

## Black American Solidarity With Palestinians Is Rising And Testing Longstanding Ties To Some Jewish Allies

Cydney Wallace, a Black Jewish community activist, never felt compelled to travel to Israel, though "Next year in Jerusalem" was a constant refrain at her Chicago synagogue.

The 39-year-old said she had plenty to focus on at home, where she frequently gives talks on addressing anti-Black sentiment in the American Jewish community and dismantling white supremacy in the U.S.

"I know what I'm fighting for here," she said.

That all changed when she visited Israel and the West Bank at the invitation of a Palestinian American community organizer from Chicago's south side, along with two dozen other Black Americans and Muslim, Jewish and Christian faith leaders.

The trip, which began Sept. 26, enhanced Wallace's understanding of the struggles of Palestinians living in the West Bank under Israeli military occupation. But, horrifyingly, it was cut short by the unprecedented Oct. 7 attacks on Israel by Hamas militants. In Israel's ensuing bombardment of the Gaza Strip, shocking images of destruction and death seen around the world have mobilized activists in the U.S. and elsewhere.

Wallace, and a growing number of Black Americans, see the Palestinian struggle in the West Bank and Gaza reflected in their own fight for racial equality and civil rights. The recent rise of protest movements against police brutality in the U.S., where structural racism plagues nearly every facet of life, has connected Black and Palestinian activists under a common cause.

But that kinship sometimes strains the more than century-long alliance between Black and Jewish activ-

ists. From Black American groups that denounced the U.S. backing of Israel's occupation of Palestinian territory to Black protesters demonstrating for the Palestinians' right to self-determination, some Jewish Americans are concerned that support could escalate the threat of antisemitism and weaken Jewish-Black ties fortified during the Civil Rights Movement.

"We are concerned, as a community, about what we feel is a lack of understanding of what Israel is about and how deeply Oct. 7 has affected us," said Bob Kaplan, executive director of The Center for Shared Society at the Jewish Community Relations Council of New York. "Antisemitism has to be seen as a reprehensible form of hate ... as any form of hate is," he said. "Antisemitism is as real to the American Jewish community, and causes as much trauma and fear and upset to the American Jewish community, as racism causes to the Black community, or anti-Asian feeling causes to the Asian community, or anti-Muslim feeling causes in the Muslim community."

But, he added, many Jews in the U.S. understand that Black Americans can have an affinity for the Palestinian cause that doesn't conflict with their regard for Israel.

According to a poll earlier this month from The Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research, Black adults were more likely than white and Hispanic adults to say the U.S. is too supportive of Israel — 44% compared to 30% and 28%, respectively. However, Black Americans weren't any more likely than others to say the U.S. is not supportive enough of the Palestinians.

Generational divides also emerged,



A mural depicting Eyad Hallaq, an autistic Palestinian man who was killed by Israeli police in Jerusalem's Old City last year, is seen on Israel's controversial separation barrier, in the West Bank town of Bethlehem

with younger Americans more likely to say the U.S. is too supportive of Israel, according to the poll. Even within the Jewish American community, some younger and other progressive Jews tend to be more critical of some of Israel's policies.

Black American support for the Palestinian cause dates back to the Civil Rights Movement, through prominent left-wing voices, including Malcolm X, Stokely Carmichael and Angela Davis, among others. More recent rounds of violence, including the 2021 Israel-Hamas war and now Israel's unprecedented bombing campaign against Gaza shown live on social media have deepened ties between the two movements.

"This is just the latest generation to pick up the mantle, the latest Black folks to organize, build and talk about freedom and justice," said Ahmad Abuznaid, the director of the U.S. Campaign for Palestinian Rights.

During a week-long truce between Israel and Hamas as part of the recent deal to free dozens of hostages seized by Hamas militants, Israel released hundreds of Palestinian prisoners and detainees. Many were teenagers who had recently been picked up in the West Bank for minor

offenses like stone-throwing and had not been charged.

Some Black Americans who watched the Palestinian prisoner release and learned about Israel's administrative detention policy, where detainees are held without trial, drew comparisons to the U.S. prison system. While more than two-thirds of jail detainees in the U.S. have not been convicted of a crime, Black people are jailed at more than four times the rate of white people, often for low-level offenses, according to studies of the American judicial system.

"Americans like to talk about being innocent until proven guilty. But Black folks are predominantly and disproportionately detained in the United States regardless of whether anything has been proven. And that's very similar to Israel's administrative detention," said Julian Rose, an organizer with a Black-run bail fund in Atlanta.

Rami Nashashibi, executive director of the Inner-City Muslim Action Network, invited Wallace and the others to take part in the trip called "Black Jerusalem" — an exploration of the sacred city through an African and Black American lens.

They met members of Jerusalem's small Afro-Palestinian community

— Palestinians of Black African heritage, many of whom can trace their lineage in the Old City back centuries.

"Our Black brothers and sisters in the U.S. suffered from racism and now they suffer from racism," said Mousa Qous, executive director of the African Community Society

Jerusalem, whose father emigrated to Jerusalem from Chad in 1941 and whose mother is Palestinian.

"We suffer from the Israeli occupation and racist policies. The Americans and the Israelis are conducting the same policies against us and the Black Americans. So we should support each other," Qous said.

Nashashibi agreed, saying: "My Palestinian identity was very much shaped and influenced by Black American history."

"I always hoped that a trip like this would open up new pathways that would connect the dots not just in a political and ideological way," he said, "but between the liberation and struggles for humanity that are very familiar to us in the U.S."

During the trip, Wallace was dismayed by her own ignorance of the reality of Palestinians living under Israeli occupation.

At an Israeli checkpoint outside the Western Wall, the Jewish holy site, Wallace said her group was asked who was Jewish, Muslim or Christian. Wallace and the others showed IDs issued for the trip, but when an Israeli officer saw her necklace depicting her name in Hebrew, she was waved through, while Palestinians and Muslims in the group were subjected to intense scrutiny and bag checks.

"Being there made me wonder if this is what it was like to live in the Jim Crow-era" in America, Wallace said.

Kameelah Oseguera, who grew up in an African American Muslim community in Brooklyn, New York, also

(See PALESTINIANS P. 2)



Cydney Wallace poses for a photo in Chicago

## Police Investigating After Child Caught On Camera Stealing Package From Home

CINCINNATI (WXIX) - Cincinnati Police are investigating after a local family says a young child stole a package off their front porch - and it all was caught on camera.

Jasmin Norman says a package was stolen from her porch, and shocked and unsettled was how she and her family felt after seeing video from her Ring doorbell camera captured outside of her home on Glenway Avenue in West Price Hill Friday night.

"I'm just shocked. I don't even know what else to say," Norman said. "It still doesn't sit or settle right."

"[At] 11:58, I got an alert to my watch that the security camera had gone off," Norman recalled. "Something told me to check the camera. I check the camera, and it was a child, and I said, 'That's not my child.'"

