

A 100-Year Review of Research on Black Families

Volume II: 1970 to 2019

Mavis Sanders, Chrishana M. Lloyd, Sara Shaw, Abigail Wulah,
Hannah Wodrich, Zabryna Balén, and Kristen Harper



Introduction

The literature on Black families is broad: It spans multiple fields and disciplines (e.g., family studies, sociology, economics, psychology, demography, social work, education) and draws on a variety of theoretical and conceptual frameworks. The methods used in research on Black families also vary, ranging from quantitative analyses of nationally representative samples of parents/caregivers to ethnographic case studies of purposively selected participants. Areas of focus within the literature on Black families are similarly wide-ranging and include examinations of Black families' structures and functions; cultural practices and assets; individual and collective experiences; and challenges, expectations, and goals.

To provide context and focus to this expansive body of research, we conducted a review of the literature on Black families published over the past 100 years (1920-2019).^a Our goal was to glean lessons from the past regarding how Black families have been depicted and theorized in research, topics of significant focus and gaps in the existing literature, and methodological strengths and limitations that can inform research, policy, and practice in the present and future. Volume I presents results from 1920-1969; this volume presents the results of our analysis for works published from 1970 to 2019.

About the Lead Author

Mavis Sanders (lead author of Volume II) is senior research scholar of Black children and families at Child Trends, where she leads an applied research agenda to advance racial equity and social justice. Prior to joining Child Trends, Dr. Sanders was a professor of education specializing in home, school, and community collaboration; school leadership and reform; Black student achievement; and qualitative and mixed-methods research. She is also a former secondary social studies teacher with a passion for interdisciplinary approaches to understanding complex societal problems and trends. A Black woman who was born in the 1960s in Birmingham, Alabama, Dr. Sanders has a deep connection to the rich civil rights legacy of her hometown. Her current role at Child Trends provides a unique opportunity to advance this legacy and contribute to the ongoing struggle for a more just American society through applied research.

Black Families in the United States

We define “Black families” 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).

When referencing Black people, we are referring to individuals who may identify as African American—those who were primarily born in the United States and are descended from enslaved Africans who survived the trans-Atlantic slave trade—as well as the smaller populations of people living in the United States 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.

^a To identify publications for the review, we began with an initial search of the literature on Black families using Google Scholar, a web search engine that indexes academic literature across multiple disciplines. We used the search terms “Negro family,” “Black family,” and “African American family” to identify publications for the decades from 1920 to 2019. To supplement the initial list of publications and fill potential gaps, we applied the same search terms using JSTOR, a digital library of academic sources. Based on publication abstracts and summaries, we omitted publications that did not have Black families as their primary focus. Given resource limitations, we also omitted dissertations and books, although our analyses do include book reviews, when available. This volume shares insights from a total of 505 research articles, reports, and essays on Black families published from 1970 to 2019 (see Appendix A).

Time Period

Research on Black families proliferated in the 1970s.^{1,2} This growth reflected the nation’s heightened awareness of conditions for Black people resulting from the modern Civil Rights Movement.^b It was also fueled by an increased interest among social scientists—and especially among a new generation of Black scholars who entered academia in the 1970s—in conceptualizing Black families beyond deficit depictions like those in the 1965 Moynihan Report, *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action*.³ Given the volume of research on Black families published in the post-civil rights era, we provide a high-level review that is intended to be comprehensive and instructive rather than exhaustive. Accordingly, we highlight key themes, identify areas of in-depth and limited knowledge, and suggest questions and methods for future research to inform policy and practice.

Organization and Content

This volume includes five chapters, organized by decade. Each decade’s chapter begins with a short sentence that captures broad developments in politics, societal context, and research on Black children and families for that decade.

Each chapter includes three sections:

- Context
- Overview of Select Research Topics, Methods, and Approaches
- Research, Policy, and Practice Connections

Context: This section briefly describes the national political, social, and economic trends of each decade, with a particular focus on the events and policies affecting families broadly and, when possible, Black families specifically. The section also includes demographic data on Black families. Drawing on the U.S. Census data available for the first year of each decade, we describe population growth and diversity, marriage rates, fertility rates, and economic outlooks for Black families.^c

Overview of Select Research Topics, Methods, and Approaches: This section summarizes key elements of studies published on Black families during the decade. It includes a discussion of:

- *Research content highlights* to promote understanding of common and divergent trends in the literature on Black families
- *Research methods and approaches* used in studies of Black families, including the number of empirical and nonempirical studies, the theoretical and conceptual frameworks that were dominant during the decade, and the most common research designs and methods

^b We capitalize “Civil Rights Movement” in recognition that the modern movement, spanning roughly 1954 to 1968, constitutes a distinct historical period in which a campaign of nonviolent activism increased national visibility of, and attention to, institutionalized racism against Black Americans.

^c Data on the demographic characteristics of Black people and families were pulled primarily from the U.S. Census and Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) National Vital Statistics System. All data come from publicly available tables or documents. While the U.S. Census Bureau publishes data tables at data.census.gov, data are not available in these searchable tables prior to 2000. For data prior to the year 2000, information was pulled from summary reports or research briefs as part of the Census Bureau Library. As noted in each chapter, the definitions of measures shift slightly over time for some metrics. For example, in 1970, marriage rates are calculated for all individuals over age 14, but calculated in other decades for all individuals over age 15. The availability and definition of measures for the focal metrics also differ across decades. Accordingly, readers should use caution when interpreting changes in these metrics across time. For more information about the demographic data used in this volume, see Appendix B.

Research, Policy, and Practice Connections: In this final section, we reflect on individuals, organizations, and events that influenced social, political, and economic conditions for Black families in each decade. Through these reflections, we aim to better understand how research has informed public discourse and advocacy, professional practice, and national and local policies in ways that have affected Black families' well-being.



Decade: 1970-1979

Scholarship, policies, and ideological shifts in the 1970s indelibly shaped research and discourse on Black families for decades to come.

Context

In the 1970s, the United States was led by three presidents—Richard Nixon (1969-1974), Gerald Ford (1974-1977), and Jimmy Carter (1977-1981)—who collectively reflected the political and social turbulence and shifts of the decade.

Richard Nixon narrowly won the 1968 election, entering the White House with a promise to end the Vietnam War that had escalated in the previous decade,⁴ and with an ambivalent relationship with civil rights leaders of the period.⁵ While Nixon's rhetoric on school desegregation was widely viewed as pandering to Southern conservatives who resented the civil rights gains of the 1960s, policies and court decisions during his first term as president continued some economic and social advances for Black children and adults, women, and people experiencing economic disadvantage.⁶ For example, from 1969 to 1973, affirmative action policies increased economic opportunities for women and Black people,⁷ school desegregation expanded in the South even as it stalled in the North,⁸ and the Voting Rights Act of 1965 was extended for an additional five years.⁹ Moreover, despite his appointment of conservative



justices to the Supreme Court,¹⁰ in 1973, the landmark *Roe v. Wade* decision established that “A person may choose to have an abortion until a fetus becomes viable, based on the right to privacy contained in the Due Process Clause of the Fourteenth Amendment.”¹¹ Nixon also expanded the Food Stamp Program to address the nation’s growing poverty rate, but his proposed guaranteed income family assistance program was defeated in 1972.¹² The administration’s secret negotiations¹³ and an extensive bombing campaign in North Vietnam preceded the signing of the Paris Peace Accords in 1973 and the withdrawal of combat troops from Vietnam,¹⁴ a disproportionate percentage of whom were Black men and women.¹⁵ Nixon won his second presidential election in 1972 with a significant lead over his opponent.¹⁶ However, he resigned amid the Watergate scandal in August 1974.¹⁷

Gerald Ford succeeded Nixon and quickly granted him “a full, free and absolute pardon ... for all offenses against the United States,”¹⁸ a controversial decision that forestalled any chance of an indictment against the previous president.¹⁹ The pardon was followed by another controversial decision: In 1974, President Ford created a conditional amnesty program for individuals who refused to join the Armed Forces or fulfill their military duties during the Vietnam war in an effort to move the nation beyond the war’s divisive impact.^{d,20} Yet an economy characterized by high inflation, low wage growth, and high unemployment (i.e., stagflation)—as well as high oil prices—continued to divide the U.S. population. Ford’s signature policy response, Whip Inflation Now (WIN), encouraged Americans to restrict their spending and was largely viewed as ineffectual.²¹

James (Jimmy) Carter (1977-1981) defeated Ford in the 1976 election. Carter was an anti-Washington, anti-corruption candidate who pledged to address economic and social issues and build “a government that [was] as good ... as ... the American people.”^{22,23,24} On the campaign trail, Carter also expressed a commitment to address issues related to families. Late in his presidency—1979—he appointed a National Advisory Committee to plan and implement the 1980 Conference on Families, a meeting of diverse people and organizations across the country that could inform public policies relevant to families.^{25,26} Despite such efforts, Carter’s plans for meeting the needs of struggling American families were not fully realized. He twice attempted to enact major reforms of the U.S. welfare system (in 1977 and 1979), but both initiatives failed.²⁷ A rift between the president and Senator Edward Kennedy about the best approach to expanding health care thwarted any progress in this area, and inflation and unemployment remained high at the close of the decade.^{28,29}

Although civil rights legislation in the 1960s and 70s opened doors for a rising Black middle class in politics, education, and business, progress stalled in the late 1970s as affirmative action policies were rolled back amid cries of reverse discrimination.^{30,31} Black Vietnam veterans faced a particularly difficult and complex transition to civilian life, experiencing racism on and off the battlefield and disproportionate rates of unemployment once back in the United States.^{32,33,34} And despite the rise of Black feminism embodied in the 1977 Combahee River Collective Statement,³⁵ at the decade’s end, Black families—especially those headed by single Black women—remained disproportionately impoverished and underserved.³⁶

