husband are raising their children in the same city as the YWCA.

The other two participants were recruited from the swim lesson program at a small liberal arts college located in a city in southeastern Wisconsin. The researcher is employed at the college and works at the aquatic center. After consulting with the aquatics director at the college, it was decided that it would be appropriate to approach parents of African American swimming students about whether they would be interested in being interviewed for a research project. Two parents were willing to be interviewed as part of the project.

Participant Four is a mixed-race woman in her mid-20s. Her mother is White and her father is Black. She is not married. The father of her children is African American. Participant Four has two children, ages 7 and 4. She grew up in a city in southeastern Wisconsin and is raising her children there. Participant Five is a white woman in her upper-30s. She is married to an African American man. They have two children, both elementary school aged. She and her husband are both from a city in southeastern Wisconsin and are raising their children there.

The researcher formerly worked at the YWCA and currently works at the college. He knows many of the families involved in both swimming schools. An effort was made to only request participation from parents and families with which he had no prior relationship.

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### **Setting**

The present study was conducted at two separate institutions. Three of the interviews were conducted in the conference room on the second floor of the YWCA. The YWCA is a social services organization in a city in northeastern Illinois. Two of the interviews were conducted in the head swimming and diving coach's office, adjacent to the aquatic center at the college. The college is a small private liberal arts college in a city in southeastern Wisconsin. The participants at the YWCA were seated at the corner of a conference table. The researcher was seated a few feet from the subjects, on the other side of the same corner of the conference table. At the college site, the subjects sat on a sofa. The researcher sat in a desk chair, a few feet away from the subjects.

The YWCA does much work toward their mission of eliminating racism and empowering women. They also have a strong learn-to-swim program that teaches 1,500 children from their community to swim each year. Their administration building and swimming pool were built in the 1970s and sit on a property just a few blocks away from a bustling downtown.

The Wisconsin college is primarily an undergraduate institution, with approximately 2,800 undergraduate students. The college has very modern and extensive athletic facilities, including an impressive natatorium. The pool is primarily used by the college's swimming, diving and water polo teams, but there are swimming lessons that are open to the public.

### **Research Design and Data Collection**

The researcher used interviews to conduct the present study. After developing a set of questions, the researcher edited those questions with their advisor. Once the researcher settled on seven questions, the questions were printed out on a sheet that could be referenced during the interviews with the participants.

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Participants signed consent forms before the interviews began. Data collected for the present study includes audio recorded interviews, captured with the Voice Memos app on an iPhone SE. The interviews were then transcribed onto a Microsoft Word document. The document is stored on a password-protected MacBook Pro.

### **Instruments and Data Analysis**

The researcher conducted semi-structured interviews with each of the five participants. When conducting the interviews, the researcher regularly asked clarifying questions. The proximity to the college participants was very close. It may have been relatively easy to follow-up with an additional interview with those parents, but because of the difficulty in scheduling follow-up interviews with the YWCA, no additional interviews were conducted for any of the subjects.

### Interview Questions

- Tell me about what attracted you to have your child(ren) swim at this location.
- What is your earliest memory of seeing swimmers at a pool or at the beach?
- Who do you see now swimming at pools or at beaches?
- Tell me about other people in your demographic that have access to the water and take advantage of it?
- Who do you see swimming in advertisements for swimming lessons, camps, water parks, etc.?
- Who do you see swimming on TV, in movies and on the news?
- What would be the best way to reach out and communicate with parents of underrepresented children about why their child would benefit from swimming lessons?

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### Chapter Four

#### Results

The purpose of this study was to identify advertising and outreach methods that attracted underrepresented families in two Midwestern cities to participate in swimming programs, and to explore what values may have led those families to seek aquatics education. The researcher investigated how cultural values, family values and media may lead to whether a family chooses swimming and where they choose to participate.

#### Data Analysis

The researcher has taken the data collected and separated it into seven different categories, aligned with the questions asked in the question set instrument. The titles for the categories are the same as the questions that were asked. Follow-up questions are not listed in the text but were utilized at times throughout the interviews.