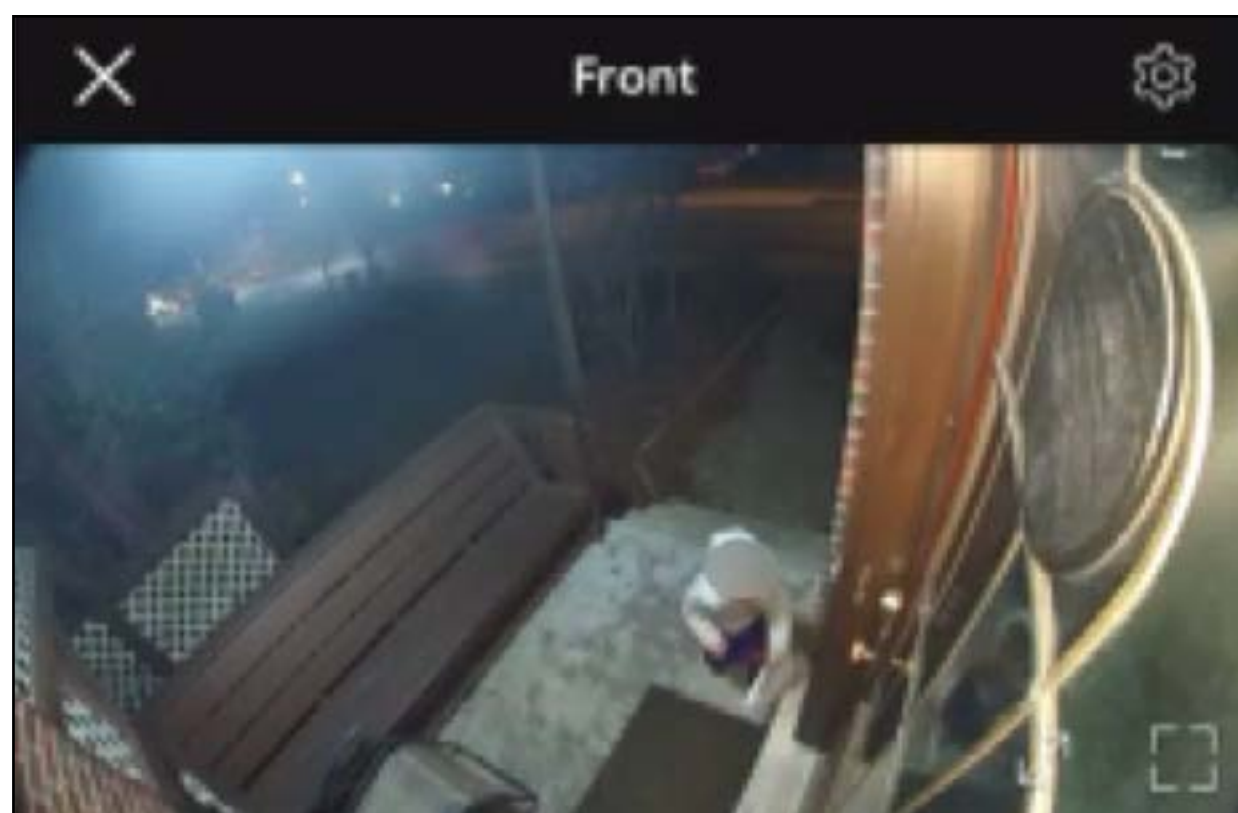
The video shows what appears to be a small child walking up to the front porch alone, then taking a package and running off.

"I see what looks to be a mother walking with a stroller, and the baby running up to the lady pushing the stroller and just kept on about her day," Norman said. "It's very uncomfortable."

Norman says by the time she opened her front door to confront the thief the child and the adult were gone. She says she was speechless.

"You're coaching a child... a baby, to take from others at such a young age," said Norman. "Where are your morals?"

According to Norman, the stolen Amazon package was supposed to be



a surprise Christmas gift to her from her husband. Norman says this incident is the second time her family has fallen victim to a porch pirate.

"I hope that baby gets help more than the adult," she said. "With the way that child is being coached and led right now, that child does not have a bright future."

Norman says the theft has been so offputting for her family. They're now considering moving out of their

home after only living there for three months.

"I'm shocked that I can't feel comfortable to receive a package or potentially any other mail to my home because others feel free to take it," Norman said.

Norman says that beyond her anger is confusion over how any adult could allow a child to steal from them when there are multiple resources to help struggling families.

"I just want that mother or the adult who had that child to know I will pray for you," she said. "In the world that we're in today, that's very sickening and disgusting and sad to say."

Norman says though she reported the theft to the police, she won't be able to report her package stolen to Amazon until Monday. She says her family will be getting a post office box and picking their packages up directly from the post office.



**A PLANE HIT POWERLINES OVER I-26 IN NORTH CAROLINA AND BURST INTO FLAMES. NOBODY WAS SERIOUSLY HURT**  
ASHEVILLE, N.C. (AP) — A small plane crashed on a western North Carolina highway and caught fire Thursday night, but the two people on board escaped life-threatening injuries, authorities said.

A single-engine Diamond DA-40 crashed on Interstate 26 near Asheville Regional Airport around 8:15 p.m. with two people on board, the Federal Aviation Administration reported.

The private plane was descending over I-26 to land at the airport when it hit power lines and a tractor-trailer, the North Carolina State Highway Patrol said in a statement. The two people aboard the plane were able to get out before it caught fire, with only minor injuries. The driver of the truck was not hurt, the highway patrol said.

The interstate reopened Friday morning, according to the North Carolina Department of Transportation.

The FAA and the National Transportation Safety Board will investigate the crash.

**MARINE BASE SHUTS DOWN SHOWERS SHOWN COVERED IN BLACK MOLD IN VIDEO**

The Marine Corps has sent in a health inspector and permanently closed off a shower facility on a North Carolina base where a social media video showed apparent mold on the ceiling.

A video posted to Instagram by the account @notinregz on or around Wednesday shows portions of the ceiling of a Camp Geiger, North Carolina, facility almost entirely coated in what appears to be black mold.

"Goddamn," one Marine says.

The problem in the shower facility was attributed on Tuesday to a faulty air conditioning unit by Maj. Joshua Pena, a spokesman for Marine Corps Training and Education Command.

The building containing those showers already was set to be fully renovated in fiscal year 2024, and the shower facility will be closed until then, Pena said.

Camp Geiger, part of the Camp Lejeune, North Carolina, complex, is home to School of Infantry-East, where all new Marines from the eastern half of the country get combat training.

Meanwhile, a crew has been sent to clean up the area, and a health professional is conducting an inspection, Pena said. Marines are using an alternative location to shower, according to the spokesman.

"The facility that was in the video had been quarantined off prior to the filming of the video," Pena said Friday. "Students had received the guidance before that to use alternative facilities."

Pena encouraged Marines to report any issues they see in the places they live, because "the safety and health of Marines is always going to matter."

"If you see something, say something, so that the command can take action," Pena said.

**EPIC WINS ITS ANTITRUST LAWSUIT AGAINST THE PLAY STORE.**

SAN FRANCISCO (AP) — Google lost an antitrust lawsuit over barriers to its Android app store, as a federal court jury has decided that the company's payments system was anticompetitive and damaged smartphone consumers and software developers.

It's a blow to a major pillar of Google's technology empire. But it's a win for Epic Games, the maker of the popular Fortnite video game that brought the lawsuit — and, analysts say, for the broader game developer community.

Below are some questions and answers about what the verdict means. Epic, which is based in Cary, North Carolina, filed its lawsuit against Google three years ago, alleging that the internet search giant has been abusing its power to shield its Play Store from competition in order to protect a gold mine that makes billions of dollars annually. Just as Apple does for its iPhone app store, Google collects a commission ranging from 15%-30% on digital transactions completed within apps.

# Black Solidarity With Palestinians—CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

said the trip opened her eyes.

