Reimagining Black Families' Cultural Assets Can Inform Policies and Practices That Enhance Their Well-being

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This brief is part of a larger effort by Child Trends researchers to expand knowledge about Black children and families. This effort will include continued work on Black family cultural assets and the development of a new multi-year applied research agenda on Black children and families. While these publications will sometimes prioritize adults within Black families and sometimes prioritize children, the goals of the publications and research agenda are consistent—to build a deeper understanding of the diversity of Black families, contextualize their experiences within systems and institutions, and produce evidence to inform policies and practices that promote their well-being in the twenty-first century.

For this work, we define a Black family as a group of at least one self-identified Black adult related by birth, marriage, adoption, or choice to one or more children (infancy through adolescence). The adult(s) may also be residing with or economically, socially, and emotionally responsible for the child(ren)'s well-being.

Introduction

The family unit has been a key institution in Black communities in America since the capture of Black people in Africa and their enslavement in the United States. Although there are variations in the composition of Black families, research has shown that they share core protective elements (i.e., cultural values, traditions, and practices). These elements—referred to in this brief as 'cultural assets'[1] or simply as 'assets'—have sustained families and supported their functioning over time.[2, 3, 4] Cultural assets include, but are not limited to, extended kin and social networks, religiosity and spirituality, optimism, and role flexibility. These assets are defined later in this brief, alongside examples of ways in which they have been operationalized.

Defining Black People in the United States

When referencing Black people as part of the research agenda on Black families, we are referring to individuals who may identify as African American—those who were primarily born in America and are descended from enslaved Africans who survived the trans-Atlantic slave trade—as well as the smaller populations of people living in America who may identify as Black African or Afro-Caribbean.

Black also includes individuals who reported being Black alone or in combination with one or more races or ethnicities in their responses to the U.S. Census—for instance, an individual who identifies as Black only, as well as someone who identifies as Black and White combined or Afro-Latino.

The body of work within which this brief belongs is the first step of a larger effort by Child Trends researchers to expand the field's knowledge about Black families' cultural assets. Our goals are to 1) highlight historical and contemporary Black family life, as well as demographic trends and shifts related to Black families; 2) use what we learn to inform an understanding of the ways in which Black families draw on and apply cultural assets within a systemically racist and everchanging American context; and 3) inform the development of policies that have the potential to strengthen Black families.

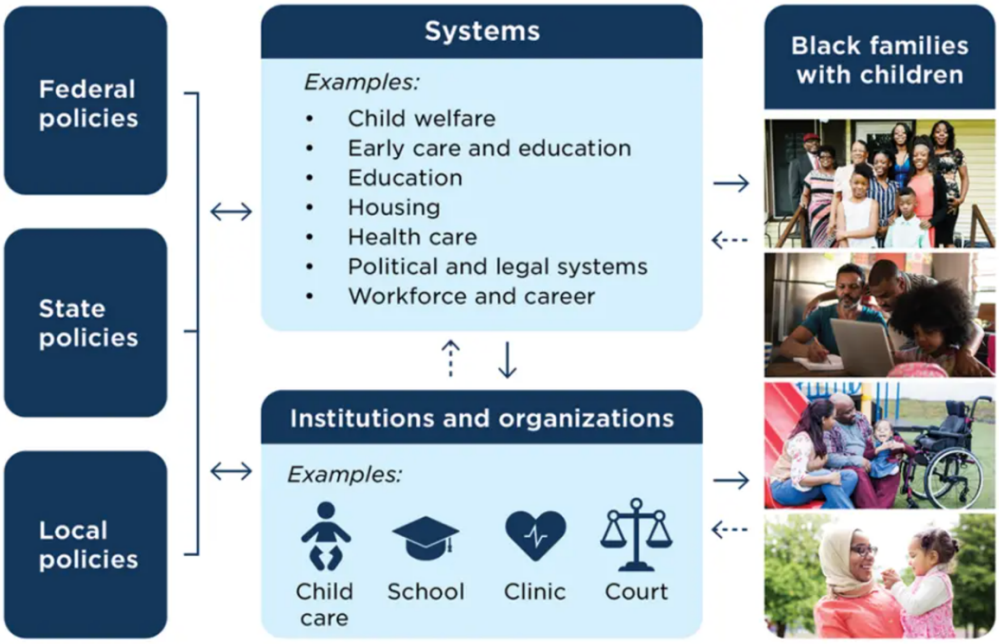
The timing for this brief and our overarching body of work is critically important. Over the past few years, there has been increased national attention to the ways in which educational,[5, 6] economic,[7, 8] housing,[9, 10] health,[11, 12] social service,[13, 14] and criminal justice[15, 16, 17] systems have perpetuated injustices and violence against Black people in the United States. Furthermore, the COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated many previously existing inequities.[18, 19, 20, 21, 22, 23] With increased push[24] from certain segments of the public and backlash[25] from others, the federal government has issued an executive order on racial equity.[26] Some researchers[27, 28] and philanthropic organizations[29] have also been vocal about shining a light on and addressing the complex relationship between policies and racialized hierarchies. Together, the public; federal, state, and local governments; researchers; and the philanthropic sector can use their power and resources to advance and expand existing policies that tackle structural racism and support the well-being of Black families. In tandem with a better understanding of cultural assets (which can shed light on the ways in which families with varying characteristics function), this strategy will help chart a path toward ensuring the well-being of Black families[30] and children, a goal that is beneficial for all Americans.[31]