Data on Black families

Race, ethnicity, and the 1970 decennial Census

The 1970 decennial Census was the first to be fully operated through the mail (with a few data collectors on hand for nonrespondents). Census surveys were also available in Spanish in 1970. Given that previous iterations of the Census had been criticized for undercounting certain segments of the population, the Census Bureau decreased the number of questions on the Census in hopes of obtaining a higher response

^d In 1977, President James Carter issued a full pardon to individuals who refused to join the Armed Forces during the Vietnam War. For more information, see: Roessner, L. A., & Bier, L. M. (2017.) Pardon me, Mr. Carter, *Journalism History*, 43(2), 86-96, DOI: [10.1080/00947679.2017.12059169](https://doi.org/10.1080/00947679.2017.12059169)

rate.³⁷ Additionally, for the first time, the 1970 Census included a question on Spanish origin, although this was only asked of 5.0 percent of respondents. Questions concerning race were designed for self-identification by the person completing the Census questionnaire, much like in 1960. The available Census responses on race were similar, as well: (1) White, (2) Negro or Black, (3) Indian (American), (4) Japanese, (5) Chinese, (6) Filipino, (7) Hawaiian, (8) Korean, (9) Other. If there was a data collector present, and this information was left blank, they were asked to fill in the blank “by observation.” In the data collector’s manual, there were also directions on how to classify write-in options. For example, if someone wrote in “Chicano,” “LaRaza,” “Mexican American,” “Moslem,” or “Brown,” these responses were changed to White, and if someone wrote “Brown (Negro),” this response was changed to Negro or Black.³⁸

Black family demographics

In 1970, there were 203,211,926 people living in the United States, 22,580,289 (11.1%) of whom identified as (or were identified as) Negro.³⁹ As with previous decades, more than half of Black people in the United States were women (52.4%).⁴⁰ A very small portion of Black people (1.1%) were “foreign born.”⁴¹

Data from the 1970s also included information about marital status for individuals who identified as Black, excluding those of “other races” for the first time. Among Black Americans alone in 1970, marriage rates were lower than those reported in previous decades—around 53.0 percent of women and 56.9 percent of men. Among unmarried men and women, most were single (35.5% of men and 28.7% of women).⁴² Among Black men, 4.3 percent were widowed and 3.3 percent were divorced. Among Black women, 13.3 percent were widowed and 5.1 percent were divorced. In 1970, less than 1.0 percent (0.1%)^e of married couples were in a Black-White interracial marriage.⁴³

Additionally, after two decades of increasing fertility rates, the 1970s marked the end of the Baby Boom. In 1970, the fertility rate for Black women in the United States was down to 115.4 births for every 1,000 women ages 15-44.⁴⁴ The number of Black children living with two parents was also substantially lower in the 1970s, with 57.5 percent living with two parents in 1970.⁴⁵ Racial and gender gaps in life expectancy continued through the decade. For example, in 1970, life expectancy for “nonwhite”^f women was 69.4 years and life expectancy for “nonwhite” men was 61.3 years, while life expectancy for the total population of women was 74.8 years, with 67.1 years expected for the total population of men.⁴⁶

Geography of Black families

By 1970, 53.0 percent of Black people in the United States were living in the South, a drastic shift from the approximately 90.0 percent who lived in the South in 1900.⁴⁷ The vast majority of Black people (81.0%) were living in urban areas irrespective of the geographic region where they resided.⁴⁸

A note on Census terminology

Data in this section draw primarily on the decennial U.S. Census, with occasional references to other sources. For all sources, we present the data using the language (including capitalization standards) as reported either on official Census records or from the original data source. For example, in this decade, we refer to Black people as “Negro” or “Black” and capitalize the N and B in alignment with the original Census data.

For each decade, we present information on families’ demographics, geography, and economic outlook. When possible, we present similar data across the decades.

^e The percentage of Black-White married couples in 1970 was calculated from data reported in Bureau of Census (1987). Marital Status. Subject Reports. U.S. Department of Commerce: Chapter 9, Table 12.

^f For the 1970s, the Center for Disease Control (CDC) Life Tables, which give the average life expectancies by age in years, were divided into “White” and “all other.”

Black families' economic outlook

The number of Black homeowners in the United States continued to rise during the decade, with 41.6 percent of Black Americans owning homes in 1970.⁴⁹ The annual median income for those who identified as Negro or “other races” in 1970 was \$5,538, compared to \$8,734 for the total population.⁵⁰ Less than half (43.9%) of Black women were employed in 1970, with few (7.7%) Black women reporting unemployment.⁵¹ Among Black men, about two thirds (62.8%) were employed in 1970, with very few (6.3%) Black men reporting unemployment.⁵² In 1970, over one third (34.9%) of Black families were living below the federal poverty level.⁵³

Overview of Select Research Topics, Methods, and Approaches Related to the Study of Black Families in the 1970s

Research on Black families published in the 1970s was dominated by responses to Daniel Patrick Moynihan’s 1965 report, *The Negro Family, The Case for National Action*.⁵⁴ Indeed, of the studies reviewed for this chapter, over 40.0 percent referenced Moynihan. Many of these studies critiqued the theoretical approach and methodological rigor of Moynihan’s work and several others challenged his depictions of Black families as deficient, providing more comprehensive and in-depth analyses of Black families’ histories, strengths, needs, challenges, and unique dynamics. Collectively, these studies explored six overlapping areas: the evolution of Black family research, Black family structures and functions, Black marital and financial stability, Black wives and male-female gender roles, parent-child dynamics and socialization, and policies and practices to promote Black family well-being.

Research content highlights

- **The evolution of Black family research.** The dramatic increase in research on Black families in the 1970s included several reviews of the field. These studies included in-depth descriptions of the development of the Black American family^{55,56} and the evolution of Black family research, including areas of focus and biases.^{57,58,59,60} The studies often recommended ways to expand and deepen the knowledge base on Black families.⁶¹ Recommendations included broadening the theoretical and methodological approaches used in research;^{62,63,64,65} building an applied, actionable agenda for the research;⁶⁶ and producing updated college textbooks to ensure widespread and sustained impact in the field.^{67,68}
- **Black family structures and functions.** Research during the decade also included historical and contemporary depictions of the structure of Black families—including two-parent, single-parent, and extended family households^{69,70,71,72,73,74,75,76,77,78,79,80,81,82,83}—as well as family composition preferences among Black and White male and female respondents.⁸⁴ Studies also described the universal and unique functions of Black families for the survival and social advancement of Black people.^{85,86,87,88,89,90,91} Additionally, several studies critiqued how Black family structures and functions were depicted in research prior to the 1970s and offered alternative interpretations of Black family and kinship systems.^{92,93}

- **Black marital and financial stability.** Given rising divorce rates and declining marriage rates, several studies published in the 1970s focused on Black family stability. Studies compared marriage stability and dissolution between Black and White couples,⁹⁴ as well as factors that influenced the likelihood of divorce for Black husbands and wives.⁹⁵ Among the latter, some studies examined the relationship between the husband's characteristics and marriage disruption, finding significant and direct effects for husband's age, income, and religiosity.⁹⁶ Additionally, studies during the decade—which followed the 1967 *Loving v. Virginia* Supreme Court decision legalizing interracial marriages—examined the rise of interracial marriages among Black people and called for more research on the implications of this rise for Black families.^{97,98}



- **Black wives and male/female gender roles.** Several studies on Black families focused on Black women and their roles and responsibilities in the family and society.^{99,100,101,102} Some studies examined the experiences of Black and White working wives across socioeconomic status.^{103,104,105,106} Others focused on Black adults' and adolescents' perceptions of marriage, sex roles, and decision making in Black families, debunking the myth of a Black matriarchy advanced by studies such as Moynihan's 1965 report.^{107,108,109} Relatedly, studies also highlighted the "equalitarian" relationship between Black husbands and wives as a unique cultural asset of Black families.^{110,111}
- **Parent-child dynamics and socialization.** Additionally, studies examined parent-child relationships, socialization, and outcomes for Black children.^{112,113,114,115,116,117,118} Some studies explored Black fathers' engagement with their children, noting the value of parenting programs for fathers across racial groups.^{119,120} Studies also examined Black children's and adolescents' relationships with their fathers—both those absent and present in the home—across sex and socioeconomic status.^{121,122} Still other studies described the complexities inhered in the interracial (historically referred to as transracial) adoption of Black children—a controversial practice that saw a significant rise in the 1960s and 1970s.^{123,124,125} Research also examined behavioral^{126,127,128,129} and educational^{130,131,132,133} outcomes for Black children, especially in single-parent households.
- **Policies and practices to promote Black family well-being.** Publications during the decade also focused on policies and practices that affected Black families' opportunities to thrive,^{134,135} especially for Black families facing economic disadvantages.¹³⁶ Several studies highlighted the inadequacy of policies that focused on the perceived "weaknesses" of Black families rather than on the systems that restricted their opportunities for social and economic equality.^{137,138,139,140,141} Studies also focused on service provision,¹⁴² and especially on the need for health workers¹⁴³ and therapists^{144,145,146,147} to engage in culturally responsive practices that recognize and respect Black families' strengths, challenges, and experiences.