At the entrance to the Aida refugee camp near Bethlehem in the West Bank, Oseguera noticed a massive key — a Palestinian symbol of the homes lost in the 1948 creation of Israel, referred to as the Nakba, or “catastrophe.” Many kept keys to the homes they fled or were forced out of — a symbol signifying the Palestinian right to return, which Israel has denied.

Oseguera said the key recalled her visit to the “door of no return” memorial in Senegal dedicated to the enslaved Africans forced onto slave ships and brought to the Americas. As a descendant of enslaved Africans, it brought thoughts of “what the dream of my return would have meant for my ancestors.”

Returning to home, she said, is a “longing that is transmitted through generations.”

Israel's Law of Return grants all Jews the right to settle permanently in Israel and acquire Israeli citizenship — a concept that drew support from many Black American civil rights leaders, including A. Phillip Randolph, Bayard Rustin, Dorothy Height, Shirley Chisholm and Martin Luther King, Sr., the father of the slain civil rights leader.

Over the last decade, however, Black Americans and the Palestinians have also found growing solidarity.

In 2020, the murder of George Floyd by a white police officer resounded in the West Bank, where Palestinians drew comparisons to their own experiences of brutality under occupation, and a massive mural of Floyd appeared on Israel's hulking separation barrier.

In 2014, protests in Ferguson, Missouri, erupted after the police killing of Michael Brown, a Black teenager, which gave rise to the nascent Black Lives Matter movement. While police officers in Ferguson fired tear gas at protesters, Palestinians in the occupied West Bank tweeted advice about how to manage the effects of the irritants.

In 2016, when BLM activists formed the coalition known as the Movement for Black Lives, they included support for Palestinians in a platform called the “Vision for Black Lives.” A handful of Jewish groups, which had largely been supportive of the BLM movement, denounced the Black activists' characterization of Israel as a purportedly “apartheid state” that engages in “discrimination against the Palestinian people.”

“There tends to be this doubt or

astonishment that Black people care about other oppressed people around the world,” said Phil Agnew, co-director of the national advocacy group, Black Men Build, who has taken four trips to the West Bank since 2014.

It would be a mistake, Agnew said, to ignore significant numbers of Black and Jewish Americans who are united in their support for the Palestinians.

None of the members of the “Black Jerusalem” trip anticipated it would come to a tragic end with the Oct. 7 Hamas attacks in which some 1,200 people were killed in Israel and about 240 taken hostage. Since then, more than 18,700 Palestinians have been killed in Israel's blistering air and ground campaign in Gaza, now in its third month. Violence in the West Bank has also surged.

Back home in Chicago, Wallace has navigated speaking about her support for Palestinians while maintaining her Jewish identity and standing against antisemitism. She says she doesn't see those things as mutually exclusive.

“I'm trying not to do anything that alienates anyone,” she said. “But I can't just not do the right thing because I'm scared.”



Jabari Shaw holds a Palestinian flag during an Oakland Unified School District board meeting at La Escuelita Elementary School in Oakland, California

## The Consequences of Police in Schools: A N.C. Case Study

At the end of the 2022-2023 school year, when she was 14 years old, a verbal altercation occurred between Amerie and a classmate who was berating her and other classmates. This wasn't the first time that Amerie, a student in North Carolina, faced harassment and bullying from some of her classmates. Her mother, Regina, had repeatedly contacted the school to bring the bullying to their attention, but no interventions took place.

This time, however, the dispute required a teacher to step in, who was later bumped by a student during the intervention. Amerie was taken to the principal's office by a school resource officer (SRO), where she was questioned by the school administrator with the SRO present. They determined Amerie was responsible for the physical altercation, despite the teacher saying she hadn't been hurt and was unable to confirm who made contact with her. Amerie was told she was being sent home and would be suspended. The officer placed her in handcuffs, which were too tight and hurt her wrists.

In North Carolina, school districts continue to devote millions of dollars to the placement of armed law enforcement officers in schools, despite clear evidence of its negative impact on students and learning environments. Prioritizing funds for law enforcement in schools over counselors, nurses, social workers, psychologists, and community-based support is a policy choice that continues to have severe consequences for children in the state, particularly Black students and students with disabilities.

It is well-established that Black students are not generally more likely to misbehave than other students, even after accounting for dif-

ferent socioeconomic backgrounds. Yet school officials punish Black students more frequently than their white peers. Our new report, “The Consequences of Cops in North Carolina Schools,” found that between 2021 and 2023, law enforcement and school staff filed complaints of disorderly conduct against Black students at over five times the rate of their white counterparts. This results in Black students and students with disabilities being over-criminalized, physically and mentally harmed, and funneled into the school-to-prison pipeline every year.

We recently sat down with Amerie and Regina, along with Legal Aid of North Carolina, who is handling her case, to hear about their experience with law enforcement in school and its detrimental impact on Amerie's academic and personal life. Our conversation has been edited for length and clarity.

ACLU: What happened when you were in the principal's office with staff and law enforcement?

Amerie: I asked to call my mom multiple times, but they refused. They aggressively told me I was disrespectful and how my mom should have taught me better. It made me very emotional. Once I left the room, I accidentally knocked over a trash can. The officer ran out and told me I was destroying the school's property and would now be charged. They told me because I had allegedly touched a teacher and was now destroying property, that I would be sent away and get what I deserved. An officer then put me in handcuffs.

ACLU: What happened when you were put in handcuffs? How did it make you feel?

Amerie: I kept asking the officer why I was being put in handcuffs. He did not respond and slammed



me down into a seat. He took my phone from me and set it on the counter. He saw my mom calling and watched it ring. The third time it rang, he picked up my cell phone and told my mother that I was in his custody. My mom kept asking why I was under his custody, but he refused to answer. It felt like a “why is this happening to me?” situation. I asked him what I did to deserve this treatment because I had never disrespected them. I have always been respectful and used my manners when it came to staff. I asked him several times, like four or five times, if he would loosen my cuffs. I was

telling him that they were cutting off my circulation. And he refused to do that. I was still shedding tears and I was telling him that he didn't have to take the cuffs off, but to please loosen them because they were hurting me. He laughed in my face and made a comment about how I was in his custody now.

ACLU: Regina, how did you feel when you discovered what your daughter had gone through?

Regina: I was upset. I was overwhelmed. This is not the first time I have brought a situation to them to help me with my daughter. Throughout the year, we have been dealing

with bullying, thoughts of suicide, stress, therapy, and medication. This is nothing new to the school; that she is going through something. She has never been aggressive. There is no documentation saying this is what she does. I thought the phone call would be our usual pep talk: “we will get through this.” The teacher explained the situation to me and said she did not feel Amerie was aggressive in any way. She did say that it was a disruption in class.

ACLU: What happened after you left the school?

Amerie: When I first got in the car, I was complaining that my wrists hurt. We left and went to urgent care. They said my cuffs were obviously too tight and cut off my circulation. There were marks and bruises that I never had before.

ACLU: How do you and your classmates feel about having police in schools?

Amerie: I feel like they overplay their part and do more than they are supposed to do. It shocks me how they do their job, because growing up I thought that they were supposed to be by your side and protect you. They normally don't take the time out of their day to actually visit a kid's classroom and have conversations. Now I don't feel safe in this environment. I'm a good kid, but they never took a chance to get to

know me. It's like they're out to get me.

ACLU: How do you think your education has been impacted since this took place?

Amerie: I feel like it ruined me in general. I don't feel how I used to feel; being happy to go to school, or just showing up in general. I don't want to converse with people anymore, or be around people in general because I'm scared I might run into one of those experiences again.