Section 1 of this brief illustrates the conceptual model for our research agenda on Black families and anchors it within the context of historical and current policies and institutions that have impacted the well-being of Black families with children in the United States. Next, in Section 2, we examine three historically dominant perspectives in research on Black families and suggest that the diversity of Black families in the United States limits the current value of each of these perspectives; this section includes an overview of the shifts in Black families' demographics over the past 20 years that necessitate a new research paradigm. In Section 3, we use the information from the previous section as context to describe select cultural assets that anchor Black family life in the United States and how these assets may have changed or be changing based on historical, social, or demographic shifts. Finally, in Section 4, we introduce the need for new or modified data collection and research approaches that will enhance the field's understanding of Black family life and well-being.

Section 1: Conceptual Model

As discussed, our focus on cultural assets is situated within a developing body of Child Trends research that examines the experiences of Black families with children relative to the systems, institutions, and organizations with which they engage. This applied research agenda is guided by a conceptual model that serves as a frame for our work (see Figure 1).[32]

Figure 1. Conceptual Model of the Black Family Research Agenda



Note: A solid arrow (→) represents a stronger level of influence than a dashed arrow (⇢)

The left side of the conceptual model illustrates the bi-directional influence of federal, state, and local policies on the systems, institutions, and organizations with which Black families with children interface, and vice versa. The single-headed arrows—two solid and two dashed—on the right side of the model also represent influence between the components, but show differential types of influence between systems, institutions, and organizations and Black families with children. Systems, institutions, and organizations have more influence and power over Black families with children (represented by the solid arrows); conversely, Black families with children have a present but less dominant influence over systems, institutions, and organizations (represented by the dashed arrows).

The reduced level of power illustrated in the model is not indicative of the lack of agency of Black families with children; rather, we recognize the powerful role of context—including history—in stymying the agency and power of Black families. For instance, both formal and informal federal, state, and local policies have and continue to implicitly and explicitly sanction racism, discrimination and oppression.[33] These situations highlight the need to formally address injustices experienced by Black families with children while simultaneously understanding the ways in which Black families' cultural assets can fortify them against these challenges.

Section 2: Historical Perspectives and Recent Trends for Black Families in the United States

Creating policies and institutions that ensure the well-being of Black families and children will require a new and more nuanced understanding of Black family life. Researchers,[34] the media,[35, 36] and other institutions have often portrayed Black families as a homogeneous group. Frequently, these depictions have pathologized Black families by putting forth negative stereotypes[37] and overgeneralizations[38, 39] that are both limiting and dangerous. These viewpoints undermine our understanding and appreciation of the richness and diversity of Black families' cultures, values, experiences, and lifestyles. In addition, these representations can also serve as the basis for the initiation and interpretation of ideologies and research that are formulated into policies and programs that codify racism[40] toward Black families.[41, 42]

Below, we provide a cursory overview of a limited number of dominant historical perspectives on the conditions of Black families in the United States. We then include a high-level summary of past and current trends in Black families' demographics. Because society is everchanging—with Black family demographics no exception—we contend that research on Black families must also evolve. We hope that this high-level exploration of previous research perspectives on Black families, set alongside ongoing and emerging societal shifts, will provide the foundation for a reimagining of Black families' cultural assets in our current context.