#### **Question One - Tell me about what attracted you to have your child(ren) swim at this location.**

Proximity to the facility was key for participants when choosing where to have their children take swimming lessons. Four of the five participants had tried another program before settling on their current one. YMCAs and high schools were the organizations that were tried before moving to an alternative. Participant One moved her children to the YWCA after trying the local high school but not seeing much progress. Participant Four moved her children to the college after seeing that there was a much lower student to teacher ratio than the YMCA. Participant Five was the lone parent who had to move lesson sites for a different reason. She moved her children to the college after the pool at a local university was shut down.

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### **Question Two - What is your earliest memory of seeing swimmers at a pool or at the beach?**

There were not many strong early memories of being exposed to swimmers at a young age. In fact, one of the participants, Participant Three, had absolutely no exposure to or concept of swimming while growing up. She stated it is, “not in my culture to practice swimming. I’m Nigerian and we didn’t do it there.”

The other four participants all mentioned that it was a young age. The researcher inferred that those four participants were pre-school or kindergarten-age when they remember being aware of swimming. All four of them recalled being six or seven when they were first directly introduced to a pool or swimming lesson. Participant Two noted, “When I was about 6 or 7 I took a swim class at the high school that didn’t work out for me. You knew about the beach, you knew about swimming. When I was in kindergarten I knew what it was to swim but, did I know how to swim, no.” Only two of the five cited traumatizing experiences that shape their view of the water. Most of them did have at least some level of discomfort in the water and did not want their children to carry that on.

### **Question Three - Who do you see now swimming at pools or at beaches?**

All five of the participants stated that they notice a lack of diversity when observing other people at pools or the beach. All of them mentioned seeing more White children and families swimming and very few Black and Latino swimmers.

Two of the five did say they noticed some differences when swimming in different settings. Participant Five mentioned that she notices much more diversity at beaches than she does at swim lessons. Participant Three says that she has seen a change over the past ten years. Her oldest daughter has participated with a swim team for quite a few years. “My daughter was

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the only Black person on the team back then. Now there's more of a mix. More integrated now.”

### **Question Four - Tell me about other people in your demographic that have access to the water and take advantage of it?**

All five participants spoke of swimming being rare in their social and family circles. Three of the five stated that they simply don't see the interest from others. Two of the mothers mentioned that they have tried to push friends with children toward swimming lessons. Participant Four said, “I have one friend that is Black, and they start but don't follow through with the lessons. I'm not sure if she knows how to swim herself. I see both sides of it. Some are scared of the water so they don't have their kids do it. Others that are scared of the water say, ‘My kids will never be like me’.”

### **Question Five - Who do you see swimming in advertisements for swimming lessons, camps, water parks, etc.?**

Advertisements for swimming lessons and other aquatic activities don't seem to be very prevalent in the two communities that were studied. All five participants stated that they have not seen marketing materials for swimming lessons in their community. Participant Two said that she had seen advertisements in different communities and that there are usually White children featured on them. Most participants repeated that it was mainly word of mouth that brought them to where they currently had their children enrolled. Four out of the five participants stated that they had heard about their current location from another parent or family. Participant Two said that she had, “heard about the YWCA through someone years ago.” Participant One mentioned that she heard great things about both the lesson program and swim

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team at the YWCA. When speaking about sending her children to swim at the college, Participant Four made a point to say, “It’s a word of mouth thing.”

Participant One mentioned that she had noticed outreach materials in the form of information about a partnership program between the school district and local organizations with swimming pools. Her second grader took advantage of the lessons that were offered through that partnership. Participant Four stated that others might be more likely to get involved if there were opportunities like that in her community. She stated, “If it was more like info about football or basketball sign up more would participate.”

### **Question Six - Who do you see swimming on TV, in movies and on the news?**

“Michael Phelps, every four years,” is what Participant Five had to say about swimming in the media. That certainly alluded to not seeing much swimming on tv, the news or movies, but it also pointed to mostly seeing White swimmers. The four other participants were clearer about the skin color of swimmers they see in the media. Each of them said they mostly saw White people participating in swimming, if they saw swimming at all. Participant Four noted that she mainly sees, “Caucasians. All of the above is mostly white people.”