Research methods and approaches

This brief review is based on 89 articles on Black families published from 1970 to 1979. Most of these articles (57.0%) were nonempirical studies, including literature reviews and historical and conceptual analyses. The remaining 38 articles were empirical studies, a sizable majority of which (84.0%) were quantitative survey studies that relied on simple descriptive and correlational research designs. A small number of qualitative studies were also conducted. Although most were cross-sectional interview studies, a few included ethnographic methods and designs (such as the research conducted by urban anthropologist, Carol Stack).¹⁴⁸

During the 1970s, there was robust debate about the best theoretical frameworks with which to study Black families in American society. Researchers critiqued functionalist, microanalytic approaches to studying Black families and called for more strengths-based research that used a historical-cultural¹⁴⁹ or systems approach¹⁵⁰ to contextualize Black families' experiences. Researchers also challenged Black family

studies that used White middle-class families as normative, arguing instead for frameworks that studied Black families as important social units, not as social problems, and that included accurate and authentic depictions of these families' diversity and complexity.^{151,152} These debates were largely, although not exclusively, fueled by a new generation of Black scholars who received their doctoral degrees in the social sciences in the 1960s and 1970s.¹⁵³ These scholars became synonymous with Black family studies during the decade and included Walter Allen, Andrew Billingsley, Julia and Nathan Hare, Robert Hill, Harriet and John Lewis McAdoo, Robert Staples, and others. Together, they added new, important, and enduring voices and theories to the study of Black families that helped to counter continued misrepresentations of Black families in the research literature.¹⁵⁴

Research, Policy, and Practice Connections

The 1970s was a decade that witnessed a new era of research on Black families. As the first decade after the modern Civil Rights Movement, the 1970s were initially characterized by a continuation of the social activism and pursuit of equality that fueled the movement.¹⁵⁵ Studies during the decade challenged long-held stereotypes about Black family “pathology” and emphasized Black families as adaptive social units central to the survival and advancement of Black people.¹⁵⁶ Research also explored socioeconomic differences among Black families and the role of Black women—as mothers, wives, and workers—and how they navigated these roles in the face of racial, gender, and class inequities.¹⁵⁷ Additionally, scholars in the 1970s emphasized the need for stronger links between research, policy, and practice in the areas of education, employment, health care, and housing to promote the well-being of Black families and children and other underserved groups in the United States.¹⁵⁸

Advancing evidence-based, systems-level reforms for vulnerable families was integral to the efforts of organizations like the National Black Child Development Institute, begun in 1970 by the Black Women's Community Development Foundation¹⁵⁹ and the Children's Defense Fund, founded in 1973 by Marian Wright Edelman, counsel to Dr. Martin Luther King's Poor People's Campaign.¹⁶⁰ However, national attention to such reforms declined as the decade progressed.¹⁶¹ Stagflation, high oil prices, declining trust in the government, and White disgruntlement about civil rights gains persisted. Black social and economic progress slowed and Black poverty and unemployment rates—especially among Black youth in deindustrialized central cities—reached record highs in the final years of the 1970s.¹⁶² Nevertheless, the scholarship, policies, and ideological shifts that occurred during this watershed decade indelibly shaped research and discourse on Black families for decades to come.



Decade: 1980-1989

Research on Black families in the 1980s both challenged and promoted the decade's intensified focus on traditional values, personal responsibility, and limited government.

Context

Ronald Reagan, the 40th president of the United States, led the country for most of the 1980s, serving from 1981 to 1989. Under his leadership, the country experienced a decade punctuated by tax cuts designed to stimulate the economy (also known as trickle-down theory),¹⁶³ expanded military spending, and reduced expenditures on social programs that had been part of President Lyndon B. Johnson's Great Society initiatives in the 1960s.¹⁶⁴ Programs facing reduced funding were numerous and included Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC), a financial assistance program whose beneficiaries were primarily single women with children; reduced and free lunches for school children whose families met certain income guidelines; food stamps to supplement grocery budgets; subsidies to make housing more affordable for families with low to moderate incomes; employment training programs for individuals to build job skills; and public and mental health services.¹⁶⁵

Also of note, the Moral Majority—founded in 1979 by Jerry Falwell Sr.—gained prominence in political circles and family policy debates. Its original platform sought to ensure that private White-only, evangelical schools (also referred to as “segregation academies”¹⁶⁶) were able to receive nonprofit tax-exempt status.¹⁶⁷ The platform also included a focus on grassroots voter registration and eventually expanded to a more ideological focus to bolster its political base and power.¹⁶⁸ Platform issues included conservative, Christian ideologies such as traditional family values, opposition to abortion and LGBTQ+ rights, the promotion of prayer in schools, and other social/moral causes.¹⁶⁹ Alongside this movement were societal views that tied the perceived deterioration of traditional family values to Black people. The derogatory term “welfare queen” gained traction in media and political discourse and was used to link Black mothers in poverty to laziness, theft of taxpayer monies, and deviance; the equally demeaning corollary to the welfare queen was the absent Black male, or “dead beat dad.”¹⁷⁰

The national spotlight on drug policy also intensified in the 1980s. Of note, the Anti-Drug Abuse Act of 1988:

- Imposed mandatory federal sentences for violating drug laws
- Tied the possession and sale of crack cocaine—an inexpensive, extremely addictive drug that quickly permeated many inner-city Black neighborhoods—to harsher sentencing than imposed for powder cocaine, which was used more often in White communities¹⁷¹
- Called for lease restrictions and evictions of tenants if they, their household members, or their guests engaged in any criminal activity (without clear enforcement guidelines)^{172,173}

The result of these shifts was mass incarceration of primarily Black men in low-income communities^{174, 175} and the creation of an additional barrier to stable housing for many innocent adults and children.¹⁷⁶ As such, Black families, particularly poor Black families, were further stigmatized by the same familiar tropes (e.g., violent, indolent, immoral) that have plagued Black people for centuries.¹⁷⁷

Other notable occurrences in the 1980s included the beginning of the Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV), which interferes with the body’s ability to fight infections; and of Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome (AIDS), a now treatable but non-curable and chronic by-product of HIV that can result in death.¹⁷⁸ The HIV and AIDS epidemic primarily affected the White gay male community when it began, but quickly took a disproportionate toll on Black people—and especially on gay and bisexual men and heterosexual women.^{179, 180} The 1980s also included the mainstreaming of in vitro fertilization (IVF), a process in which an egg is medically combined with sperm outside of the body and then reinserted to produce a baby.¹⁸¹ IVF was used by both heterosexual and homosexual individuals and couples to start or expand their families. Both occurrences influenced national debates about definitions of family, marriage, parenthood, and child custody during the decade.^{182,183}

Data on Black families

Race, ethnicity, and the 1980 decennial Census

In 1980, the Census Bureau expanded its question on Hispanic ethnicity to ask all Census respondents whether they were of Spanish or Hispanic descent. The Census further expanded response options for race and ethnicity to include: (1) White, (2) Black or Negro, (3) Japanese, (4) Chinese, (5) Filipino, (6) Korean, (7) Vietnamese, (8) Indian (American),[§] (9) Asian Indian, (10) Hawaiian, (11) Guamanian, (12) Samoan, (13) Eskimo, (14) Aleut, and (15) “other.” As in previous decades, respondents were asked to self-identify their race or ethnicity. There were no further instructions available to data collectors on how to identify individuals’ race or ethnicity in 1980.¹⁸⁴

[§] The Census further asked respondents to include the name of the specific tribe or group to which they belonged.

Black family demographics

In 1980, a total of 226,542,199 people lived in the United States, of which approximately 27,954,000 (12.3%) identified as Black.¹⁸⁵ Black Americans included 15 million women, who outnumbered men by 1.4 million (90 men per 100 women).¹⁸⁶ A small but growing proportion (3.1%) of the Black population in the United States identified as “foreign born” in 1980.¹⁸⁷

In 1980, fewer than half of Black women ages 15 and older were married (44.9%) and just over one third were single (33.4%). The remainder were either widowed (13.0%) or divorced (8.7%). Among Black men ages 15 and older, half were married (49.5%) and over one third were single (40.2%). Very few were widowed (3.9%) or divorced (6.4%).¹⁸⁸ In 1985, the number of interracial marriages in the United States grew (up to 1.5% from less than 1.0% in 1970); however, interracial marriages still represented very few total marriages.¹⁸⁹ In 1980, racial and gender gaps in life expectancy remained consistent with the previous decade. Life expectancy was 72.3 years for Black women and 63.7 years for Black men, while life expectancy for the total population was 77.5 years for women and 70.0 years for men.¹⁹⁰

In 1980, the fertility rate among Black women remained relatively low (84.7 births per 1,000 women ages 15-44).¹⁹¹ However, the rates of children living in single-parent households increased. In 1980, for example, nearly half (45.8%) of all Black children lived in single-parent families. Among single-parent households, almost all children (95.7%) were in mother-only households.¹⁹²

Geography of Black families

In 1980, the vast majority of Black people in the United States still lived in urban areas (85.3%). Consistent with the previous decade, over half of Black people lived in the South (52.7%). Close to twenty percent (19.8%) lived in the North Central^h region, 18.1 percent lived in the Northeast, and 9.4 percent lived in the West.¹⁹³

Black families' economic outlook

In 1980, the median income for Black households was \$10,764, compared to the national median income of \$17,710.¹⁹⁴ Slightly more than half of Black men (55.8%) and less than half of Black women (47.0%) over age 16 were employed.¹⁹⁵ The poverty rate for Black families with children under age 18 was more than double the national rate, at 42.1 percent in 1980.¹⁹⁶ Among Black children living in single-mother households in 1980, nearly two thirds (64.8%) lived below the federal poverty threshold.¹⁹⁷ Unemployment was also high, with over one in 10 (11.8%) Black Americans reporting unemployment in 1980, compared to 7.1 percent for the total population.¹⁹⁸ More than two in five (44.1%) Black Americans owned their homes in 1980.¹⁹⁹

A note on Census terminology

Data in this section draw primarily on the decennial U.S. Census with occasional references to other sources. For all sources, we present the data using the language (including capitalization standards) as reported either on official Census records or from the original data source. For example, in this decade, we refer to Black people as “Black,” and capitalize the B in alignment with the original Census reports.

For each decade, we present information on families' demographics, geography, and economic outlook. Unless otherwise noted, all demographic information is from 1980.