Dominant research perspectives on Black families

Researchers who have studied Black families have articulated a range of perspectives about their functioning and well-being. While the constraints of this brief do not allow for an examination of all prior perspectives on Black families, we are sharing three specific perspectives that are (or have been) widespread and have shaped the design and implementation of research and policy that impact Black families.

- **The first perspective: Black families are disorganized, pathological, and unstable, in large part because of their history of enslavement in the United States.**[43] According to this perspective, the impact of slavery on family structure led to the formation of single female-headed households that are mired in poverty, with adults and children at significant disadvantage and risk for poor outcomes across a range of domains (e.g., housing, education, employment, etc.) important to family stability.[44, 45, 46] Implicit in this narrative is an assumption that Black families are deviant because they do not mirror White middle-class families in structure or behaviors.
- **The second perspective: Black family challenges are a result of living within a society that is affected by historical and structural issues such as systemic racism, oppression, and discrimination, and family strengths help to navigate these barriers.** This perspective counters the first and explores the ways that Black families have shown resilience and strength by drawing on cultural mores[47] from their histories, and by using and/or adapting these histories to navigate the realities of racism.[48, 49] This perspective (which also tends to implicitly focus on the White middle class as a normative standard) suggests that the emergence of female-headed households[50] and disadvantage among Black households is not because of family structure, but that structural racism and other unfair treatment of Black people causes disadvantage. In addition, culturally specific values, behaviors, and resources[51, 52, 53] within the Black family, such as linkages to extended relatives,[54, 55, 56] have enabled Black families to survive—and in some cases thrive—despite relentless challenges to their well-being.[57, 58, 59] Some work in this area suggests that the values, behaviors, and resources on which Black families in America have drawn are an extension of familial strategies and resources that African people carried with them to the United States that were then translated and adapted during and after enslavement.[60]

- **The third perspective: Black families experience structural racism as a result of the country's history, but may react to and attend to these issues differently based on income, social standing, or other factors.** This perspective examines Black families within a framework of intra-race comparisons and income, highlighting distinctions[61] between various socioeconomic classes of Black families.[62, 63] In this body of work, income and class become a proxy for social standing, and may be used comparatively to understand differences in family structure and behaviors, and/or the "success" of Black families. Notably, even within-group examinations of Black families that attend to historical and structural issues within U.S. systems tend to underscore White middle-class standards as aspirational.

Our work both builds on and challenges these perspectives, acknowledging that they are complex and not always mutually exclusive. We examine the ways in which history, structural racism, and cultural assets affect Black families, but do so within a contemporary context. For example, we broaden our examination of Black families beyond previously over-researched family types such as female-headed households or Black families in poverty. Instead, we include families with different structures, families across varying socioeconomic strata, families with adults who identify as Black and another race, Black families who may not identify as American (e.g., those who are African, Caribbean, or Afro-Latino), and Black immigrant families. To the extent possible, our work is also noncomparative, meaning we focus specifically on Black families with children unless there is a firm rationale for making comparisons to other racial groups—for example, to highlight significant disparities that result from systemic racism or other factors.

Trends in the number, structure, geography, education, earnings, and wealth of Black families

In this section, we explore demographic data to provide context on Black families that is helpful for understanding how cultural assets may have evolved and been used historically. We also highlight emerging demographic trends to inform thinking about how research (e.g., data collection, research strategies and perspectives) and cultural assets may need to be reimagined in the future in response to changes among Black families.

A note on data sources

The majority of data presented are compiled from the U.S. Census Bureau. We focus on data on the demographics of Black families specifically, which includes families where any adult member identifies either as Black or African American alone, or in combination with one or more other races. Due to data limitations, some sources do not explicitly state whether they are inclusive of Black multiracial individuals—we note these instances in the text for clarity. The Census defines a family as a group of at least two people who are living together *and* are related either legally (e.g., marriage, adoption) or biologically. Finally, data are reported from 2019, the most recent year of data available, unless otherwise noted.

