Exploring Children’s Secondhand Smoke Exposure with Early Child Care Providers

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Background: Exposure to secondhand smoke (SHS) is a contributor to the increased morbidity and mortality experienced by inner-city African-American children. Limited evidence-based programming exists regarding how to address the negative effects of SHS in this community.

Purpose: A collaboration with an early child care center provided an opportunity to explore factors related to young children’s SHS exposure as the first step in developing strategies to reduce exposure.

Methods: Survey data were obtained between 2008 and 2009 from 63 African-American parents of infants and children aged ≤5 years at two early child care centers located in an urban Minneapolis neighborhood. Forty-three of these children had salivary cotinine levels assessed.

Results: Parents living below the poverty level were more likely to report that their children were regularly exposed to SHS by family/friends (p < 0.01). Sixty-eight percent of participants reported complete home smoking restrictions, which was significantly correlated with advice from the child’s health provider (p < 0.001). Nonsmokers and older parents were less likely to receive advice (p < 0.03). Of the 43 children in whom cotinine levels were assessed, 39.5% had levels >0.64 ng/ml, which suggests high SHS exposure. Lower cotinine levels were significantly correlated with living in detached houses.

Conclusions: Exposure to SHS was common for children in this study. These findings, if supported by additional research, can be used to develop and disseminate targeted health messages about childhood SHS sources/negative effects and strategies to reduce exposure.

Background

Nine million children aged less than 5 years may be exposed to secondhand smoke (SHS) in the U.S.1,2 SHS exposure is particularly high among lower-income African-American children, in whom serum cotinine levels have been measured at more than two times the level observed in white and Mexican-American children.3 Among young children, exposure to SHS is associated with intellectual deficits, and diseases such as asthma4,5 that result in large numbers of hospital visits.6 Asthma disproportionately affects African-American children living in low-income households.6–8 In inner-city Minneapolis, Minnesota, nearly one in five households report that children aged less than 6 years are exposed to SHS, and there is also a high concentration of children with asthma in this community.9

The implementation of smoking restrictions by parents has been shown to greatly reduce the negative effects of SHS exposure among young children.3,10,11 Unfortunately, lower-income African-American households are less likely to establish home smoking restrictions.3 One reason may be that these parents are less likely to be given advice from their physician to protect their children from SHS exposure, as is true for more than half of parents.12,13 If parents do receive such advice, cultural factors, including mistrust, can affect African Americans’ interaction with health providers,14 causing parents to perceive advice on the negative effects of SHS as calling into question their parenting skills.

Because of the negative effects of SHS for young children and potential barriers to SHS reduction within lower-income and inner-city African-American communities,
there is a need to develop new approaches to understand and address SHS exposure. One strategy is to provide community-based intervention through community assets, such as child care centers. Studies have demonstrated that interventions in child care centers are highly effective in changing parental behavior, resulting in long-term benefits among lower-income African-American families. Moreover, partnering with local centers using community-based participatory research (CBPR) has been an effective strategy in dismantling mistrust-related barriers among lower-income communities of color. Even though these centers have frequent contact with parents, the capacity of early child care centers to address children’s SHS exposure in lower-income African-American communities remains unclear.

In the current study, a CBPR approach was used to conduct a tobacco-related survey, including cotinine testing in an inner-city child care center serving a predominately lower-income African-American population. This represented one aspect of a multi-component CBPR study. The community–academic partners were interested in gaining a baseline understanding of smoking restriction practices and children’s SHS exposure at the partnering center. The goal of the research was to collaboratively plan communication strategies to address SHS exposure within the broader community by targeting the child care center.

Methods
Setting and Sample
This study represented a CBPR collaboration among the Program in Health Disparities Research at the University of Minnesota, a parent advisory board (PAB), and La Crèche Early Childhood Centers, Inc., in North Minneapolis MN. According to the Executive Director of La Crèche, 144 parents with 175 children utilized La Crèche services across two child care centers at the time of this study. Ninety-eight percent of the children were African-American, and 91% of the families were considered poor by federal income guidelines. The community–academic research team was closely involved throughout the entire project, including choice of research design and data collection methods. Survey data and salivary cotinine assays were collected on-site at one of the La Crèche centers during the school day by inserting two sorbettes (cotton-swab device) into the child’s mouth, which were held under the tongue and moved around the mouth to enable total saturation. Once saturated, the sorbettes were immediately placed in conical tubes for storage, refrigerated, and then shipped to Salimetrics, LLC, in State College PA for testing. Parents were provided with a $25 savings bond for the participating child.

Eligibility/Procedures
Eligibility criteria for the parent survey included self-identifying as African American and having a child aged 6 weeks to 5 years attending La Crèche. Center administrators were certified in human subjects training through the University of Minnesota and identified eligible parents from their official database. Of the 144 parents utilizing La Crèche services, 64 were found to be eligible and were mailed the baseline survey (one survey per household) with consent information and an anonymous self-addressed stamped return envelope. Parents were provided with a $25 gift card for completing the survey.

Survey measures. A paper survey (107 items) was developed by the research team and administered to parents whose children attended La Crèche. The survey items were adapted from previous studies (see references for detail regarding question and response options) and included: demographic characteristics; home smoking restrictions; general smoking restrictions; exposure to second-hand smoke; child’s health provider advice; and social environment. For a child to be eligible for salivary cotinine testing, the child must have been aged 6 weeks to 5 years, currently enrolled at La Crèche, identified as African American, and have a parent who completed and returned the baseline survey. Parents who had multiple eligible children could choose only one child for testing. Sixty-three children were eligible. Salivary assays were collected on-site at one of the La Crèche centers during the school day by inserting two sorbettes (cotton-swab device) into the child’s mouth, which were held under the tongue and moved around the mouth to enable total saturation. Once saturated, the sorbettes were immediately placed in conical tubes for storage, refrigerated, and then shipped to Salimetrics, LLC, in State College PA for testing. Parents were provided a $25 savings bond for the participating child.