^h The United States Census changed the region designation from “North Central” to “Midwest” in June 1984. Bureau of the Census. (n.d.) *Census Bureau Regions and Divisions with State FIPS Codes*. https://www2.census.gov/geo/pdfs/maps-data/maps/reference/us_regdiv.pdf

Overview of Select Research Topics, Methods, and Approaches Related to the Study of Black Families in the 1980s

Research on Black families during the 1980s clustered around six themes: race, class, and the state of the Black family; Black single-parent households; Black male-female relationships and marriage; Black families' extended kin and social networks; Black families as socializing institutions; and culturally responsive mental health and social services and supports for Black families.

Research content highlights

- **Race, class, and the state of the Black family.** The Moynihan report remained a point of reference for many studies on Black families in the 1980s.²⁰⁰ While such studies continued a trend that peaked in the 1970s, they also responded to arguments posed by William Julius Wilson²⁰¹ and others about the declining significance of race and the growing class divide among Black Americans in the post-civil rights era. These studies described characteristics of the Black family, including its historical roots and its contemporary value for promoting Black people's resilience and progress,^{202,203,204,205,206} Black demographic trends across time—especially in the area of fertility,^{207,208,209} the presence and role of Black fathers in the family,^{210,211,212,213,214} and the impact of capitalism, racism, and the retrenchment of social and economic policies on the well-being of Black families.^{215,216,217,218,219,220,221,222,223}
- **Black single-parent households.** Relatedly, a significant portion of the research in the 1980s focused on documenting and explaining the rise and impact of households in the Black community headed by single women.²²⁴ Demographic studies showed that, despite declining fertility rates and teen pregnancies overall, the 1980s saw higher birth rates among teen mothers who were poor and had never been married, continuing a trend from the 1970s.^{225,226} Other studies described the sexual activities, family structure, and social conditions of Black teen mothers and fathers^{227,228,229,230} and the impact of high Black male unemployment and low wages for Black women on the viability of Black two-parent households.^{231,232,233,234,235,236,237} Still other studies discussed characteristics of Black teen fathers²³⁸; the impact of fathers' presence and financial contributions on child outcomes^{239,240,241}; and single Black mothers' behaviors, stressors, and sources of support.^{242,243,244,245,246,247,248}
- **Black male/female relationships and marriage.** In the face of continued declining marriage rates among Black Americans in the 1980s,²⁴⁹ scholars called for greater attention to Black male/female relationships.²⁵⁰ During the decade, several studies focused on the declining male/female sex ratio and relationship and marriage options for young adults.^{251,252} Research also focused on perceptions of relationship and marriage satisfaction and role definitions among Black women and men^{253,254,255,256,257,258,259,260}; factors influencing the quality and sustainability of Black heterosexual relationships, including perceptions of differences in the social status of Black men and women^{261,262,263,264}; and attitudes about Black men's sexual fidelity.²⁶⁵



- **Black families' extended kin and social networks.** In the Black family assets literature published in the 1980s, several studies focused on extended social networks with family, friends, and church members. Research on extended networks included studies focused on the nature of these networks for Black adults and families.^{266,267,268,269} Studies also focused on the significance of such networks for married and unmarried Black women,²⁷⁰ as well as the effects of these networks on Black mothers' health and stress levels,^{271,272} parenting skills and relationships with their children,^{273,274} and likelihood of continuing their education.²⁷⁵ Additionally, several studies examined the effects of extended kin, social networks, and social support more broadly on a variety of family and child outcomes.^{276,277,278,279,280,281,282,283}



- **Black families as socializing institutions.** A significant body of research in the 1980s also examined the role of Black families (including those led by biological, adoptive, and foster parents) as socializing institutions.^{284, 285, 286} Among these studies, some focused on Black adoptive and foster parents' relationships with social service agencies^{287, 288} and their roles in the racial socialization of Black children.^{289, 290, 291} Similarly, several studies investigated gender and racial socialization of boys and girls in nuclear and extended Black families.^{292, 293, 294, 295} Research on Black families as socializing institutions also included studies on parents' beliefs about and practices of discipline for Black children.^{296, 297, 298}
- **Culturally responsive services for Black families.** Another major focus of Black family studies during the 1980s was mental health and social welfare services for Black families. As in the previous decade, scholars described the need for culturally competent therapists and service providers with the capacity to build on the assets of Black families and to address the impact of structural racism on their well-being.^{299, 300, 301, 302} Additionally, these studies highlighted the need for social service professionals to use Black teen mothers' extended kin and social networks to better support them and their children.^{303, 304}

Research methods and approaches

This brief review is based on 90 articles, book chapters, conference papers, and reports on Black families published from 1980 to 1989. These studies generally conceptualized Black families within a heteronormative framework, centering one or both biological parents as primary caregivers with the support of close relatives and friends. Thirty-six publications (40.0%) were non-empirical, mainly literature reviews and conceptual and historical analyses. Of the empirical research, the majority (83.0%) were quantitative survey studies, including some that analyzed Census and demographic data, and nearly one in five (17.0%) were qualitative studies relying primarily on interviews. As described by Taylor et al. (1990) in their review of Black family research in the 1980s, despite conceptual and methodological limitations that sometimes reinforced persistent stereotypes, “research increasingly reflected an appreciation for variability in the status of Black families overall as well as within particular social strata” (p. 1009)³⁰⁵.

Research, Policy, and Practice Connections

Although a significant quantity of research in the 1980s attempted to broaden the understanding of Black family diversity, threats to Black families' well-being, and policies and practices with the potential to improve child and family outcomes, other studies continued to focus on Black families as deviant—reflecting the decade's intensified focus on traditional values, personal responsibility, and limited government.³⁰⁶ Within this context, families were centered as critical for regaining America's economic and moral standing in the world.³⁰⁷ Traditional family formation was encouraged,³⁰⁸ abortions were discouraged,³⁰⁹ and parents' authority and rights in the “education, nurture, and supervision of their children” were emphasized.³¹⁰ The idealized image of the American family was one that was middle class and headed by a father and a “stay at home” mother, with healthy, well-adjusted children.³¹¹ These families were characterized as deserving of federal assistance through tax cuts.³¹² The foil for the idealized American family was the poor, single female-headed household, with poorly adapted children resulting from parental neglect. These families (often depicted as Black and concentrated in central cities) were portrayed as emblematic of the “welfare culture” and the “breakdown” of the American family—undeserving of federal assistance. Such racially stigmatizing views were undergirded by controversial books such as Murray's *Losing Ground* (1984), which argued that the social programs of the 1960s and 1970s had worsened conditions for people experiencing poverty and people of color and therefore should be abandoned.³¹³

The decade's policy landscape included a reduction in the number and scope of social programs, a shift of responsibility for administering these programs to states, “work” program requirements that generally did not create jobs nor appreciably upgrade skills, and “get tough on crime” bills that nearly doubled the prison population from 1980 to 1988.³¹⁴ These policies increased the number of poor children in the country and in the child welfare system.³¹⁵ Poor Black children and families in urban communities, described by William Julius Wilson as the “truly disadvantaged,” bore the brunt of the social and economic policies of the 1980s, a trend that would continue in the 1990s.^{316,317}



Decade: 1990-1999

Research on Black families in the 1990s attempted to uncover sources of racial resilience in the face of increasing economic inequality.

Context

George H. W. Bush ushered in the 1990s, serving as president from 1989 to 1993; William Jefferson Clinton closed out the decade, leading the Oval Office from 1993 to 2001. The beginning of the 1990s included the Gulf War,^{318,319} an eight-month recession (July 1990 to March 1991), little growth in employment,³²⁰ and five days of protests and riots in Los Angeles in 1992 after police officers were acquitted of excessive use of force in the beating of motorist Rodney King.³²¹ Key scholars provided analyses of the nation's continued racial violence and divisions, including Derrick Bell, a professor of law and an originator of critical race theory,³²² who wrote about the permanence of racism in American society in his groundbreaking 1994 book, *Faces at the Bottom of the Well*.³²³ To draw national attention to racial oppression, especially the mass incarceration and demonization of Black men, the controversial leader of the Nation of Islam, Minister Louis Farrakhan,³²⁴ and Benjamin Chavis, then director of the National African American Leadership Committee, organized one of the largest mass political demonstrations in the nation's history—the Million Man March. Held in November 1995, the March attracted Black men from across the nation and from diverse social, economic, and political backgrounds.³²⁵ The mission of the March was multipronged and included a call for Black cooperation and collective action to build stronger families and safer communities, increased efforts to eliminate negative stereotypes of Black people and culture, national policies to provide affordable health care and housing for Black families and to rebuild America's declining cities, and the end to anti-Black racism.^{326,327,328}

Despite such demands for change, several family policies during the 1990s mirrored those of the preceding decade.³²⁹ President Clinton's neoliberal leadership, coupled with a conservative-leaning Congress led by Newt Gingrich from 1995 until his resignation in 1998,³³⁰ continued to advance policies to address perceptions of U.S. moral and family decline. These wide-ranging policies reflected familiar themes. For example, the 1994 Violent Crime Control Act³³¹ and the 1996 Antiterrorism and Effective Death Penalty Act³³² continued "tough on crime" legislation³³³ that increased racial disparities in the criminal justice system.³³⁴ Even as diversity in family structure was increasing,³³⁵ the 1996 Defense of Marriage Act officially defined marriage as a heterosexual union for federal law and gave states an option to recognize (or not) a same-sex marriage from another state.³³⁶ For many, President Clinton's decision to sign this Act was a betrayal of his LGBTQ+ supporters.³³⁷ The 1996 Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA), among other things, gave greater control of welfare benefits to the states via a federal block grant, included time limits on welfare receipt, and had goals to reduce out-of-wedlock pregnancies and promote the formation and maintenance of heterosexual, two-parent families.³³⁸ PRWORA initiated the widespread development and implementation of "responsible fatherhood programs" that targeted mostly low-income men of color.³³⁹ Many of these programs and other legislation in the 1990s—such as the 1998 Deadbeat Parents Punishment Act³⁴⁰—continued to emphasize individual and parental responsibility for financial support to children, regardless of one's economic circumstances and ability to do so.