Number of Black people in the United States

An estimated 46.7 million people, or about 14 percent[64] of all people in the United States, identify as Black or African American (including just under 42 million who report their race as Black or African American alone, and an additional 4.7 million Americans who identify as Black or African American in combination with one or more additional races). In 2000, this number was considerably lower,[65] at roughly 36 million Americans who identified as Black or African American. This growth is notable and marks a 29 percent[66] increase in the number of Americans who identify as Black or African American since 2000. Across all individuals identifying as Black or African American, women (52%) outnumber men (48%) by 4 percentage points.[67] Currently, 10 percent of the Black population living in the United States was born elsewhere (up from 7% in 2000), most of whom (88%) come from Africa or the Caribbean.[68]

Structure of Black families in the United States

Black families in the United States have many different structures.[69] Almost one third (29.2%) of Black people in the United States over age 15 are married and just over half (50.9%) have never been married.[70] The remaining 15 percent reported being divorced (11.5%), separated (3.2%), or widowed (5.2%).[71] Just under 9 percent (8.8%) of all cohabitating same-sex couples[72] (married and unmarried) reside in households where the householder is Black or African American.[a]

Since the end of state laws making interracial marriages[73] illegal in the late 1960s, the number of mixed-race marriages in the United States has grown. A Pew Research Center analysis of 2014-2015 American Community Survey data show that, in 2015, 18 percent of newlywed marriages[74] were those in which one partner was Black and the other partner was a race other than Black. Looking more closely at the composition of these marriages, Black men appear more likely to marry a non-Black spouse than Black women. For instance, 7 percent of all interracial marriages occurred with a Black husband[75] and White wife and 4 percent occurred with a Black husband and Hispanic wife.[b] In comparison, marriages between Black women[76] and a White husband occurred at a rate of 3 percent, and marriages between Black women and Hispanic husbands occurred at a rate of 1 percent.[c] In general, the analysis finds the rate of intermarriage[77] by Black men has consistently been about two times that of Black women (24% vs. 12%) since the 1980s.

In total, 59.1 percent of Black Americans are living in a family household.[78, d] Just over one quarter (27.4%) of Black households are led by a married couple, with 11 percent of couples having at least one child under age 18.[79] More than one in ten (13.9%) Black family households are female-headed (with no spouse present).[80] In fact, the majority of Black children (64%) are being raised in single-parent households, most often led by women.[81, 82] Among Black families, 27.6 percent live with at least one child of their own under age 18. These families differ in composition,[83] but most households with children are headed by parents.

In addition to parent-headed households, many grandparents live with their grandchildren. Among Black people over age 30, 4.9 percent were grandparents living in a household with their grandchild. Within these households, 40.4 percent were the primary caretaker responsible for the care of their grandchild.[84] In addition, more than one quarter of Black children (27.7%) are living with and being cared for by a grandparent[85] with no parents involved.

Some children may also be living with others outside of their family, either through engagement with the foster care system or through legal adoptions. According to data analyzed from Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System, a total of 97,156 children whose race was reported as "Black, non-Hispanic"[e] were engaged in the foster care system, representing 23 percent of all children.[86] Additionally, 11,663 Black children were adopted in the United States in 2019.[87]

[a] Data were not available for individuals who identified their race as Black or African American in combination with one or more other races.
[b] These data predate the U.S. Supreme Court ruling legalizing same-sex marriage and are reported for heterosexual couples only. Black/Asian marital rates were deemed by Pew to be very low across all genders.
[c] Data are not available for individuals who identify their race as Black or African American in combination with one or more other races.
[d] Family households refer to those in which the residents of a household are all members of the same family.
[e] Data are not available for individuals who identify their race as Black or African American in combination with one or more other races.

Geography of Black families in the United States

Due to the prevalence of slavery in the Southern regions of the United States, the U.S. Black population has historically had a larger presence in the South. This presence persisted even after slavery ended. For instance, from the 1900s to the 1940s, over 70 percent of the Black U.S. population lived in the South. Even at the height of the Great Migration (1916-1970)—when millions of Black Americans purposefully left the South to head for what they thought to be less racist environments, and better educational and employment opportunities in Northern and Western cities—the number of Black people in the South never dropped below 50 percent of the total Black population.[88] Black people moved not just for opportunity, but also to where they had family (or other ties). These preferences meant they tended to concentrate in particular states such as California and Michigan,[89] as well as certain cities such as New York, NY and Chicago, IL.[f]