ACLU: Why do you think it's important to share this story?

Regina: I never thought that I would have a child be suicidal. As a parent you do everything you can, like keeping them in activities and sports. There are so many kids that Amerie knows that are fighting the same issues she is. I'm willing to do anything to help these kids.

ACLU: Amerie, what do you want to do in the future?

Amerie: I want to teach kids who need extra help. I have had that dream since I was in kindergarten. I feel like I can really relate to them, and sitting one on one with them could bring a lot of joy. In my school, it's common for these kids to get bullied for how they are. I have always made sure to tell them that anything they want to do, I support them and am proud of them, even if I felt like I was not proud of myself.

## He Changed His Avatar To A Cartoon White Man And Gained Thousands More Views

A Twitch streamer, who is Black, changed his avatar to a white man, and immediately saw a major bump in views.

Just\_Relax\_Kid, whose name is Zach, has been a Twitch creator for about nine years, and has 77,000 followers on his channel where he normally streams gaming content.

On December 2, Zach decided to replace his video feed with a cartoon avatar of a white man with a beard — a method used by virtual YouTubers, or VTubers, who prefer to stay anonymous.

According to Dexerto, Zach, on average, amasses around 300-800 views per stream. But after changing the image, he saw that number increase by at least three times. One stream received 1,600 views, another 7,900, and another over 22,000.

“What the hell?” Zach said when he saw his view count rising. He then responded to a comment which suggested it's “because you a white dude with a beard now.”

“Is this what it feels like to have privilege on Twitch?” Zach said. “That shit worked earlier than I



thought it would.”

Zach said he had a feeling it would have worked, and he should have tried the experiment before.

He shared a video to X, formerly Twitter, as well to prove his point.

“I really got 3x more viewers since I took off my cam and de-

cid to be a white man,” he said.

“Oh y'all think I'm joking?” he added. “My numbers while being black vs white.”

Zach told Dexerto in an interview that he was “hurt” by the realization, and that he didn't want

“people feeling shame just for be-

ing who they are.”

He also said he had fellow Black creators messaging him and saying they had changed their avatars and seen similar results.

While he didn't want to make a point, saying in a follow-up X post that he didn't ask for “people to pull out the pitch forks,” Zach told Dexerto he received some criticism for his video.

“I was getting hate from everywhere, from Black people and white people,” he said. “White people were mad at me because they said I was screaming racism, but Black people were mad at me because I wasn't screaming racism.”

He added that he felt “betrayed” by Twitch, believing he did not receive the recognition he deserved for the time he had put into the platform.

“I've been one of your partnered streamers for almost a decade, and I've never gotten any love or nothing from Twitch ever,” he said. “Like, not a single thing besides Black History Month. Like, nothing. It was wild to me, and I was like, ‘You know what, I probably won't show my camera anymore.’”

## Andre Braugher, Emmy-Winning Actor Who Starred In ‘Homicide’ & ‘Brooklyn Nine-Nine,’ Dies At 61

LOS ANGELES (AP) — Andre Braugher, the Emmy-winning actor who would master gritty drama for seven seasons on “Homicide: Life on the Street” and modern comedy for eight on “Brooklyn Nine-Nine,” died Monday at 61.

Braugher died after a brief illness, his publicist Jennifer Allen told The Associated Press. No further details were given.

The Chicago-born actor would establish himself in the role of Det. Frank Pembleton, the lead role on “Homicide: Life on the Street,” a dark police drama based on a book by David Simon, who would go on to create “The Wire.” The show, which focused on the homicide unit of the Baltimore Police Department, ran for seven seasons on NBC, and would win critical acclaim with Braugher as its dramatic center and

breakout star.

He would win his first career Emmy for the role, taking the trophy for lead actor in a drama series in 1998.

He feared he would be typecast after spending most of the 1990s as the brooding detective. “If I do it too long then I'll stop really searching and probing inside my own work,” he told the AP in 1998. “That's just a great danger. I think I'm going to escape that trap, and get an opportunity to do some work that will be more challenging for me.”

That would not prove to be a problem. He would go on to play a very different kind of cop on a very different kind of show, shifting to comedy as Capt. Ray Holt on the Andy Samberg-starring “Brooklyn Nine-Nine.” It would run for eight seasons from 2013 to 2021 on Fox and NBC.



### The Carolinian

(ISSN 00455873)

1504 New Bern Ave, Raleigh, North Carolina 27610

Mailing Address: P.O. Box 25308

Raleigh, North Carolina 27611

Periodical Postage Paid at Raleigh North Carolina 27611

Warrenton Address: P.O. Box 536

Warrenton, NC 27589

Rocky Mount Address: 120 N Franklin St

Rocky Mount, NC 27804

Postmaster

Send all address changes to:

The Carolinian

1504 New Bern Avenue

Raleigh, NC 27610

PUBLISHED SIX TIMES MONTHLY

SUBSCRIPTION RATES

One Year ..... \$45.00

Payable in advance. Address all communications and make all checks and

money orders payable to *The Carolinian*.

Founded by P.R. Jervay, Sr. in 1940

The Carolinian Newspaper, Inc. of Raleigh

Publisher.....Adria Jervay

Sales Consultant.....Paul R. Jervay, Jr.

Circulation Manager.....Andrew Alston

Jervay Agency, National Advertising Representative

www.TheJervayAgency.com

Member:

North Carolina Black Publishers Association

National Newspaper Publishers Association

HUB Certified MWBE

The Publisher is not responsible for the return of unsolicited news, pictures or advertising copy unless necessary postage accompanies the copy. Opinions expressed by columnists in this newspaper do not necessarily represent the policy of the newspaper.

Phone: 919-834-5558

e-mail: info@caro.news

www.caro.news

Facebook: TheCaroNews

Twitter: @TheCaroNews

To SUBSCRIBE To The Carolinian

call us at

919-834-5558

or visit us online at

www.CARO.news



# Business & Finance

## Largest US Credit Union Scrutinized Over Significant Gaps Between Approval Rates For White And Black Borrowers

By Stacy M. Brown

NNPA

Navy Federal Credit Union, the largest credit union in the United States, is under fire for exhibiting the most substantial racial disparities in mortgage approval rates among major lenders. The disparities, reaching new heights in 2022, underscored a pronounced contrast in approval rates for white and Black borrowers.

Recent Consumer Financial Protection Bureau data indicated that Navy Federal approved over 75% of white applicants for new conventional home purchase mortgages in 2022. In stark contrast, the approval rate for Black borrowers applying for the same type of loan was less than 50%. The nearly 29-percentage-point gap in approval rates at Navy Federal stands out as the widest among the top 50 lenders originating the most mortgage loans last year.

Even when considering similar incomes and debt-to-income ratios, the racial disparity persisted. Navy Federal approved a higher percentage of applications from white borrowers earning less than \$62,000 annually than Black borrowers earning \$140,000 or more.

A detailed statistical analysis



conducted by CNN revealed that Black applicants to Navy Federal were more than twice as likely to be denied compared to white applicants, even when multiple variables, including income, debt-to-income

ratio, property value, downpayment percentage, and neighborhood characteristics, were identical.

Navy Federal, initially founded in 1933 to serve Navy employees and now open to all armed forces mem-

bers, Department of Defense personnel, veterans, and their relatives, boasts about 13 million members and holds over \$165 billion in assets. Last year, the credit union rejected approximately 3,700 Black appli-

cants for home purchase mortgages, potentially impeding their path to homeownership, notably as interest rates spiked.

