

Breastfeeding among Low Income, African-American Women: Power, Beliefs and Decision Making

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ABSTRACT

Breastfeeding rates among African-American women lag behind all other ethnic groups. National data show that only 45% of African-American women reported ever breastfeeding compared to 66 and 68% of Hispanic and white women, respectively. Of African-American women who do choose to breastfeed, duration is short, with many discontinuing in the first days after birth. This report applies a social ecological framework to breastfeeding to investigate macrolevel–microlevel linkages. We posit that macrolevel factors, such as the media, aggressive marketing of breastmilk substitutes, welfare reform, hospital policy and breastfeeding legislation, *interact with* microlevel factors to influence a woman’s decision to breastfeed. These microlevel factors include features of the community, neighborhoods, workplaces that support or discourage breastfeeding, social and personal networks and cultural norms and individual beliefs about breastfeeding. The report discusses how power operates at each level to influence women’s choices and also emphasizes the value of ethnographic data in breastfeeding studies. Through a case study of a sample of low income, African-American women living in Baltimore, MD, where breastfeeding role models are few, beliefs that discourage breastfeeding are many, and where everyday life is full of danger and fear, it is understandable that breastfeeding is not considered practical. The narrative data provide important information that can be used to enhance intervention efforts.

Link to study: <http://jn.nutrition.org/content/133/1/305S.full>