During the 1960s and 70s, however, changes began to occur in Western and Northern areas. Employment opportunities[90] decreased and social upheaval in the form of riots (often initiated because of oppressive practices and poor treatment of Black people) occurred in predominantly Black cities. These occurrences propelled some Black people to move back to the South.[91, 92] These moves have continued, led in part by Black professionals,[93] college graduates, and retirees who have been drawn back to the South because of family, social, and cultural ties, as well as lower costs of living.[g] Recently, places like California, Michigan, Illinois, and New York have been seeing absolute declines in the numbers of Black people, and the Black population in places such as Florida, Georgia, North Carolina, and Texas has been growing.[94] Currently, the Black population in the South is up to 56 percent in 2019 from 52 percent in 1970.[95] In comparison, 17 percent of Black Americans live in each of the Northeast and Midwest, and 10 percent of Black Americans live in the West.[96]

Education, earnings, and wealth of Black families in the United States

Educationally, Black people are making strides. Nearly 23 percent of Black adults (20.1% of Black men and 25.5% of Black women) had obtained a Bachelor's degree or higher in 2019, up 8 percent from 2000.[97] Despite having slightly higher rates of post-secondary education, Black women's median earnings in the United States are still lower than Black men's ($37,430 and $41,356, respectively).[98] Overall, with increased education, Black families' median income has only risen by $15,000 since 2010 to roughly $55,379 annually in 2019.[99] In addition, most middle-class Black people[100] are represented in the lowest of the middle-class quintiles,[101] which range from $26,400 to $96,700,[h] and Black people are often new to middle-class status.

In terms of wealth, Black families have low levels of affluence and experience large differentials in wealth inequality.[102] For instance, middle-class Black households[i] had a median net worth of roughly $38,300 in 2016, with home ownership rates at 53 percent, compared to approximately $154,400 in median net worth and 76 percent home ownership rates for middle-class White households (comparison between families who fall at the top of the scale in both racial categories).[103] The fact that the median wealth[104] of young Black families is just $600[j] is also concerning, as is the fact that 9 percent of Black families[k] have so much debt[105] that their net worth is negative.[106] This lack of wealth has been attributed to longstanding racist and discriminatory practices in the United States that have prevented Black Americans from building prosperity[107] and limited the ability[108] of Black families to flourish.[109] Also at play are close linkages between

[f] Data are not available for individuals who identify their race as Black or African American in combination with one or more other races.
[g] Data are not available for individuals who identify their race as Black or African American in combination with one or more other races.
[h] Data were not available for the percentage of households that included someone who identified their race as Black or African American in combination with one or more other races.
[i] Data were not available for the percentage of households that included someone who identified their race as Black or African American in combination with one or more other races.
[j] Young Black families are defined as families headed by individuals under age 35.
[k] Data were not available for the percentage of families that included someone who identified their race as Black or African American in combination with one or more other races.

Black families, whereby more affluent individuals are often a source of support for less advantaged relatives. While deemed to be a cultural asset, this type of monetary assistance can result in income instability[110] for family members who are more financially well off, as well as the inability of many Black families to accumulate wealth.

Section 3: Overview of Black Families' Cultural Assets

Some scholars have attributed the survival and thriving of Black families in the face of systemic racism and oppression to the transfer of particular cultural assets within and across families.[111, 112, 113, 114, 115] These assets have been identified and studied by individuals from a wide variety of disciplines, including African American studies scholars,[116] anthropologists,[117] economists,[118, 119, 120] family studies scholars,[121] historians,[122, 123] psychologists,[124, 125] and sociologists.[126, 127, 128, 129] While these researchers' perspectives have been varied, and their work often debated, a core set of cultural assets unique to Black families in America consistently emerges from their collective analyses. Some of these cultural assets[130] are thought to be remnants from the African ancestors of Black Americans and include, but are not limited to, the following:[131, 132, 133]

- Extended kin and social networks
- Religiosity and spirituality
- Optimism
- Role flexibility

In the following section, we define these assets and highlight examples of the ways in which they have been used historically in Black families.

Historical expression of Black family cultural assets

Describing and operationalizing cultural assets is not a straightforward endeavor. Difficulties can stem from defining concepts: For instance, religiosity and spirituality are often thought about and discussed in tandem but are not the same. Cultural assets can also change over time, and contextual factors such as geography, income, family structure, and other issues can play a key role in how they are used. Capturing how the transmission of cultural assets occurs (e.g., consciously and unconsciously), and by whom (e.g., from parents to children), is also complicated. Despite these challenges, it is important for researchers to explore how cultural assets have been used in the past. Here, we conduct a high-level review of four commonly identified Black family assets. This overview provides initial insights that enables researchers to think about the ways in which these well-established cultural practices may change over time in response to shifts in trends and the experiences of Black families.