Bill Pearson, a spokesperson for Navy Federal, defended the credit union's lending practices. "Navy Federal Credit Union is committed to equal and equitable lending practices and strict adherence to all fair lending laws," Pearson stated. However, experts in mortgage lending and advocates for fair housing express concerns about the institution's practices, emphasizing that the racial gaps in approval rates raise questions about Navy Federal's commitment to fairness.

The widening gap in homeownership rates between white and Black Americans, exemplified by Navy Federal's 2022 approval rates of 77.1% for White applicants, 55.8% for Latino applicants, and 48.5% for Black applicants, mirrors a broader national issue. In comparison, other major lenders like Wells Fargo, US Bank, and Bank of America exhibit smaller racial approval rate gaps.

CNN reported that advocates have urged lenders to improve automated underwriting systems to reduce racial disparities in decision-making. Some experts pointed out that Navy

Federal's unique member base may have different financial characteristics than large banks, potentially influencing the observed racial differences.

While federal regulators review banks' lending under the Community Reinvestment Act, the network reported that credit unions like Navy Federal are not subject to the same scrutiny. Calls for legal revisions to ensure credit unions adhere to similar rules as banks have continued.

Sara Pratt, a lawyer at Relman Colfax, noted that racial disparities in mortgage lending may also be linked to loan officers assisting white borrowers more than Black ones. Despite having no evidence of such practices at Navy Federal, Pratt emphasized that the approval rate gaps demand explanations from the lender.

Federal law stipulates that lenders can be in violation of fair lending rules without intentional racism, as a "disparate impact" on minorities can lead to discrimination claims. This is not the first time Navy Federal has faced scrutiny over racial disparities, as a previous analysis in 2019 indicated significant gaps. This trend appears to have only intensified since then.

## Groundwater Is Being Shipped Overseas & Depleted By Alfalfa

About a decade ago, having depleted their own ancient aquifers to grow livestock feed, some wealthy Middle Eastern nations, along with China, began tapping into the largely unregulated aquifers of drought-stricken American states. Notably, megafarms in the Arizona desert and in other Western states have been exporting vast quantities of precious groundwater in the form of alfalfa hay.

Even without the exports, unchecked growth and industrial-scale farming across the nation are draining this finite resource more rapidly than it can be replenished. States, meanwhile, are doing an abysmal job of managing it—Arizona, for instance, has even encouraged exports of its groundwater. Here's a brief timeline of that situation, based on original reporting from Reveal. For a deeper dive, listen to their podcast, "The Great Arizona Water Grab."

1986: Fast-growing Phoenix buys a 20-acre parcel in arid La Paz County to gain access to its aquifer

for potential future use.

2006: Abu Dhabi bans production of alfalfa, a water-intensive crop.

2011: Arizona exports 500 metric tons (MT) of alfalfa, equivalent to the annual water use of up to 3,038 residents.

2012: Arizona's state pension fund invests \$175 million with International Farming Corporation, a North Carolina firm whose business model is to buy up land with water rights in desert states, sink ultra-deep wells, and then lease or sell the land to megafarms. Using some of the pension fund's \$175 million, and with the knowledge of its officials, IFC purchases Phoenix's acreage and sinks wells on it.

2013: IFC leases the Phoenix parcel and water rights to Al Dahra, an Emirati firm whose 3,000-acre farm in La Paz County exports its alfalfa to the UAE.

2014: Almarai, a Saudi firm, buys nearly 10,000 acres in La Paz County, which gets 5 inches of annual rainfall, for a megafarm whose pumps are capable of pulling up tens

of thousands of gallons per minute.

2014: NASA hydrologist Jay Famiglietti urges the US government to regulate groundwater, writing that its depletion will bring "major declines in agricultural productivity and energy production, with the potential for skyrocketing food prices and profound economic and political ramifications."

2015: Arizona's alfalfa exports hit 35,900 MT (the production of which consumes as much water as 241,500 state residents); Al Dahra boasts that it's now America's No. 1 exporter of feed forage.

2016: Saudi Arabia begins phasing out domestic alfalfa production.

2017: Total alfalfa exports from the United States to Saudi Arabia reach 275,000 MT—a four-fold increase from two years earlier.

2022: Arizona's alfalfa exports grow to 200,800 MT (consuming adequate water for up to 1.2 million residents). By now, combined alfalfa exports of the Western states represent 20 percent of the total US crop.

## Civil Lawsuit Filed In Alleged Killings Of Patients At Atrium

WINSTON-SALEM, N.C. (WGHP) — A class action lawsuit has been filed on behalf of the estate of Gwen Crawford and other victims in relation to the alleged crimes committed by former nurse Johnathan Hayes at Atrium Health Wake Forest Baptist.

The lawsuit is being filed by Lanier Law Group, P.A.

Johnathan Hayes is accused of killing two women and attempting to kill another between December 2021 and January 2022 while he worked at Atrium Health Wake Forest Baptist.

Warrants state that in March 2022, detectives met with staff from Atrium Health Wake Forest Baptist, where they told detectives about what they believed were suspicious circumstances around the deaths of two patients.

Gwen Crawford died in intensive care on Jan. 8, 2022, after a hypoglycemic episode on Jan. 5, 2022. Warrants state that her blood was drawn and doctors verified that she had been given over 100 units of insulin.

The morning of Crawford's episode, Hayes drew up 12 units of insulin for Crawford, which is "generally accepted" as being the highest dose of insulin given to an average patient by nursing staff, despite notes from the prior shift indicating her blood sugar had been normal and Crawford having not needed external insulin since Dec. 31, 2021.

"Medical professionals present at this meeting could offer no explanation as to why anyone would administer such a high dosage of insulin to a patient," warrants said.

He was seen on camera taking a full vial of insulin, 300 doses, from the medicine room. When asked about the amount of insulin, he claimed he "wasted" the vial, disposing of it in the sharps container. Surveillance did not corroborate Hayes' claim.

He made a written statement at the time acknowledging that he "may

have accidentally given Crawford insulin that was meant for another patient."

Vicky Lingerfelt was a patient in January 2022, and she had a hypoglycemic episode on Jan. 22, 2022, dying on Jan. 28, 2022. When her blood was drawn, a doctor verified that her death resulted from the application of over 100 units of insulin. Lingerfelt was not diabetic and had no orders to receive insulin for any reason.

While Hayes was not the primary nurse for Lingerfelt on that day, he helped move her to a new bed earlier in the day. Lingerfelt's hypoglycemic episode happened while her primary nurse was on lunch.

Hayes was seen on video again removing a full vial of insulin from the medication room, documenting that he needs 12 units for a different patient, and hours after her event he allegedly accessed her medical chart, which he would have no reason to do.

On April 12, 2022, detectives were made aware of a third patient who suffered a hypoglycemic episode, Pamela Little.

Her episode was on Dec. 1, 2021. She was under the care of Hayes at the time of her episode, and warrants state that he pulled insulin for Little but noted in the chart that the insulin was not provided. However, she suffered a hypoglycemic episode within hours.

She was moved out of the hospital. Detectives spoke with Little on May 3, 2022, about the episode. She confirmed that she was a type 1 diabetic, and she only knew of one time she had received insulin at the hospital, from a female nurse, but that she normally didn't take insulin. She told detectives that she was "scared of a male nurse because he was sneaky."