These policies stood in sharp contrast to others that increased working families' access to needed resources. For example, the 1993 Family and Medical Leave Act³⁴¹ expanded job-protected family leave for qualified employees, the 1993 expansion of the Earned Income Tax Credit³⁴² offset taxes and frequently provided a wage supplement to families with children, and the 1997 Child Health Insurance Program³⁴³ extended health care access to children whose families had incomes too high to qualify for Medicaid but who could not afford private coverage. By the end of this decade of social and political extremes, the economy had rebounded, with the country experiencing low unemployment and inflation rates, a budget surplus, and the highest home ownership rates in U.S. history.³⁴⁴ The United States also experienced a 75.0 percent increase in the number of sentenced inmates in federal and state prisons from 1990 to 1999; in the final year of the decade, 43.0 percent of these inmates were Black men.³⁴⁵

Data on Black families

Race, ethnicity, and the 1990 decennial Census

In 1990, the Census continued to be distributed through the mail, and respondents were asked to self-identify their race and ethnicity. Additional response options were available for all racial or ethnic groups, allowing for more specificity. Directions also included a note stating that the "Black or Negro category also includes persons who identify as African-American, Afro-American, Haitian, Jamaican, West Indian, Nigerian, and so on" (p. E-2).³⁴⁶

Black family demographics

In 1990, there were a total of 248,709,873 U.S. residents, of whom 29,986,060 (12.1%) identified as Black. Over half of Black people in the United States were women (53.0%),³⁴⁷ and nearly one third (32.0%) were children under age 18.³⁴⁸ The vast majority of Black people were born in the United States, with 4.9 percent being "foreign born" as of 1990.³⁴⁹

A note on Census terminology

Data in this section draw primarily on the decennial U.S. Census with occasional references to other sources. For all sources, we present the data using the language (including capitalization standards) as reported either on official Census records or from the original data source. For example, in this decade, we refer to Black people as "Black" and capitalize the B in alignment with the original Census reports.

For each decade, we present information on families' demographics, geography, and economic outlook. Unless otherwise noted, all demographic information is from 1990.

In 1990, 43.4 percent of Black men in the United States ages 15 and older were single, while 45.1 percent were married; the remainder were either widowed (3.4%) or divorced (8.1%). Among Black women ages 15 and older, over one third (36.9%) were single and 40.2 percent were married. The remaining Black women ages 15 and older were either widowed (11.6%) or divorced (11.2%).³⁵⁰ This was also the first year for which unmarried, same-sex partners were recorded in the Census: 1.0 percent of unmarried Black couples were “both male” and 1.6 percent were “both female.”³⁵¹ In 1990, the fertility rate among Black women was comparable to the previous decade (86.8 births per 1,000 women ages 15-44), but declined throughout the 1990s (68.5 births per 1,000 women ages 15-44 in 1999).³⁵² The life expectancy of Black women and men in the United States in 1990 was 73.6 and 64.5 years, respectively, compared to 78.8 years for the total population of women and 71.8 years for the total population of men—continuing the racial and gender gaps in life expectancy seen in previous decades.³⁵³

Geography of Black families

Geographic patterns in the 1990s mirrored those in the 1980s, with over one half of Black people in the United States living in the South in 1990 (53.0%). The majority (83.8%) of all Black people continued to live in metropolitan areas.³⁵⁴

Black families’ economic outlook

In 1990, 37.2 percent of Black families with children under age 18 lived below the federal poverty threshold and the median yearly income of Black households was \$18,676, compared to \$29,943 for the total population.^{355,356} Among single-parent, female-headed households, data from 1990 show that the median annual income was \$12,125.³⁵⁷ Continuing trends from the previous decades, the majority of both Black men (62.6%) and Black women (51.9%) over age 16 were employed.³⁵⁸ However, unemployment rates remained relatively high, at 11.9 percent for Black men and 10.9 percent for Black women.³⁵⁹ In 1990, 43.4 percent of Black Americans owned their homes.³⁶⁰

Overview of Select Research Topics, Methods, and Approaches Related to the Study of Black Families in the 1990s

Research on Black families in the 1990s generally reflected themes prominent in prior decades (e.g., male-female relationships and family structures, child socialization and parenting practices, extended social networks and other assets, and social welfare supports and services), but with greater attention to the diversity (especially geographic and socioeconomic differences) among Black families and using a broader array of methods and theoretical frameworks. Specific areas of focus included the contributions of Black fathers, the experiences and childrearing practices of Black mothers, the role of Black grandparents, Black family assets and church support, and the effects of family socialization on Black children’s educational, behavioral, and health outcomes.

ⁱ “Both male” and “Both female” are the designations given by the 1990 Census. These percentages were calculated based on the referenced Census tables.

Research content highlights

- **Contributions of Black fathers.** Nearly one in four publications (23.0%) reviewed for this decade examined the role and saliency of Black fathers. Qualitative studies focused on a subset of Black fathers (e.g., divorced, teen, urban) and quantitative survey studies controlled for characteristics such as age, income, geographic region, and employment. This research focused on fathers' role perceptions and contributions to household tasks, child care, and financial stability^{361,362,363,364,365,366,367,368,369}; participation in social welfare programs and interventions^{370,371}; and influence on children's behavioral, educational, and developmental outcomes.³⁷² Studies also described Black men's marital patterns and adjustment.^{373,374,375,376,377,378} Additionally, studies examined micro- and macro-level barriers to fatherhood for Black men (e.g., disproportionate rates of incarceration, relationships with their children's mothers, access to employment) and strategies to address these barriers.^{379,380,381,382,383}



- **The experiences and childrearing practices of Black mothers.** Research on Black families in the 1990s also focused on Black mothers' parenting attitudes and practices,³⁸⁴ especially among Black single and teen mothers. Studies examined the economic and emotional impact of pregnancy for adolescent mothers^{385,386}; sources of stress and support for Black mothers across income, employment, health, age, and marital status^{387,388,389,390,391,392,393,394}; and the antecedents, viability, and resilience of female-headed households.^{395,396,397,398,399} Studies also described opportunities and preferences for marriage among Black women,^{400,401,402} the rise of single female-headed households in rural areas,⁴⁰³ and the influence of Black mothers on child outcomes.^{404,405,406,407}

- **The role of grandparents.** The 1980s and 1990s saw a rise in the number of Black children in grandparent-led households.⁴⁰⁸ As the proportion of grandparent-headed households increased, so did research on their experiences, successes, and challenges. Some studies focused on grandparents' roles, strengths, and needs,^{409,410,411} while others focused on the conditions (e.g., household structure, socioeconomic status, timing of role as grandparent) that influenced the nature and quality of their family interactions.^{412,413,414}



Research also examined the self-perceptions, social connections, and marital satisfaction of grandparents raising their grandchildren.^{415,416} Most of these studies focused on grandmothers as the primary caretakers, with limited attention to the role of grandfathers.

- **Black family assets and church support.** As in previous decades, the literature on Black families in the 1990s also documented the history and effects of racial and economic discrimination on male-female relationships, and on family structure and stability.^{417,418,419,420,421,422,423} However, studies also focused on the assets, aspirations, and adaptive strategies of diverse Black families.^{424,425,426,427,428,429,430,431,432}

The Black family assets literature published during the decade focused primarily on extended kin and social networks, and on religious and spiritual beliefs and practices. Studies on Black family networks examined their composition and structure.^{433,434,435,436,437} They also explored family networks as buffers against the effects of racism, generally, and against social and economic conditions specific to the 1980s and 90s that disproportionately harmed Black people and communities.^{438,439,440,441,442,443} Similarly, studies on Black family spirituality focused on its role as a coping mechanism.^{444,445} Situated at the nexus of the literature on Black family networks and spirituality, studies on the Black church described its utility as an institution providing child socialization^{446,447} and psychological, emotional, and marital support to Black families.^{448,449,450,451}

- **The effects of family socialization on Black children's educational, behavioral, and health outcomes.** The influence of family contexts, structures, practices, and resources on Black child socialization and outcomes was also prominent among studies conducted in the 1990s.^{452,453,454,455,456,457,458,459} Black family configurations, attitudes, and engagement activities on educational experiences and outcomes for young children and adolescents^{460,461,462,463,464,465,466,467} were of interest. Studies also explored childrearing practices and their association with behavioral^{468,469,470,471,472,473,474}, and developmental^{475,476,477,478} outcomes for Black boys and girls at different ages and from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds. Additionally, research from the decade focused on the need for education, health, and social service providers to promote the positive socialization of typically developing children and, to a more limited extent, those with special needs by acknowledging racial inequities and building on Black family assets.^{479,480,481,482,483,484,485,486,487}

Research methods and approaches

This brief review is based on 123 articles, book chapters, and reports on Black families published from 1990 to 1999. Thirty-nine of the publications (32.0%) were non-empirical, mainly literature reviews and conceptual and historical analyses. Of the empirical research, the majority were quantitative survey studies, including those analyzing Census and other demographic data (61.0%); nearly one third (33.0%) were qualitative (primarily interview) studies and 6.0 percent were mixed methods studies, combining survey and interview or observation data. While the primary research themes on Black families during the decade were familiar (i.e., male-female relationships and family structures, socialization and parenting practices, extended social networks and other assets, and social welfare supports and services), distinct trends emerged that attempted to introduce greater nuance and critical analysis into the scholarship and public discourse on Black families. When describing the strengths of research conducted on Black families in the 1990s, McLloyd et al.⁴⁸⁸ (2000) observed:

For African Americans, the research literature evolved from documenting demographic changes in family structure and formation to investigating the underlying causes of such changes and from a unidimensional perspective on gender roles among African American men to one suggestive of the complexities of this issue.... Advances in theory and methods throughout the 1990s provide a clear road map for the type of research needed in the future (p. 1087).