Extended kin and social networks refer to close ties among Black family members[134]—especially among consanguineal (blood) relatives and among friends integrated into the family as "fictive" or voluntary kin.[135] Extended kin and social networks differ in composition,[136] strength of ties, and quality of exchange and interaction. Research also indicates differences in access[137] to and use of these assets by gender.[138] In general, however, the existing literature demonstrates the beneficial role that family and social networks play[139] for Black families and children, including through the receipt of support and resources that allow them to address members' immediate needs, weather crises, and care for those unable to care for themselves (e.g., children, the disabled, the elderly). These exchanges have also been found to contribute to Black families' psychological well-being[140] and help them survive[141] racist and hostile environments.

Religiosity and spirituality refer to the role of faith and a belief[142] in and connection to a higher power that is external from the individual. These concepts are complementary[143] and can be mutually reinforcing[144] but they do differ.[145] Religion tends to be formal and is generally organized around communally held beliefs and practices that occur in a group. Spirituality tends to be less formal, more individualized, and internally focused. Both, however, can help individuals and families gain perspective on (and inform) the ways in which they live their lives and their connections to others and society at large. Black people who were enslaved in America brought religion[146] (e.g., beliefs in certain deities) and religious practices (e.g., particular ways of worship) with them, and these varied depending on place of origin. These practices were often used to facilitate communication[147] among enslaved people and to subvert control from slave owners. Over time, many of these practices changed and adapted to local circumstances and influences.

Currently, religion and spirituality still play important roles[148] in the lives of Black people in the United States. Seventy-four percent of Black people in the United States report a deep belief in God,[149] and a large majority also report valuing and participating in regular prayer. Sixty-six percent of Black Americans are Protestant and most Black people attend a Black church.[150] Black people credit the church with providing them spiritual, social, and economic support, as well as promoting racial progress in the United States. Differences do exist, however, among age groups and immigration status. Younger generations of Black people are less tied to religion[151] and less engaged in their congregation than older generations. Black African immigrants tend to be more religious than Black Caribbean immigrants or U.S.-born Black people.[152] Black African immigrants are also more likely than Black Americans to practice orthodox Christian religions and/or Islam.[153]

As with religion, spirituality[154] plays an important role with respect to steeling Black families from some of the negative artifacts of enslavement in the United States. Some scholars have found that spirituality is a buffer against racism.[155] Spirituality has also been found to support positive racial socialization within families.[156]

Optimism refers to "the penetrating belief held by most Black families that conditions will improve."[157] Current research indicates that—even in the face of challenging circumstances such as a lack of satisfaction with living arrangements or finances[158]—a sense of optimism about the future remains a defining feature of Black families across varied situations, including different socioeconomic strata.[159, 160, 161, 162] Optimism is also associated with positive mental and physical health outcomes for Black Americans.[163, 164, 165] The mechanisms for understanding the ways in which optimism supports the health of Black Americans, however, are not easily understood. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, progress by Black people (albeit slow) in areas such as education and health strengthened their quality of life[166] relative to previous generations. These improvements, coupled with optimism[167] as a defining feature and key cultural asset of Black families, appear to be part of the reason for positive outcomes.

Role flexibility refers to the idea that an individual's responsibilities in a family adapt and change based on circumstances and/or need.[168, 169] For example, primary responsibilities related to household earnings, child care, house work, or other duties might shift between Black fathers, mothers, adolescents, or others (i.e., grandparents, aunts/uncles, etc.) based on contextual factors such as the availability of work for one person or the other. This type of flexibility has enabled Black families to successfully manage changing environments and withstand challenging situations such as systemic racism.[170, 171]

Section 4: Implications for Next Steps in Research

This brief presents findings that provide a preliminary and broad-brush picture of the historical and contemporary context of Black families in the United States, including the following:

- An increase in the number of individuals identifying as Black, including those who are multiracial
- A rise in different types of family structures
- A rise in the number of Black immigrants
- Differentials between Black men and women in interracial marriage rates
- Changes in religious worship preferences for younger generations of Black people
- Varied religious preferences among Black immigrant populations
- Shifts in the residential locations of Black people
- Improved educational attainment, moderate incomes, and low levels of wealth for Black people in America

The findings also enhance our understanding of the ways in which certain cultural assets are used in Black families. Taken together, these insights highlight the need to strengthen our approach to research on Black families. As we progress in our efforts to identify and characterize the diversity, range of experiences, and cultural assets of Black families, we suggest the following considerations to ensure that our approach to this work (as well as efforts undertaken by other researchers, policymakers, and key stakeholders) is as useful as possible in supporting Black families. This goal includes informing policies that move toward eliminating racism within institutions, systems, and organizations with which Black families interact. We focus this discussion on two key areas of research: data collection and research strategies.