Analysis
Surveys were double-data entered in Access and exported into SPSS version 13. Descriptive statistics were used to summarize participant demographic and tobacco-related characteristics. Categorical variables were analyzed using frequencies and percentages, and continuous variables were summarized using means and SDs. Correlational analyses were also conducted to assess the relationships among the scales. Cronbach’s alpha for the scales ranged from 0.48 to 0.89. Drawing on precedents set in the literature, cotinine data were treated categorically. Results for all analyses were considered significant at $p < 0.05$.

Results
Survey
Sixty-three parents returned surveys for a 98% response (63/64). Demographic characteristics are outlined in Table 1. Sixty-eight percent maintain complete home smoking restrictions, with 28.6% allowing smoking in some places or at some times in their home, and 3.2% reporting no restrictions anywhere in the home. Parents with incomes below the poverty level (4% (49%)) were less likely to have smoking restrictions in their homes (Table 2) and more likely to report their children were regularly exposed to SHS by family/friends ($p = 0.01$). Current smokers (29%) were more likely to report that their child had been exposed to SHS in a greater number of private or public places in the past week ($p < 0.001$). The likelihood of having complete home smoking restrictions was correlated with parents’ reports of the child’s healthcare provider advising a smokefree environment for their children in the past 12 months ($p = 0.001$). Parents who were employed full-time, who were older, and those who were...
nonsmokers ($p=0.03$) were less likely to have been asked about SHS exposure by their child’s healthcare provider in the last 12 months.

Children’s Cotinine Levels
Of the 63 children eligible for testing, 43 were tested, a response of 68% (43/63). Cotinine cut-off levels were: nondetectable=$0.0$; low=$0.06$; intermediate=$0.12$; and high=$0.64$. Of the 43 children (M age: 3 years; range: 1–5 years) whose cotinine levels were assessed (M=1.07; median=0.27; SD=1.88; range=0.00–8.42), 27.9% ($n=12$) had nondetectable levels of cotinine, 11.6% ($n=5$) had low levels of cotinine, 20.9% ($n=9$) had intermediate levels of cotinine, and 39.5% ($n=17$) had high levels of cotinine. Children living in attached housing were more likely to have high levels of cotinine (63.6%; Figure 1).

Discussion
Consistent with previous studies, this investigation found a positive association between poverty status and exposure to SHS among African-American children$^1$ as well as between complete home smoking restrictions and advice from the child’s healthcare provider to have a smokefree environment.$^5,23$ In the current study, utilizing a CBPR approach to collaborate with an early child care provider, resulted in high levels of response for both the research survey (98%) and biochemical testing (68%). This contrasts with prior findings that have shown African Americans as less willing to participate in biomedical research.$^24$ Additionally, as prior studies have shown, child health providers may not be advising all parents regarding SHS exposure.$^{12,13}$ The current study found that parents who are full-time workers, nonsmokers, or older, may not be consistently receiving this advice.

Interestingly, smoking prevalence was lower than previously measured within similar populations,$^1$ and the prevalence of complete home smoking restrictions was higher compared to other studies.$^3$ There was, however, a high prevalence of biochemically confirmed exposure among the children tested, which supports prior studies.$^3$ It is possible that intermittent SHS exposure may occur because reported implementation of home smoking restrictions may be less comprehensive than realized and/or the impact of thirdhand smoke in this population may not be fully understood.$^{25}$ Lastly, children may also be exposed to SHS from someone other than their parent(s), including tobacco smoke contamination in housing developments that infiltrates neighboring units.$^{26}$

Table 1. Demographic characteristics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristic (N=63)</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age (years)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M (range)</td>
<td>31 (20–47)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poverty level</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Below</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employment</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Less than full time</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High school or less</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Housing type</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Detached home</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attached home</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marital status</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Single</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of children</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More than one child aged &lt;5 years in home</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2. Relationships between secondhand smoke restrictions and poverty status, M (SD)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Restrictions</th>
<th>Below poverty level</th>
<th>Above poverty level</th>
<th>$p$-value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Home smoking restrictions</td>
<td>5.66 (1.28)</td>
<td>6.45 (1.03)</td>
<td>0.01*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Smoking restrictions in other public or private places</td>
<td>4.75 (1.62)</td>
<td>5.56 (1.41)</td>
<td>0.01*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Significant $p$-values are bolded.

Source: Reference 22

Figure 1. Cotinine levels based on poverty status and housing type

*Fisher’s exact test: 8.632 ($p=0.029$)
**Fisher’s exact test: 11.349 ($p=0.007$)
Cotinine measures in the current study indicated SHS is a common exposure for the children living in attached housing (e.g., apartments).

This study has limitations. It represents a small sample from two child care centers and thus the results may not be generalizable. Because this is a cross-sectional study, it is not possible to infer causality. Despite these limitations, the results provide relevant and novel local data from which to develop intervention strategies.

Conclusion
The current research may represent the first published study that has utilized CBPR approach with child care centers to explore young children’s SHS exposure. Such an approach has the potential to overcome barriers that may limit the involvement of lower-income African-American communities in biomedical research. Additionally, child health providers should seek to identify parents living in multi-unit dwellings to address these causes of exposure, as well as including nonsmokers, older parents, and those with full-time employment in advice given regarding SHS. With further study, these findings have the potential to enhance efforts to reduce young children’s exposure to SHS and reduce tobacco-related childhood illness and disease.

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