



## SOCIAL & CULTURAL FACTORS IMPACTING WEIGHT STATUS

# What is Impacting the Waistlines of Black Women Living in Prince George's County, Maryland?

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Approximately 75.5% of Black women living in Prince George's (PG) County, Maryland are overweight or obese (OVO), compared to 61.8% of White women.

Being overweight or obese can lead to a myriad of health issues, ranging from chronic diseases like **diabetes or heart disease, poor mental health, decreased social wellbeing, as well as increased healthcare costs, and risk of disability or premature death**. Health related behaviors are hard to change, and external influencers, like social networks, can make them even more challenging.

In this research study, all women were individually interviewed and participated in focus groups to learn more about the impact of social and cultural factors—and their social networks influence on their weight decisions. In each response, the women in this study reported being influenced by their social network and reported carrying on unhealthy traditional and cultural norms that were instilled at a young age. Findings show that these factors are critical in the decision-making pathway for this group of Black women.



“We (Black people) are learned to appreciate our bodies and love our bodies, but that does not mean we take care of our bodies.”

—Research participant

### WHY DOES THIS MATTER?

This study adds to the body of research to help explain the **underlying social and cultural factors that affect the waistlines of Black women living in PG County**.

The research provides valuable insights to engage local community organizations, health departments, and other health professionals who can implement culturally relevant, tailored, weight loss centric programs and policies to help address some of the county-level barriers identified by women in this study.

The participants were middle-income, overweight and obese Black women between the ages of 35–50 who reside in Prince George's (PG) County, Maryland.

## KEY FINDINGS

The dominant social and cultural factors that impacted their weight-related decisions were **income, education, media (social and traditional), and social network (family upbringing and social circle)**.

Despite having higher incomes and living in an affluent area, these women still experienced common barriers to eating healthy and engaging in physical activity like lack of time, motivation, desire, and access to healthy foods and physical activity options. Most identified as OVO but had positive body image and wanted to focus on being healthy versus trying to reach a certain number on the scale. Furthermore, this study was conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic, which also impacted participants' weight—some gained weight, while others lost weight.

### SOCIAL NETWORKS

Social networks had the biggest impact on weight-related decisions and familial influence was strong; habits adopted in childhood, whether good or bad, were often carried into adulthood. **Key cultural and social components guiding decisions included:**

**Socializing over food.** Nearly all events centered around food. The women often structured their social life around trying new restaurants, happy hours, and celebrating good or bad times over food and drinks.

**Learning how to cook soul food and Caribbean dishes at a young age.** The women learned to cook with lots of salt-based seasonings, processed meats, and prepared fried and high fat foods. Unspoken rules around food consumption meant accepting food when it is offered and eating when others are eating.

**Friends and family had an impact on how they prepared and consumed their food.** The types of foods eaten, how they engaged in activities, and the types of physical activity were mostly modeled food behaviors (good or bad) after others.

**Their social circle often times helped motivate them to live healthier lives.** All participants had a desire to ward off chronic diseases, perform daily activities with ease, and wanted to look and feel good overall, but noted it was hard to achieve.

### MEDIA (SOCIAL AND TRADITIONAL)

Overall social and traditional media had a positive impact on their weight. **Many were inspired by social media to adopt healthier behaviors** like trying new recipes, workout routines and sharing with friends and family.

### INCOME & EDUCATION

**Higher education afforded the women higher incomes**, exposed them to new ways of eating and cultural foods; and expanded their economic network of friends.

**Earning higher incomes allowed some to purchase gym memberships, better quality food, and tools to manage weight** (e.g. personal trainer or juicers) and most noted income is a barrier to achieving good health.

### LOCATION

PG County is one of the most affluent Black communities in the United States but social determinants of health like sufficient access to healthy food and physical activity options (e.g. green space and sidewalks.) are lacking. **Most lived in designated food deserts**; grocery stores lacked quality produce and meats; and many willingly drove longer distances to do their grocery shopping.



### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dr. Jovonni R. Spinner is a visionary award-winning public health strategist passionate about improving health equity across the lifespan. She creates culturally competent programming, shines at telling public health stories, and gives voice to those rarely heard. All while shifting mindsets to use an equity lens to address health disparities and enlightening senior leaders to influence policy and systems change. She is an alum of Virginia Commonwealth University, Emory University, and Morgan State University.