Improve data collection to better understand Black families' complexity

Data are critical to the research process. They can be used to inform the creation of policies and provide a way to monitor and measure the effectiveness of already existing policies, institutions, and organizations. Data also facilitate an understanding of cultural assets across different family types. For example, examinations of Black extended family interactions[172] have found that, compared to Black women, Black men interact with their families less frequently, seek less help from family or others to deal with personal challenges, and tend to primarily seek help from other men. In addition, Black Caribbean men do not adhere to the same pattern of help-seeking[173] as American-born Black men. These ethnic distinctions are worthy of further exploration and can be useful for understanding the unique and shared experiences of Black families, developing theory related to Black families, and putting into place effective policies and strategies to support them. Below, we outline select data collection and use issues, noting our assessments are far from exhaustive and are heavily informed by our own experiences.

Data sets do not adequately capture race and ethnicity. As this brief highlights, Black families are diverse along many dimensions, and our understanding of their differences is hindered by a lack of data. For example, we know that Black immigrants from Africa and the Caribbean (including Latin America) are diversifying the Black American population. Increases in mixed-race marriages and people with mixed ancestry are also resulting in shifting boundaries between racial and ethnic groups. Documentation of these research issues, however, has only recently begun. The option to identify as multiracial[174] on the U.S. Census became available just 20 years ago, in 2000. Given that the Census is one of the largest, most comprehensive, and frequently used data sets to study populations in the United States, there is a void in

our understanding of historical issues related to Black families of different races and ethnicities prior to this timeframe. Large-scale data sets that help researchers examine correlations and causality about Black families from varying backgrounds will be critically important to understanding and interpreting the nuanced experiences of Black families in America. Data from instruments such as the National Survey of American Life (NSAL)[175] can be helpful for disentangling racial and ethnic group composition, and better understanding differences between Black populations; however, this survey's current focus is solely on Black American and Caribbean individuals and mental health.

There is limited inclusion of strengths-based variables in large-scale data sets, including those relevant to specific cultural assets. Studying relationships between and among the cultural assets of Black families at a large scale requires high-quality, strengths-based variables. For example, an exploration of indicators for Black families and children using the ZERO TO THREE State of Babies Indicators[176] found that, while the State of Babies Indicators are grounded in research about circumstances and activities that support the development of infants and toddlers, the studies that informed the indicators typically focused on White, middle-class people. Such issues limit the applicability of the indicators[177] to other races and ethnicities, including Black families. As researchers move toward more carefully attending to race and ethnicity in family-oriented work, we recommend large-scale survey and data harvesting efforts that are culturally specific and useful. For example, collecting data that highlight cultural assets, strengths, and resources will facilitate a shift away from deficit orientations. Building on the pioneering and groundbreaking work of the Program for Research on Black Americans (PRBA)[178] will be important to this consideration.

It is challenging to compare across existing data sets. Joining data sets helps identify patterns and insights that may not be revealed when solely relying on one data set or examining them in isolation. While the U.S. Census has allowed respondents to make multiple race choices[179] over the last 20 years, documenting agencies—like vital records offices and institutions and organizations with which families engage, like education and medical facilities—often limit choices related to racial identification. For example, state-level vital records offices[180] (the entities that issue birth certificates) and some schools[181] allow just one racial categorization choice. As researchers and policymakers work to expand the ways in which Black families are counted and viewed, data collection practices will need to change. Better understanding of the full experiences of Black families—including the ways in which institutions, organizations, and policies may impact certain subgroups or facilitate or hinder the use of particular cultural assets—is contingent upon high-quality useful data. Lessons about data linking from the University of Pennsylvania[182] and the United Kingdom[183] may be helpful for informing this work.