Research, Policy, and Practice Connections

Policies in the 1990s did little to stem the tide of mass incarceration that disproportionately affected Black men and families or to dismantle harmful stereotypes vilifying economically disadvantaged single Black mothers, but research continued to make inroads toward creating broader and more nuanced depictions of Black families. Theories and social action that emphasized the need to address racial inequality in the United States were reflected in research across disciplines that not only challenged monolithic stereotypes of Black

families by highlighting their diversity but also described how racism continued to influence Black families' experiences and outcomes.⁴⁸⁹

Among the studies published during the 1990s—a decade awash with “responsible fatherhood programs” and policies emphasizing individual accountability for “deadbeat dads”—there was a pronounced focus on (and defense of) Black fathers, including research that described their financial and nonfinancial contributions to their children’s lives. These studies helped debunk stereotypes of Black fathers as irresponsible and highlighted factors influencing their family roles and engagement.⁴⁹⁰ Likewise, drawing on Black feminist frameworks, research began to problematize stereotypes of economically disadvantaged Black mothers and offered critiques of the “workfare” reform policies that characterized the decade.⁴⁹¹ Scholars also sought to better understand Black grandparents’ experiences as “surrogate parents” for children caught in the crossfire of a decades-long war on drugs,⁴⁹² welfare reform,⁴⁹³ and an economic recovery⁴⁹⁴ that bypassed many central cities. Moreover, studies on Black family assets, particularly extended kin and social networks and religiosity, reflected scholars’ ongoing efforts to uncover sources of racial resilience and resistance during a decade characterized by social and economic contraction and expansion amid increasing economic inequality.⁴⁹⁵



Decade: 2000-2009

Research on Black families in the 2000s increasingly used intersectional frameworks and qualitative methods to document and analyze their diverse conditions.

Context

A contested election⁴⁹⁶ placed George W. Bush (son of George H. W. Bush, the 41st president) in the White House for most of the 2000s (2001 to 2009).⁴⁹⁷ Domestically, the decade was characterized by policy *déjà vu*, with legislation that continued a two-decade trend of idealizing “traditional” family values. Two-parent households, responsible fatherhood, heterosexual unions (although several states—including Massachusetts, Connecticut, and Iowa—legalized same-sex marriages during the decade),⁴⁹⁸ and the birth of children within those unions were touted as remedies to poverty, crime, and other social ills.⁴⁹⁹ These principles were reflected in the George W. Bush Administration’s 2002 Healthy Marriage Initiative,⁵⁰⁰ which aimed to increase two-parent families and reduce childbearing outside of marriage as part of welfare reform. Family maintenance and kinship adoption also continued to be key pillars of family policy during the decade, as reflected in the Promoting Safe and Stable Families Amendments of 2001.⁵⁰¹ These policies were increasingly implemented through block grants to states with rising federal reporting requirements and declining dollar values.⁵⁰² Religion also played a dominant role in policy formulation and implementation in the 2000s as megachurches began to wield more political influence⁵⁰³ and religious organizations were encouraged to become more involved in government-funded human service programs.⁵⁰⁴

Early in the decade, domestic policies were overshadowed by foreign affairs. In September 2001, the United States experienced the deadliest foreign attacks on its soil since Pearl Harbor. These attacks killed over

3,000 people in the United States, shocked the nation and the world,⁵⁰⁵ and were the catalyst for a protracted “war on terror”⁵⁰⁶ that included international armed conflicts in Afghanistan (2001)⁵⁰⁷ and Iraq (2003).⁵⁰⁸ As with the U.S. conflict in Vietnam during the 1960s and 1970s,⁵⁰⁹ the war in Iraq fueled mass protests opposing the military action.⁵¹⁰ Over the course of the decade, nearly 2 million U.S. military personnel were deployed in 3 million tours of duty. A disproportionate percentage of U.S. soldiers engaged in the conflict were Black men and women; of those serving, 66.0 percent were White, 16.0 percent were Black, 10.0 percent were Hispanic, and 4.0 percent were Asian, compared with the general population, which was 75.0 percent White, 12.0 percent Black, 12.5 percent Hispanic of any race, and 4.0 percent Asian. Eighty-nine percent of those deployed were men and 11.0 percent were women.⁵¹¹

As the decade unfolded, so did the nation’s continued racial divisions. While in the early 1980s most HIV/AIDS cases occurred among White gay men, from 1996 to 2000, more cases occurred among Black people than any other racial/ethnic population.⁵¹² Increasing rates of concentrated poverty in distressed metropolitan neighborhoods and suburban communities in the South and Midwest also disproportionately affected Black Americans.⁵¹³ In 2005, Hurricane Katrina caused one of the largest displacements of people in U.S. history and was particularly devastating for Black people in New Orleans.⁵¹⁴ The government’s



response was perceived by most Americans as only “fair or poor,” and nearly three quarters of Black Americans viewed the response as emblematic of racial inequality in the United States.^{515,516} Additionally, a deep recession from 2007 to 2009 had widespread effects on wealth and homeownership in the nation, especially for Black families.⁵¹⁷ Yet the decade also saw declines in the crack cocaine epidemic and a decline in the nation’s prison population. Most of the decline in the latter was due to a significant drop in the number of Black men and women incarcerated on drug charges.^{518,519} From 2000 to 2008, for example, the number of Black people in prison declined by 18,400. Nonetheless, racial disparities in incarceration continued and the United States remained the nation with the highest incarceration rate in the world.⁵²⁰

Data on Black families

Race, ethnicity, and the 2000 decennial Census

The 2000 Census was sent through the mail for respondents to fill out and return, and respondents were asked to self-report their race. This Census was the first time an option was available for people to self-identify as more than one race.⁵²¹ Throughout this decade, we present data on people in America who identify as Black or African American alone or in combination with one or more races.^j

Respondents to the Census self-identified their race through the following options: 1) White; 2) Black, African American, or Negro; 3) American Indian or Alaska Native; 4) Asian Indian; 5) Chinese; 6) Filipino; 7) Japanese; 8) Korean; 9) Vietnamese; 10) Other Asian; 11) Native Hawaiian; 12) Guamanian or Chamorro; 13) Samoan; 14) Other Pacific Islander; and/or 15) Some other races. They could also choose to select one or more of the following ethnic identities: 1) Not Spanish/Hispanic/Latino; 2) Mexican, Mexican American, Chicano; 3) Puerto Rican; 4) Cuban; or 5) Other Spanish/Hispanic/Latino.⁵²²

Black family demographics

In 2000, there were 281,421,906 U.S. residents, of whom 36,213,467 (12.9%) identified as Black or African American alone or in combination with one or more races.⁵²³ Just over half (52.5%) identified as female and just over one third (35.8%) were children up to age 19.⁵²⁴ Among Black people in the United States in 2000, 6.7 percent were foreign-born.

Black marriage^k rates continued to fall while divorce rates continued to rise.⁵²⁵ About two in five (41.5%) Black men in the United States ages 15 and older were married in 2000, and many non-married Black men had never married (41.6%). Fewer Black men were widowed (3.0%) or divorced (9.5%).⁵²⁶ Among Black women ages 15 and older, the greatest proportion were never married (39.7%); less than one third were married (31.2%) and the remaining were either widowed (10.4%) or divorced (12.8%).⁵²⁷ Among all coupled households, 1.4 percent were in same-sex relationships.⁵²⁸

Fertility rates remained low in 2000, with just 70.0 births per every 1,000 Black women ages 15 to 44 in the United States.^{l,529} In 2000, racial gaps in life expectancy remained consistent with previous decades, although the gender gap in life expectancy narrowed for Black women and men. Specifically, the life expectancy for Black women was 74.9 years (79.5 years for the total population of women) and 68.2 years for Black men (74.1 years for the total population of men) in 2000.⁵³⁰

A note on Census terminology

Data in this section draw primarily on the decennial U.S. Census with occasional references to other sources. For all sources, we present the data using the language (including capitalization standards) as reported either on official Census records or from the original data source. For example, in this decade, we refer to Black people as "Black" and capitalize the B in alignment with the original Census reports. In 2000, when asking about respondents' race, the Census allowed respondents to select more than one race for the first time. In this decade, we present data on Black people in the United States who identify as Black or African American alone or in combination with one or more other races.

For each decade, we present information on families' demographics, geography, and economic outlook. Unless otherwise noted, all demographic information is from 2000.

^j Census tables use the terminology "Black or African American alone or in combination with one or more races."

^k Data on Black marriage rates are presented only for "Black or African American alone."

^l Data presented on birth rates are from a Census publication, and it is unclear if the birth rate among Black people in the United States includes those who identify as Black alone or those who identify as Black and one or more other races.

Geography of Black families

The majority (53.6%) of Black people in the United States continued to live in the South in 2000, followed by the Midwest (18.8%), Northeast (18.0%), and West (9.6%).⁵³¹

Black families' economic outlook

Throughout the decade, most Black men (63.6%) and women (58.6%) were employed,⁵³² but Black workers continued to face the highest rates of unemployment in the country, at about 7.6 percent in 2000.⁵³³ In 2000, poverty was lower than in previous years among Black families with children under age 18. One quarter (25.3%) were at or below the federal poverty level.⁵³⁴ However, for Black children in single-mother households, the poverty rate was much higher (38.7%).⁵³⁵ The median income of Black^{m,n} households in 2000 was \$30,439, compared to \$42,148 for the total population.⁵³⁶ In 2000, 46.0 percent of Black^o households in the United States were owner-occupied.⁵³⁷

Overview of Select Research Topics, Methods, and Approaches Related to the Study of Black Families in the 2000s

In addition to reviews and essays on the contributions made by Black researchers^{538,539} and research partnerships⁵⁴⁰ to the growing body of knowledge on Black families, publications during the decade continued to focus on outcomes associated with Black family structure,^{541,542,543,544} including grandparent-led households,^{545,546,547} perceptions and quality of Black marriage and family functioning,^{548,549,550,551,552,553,554,555,556,557} key dimensions of Black parenting practices,^{558,559,560,561,562,563,564,565} the value of Black family cultural assets,^{566,567,568,569,570,571,572} and professional strategies to address the needs of Black children and families.^{573,574,575} In addition, publications highlighted decade- and period-specific topics, including the impact of mass incarceration on Black families, the role of families in addressing health concerns (e.g., diabetes, hypertension, depression, and HIV/AIDS) in the Black community, issues of gender and sexuality, and the relationship between Black families, schools, and student success. These topics are described in greater detail below.