Participant One said that she had never considered it before. “I would have to say more White people. That’s probably all. You don’t really think about it, but now that you asked, you don’t really see anyone else. It’s not normal to see scenes with a minority group that I can think of.” Participant Two was clear that she had considered it before. “You do see swimming in those things. And you see the stereotypes of the pool parties. When White people have pool parties they’re all in the pool. When Black people have pool parties they’re all *around* the pool and nobody’s in the water.”

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**Question Seven - What would be the best way to reach out and communicate with parents of underrepresented children about why their child would benefit from swimming lessons?**

There were more common responses to this question than any other. The question was focused on what would be the best way to reach out and communicate with parents of underrepresented children about why their child would benefit from swimming lessons. Each of the five participants stated that working through the schools could be effective. Participant One and Participant Two have both seen and taken advantage of the Evanston Swims program offered to District 65 second graders. Participant Four and Participant Five, both from the southeast Wisconsin region, brought up ideas that echoed the program in Evanston.

“Schools,” Participant Five said. “You’d have to get transportation because they may not have a way to get here. You would need one in the inner city. And maybe a thing in the school like an assembly for water safety.” Participant Four had an even more robust idea of what a program like that could look like. She stated, “You have to take swimming in high school. So, I feel like maybe they should start at a younger age, or maybe they should be able to do a program at school to offer kids to come on a Friday for low cost. Little things could open up minds to see that swimming is important. A lot of people don’t think it’s important. They just think it’s another sport. They don’t think that it has the different levels of importance. Fitness, safety.”

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### Chapter Five

#### Discussion

The purpose of this study was to identify advertising and outreach methods that attracted underrepresented families in two Midwestern cities to participate in swimming programs, and to explore what values may have led those families to seek aquatics education. The researcher investigated how cultural values, family values and media may lead to whether a family chooses swimming and where they choose to participate.

#### Interpretation and Implications

An important question is, What can communities do? This question is important for both specific minority groups and for communities in general. Disparities in swimming is a social and public health problem. It impacts individuals, racial groups and entire communities. The past decade has seen growth in research studying this topic, including a push from USA Swimming for more empirical data. The present study was an attempt to use qualitative methods to expand the understanding of swimming disparity in the United States.

A need for more communication was highlighted in this study's results. As the responses to question one showed, communication with others in their community, through word of mouth recommendations, was the deciding factor in them swimming at their present location. Four out of the five said that they had heard about their current location from another parent or family. A particularly impactful finding came from the results of question seven, regarding what might be the best way to communicate with parents of underrepresented children about swimming. Every participant felt that more outreach could be done, especially at the schools and other community organizations. This echoes past research that has shown that communities may need to take ownership of swimming disparities and do something on a local level.

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The Evanston Swims program that is on-going in Evanston, Illinois is an example of a community working together and closing the swimming disparity gap. The program was part of a process that did take a number of years, but grew surprisingly fast. The seed of the program started in 2012 as part of Evanston150, an initiative that promoted 10 ideas to improve Evanston in celebration of the city's 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary. It was selected as one of the ideas to move forward and began with three of the eight Evanston elementary schools. The program is now implemented in all eight schools and has continued to see more participation each year. This is a model that could be duplicated in many other communities. It helps when parents in a community see others participating and begin to see how it could be something for their children. Stereotypes can be chipped away when there are people in your community modeling a behavior that has not been the norm in the past.

Outside of grassroots efforts like Evanston Swims, underserved populations are not seeing themselves in outreach materials or media that pertain to swimming. Each of the five participants stated that they never saw outreach or advertising materials in their communities. They made it clear that they did not see people that looked like them or their children swimming in any form of media; on tv, in movies or in the news. This reflects earlier research, which showed that the existing marketing materials from national campaigns, such as USA Swimming's Make a Splash initiative, may not be reaching very far beyond the current swimming community.

Together, all of these results point the researcher to these three approaches needed for a community to take the next step in tackling the swimming disparity issue. First, a community needs to recognize the need for a change. It can be important to have the big names and organizations shouting from the top, but local groups and individuals have the greatest impact.