Pursue research strategies that build a contemporary, forward-thinking knowledge base on Black families

In light of these data challenges, it is important for researchers to not just work toward resolving data issues, but also to employ strategies that move the field toward producing better knowledge concerning Black families while data issues are being addressed. Here, we emphasize research strategies related to processes and areas of focus. These recommendations should occur at the onset of research studies to facilitate the development of a contemporary knowledge base about Black families. These considerations not only highlight the variation in Black families, but also help researchers emphasize and re-envision cultural assets in ways that are relevant to families' current circumstances. Implicit in these considerations is an examination of institutions, systems, and organizations, including the ways in which racism may be embedded within these structures and limit opportunity for all (or particular segments of) Black families in America.

With these considerations in mind, we suggest that researchers take the following actions:

Use frameworks that combat anti-Black racism in policy. Racism is complex[184] and exists on many different levels in society, including in institutions and within individuals. When appropriate, we suggest the use of a

racial equity lens in examining policies that impact Black families, coupled with frameworks specifically designed to combat anti-Black racism. For example, The Protect, Promote, and Preserve (3Ps) Framework[185] facilitates examination of policies and programs that protect Black families from harm and trauma; promote their health, wealth, and educational access; and preserve their cultural heritage and language. Although the 3Ps framework is limited to Black families with young children, it represents a first step in a growing body of research by scholars focused on Black families and children that seeks to dismantle systemic racism in institutions, systems,[186] and policies.[187] The 3Ps Framework in particular can be lined up against Black family, infant, and toddler outcomes to evaluate their alignment with positive aspects of families —including Black family cultural assets[188]—which is a critical task for understanding the ways in which policies may impact Black people.

Investigate and report on intra and inter-family contextual issues. Our work emphasizes the examination of Black families across multiple dimensions, including (but not limited to) family structure, ethnicity, place of residence, education, income, and wealth. While we aim not to compare Black families to other races or ethnicities in most circumstances, we suggest the examination of within-group comparisons to strengthen Black families and the institutions with which they interact. For example, a child growing up with two Black parents may have very different access to resources and privilege than a child growing up with one Black parent and one White parent, even though both children may identify and be identified by society as Black. Socialization of children might also differ in this situation. For instance, Black men are more likely than Black women to marry interracially. This difference, coupled with an inclination of White parents of mixed-race children to instill dominant Western cultural values in their children and ignore issues related to racial socialization,[189, 190] may result in Black children being raised by Black men and White women having distinctly different experiences than children raised with two Black parents. Extended family relationships, historically a cultural asset in Black families and important for racial socialization, may be impacted by spouse selection. Understanding the ways in which family structure, composition, and other variables affect identities is important for attending to racism at institutional, organizational, and interpersonal levels.

Develop family typologies. Collecting good data is a requisite first step in formulating policies to specifically address the needs of a variety of Black family types. Policymakers also need to be able to aggregate the characteristics and attributes of families into distinct groups with similar characteristics to understand how institutional and organizational policies may differentially impact families of varying types. By necessity, this also means our (and any other) applied research agenda must also give attention to generating new theory—and questioning already existing theory—on families more broadly, and on Black families specifically. For example, with appropriate data we can begin to further the field's understanding of how cultural assets present in Black families change based on family typology (e.g., Is role flexibility less likely to pair with families who are particularly religious or spiritual?). Development of Black family typologies takes granular contextual data that can be categorized and used to facilitate broader understanding of specific groups of families. These insights can then be translated into strategies that address inequalities in institutions and organizations, and policy that can better support Black families.

Conclusion

This brief lays the foundation for examining the cultural assets of Black families to inform the development and strengthening of institutions, organizations, and policies that affect Black families' day-to-day lives and well-being. While wide-ranging in scope, we acknowledge that a complete analysis of the complexity of Black family issues is beyond the bounds of this brief. Our long-term aim, however, is to expand upon the issues identified in this brief and the broader research agenda to add to the burgeoning contemporary knowledge base on Black families. Future research undertaken by Child Trends will continue to advance the field's understanding of present-day Black families' cultural assets by examining how they are transmitted, their relative significance for Black family stability and well-being, and factors that impact their presence

among families that differ in multiple ways—including, but not limited to, composition, education, geography, immigration status, income, and wealth. To maximize its impact, this exploration will be overlaid with an examination of the ways in which institutions, organizations, and policies can undermine or buffer the progress of Black families with children.

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