

## *Family, Maternal and Child Health Programs Life Course Initiative*

### An Overview

#### What is the Life Course Initiative?

The Life Course Initiative, launched in 2005, is a 15-year Family, Maternal and Child Health (FMCH) Programs initiative based on the Life Course Perspective. The mission of the Life Course Initiative is to reduce disparities in birth outcomes and change the health of the next generation in Contra Costa County by achieving health equity, optimizing reproductive potential, and shifting the paradigm of the planning, delivery, and evaluation of maternal, child, and adolescent health services.

FMCH Programs developed the Life Course Initiative when we learned about the Life Course Perspective from the work of leading academics and researchers. As a result, and in light of local data showing alarming and unchanging disparities in birth outcomes, we were inspired to take action. With the support of higher-level management in our organization, we moved forward to implement this new initiative.

#### What is the Life Course Perspective?

The Life Course Perspective suggests that a complex interplay of biological, behavioral, psychological, and social protective and risk factors contributes to health outcomes across the span of a person's life. For example, disparities in birth outcomes, such as low birth weight and infant mortality, are often explained by the quality and frequency of prenatal care. In contrast, the Life Course Perspective suggests that these disparities result from differences in protective and risk factors between groups of women over the course of their lives. As a result, the health and socioeconomic status of one generation directly affects the health status of the next one.

The Life Course Perspective integrates a focus on critical periods and early life events with an emphasis on the wear and tear a person experiences over time. For example, as Figure 1 illustrates for White and African American women, differences in risk factors (downward arrows) and protective factors (upward arrows) over one's life course affect one's health and development and contribute to disparities in birth outcomes.<sup>1</sup> Reproductive potential describes how one's health status at any given age may influence reproductive health and future birth outcomes.

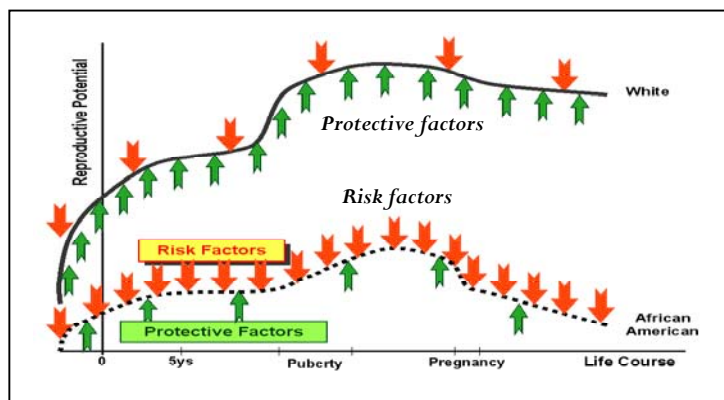


Figure 1.<sup>1</sup>

## **What protective and risk factors during the life course affect health outcomes?**

Socioeconomic status, race and racism, health care, disease status, stress, nutrition and weight status, birth weight, and a range of behaviors are some of the key protective and risk factors that may affect health outcomes, including reproductive and birth outcomes. These factors, in both the past and present, may affect women of various ethnic groups differently. For example, high socioeconomic status or prenatal care may not confer the same benefits on African-American women as they do on White women.<sup>1</sup>

## **What are the public health implications of the Life Course Perspective?**

Understanding the Life Course Perspective creates opportunities to build upon protective factors and reduce risk factors. In this context, public health programs and interventions need to focus on building environments that support healthy and thriving communities, and ensuring that the broad array of protective and risk factors are addressed in an integrated, coordinated, and comprehensive manner.

## **What is the “road map” for the Life Course Initiative?**

The Life Course Initiative uses Lu et al.’s 12-Point Plan to Close the Black-White Gap in Birth Outcomes<sup>2</sup> as a road map for achieving its mission. The 12-Point Plan is a specific framework for reducing racial disparities in birth outcomes by moving beyond prenatal care and the traditional medical model to address family and community systems, and social and economic inequities. (See the Life Course Initiative’s fact sheet, *A 12-Point Plan to Close the Black-White Gap in Birth Outcomes*, for more information.)

## **What has the Life Course Initiative accomplished so far?**

Since its inception in 2005, the Life Course Initiative has implemented a number of activities. We have:

- Conducted interactive educational sessions for staff with FMCH Programs, other County agencies, and community-based organizations;
- Identified current and future FMCH Programs activities that fit with the 12-Point Plan and integrate the Life Course Perspective;
- Established the Life Course Initiative Data Team, which meets regularly;
- Surveyed FMCH Programs staff to measure the effectiveness of the educational sessions; and
- Hosted a National MCH Life Course Meeting, in conjunction with the Life Course Work Group, funded by The California Endowment.

## **What is the Life Course Initiative doing next?**

The Life Course Initiative is currently developing and implementing Building Economic Security Today (BEST), an asset development pilot project (see the Life Course Initiative’s fact sheet on BEST for more information). We also continue to share our work with other public and private organizations around the country interested in learning about and replicating our work.

## **References**

1. Lu MC, Halfon N. Racial and ethnic disparities in birth outcomes: a life-course perspective. *Matern Child Health J* 2003;7:13-30.
2. Lu MC, Kotelchuck M, Hogan V, Jones L, Jones CA, Halfon N. Closing the black-white gap in birth outcomes: A life-course approach. Accepted for publication in *Ethnicity and Disease*. 2009.