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Local governments, schools, YMCAs, Boys & Girls Clubs are just a few examples of organizations that could form partnerships. Those partnerships should be with schools and parent groups, but also between the organizations themselves. Second, there needs to be a focus on the funding. Cost is a major factor in families deciding whether swimming is something for them, so low or no cost lessons have to be an option in many communities. The more organizations that a community can get involved, the more opportunities there will be for fundraising to cover some of the expense for scholarships. Third, a focus on the cultural and economic capital gap could be a fresh new way of framing this issue. While it may be clear to most people that knowing how to swim could help save your life, it is not as clear that there are many things that certain populations in America are missing out on. As noted earlier, certain youth activities like summer camps and birthday parties are exclusive to youth who can swim. Later in life, lucrative adolescent jobs like lifeguarding, camp counseling and swim lesson instruction are out of the question. Careers like aquatic sport coaching and aquatic director positions are certainly out of the reach of individuals who don't have a history around water.

### **Limitations**

There were important over-arching themes that came up through this research study, but there were also some obstacles that arose. The sample size was relatively small. Future research could try to broaden the scope, but researchers could have similar difficulties due to the lower number of African Americans taking swimming lessons in these two communities.

The responses from the participants were, for the most part, quite brief. Follow-up questions were asked, but the responses still remained brief. The researcher would have liked to conduct follow-up interviews with the participants. Proximity to the college participants would have made that easy, but proximity to YWCA participants made that difficult. There may have

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been an opportunity to follow-up over the phone. In the end, the researcher decided not to conduct follow-up interviews because he would not have been able to do so in a consistent way with all participants. Additionally, participants did not answer some of the questions fully or directly in the initial interview. One example of a better question or follow-up question that the researcher could have asked is related to the advertisement question. A better question could have been, “If you were going to make an advertisement for outreach purposes, what would it look like?”

### **Future Research**

There is certainly room for future research on this topic. More qualitative work could be done to expand our understanding even further. A more robust sample from a more varied region could be beneficial.

There has now been over a decade of a new focus on research for this topic but there has not been direct research on the largest advocate group. USA Swimming’s “Make a Splash” initiative has helped spearhead reports on progress within certain localized groups. What we have not seen is a study on the “Make a Splash” initiative as a whole.

A third opportunity for further research would be to focus on a different minority group. We have a large amount of data on swimming disparity for African Americans but relatively little for Latino and mixed-race Americans. Two of the five parents in the present study are from families that have one parent or grandparent that identifies as Caucasian. Future research might explore whether mixed-race families see a greater swimming influence coming from their White family members.

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### **Conclusion**

The present study reminded the researcher that, more than anything, swimming is a lifesaving skill that everyone should have. It is not realistic to spend an entire life avoiding the water, especially in lakefront communities such as those in southeast Wisconsin and northeast Illinois. Early on, both the research and interviews for this study pointed to the educational aspect of swimming. The United States pays close attention to competitive swimming every four years, but there is a much deeper level to this activity that saves lives and loses lives every day.

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**Appendix****Transcribed Interviews with Participants**

**Tell me about what attracted you to have your child(ren) swim at this location.**

*Participant One*

Heard from other parents at (school deleted) who had kids in lessons, and the swim team. Heard great stuff. Had her at high school but didn't see a lot of progress. Were open to trying something new. Been here 5 years. We really liked it, seen progress.

*Participant Two*

I heard about it through someone. Years ago I heard that. And they were the most reasonably priced.

*Participant Three*

My daughter she needed more extracurricular activities. So we tried swimming and loved it. She's swimming for (school deleted) now. Was looking into membership at the (organization deleted) so we tried it there. Didn't love it there so ended up here.

*Participant Four*

A friend of the family told me about it. I was especially interested because it was only two students per instructor so I felt like they get more experience out of it. At the (organization deleted) they have many more kids per class so they sit on the side more. It was a word of mouth thing.

*Participant Five*

(School deleted) shut down. Looking for different options and heard this was good because of swimmer to teacher ratio. Looked at a couple others and got it here.