She said she saw him two times before her attack and said she saw him put a white pill in her IV line, but he removed it when another nurse came

into the room.

Little did not recall the name but gave a description that approximately matched Hayes.

Little passed away two days after speaking with detectives, on May 5, 2022.

"Further investigation by hospital staff generated the following information about Johnathan Hayes and his usage of insulin within Atrium Health Wake Forest facilities," according to the warrants.

Hayes was found to be the top insulin dispenser in the facility by seven times the facility average, and the highest user of insulin by any employee over three months and there were discrepancies over Hayes's record keeping.

"It was explained to detectives that insulin is a 'high alert' medication, thus prompting additional steps to monitor its use," warrants said. "It was further explained that in a 'high alert' medication, it is requested that the administering professional draw the medication and have the type of medication and the dosage amount verified by another nursing professional. This is known as the dual verification process implemented by hospital administration."

Detectives were told that Hayes had properly documented "high-alert" medication but improperly documented it in one instance.

"This demonstrates that Johnathan Hayes is aware of how to properly document the use of these 'high-alert' medications, as well as his willingness to not properly document their usage."

Hayes's employment records showed that his resume stated he had worked, in the past 20 years, at Baptist Hospital, Novant Health, High Point Regional Hospital, Moses Cone Wesley Long Hospital, Iredell Memorial/Davis Regional Hospital and UNC Wayne Memorial Hospital among others.



## By 99%, Teamsters Authorize Strike At Anheuser-Busch

ST. LOUIS — A strike is set for 2024 if Anheuser-Busch fails to negotiate a new agreement with their employees, according to the Teamsters National Negotiating Committee. Around 99% of the brewery's unionized workers reportedly voted in favor of the strike.

The members of the union are demanding the following changes:

- improved wages
- protection of jobs
- secure healthcare
- retirement benefits

The union estimated that 5,000 members across 12 US breweries would benefit from these changes. The current contract agreement expires on February 29, 2024. There are reportedly no dates scheduled for negotiations.

"Our members' labor, talent, and sacrifice are what put Anheuser-Busch products on the shelf, and we are committed to getting a contract that rewards and recognizes their hard work," said Teamsters General President Sean M. O'Brien. "If Anheuser-Busch's executives can't get their act together to negotiate an agreement that respects workers, we will see them out on the streets."

The union said Anheuser-Busch ended tiered healthcare and recommitment to retiree health benefits in November after pressure from the union.

Since then, the company has not negotiated on "important job security," despite multiple requests from union members.

"We represent the brewery workers that actually produce the product," Jeff Padellaro, director of the Teamsters Brewery Conference, said. "We're in all 12 breweries. If our members don't go to work, there is no Anheuser-Busch products to purchase. That's the beginning and end of it."

Anheuser-Busch released the following statement to 5 On Your Side:

Anheuser-Busch is aware of the Teamsters' strike authorization vote, which is common during labor negotiations. We are committed to negotiating in good faith with the union to reach an agreement that recognizes and rewards the talent, commitment, and drive of our employees.

The brewery's St. Louis location is reportedly not the only location willing to strike. Union members in New Hampshire, California, and Florida may also join the strike.

"My Teamster brothers and sisters have a lot of fight in us and, by all means, we will stand united," said Josh Blanton, an Anheuser-Busch worker with Teamsters Local 947 in Jacksonville, Florida.

Anheuser-Busch reported "double-digit revenue growth" and "all-time

high full-year volumes" in its 2022 end-of-year earnings report released this past March. Despite a drop in the brewer's North American beer sales widely attributed to fallout from a company promotion with a transgender influencer, the company's revenue still saw a 5% increase for the July-September period.

Tentatively, Teamsters was scheduled to meet next week with Anheuser-Busch but the brewers unions says the company's negotiators have yet to come back to the table.

Dr. Bonnie Wilson, an associate professor of economics at Saint Louis University said in a statement that with a relatively strong labor market, "workers have options. As a result, workers may well have the upper hand in the negotiations that will be taking place to find a deal both sides can accept."

"We're prepared to negotiate it," Padellaro said. "But we need the commitment on job security. We need the commitment that the company is willing to take this seriously and come to the table to address these issues. Short of that, on March 1 this problem gets a lot worse for them."

Anheuser-Busch has not yet responded to 5 On Your Side's request for comment about the strike announcement.

The Carolinian  
N.C.'s Twice-Weekly African American Newspaper

SUBSCRIBE TODAY

Yes, I Want A 1 Year Subscription For \$45.00

Yes, I Want A 2 Year Subscription For \$75.00

NAME \_\_\_\_\_

ADDRESS \_\_\_\_\_

CITY \_\_\_\_\_ STATE \_\_\_\_\_ ZIP \_\_\_\_\_

PHONE \_\_\_\_\_

EMAIL \_\_\_\_\_



Make checks payable to The Carolinian Newspaper

Mail your subscription form and payment to PO Box 25308 Raleigh, NC 27611

# Health & Fitness

## Woman Was Criminally Charged After A Miscarriage

COLUMBUS, Ohio (AP) — Ohio was in the throes of a bitter debate over abortion rights this fall when Brittany Watts, 21 weeks and 5 days pregnant, began passing thick blood clots.

The 33-year-old Watts, who had not shared the news of her pregnancy even with her family, made her first prenatal visit to a doctor's office behind Mercy Health-St. Joseph's Hospital in Warren, a working-class city about 60 miles (100 kilometers) southeast of Cleveland.

The doctor said that, while a fetal heartbeat was still present, Watts' water had broken prematurely and the fetus she was carrying would not survive. He advised heading to the hospital to have her labor induced, so she could have what amounted to an abortion to deliver the nonviable fetus. Otherwise, she would face "significant risk" of death, according to records of her case.

That was a Tuesday in September. What followed was a harrowing three days entailing: multiple trips to the hospital; Watts miscarrying into, and then flushing and plunging, a toilet at her home; a police investigation of those actions; and Watts, who is Black, being charged with abuse of a corpse. That's a fifth-degree felony punishable by up to a year in prison and a \$2,500 fine.

Her case was sent last month to a grand jury. It has touched off a national firestorm over the treatment of pregnant women, and especially Black women, in the aftermath of the U.S. Supreme Court's *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization* decision that overturned *Roe*

*v. Wade*. Civil rights attorney Benjamin Crump elevated Watts' plight in a post to X, formerly Twitter, and supporters have donated more than \$100,000 through GoFundMe for her legal defense, medical bills and trauma counseling.

Whether abortion-seekers should face criminal charges is a matter of debate within the anti-abortion community, but, post-*Dobbs*, pregnant women like Watts, who was not even trying to get an abortion, have increasingly found themselves charged with "crimes against their own pregnancies," said Grace Howard, assistant justice studies professor at San José State University.

"Roe was a clear legal roadblock to charging felonies for unintentionally harming pregnancies, when women were legally allowed to end their pregnancies through abortion," she said. "Now that *Roe* is gone, that roadblock is entirely gone."

Michele Goodwin, a law professor at the University of California, Irvine, and author of "Policing The Womb," said those efforts have long overwhelmingly targeted Black and brown women.

Even before *Roe* was overturned, studies show that Black women who visited hospitals for prenatal care were 10 times more likely than white women to have child protective services and law enforcement called on them, even when their cases were similar, she said.