Research content highlights

- **Incarceration and the Black family.** Publications on incarceration focused on the impact of juvenile detention and adult imprisonment on Black families and communities. These studies examined the association between mass incarceration and family stability,⁵⁷⁶ the effects of sons' imprisonment on mothers' financial and psychological distress,⁵⁷⁷ factors mediating the effects of incarceration on Black family functioning and outcomes,⁵⁷⁸ and the promise of restorative justice practices for reforming U.S. criminal and social welfare systems.⁵⁷⁹ While limited in number, these publications highlighted mass incarceration as a continued concern among Black family scholars during the decade.
- **Black families and health concerns.** Studies during the decade also focused on the association between family functioning and the emotional and physical health of Black adults and children. Health concerns of interest included depression and suicide,^{580,581,582,583,584,585,586,587,588} stress,⁵⁸⁹ HIV/AIDS,⁵⁹⁰ obesity,⁵⁹¹ diabetes,⁵⁹² and drug and alcohol use,^{593,594,595,596} and their disproportionate effects on Black people during the decade. These studies consistently showed that higher family functioning, more positive

^m Data on Black marriage rates are presented only for "Black or African American alone."

ⁿ Data presented on Black households in the United States are from a Census publication, and it is unclear if median income is reported for those who identify as Black alone or those who identify as Black and one or more other races.

^o Data presented on homeownership are for those who identify as Black alone or those who identify as Black and one or more other races.

reports of family and kin support, and lower levels of economic stress were associated with healthier outcomes for Black children and their parents.

- **Gender, sexuality, and Black families.** Several publications on Black families in the 2000s focused on gender and sexuality. For example, research explored the influence of family variables on Black boys' attitudes, experiences, and developmental outcomes^{597,598,599}; the gendered role of Black men in families and communities^{600,601,602,603,604,605,606}; and the origins, meanings, prevalence, and consequences of Black males' economic and physical "absence" for children and mothers.^{607,608,609,610,611,612} Similarly, studies sought to understand the



relationship between mothers and daughters, especially related to sexual behaviors and pregnancy among African American girls^{613,614,615,616} and the intergenerational exchange of resources and support among female extended kin.⁶¹⁷ Additionally, film reviews and scholarly publications during the decade began to challenge the heteronormative portrayal of Black families. Studies explored the experiences of LGBTQ+ couples,^{618,619,620} described historical efforts to control the sexuality and economic resources of Black girls and women and their resistance to such efforts,^{621,622} and discussed the role of feminist therapeutic paradigms in promoting "womanist epistemologies that encourage care of the self ... [and] responsibility to community ..."⁶²³

- **Black families, schools, and student success.** Research during the decade also explored the relationship between Black families, schools, and students' academic success and educational attainment.^{624,625} Some studies examined the role of mothers in promoting the academic success of their children.^{626,627,628} Other studies examined the roles of family structure, expectations, and practices—including racial socialization—on Black children's school-related attitudes, behaviors, and outcomes.^{629,630,631,632,633,634,635,636,637} Research in this area also examined the importance of schools' outreach to and relationships with the parents of Black students, including those in gifted and special education programs.^{638,639,640}

Research methods and approaches

This research summary is based on 108 journal articles, book chapters, reviews, and essays on Black families published from 2000 to 2009. Sixty-five percent were empirical studies; of these, 59.0 percent were quantitative—mostly survey studies—while 41.0 percent were qualitative studies, an increase over the preceding three decades. The research published during the 2000s continued to expand the knowledge base on Black families. Studies that featured LGBTQ+ family members, used intersectional and feminist frameworks, employed historical analyses, and explored the social determinants of health were substantively represented. Additionally, studies on Black children's educational outcomes began to examine schools' family engagement practices in addition to exploring the influence of family processes and behaviors. While some studies persisted in a deficit framing of Black families, many others identified family strengths and assets associated with positive family outcomes and child resilience, continuing a decades-long trend in the research on Black families. Ultimately, research during the decade reflected an increasing range of topics and perspectives that challenged monolithic portrayals and, as noted by Hill (2001, pg. 494), "uniformly attest[ed] to the immense importance of children in Black families".⁶⁴¹

Research, Policy, and Practice Connections

Research on Black families in the United States in the 2000s continued to document and analyze their diverse conditions.⁶⁴² For example, researchers increasingly used intersectional frameworks to explore the experiences of Black single-parent households, grandparent-led households, and LGBTQ+ households. Research during the decade also highlighted the effects of employment status, poverty, and stress on health disparities in Black communities, along with the consequences of the social welfare and crime policies of the 1980s and 1990s (e.g., mass incarceration and family disruption) on the well-being of Black children, adults, and families. The increased number of qualitative studies was especially important in capturing and amplifying the voices of Black families.

Reminiscent of the 1970s, many scholars called for policies and practices to address racial inequities and promote social justice. New advocacy organizations also emerged during the decade. For example, Color of Change, which was founded in 2005 after Hurricane Katrina, capitalized on Americans' expanded access to and use of the internet to elevate the voices and political influence of Black Americans.^{643,644} Additionally, policy responses to research and advocacy were increasingly visible at the state level. For instance, during the decade, several states began to enact criminal justice reforms⁶⁴⁵ and marriage equality laws.⁶⁴⁶ Barack Obama's historic election as the first U.S. president of African descent in 2008 was viewed by many Americans as an opportunity to build on this progress and achieve long-awaited societal change.⁶⁴⁷



Decade: 2010-2019

Research in the 2010s helped broaden the nation's discourse on race and Black family and child well-being in the face of continued racial inequity.

Context

Barack Obama's election as the first U.S. president of African descent (2009-2017) marked a national racial milestone, fueling debates about whether the United States had entered a "post-racial" historical period.⁶⁴⁸ Indeed, several policies implemented during his administration reflected an ideological break from those of his predecessor and helped to mitigate the effects of the Great Recession for many American families. For example, the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA) of 2009 expanded the child tax credit, the earned income tax credit, and food subsidies (through the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, or SNAP) for families with low and moderate incomes.⁶⁴⁹ ARRA kept millions of Americans from falling below the poverty threshold, including approximately 1.6 million Black Americans.⁶⁵⁰ The Obama Administration also championed the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act, signed into law on March 23, 2010, with full implementation beginning in 2014⁶⁵¹; this legislation expanded Medicaid and health insurance to millions of previously uninsured individuals and families.⁶⁵² In 2012, President Obama gave states greater flexibility in establishing work requirements for welfare assistance that could include a broader range of activities—this was the first significant change in these requirements since President Clinton signed the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act in 1996.⁶⁵³ Moreover, in a reversal of previous statements on the issue, President Obama supported the Supreme Court's 5-4 decision to uphold the constitutional right of same-sex couples to marry, becoming the first U.S. president to do so.⁶⁵⁴ President Obama also signed the Fair Sentencing Act (2010),⁶⁵⁵ which reduced sentencing disparities

between crack and powder cocaine—a policy legislated by President Ronald Reagan (1981 to 1989) as part of the Anti-Drug Abuse Act of 1988.⁶⁵⁶

Yet Obama’s focus on responsible fatherhood echoed previous administrations’ prescriptions for improving the social conditions of children and families. Although President Obama’s fatherhood initiatives included greater emphasis on evaluating program effects, the familiar discourse on strengthening families and holding “deadbeat” dads accountable for their families’ well-being elicited similar responses to previous such policies—both favorable (i.e., applauded for preserving traditional values)⁶⁵⁷ and unfavorable (i.e., criticized for failing to address systemic factors preventing fathers from financially supporting their children).^{658,659}



The perceived inadequacies of these policies and perceptions of growing racial inequality sparked a new era of Black-led activism. Notably, the acquittal of George Zimmerman in the shooting death of 17-year-old Trayvon Martin in 2012 gave rise to the Black Lives Matter movement in 2013,^{660,661} and Michelle Alexander’s *New York Times* best seller, *The New Jim Crow* (2010),⁶⁶² and Ava Duvernay’s critically acclaimed documentary film, *13th* (2016),⁶⁶³ called for a national movement to end mass incarceration and institutionalized racism within the U.S. criminal justice system.