**What is your earliest memory of seeing swimmers at a pool or at the beach?**

*Participant One*

It looked fun. Wanted to do it.

I remember coming here when I was a kid, playing in the water, but never learned. The little bit I did learn was not enough to be comfortable. The point is to get them comfortable as early as possible. I always had friends that knew how to swim and we'd go to the beach. I couldn't go in that far. They'd be playing. We'd go to the beach in (city deleted). I grew up with my grandmother and it wasn't a thing that she did in the culture. I was never in swimming classes and didn't learn. I remember going to a friend's father's company picnic but my older sister came along. There was a pool and all the kids started going down the slide in the pool. I wanted to do it and my sister was more comfortable in the water so said "go down and I'll catch you at the bottom." I went down

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and didn't see her anyway. It was a traumatizing experience for me. So after that, including in high school, I had a fear of the water so trying to learn, I couldn't focus and just had fear. I didn't want my kids to have that. So that was a big reason I wanted to push them to be comfortable in the water and learn how to swim. What drove us is that we vacation a lot to places that have water and they wanted to go in the water. Neither of us swim. Wanted to feel safe letting them go in the water even if we didn't.

### *Participant Two*

When I was about 6 or 7 I took a swim class at the high school that didn't work out for me. You knew about the beach, you knew about swimming. When I was in kindergarten I knew what it was to swim but did I know how to swim, no.

### *Participant Three*

Didn't see a lot when I was a kid. Not in my culture to practice swimming. I'm Nigerian and we didn't do it there.

### *Participant Four*

When I was 3 or 4 I'd see people at friends swimming pools.

I remember my mom had us swim at (school deleted) when I was 7. I did it every summer. I love it and that's why I have them do it.

I want my kids to be comfortable in the water and not afraid. I work with adults that are afraid of water. They don't know how to swim, especially the minorities. It's kind of sad and you're thinking, why don't you know how to swim. Was it not in your culture to learn?

### *Participant Five*

I used to swim at the downtown (organization deleted) in elementary school.

I was 10 by the time I got brought to the beach. Maybe hotel pools but no easy access to water.

## **Who do you see now swimming at pools or at beaches?**

### *Participant One*

I still don't see a lot of minorities in the water or water sports. You may see them wading in the water, but don't see much else.

### *Participant Two*

Mostly white. Some Latino. Same as I saw when I was a kid. No change at all.

### *Participant Three*

It's getting better. 10 years ago it would have been many more white kids. My daughter was the only black person on the team back then. And now there's more of a mix. More integrated now.

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*Participant Four*

Mostly children and very few adults. When I do see adults they're usually just standing. Mostly Caucasian. If they are they're not in deep end.

*Participant Five*

Old people at the mom's condo. Beach it expands across the board. Much more diverse at the beach versus swim lessons. Beach is free and lessons can be expensive.

**Tell me about other people in your demographic that have access to the water and take advantage of it?**

*Participant One*

No, not really. When I think of the friends that we do hang with, not so much. A few that do when vacationing. But we don't see them doing a lot of water stuff. Even for us, when we go somewhere, he's not really the one to go in the water. He'd rather sit off to the side.

*Participant Two*

No, and I'm trying to get people that I know personally to do it. I've become one of those word of mouth people.

*Participant Three*

Don't know many that do.

*Participant Four*

Their dad does not swim at all. He knows how to swim but does not enjoy it. I may only have one or two friends that don't know how to swim or don't take advantage. Their children have been in lessons.

I have one friend that is black and they start but don't follow through with the lessons. Not sure if she knows how to swim herself.

I see both sides of it, some that are scared of the water and don't have their kids do it and some that say my kids will never be like me.

*Participant Five*

All my nieces and nephews like to swim and go to the beach. But not swim lessons as a huge thing. Not a lot of friends with kids our age have kids in lessons.

Niece dives but doesn't swim well.

**Who do you see swimming in advertisements for swimming lessons, camps, water parks, etc.?**

*Participant One*

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I don't see a lot of outreach materials for swimming lessons. The only things I've seen that we do take advantage of is (organization deleted). Son is in 2<sup>nd</sup> grade so he's signed up for it. Other than that we don't get anything coming home. Even for camps, I don't see anything water related.