"Post-*Dobbs*, what we see is kind of a wild, wild West," said Goodwin. "You see this kind of muscle-flexing by district attorneys and prosecutors wanting to show that they are going



Demonstrators rally for reproductive rights in front of the White House in Washington D.C.

to be vigilant, they're going to take down women who violate the ethos coming out of the state's legislature." She called Black women "canaries in the coal mine" for the "hyper-vigilant type of policing" women of all races might expect from the nation's network of health-care providers, law enforcers and courts now that abortion isn't federally protected.

In Texas, for example, Republican Attorney General Ken Paxton mounted an aggressive and successful defense against a white Texas mother, Kate Cox, who sued for permission to skirt the state's restrictive abortion law because her fetus had a fatal condition.

At the time of Watts' miscarriage, abortion was legal in Ohio through

21 weeks, six days of pregnancy. Her lawyer, Traci Timko, said Watts left the hospital on the Wednesday when, coincidentally, her pregnancy arrived at that date — after sitting for eight hours awaiting care.

It turned out the delay was because hospital officials were deliberating over the legalities, Timko said. "It was the fear of, is this going to constitute an abortion and are we able to do that," she said.

At the time, vigorous campaigning was taking place across Ohio over Issue 1, a proposed amendment to enshrine a right to abortion in Ohio's constitution. Some of the ads were harshly attacking abortions later in pregnancy, with opponents arguing the issue would allow the return of

so-called "partial-birth abortions" and pregnancy terminations "until birth."

The hospital did not return calls seeking confirmation and comment, but B. Jessie Hill, a law professor at Case Western Reserve University School of Law in Cleveland, said Mercy Health-St. Joseph's was in a bind.

"These are the razor's edge decisions that health care providers are being forced to make," she said. "And all the incentives are pushing hospitals to be conservative, because on the other side of this is criminal liability. That's the impact of *Dobbs*."

Watts had been admitted to the Catholic hospital twice that week with vaginal bleeding, but she left without being treated. A nurse told the 911 dispatcher that Watts returned no longer pregnant on that Friday. She said Watts told her, "the baby's in her backyard in a bucket," and that she didn't want to have a child.

Timko said Watts insists she doesn't recall saying the pregnancy was unwanted; it was unintended, but she had always wanted to give her mother a grandchild. Her lawyer believes Watts may have meant that she didn't want to fish what she knew was a dead fetus from the bucket of blood, tissue and feces that she'd scooped from her overflowing toilet.

"This 33-year-old girl with no criminal record is demonized for something that goes on every day," she told Warren Municipal Court Judge Terry Ivanchak during Watts' recent preliminary hearing.

Warren Assistant Prosecutor Lewis Guarnieri told Ivanchak that Watts left home for a hair appointment after miscarrying, leaving the toilet clogged. Police would later find the fetus wedged in the pipes.

"The issue isn't how the child died, when the child died," Guarnieri told the judge, according to TV station WKBN. "It's the fact the baby was put into a toilet, was large enough to clog up the toilet, left in that toilet, and she went on (with) her day."

In court, Timko bristled at Guarnieri's suggestion.

"You cannot be broadcasting any clearer that you just don't get it," she said in an interview, suggesting Watts was scared, anxious and traumatized by the experience. "She's trying to protect Mama. She doesn't want to get her hair done. She wants to stop bleeding like crazy and start grieving her fetus, what she's just

been through."

As chief counsel to the county's child assault protection unit, Assistant Trumbull County Prosecutor Diane Barber is the lead prosecutor on Watts' case.

Barber said she couldn't speak specifically about the case other than to note that the county was compelled to move forward with it once it was bound over from municipal court. She said she doesn't expect a grand jury finding this month.

"About 20% of the cases get no-billed, (as in) they do not get indicted and the case does not proceed," she said.

The size and stage of development of Watts' fetus — precisely the point when abortion crossed from legal to illegal in most cases — became an issue during her preliminary hearing.

A county forensic investigator reported feeling "what appeared to be a small foot with toes" inside Watts' toilet. Police seized the toilet and broke it apart to retrieve the intact fetus as evidence.

Testimony and an autopsy confirmed that the fetus died in utero before passing through the birth canal. In regard to abuse, the examination identified "no recent injuries."

Ivanchak acknowledged the case's complexities.

"There are better scholars than I am to determine the exact legal status of this fetus, corpse, body, birthing tissue, whatever it is," he said from the bench. "Matter of fact, I'm assuming that's what ... Issue 1's all about: at what point something becomes viable."

Timko, a former prosecutor, said Ohio's abuse-of-corpse statute is vague. It prohibits treating "a human corpse" in a way that would "outrage" reasonable family or community sensibilities.

"From a legal perspective, there's no definition of 'corpse,'" she said. "Can you be a corpse if you never took a breath?"

Howard said clarity on what about Watts' behavior constituted a crime is essential.

"For rights of people with the capacity for pregnancy, this is huge," she said. "Her miscarriage was entirely ordinary. So I just want to know what (the prosecutor) thinks she should have done. If we are going to require people to collect and bring used menstrual products to hospitals so that they can make sure it is indeed a miscarriage, it's as ridiculous and invasive as it is cruel."

## Sickle Cell Affects More Families In Africa & India, But New Therapies Are Out Of Reach

Gautam Dongre's two children in India and Pascazia Mazeze's son in Tanzania live with an inherited blood disorder that turns blood cells into instruments of pain.

Now that new gene therapies promise a cure for their sickle cell disease, Dongre says he's "praying the treatment should come to us."

But experts say the one-time treatment is out of reach in India and Africa — places where the disease is most common. Vast inequities cut much of the world off from gene therapy in general.

While access to all sorts of medicine is limited in developing countries, the problem is especially acute with these therapies, which are among the most expensive treatments in the world.

Beyond their sky-high prices, these therapies are extremely complex to give patients because they require long hospitalizations, sophisticated medical equipment and specially trained doctors and scientists. So far, the two gene therapies for sickle cell have only been approved in wealthier countries: both of them in the U.S., and one in Britain and Bahrain as well.

"The vast, vast majority of patients live in an area where they have no access to this kind of therapy," said Dr. Benjamin Watkins, who treats sickle cell in New Orleans and is also involved in pediatric work internationally. "We as medical professionals, and as a society, have to think about that."

Access to gene therapies was a major focus of this year's international summit on human genome editing in London. A subsequent editorial in the journal *Nature* said high prices leave low- and middle-income countries "entirely in the lurch" and could stymie progress across the field.

Some scientists worry that new cures won't reach their potential, future treatments may never be invented and the prospect of wiping out diseases like sickle cell will remain a distant dream.

### STRUGGLING FOR BASIC TREATMENT

For gene therapy to even be an option, people in developing nations must stay alive long enough to get it. There, sickle cell disease is more likely to disable or kill than in wealthy regions. Late diagnosis is common and basic care can be hard to come by.

While gene therapy "is a huge leap forward ... we can't forget about those patients," said Watkins, of Children's Hospital New Orleans.

Sickle cell disease begins its assault on the body at birth, affecting hemoglobin, the protein in red blood cells that carries oxygen. A genetic mutation causes the cells to become crescent-shaped, which can block blood flow and cause problems such as excruciating pain, organ damage and stroke.

The only other cure is a bone marrow transplant, which must come from a closely matched donor and brings a risk of rejection.

Global estimates of how many people have the disease vary, but



This family photo shows Pascazia Mazeze, executive director of the Tanzania Sickle Cell Warriors Organization, with her sons, from left, Ian, Rian and Gian outside their home in Tanzania



This family photo shows Pascazia Mazeze, executive director of the Tanzania Sickle Cell Warriors Organization, with her sons, from left, Ian, Rian and Gian outside their home in Tanzania

some researchers put the number between 6 million and 8 million. It's more common in malaria-prone regions because carrying the sickle cell trait helps protect against severe malaria. More than 1 million people with sickle cell disease live in India, studies show, and more than 5 million are in sub-Saharan Africa.

Dongre, who lives in Nagpur in central India, has seen the struggles in his own family and among people he's met as a leader in the National Alliance of Sickle Cell Organizations in India. For many years, awareness of the disease has been lacking, he said, even among some health professionals.

Dongre recalled how his newborn son Girish cried constantly from stomach and leg pain. Doctors couldn't figure out what was wrong and didn't diagnose him with sickle cell for 2 1/2 years. When their daughter Sumedha was born, he and his wife had her tested immediately and learned she had the disease too.

Other patients go undiagnosed for a decade or more. Lalit Pargi, who lives in Udaipur in northern India, said he wasn't diagnosed until he was 16 despite having the tell-tale yellow eyes and skin of jaundice,

a common sign of sickle cell. That meant a childhood filled with inexplicable pain.

### 'GOD AND GOOGLE'

Available treatments can reduce the bouts of pain known as "crises." Dongre's children, now 19 and 13, take a medicine called hydroxyurea, a decades-old chemo drug that helps prevent the formation of sickle-shaped red blood cells and control the disease. Both have been hospitalized for pain episodes, especially when they were younger.

Other patients in rural areas are dying at very young ages without getting the right treatments, Dongre said.

In July, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi launched a sickle cell "elimination mission" that combines awareness, education, screening, early detection and treatment. Dongre lauded the effort but said the country faces huge obstacles to meet its goals.

The situation is much the same in East Africa's Tanzania, where the health ministry has partnered with drug company Novartis, which makes sickle cell medicine, to improve access to diagnosis and treatment.

Mazeze scrambled for information

after her son, Ian Harely, was diagnosed.

"I Googled and Googled and I couldn't sleep," said Mazeze, executive director of the Tanzania Sickle Cell Warriors Organization. "After that, I was praying. It was God and Google."

Her son is now 10 and takes hydroxyurea and folic acid for anemia. They've helped, but haven't eliminated pain episodes like the one that put him in the hospital for two weeks earlier this year.

Still, Mazeze counts herself lucky she can afford treatment at all.

"We have people in Tanzania who can't even manage folic acid," she said. "Folic acid for a month is 1,000 Tanzanian shillings — less than a dollar," while out-of-pocket costs for hydroxyurea can be more than 35 times that.

### 'SIGNIFICANT CHALLENGES'

Such stark realities make the cost of gene therapies an insurmountable obstacle, experts say. The price tags for the two sickle cell therapies in the U.S. are \$3.1 million and \$2.2 million although the cost for gene therapies can vary by country.

The process of giving the therapies is just as big a hurdle.

Patients must go to the hospital, where stem cells are removed from their blood in a process that requires specialized equipment. One treatment, made by Vertex Pharmaceuticals and CRISPR Therapeutics, involves sending the cells to a lab as quickly as possible to keep them fresh and using a gene-editing tool called CRISPR to knock out a gene. The cells must be sent back in liquid nitrogen so they stay frozen until they're ready to use.

The other therapy, made by Bluebird Bio, doesn't use CRISPR but involves the same process for patients. In both cases they must undergo chemotherapy before they get back their altered cells by IV, and spend weeks in the hospital. The process can stretch on for months.

"The infrastructure doesn't exist to make it possible in many parts of the world," said Dr. David Altshuler, chief scientific officer at Vertex. "There's great unmet need, but there are also significant challenges."

Not only do many medical centers lack things like specialized equipment, but health care systems themselves are comparatively skeletal. For example, World Health Organization data shows India and Tanzania both have less than a quarter of the per-capita hospital beds the U.S. has.

Scientists say one possible solution — though not an immediate fix — is to develop easier-to-administer versions of the new therapies. Altshuler said Vertex is trying to find ways to provide the same benefits without requiring chemo, which comes with serious risks such as infertility. His team is working on making a pill that wouldn't edit genes but would have the same goal: helping the body produce a fetal form of hemoglobin since the adult form is defective in people with sickle cell.

## Two Babies Are Infected With Dangerous Bacteria

ST. LOUIS (AP) — The dangerous bacteria that sparked powdered formula recalls and shortages last year has infected two babies this year, killing a Kentucky child and causing brain damage in a Missouri infant.

Federal health officials confirmed Thursday that two cases of invasive infections caused by *Cronobacter sakazakii* have been reported in 2023, both in infants who consumed powdered infant formula made by Abbott Nutrition, the company at the center of the 2022 crisis.

Food and Drug Administration officials said there was no evidence that the infections were linked to manufacturing and no reason to issue new recalls. The bacteria are found naturally in the environment and also can make their way into infant formula after the packaging is opened.

"There is no indication of a broader public health concern related to this product at this time," the FDA said in a statement.

Kentucky health officials notified the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention on Nov. 15 that a child who consumed Similac Total Comfort powdered formula died after being infected with *Cronobacter sakazakii*.

In Missouri, 6-week-old Mira White, of Sikeston, was diagnosed in early March with a brain infection caused by the bacteria, which was detected in an open container of Similac NeoSure formula in her home.

The same type of bacteria led federal investigators to shut down an Abbott formula plant in Sturgis, Michigan, last year when inspections sparked by four infant illnesses, including two deaths, showed widespread contamination in the plant.

Since falling ill, Mira has suffered nearly constant seizures and inconsolable bouts of crying, said her 33-year-old mother, Asian Davis. Brain scans showed neurological damage and missing tissue caused by the infection.

"It affected her brain real bad," Davis said. "She'll grow, but it will be a slow progress."

FDA investigators said they "did not identify a causal link" between Mira's infection and the Casa Grande, Arizona, factory that made the formula marketed for premature babies. Abbott officials said they found no *Cronobacter* in batches of formula at the plant. The bacteria also weren't found in unopened cans of Similac NeoSure formula from Mira's home.

In Kentucky, the FDA said it "has not found evidence" of contamination after a Nov. 21 inspection at an Abbott plant. Officials did not identify the child or the location of the plant.

Abbott officials said there is no evidence that conditions at the company's manufacturing plants or contamination in sealed products caused the illnesses.

Frank Yiannas, a former FDA official in charge of food safety response, cautioned that a negative test does not guarantee there's no contamination. "A positive test result means a lot. A negative test result doesn't mean anything," he said.

Food safety advocates say the tragic cases underscore the overlooked risk of powdered formula, particularly for babies born prematurely, as Mira was. And it highlights the need for better education for parents and caregivers about how to prepare and use the crucial food.

Many people don't understand that powdered infant formula isn't sterile, said Mitzi Baum, chief executive of the nonprofit group STOP Foodborne Illness.

The powder itself can harbor potentially dangerous germs — and it is easily contaminated by sources in the home. *Cronobacter sakazakii* bacteria are common in soil and surface water, as well as dry foods.

Very young babies and those born prematurely are vulnerable to illnesses caused by the germ because their immune systems aren't developed enough to fight it off.

Earlier this year, the CDC warned parents to wash their hands and to sterilize equipment and the environment before feeding newborns. The warning followed the 2022 death of a baby from a *Cronobacter sakazakii* infection tied to a contaminated breast pump.