### *Participant Two*

Not a lot of that in this area, but usually see white kids in materials.

### *Participant Three*

No, not at all. It's word of mouth to find out.

### *Participant Four*

Don't ever see those things. You have to hear it through word of mouth.

Everyone knows about (parks deleted) but the only way you hear about lessons is from somebody. No flyers.

If it was more like info about football or basketball sign up more would participate.

### *Participant Five*

No, none. You know that the (organization deleted) does it. I knew about (business deleted) and that the line was ridiculously long. Heard about this because swim instructor at (school deleted) sent us this direction.

I've never gone to the pools to look at diversity. There are public pools here but no advertisements we see.

I get one through work but really just word of mouth.

## **Who do you see swimming on TV, in movies and on the news?**

### *Participant One*

I would have to say more white people. That's probably all. You don't really think about it, but now that you asked, you don't really see anyone else. It's not normal to see scenes with a minority group that I can think of.

### *Participant Two*

You do see swimming in those things. And you see the stereotypes of the pool parties. When white people have pool parties they're all in the pool. When black people have pool parties they're all *around* the pool and nobody's in the water.

For news, when you do hear about the summertime beach openings you do see pretty much white people there.

### *Participant Three*

A lot of Caucasian. But in general, swimming is not so represented. I'll tell people that my daughter swims and they'll say, "for what?"

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*Participant Four*

Caucasians. All of the above is mostly white people. Very rare you would see someone of another background.

*Participant Five*

Michael Phelps.

Swimming's just every four years.

**What would be the best way to reach out and communicate with parents of underrepresented children about why their child would benefit from swimming lessons?**

*Participant One*

Through the school district. Maybe after school programs. A lot of minority families work full time and sign kids up for enrichment programs and after school childcare. Enrichment fairs, (school deleted) had one about what programs might be available.

(Organization deleted) has a large number of minority families. They're expanding more and having events in their new building. Community centers like (organization deleted).

*Participant Two*

Through the school of after school programs. They offered the half day lessons, (organization deleted).

Pricing is a big issue. If you don't know to ask for a scholarship, or that you can get one, swimming can be like \$140 for a session.

You just have to ask for it.

*Participant Three*

If the school district had a once a week option for kids to do. If parents see swimming as a sport parents would try.

*Participant Four*

Advertise. There is zero that advertises swimming here.

Also through school. Like in school, you have to take swimming in high school. So I feel like maybe they should start at a younger age, or maybe they should be able to do a program at school to offer kids to come on a Friday for low cost. Little things could open up minds to see that swimming is important. A lot of people don't think it's important. They just think it's another sport. They don't think that it has the different levels of importance. Fitness, safety.

*Participant Five*

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Boys and girls club or groups like that. Schools. You'd have to get transportation. May not have a way to get here.

You would need one in the inner city.

Maybe a thing in the school like an assembly for water safety.

Has to be affordable.

Could do a program through school district?

### **Anything else?**

#### *Participant One*

Sometimes for punishments things are taken away from them, but swimming is not. This is not optional. They like it, which is a good thing, but it's not an option. They have to do swimming.

#### *Participant Two*

My oldest started swimming at 3. Went away then we came back.

I think it's a big help because we have the stigma of black people don't swim. It's something everyone should know how to do. It looks fun, but I'm terrified of the water and I don't want my kids like that.

It can affect life. When I go over bridges I'm scared that if something happens I can't save my kids. I don't want them to be like me. I want them to be comfortable.

If they can save themselves then I'll be good. I used to not be able to be here when they were in the water and used to have my friend bring them. Now that they're more comfortable I'm getting better with it.

#### *Participant Three*

Also not many people are going to pay a full fee to do an extracurricular like swimming.

#### *Participant Four*

It should be mandatory. Like how they do music or art, should do swimming. My son goes to (school deleted) and they actually have a pool in their school but they use it for physical therapy. They can get points and have a swimming day, but very few kids there know how to swim. They just stay in the shallow part.

Just hoping it starts younger.