Toward the close of the decade, Donald Trump was inaugurated as the nation’s 45th president (2017-2021), ushering in one of the most controversial presidential administrations in modern history.⁶⁶⁴ Immigration restrictions were a primary focus of the Trump Administration. His “zero tolerance” immigration policies escalated the crisis of immigrant family separation at the southern border,⁶⁶⁵ resulting in several legal challenges to overturn his executive orders and protect immigrant rights. In 2018, Trump reversed Obama’s loosening of work requirements for welfare assistance, reviving the promise of previous administrations to overhaul the welfare system.⁶⁶⁶ Less controversial was Trump’s continuation of prison reform. The bipartisan First Step Act (2018)⁶⁶⁷ was designed to reduce excessively long federal prison sentences and improve conditions in federal prisons.⁶⁶⁸ Under Section 404 of the Act, Black prisoners accounted for most (91.4%) of those receiving sentence reductions in the policy’s first year of implementation—largely due to racial disparities in sentencing for crack cocaine that occurred in the 1980s and 1990s.⁶⁶⁹ In the final year of the decade, the nation faced the coronavirus disease of 2019 (COVID-19); the COVID-19 pandemic⁶⁷⁰ was to take a disproportionate toll on Black people and highlight ongoing disparities in their access to high-quality health care.⁶⁷¹

Data on Black families

Race, ethnicity, and the 2010 decennial Census

2010 Census respondents were asked to self-report their race and ethnicity. As with the 2000 Census, individuals were able to self-identify as more than one race and to report their Hispanic ethnicity.⁶⁷² Therefore, we present data on individuals who identified as Black or African American alone or in combination with one or more races.^p

Respondents self-identified their race through the following options: 1) White; 2) Black, African American, or Negro; 3) American Indian or Alaska Native; 4) Asian Indian; 5) Chinese; 6) Filipino; 7) Japanese; 8) Korean; 9) Vietnamese; 10) Other Asian; 11) Native Hawaiian; 12) Guamanian or Chamorro; 13) Samoan; 14) Other Pacific Islander; and/or 15) Some other races.

Respondents could also choose to select one or more of the following ethnic identities: 1) Not of Hispanic/Latino/Spanish origin; 2) Mexican, Mexican American, Chicano; 3) Puerto Rican; or 4) other Hispanic/Latino/Spanish origin.

Black family demographics

In 2010, there were 303,965,272 people living in the United States, of whom 40,633,114 (13.4%) identified as Black or African American alone or in combination with one or more other races.⁶⁷³ Just over half (52.3%) of the Black population in 2010 identified as female and under one third (29.5%) were children under age 18.⁶⁷⁴ Of the Black population in the United States in 2010, almost one tenth (8.8%) were born outside the country.⁶⁷⁵

In 2010, almost half (48.9%) of Black^q men in the United States ages 15 and older were never married, over one third were married (35.7%), and the remaining were either widowed (2.6%) or divorced (9.2%). Among Black women ages 15 and older, 45.5 percent were never married and just over one quarter were married (28.7%). The remaining Black women ages 15 and older were either widowed (8.9%) or divorced (12.4%).⁶⁷⁶ In 2010, fertility rates among Black women were consistent with the previous decade (66.3 births per 1,000 women).⁶⁷⁷ Racial and gender gaps in life expectancy narrowed in 2010. Life expectancy was 78.0 years for Black women and 71.8 years for Black men, compared to 81.0 years for the total population of women and 76.2 years for the total population of men.⁶⁷⁸

Among Black households in 2010, few respondents (7.0%) were living with partners in unmarried households; among these households, very few (0.4%) were living with same-sex partners.⁶⁷⁹

A note on Census terminology

Data in this section draw primarily on the decennial U.S. Census with occasional references to other sources. For all sources, we present the data using the language (including capitalization standards) as reported either on official Census records or from the original data source. For example, in this decade, we refer to Black people as "Black" and capitalize the B in alignment with the original Census reports. In 2010, when asking about respondents' race, the Census allowed respondents to select more than one race. In this decade, we present data on Black people in the United States who identify as Black or African American alone or in combination with one or more other races.

For each decade, we present information on families' demographics, geography, and economic outlook. Unless otherwise noted, all demographic information is from 2010.

^p Census tables use the terminology "Black or African American alone or in combination with one or more races."

^q Marriage status percentages are for "Black or African American alone or in combination with one or more races."

Geography of Black families

Geographic patterns for Black people in the 2010s were similar to those in the previous four decades. The majority of Black Americans still lived in the South in 2010 (55.0%), followed by the Midwest (18.3%), Northeast (17.0%), and West (9.7%).⁶⁸⁰

Black families' economic outlook

In 2010, the unemployment rate for Black people was 16.0 percent.⁶⁸¹ Of Black people over age 16, slightly over half of men (53.1%) and women (51.7%) were employed.⁶⁸² One third (33.6%) of Black families with children under age 18 were living below the federal poverty level in 2010⁶⁸³ and Black children, in particular, experienced relatively high levels of poverty (38.2%).⁶⁸⁴ The median income of Black households in 2010 was \$35,341, compared to \$51,914 for the total population.⁶⁸⁵ In 2010, 45.6 percent of Black Americans owned their homes.⁶⁸⁶

Overview of Select Research Topics, Methods, and Approaches Related to the Study of Black Families in the 2010s

During the second decade of the 21st century, researchers used a variety of methods and theories to deepen understanding of Black families' changing demographics, persistent challenges, and enduring strengths. As with previous decades, most of this research focused on family structure, parenting practices, cultural assets (including extended kin and social networks), child socialization and outcomes, and culturally responsive mental health and social services for Black families. Within these five main categories, research focused on family formation, including the continued decline in marriage rates and the increase in same-sex and interracial marriages; Black immigrant families; the kinship and social network roles of grandparents, aunts, and church members; the independent and overlapping roles of mothers and fathers; and family characteristics and practices and child outcomes. These areas of focus are described in greater detail below.

Research content highlights

- **Relationships and family formation.** Relationship quality and family formation were the focus of several studies in the 2010s, including critical analyses highlighting the significance of race on Black marriages and family structure.^{687,688} These studies examined Black women's perceptions of womanhood, marriage, motherhood, and fathering^{689,690}; factors (e.g., religiosity, parents' family structure, fear of intimacy) influencing Black men's attitudes toward marriage^{691,692}; and young Black adults' beliefs about same-race and interracial dating and marriage.⁶⁹³ Studies also focused on the role of emotional support from extended family on Black mother-adolescent relationships.⁶⁹⁴ Additionally, studies explored factors influencing the family relationships of formerly incarcerated men⁶⁹⁵ and Black couples' attitudes and concerns about marriage and family therapy.⁶⁹⁶
- **Black immigrant and ethnically diverse families.** Migration patterns during the 2010s included geographic immobility within the United States⁶⁹⁷ and higher rates of Black immigration to the United States.⁶⁹⁸ With increases in Black immigration, studies during the decade focused on Black family experiences across ethnicities. For example, studies examined risk factors for poverty among Black children of immigrant families⁶⁹⁹ and the mechanisms influencing relationships between schools and Black immigrant



families.⁷⁰⁰ Studies also explored differences and similarities between African American and Black Caribbean families. This research specifically examined relationships between parental stress, adolescent stress, and depression⁷⁰¹; factors associated with the closeness and support of extended family networks⁷⁰²; and variations in family support provided to adolescents.⁷⁰³

- **Kinship and social network roles.** Studies in the 2010s continued to explore and critically analyze extended kin networks and other Black family assets.^{704,705,706,707,708} Publications in this area examined how extended kin and social networks provided a buffer against risks associated with impoverished neighborhoods.^{709,710} Studies also examined the effects of extended family support on Black students' college attendance,⁷¹¹ the mental and physical health of Black parents with children with disabilities,⁷¹² and young Black women's knowledge and use of contraception.⁷¹³ Several studies explored the role of grandmothers as integral to kinship networks in Black communities; these studies examined factors that influenced stress levels of Black grandmothers raising their grandchildren⁷¹⁴ and the adjustment issues and needs of their grandchildren.⁷¹⁵ In addition to grandmothers, studies also examined the role of aunts and other "non-marital co-parents" in "other mothering" and responding to the needs of Black children.^{716,717}
- **Independent and overlapping roles of mothers and fathers.** Several publications during the decade focused on the independent and overlapping roles of Black mothers and fathers in promoting their families' effective functioning^{718,719,720} and economic well-being,^{721,722,723} as well as the complex depictions of Black mothers and fathers in popular culture.^{724,725,726} Studies in this area explored the diverse experiences of Black mothers, including those who were formerly incarcerated⁷²⁷ and those with a history of suicide attempts,⁷²⁸ as well as declining pregnancy rates among Black female adolescents.⁷²⁹ These studies also examined dimensions of Black mothers' parenting practices for male and female children,^{730,731,732,733,734,735} the effects of Black mothers' racial socialization practices and parent-child relationship quality on youths' school engagement,⁷³⁶ Black mothers' perceptions and use of discipline practices,⁷³⁷ conceptions and practices of "motherhood" within families headed by Black lesbian couples,⁷³⁸ and Black mothers' experiences of love and loss.⁷³⁹ Publications also explored the role of Black fathers in family life,^{740,741} including those that examined the importance of father-school partnerships in promoting the school success of students in gifted and talented programs,^{742,743} differences and similarities in the parenting practices of Black married and unwed cohabitating fathers,⁷⁴⁴ Black fathers' perceptions of effective parenting,^{745,746} Black fathers' racial socialization practices and differences with sons and daughters,^{747,748} and the influence of Black fathers on co-parenting quality.⁷⁴⁹ Studies also examined familial incarceration and Black men's psychological distress.⁷⁵⁰
- **Family characteristics and practices and child outcomes.** Studies published during the decade further examined the influence of Black family characteristics and practices on child outcomes and the effects of racial inequity on family functioning and access to appropriate resources and supports.^{751,752,753} Publications included historical analyses of Black families' physical disciplinary practices—noting their utility in the context of institutional racism and racial disproportionality in the child welfare system,⁷⁵⁴ Black sibling relationships,⁷⁵⁵ and empirical studies measuring the effects of family-centered interventions on Black adolescents' risk-taking behaviors.^{756,757} Other studies explored the role of factors such as family routines,⁷⁵⁸ caregivers' literacy practices,⁷⁵⁹ the proportion of female-headed households in a neighborhood,⁷⁶⁰ parent-child relationships,^{761,762,763,764,765,766,767} and families' home- and school-based engagement and expectations^{768,769,770,771,772} on educational and behavioral outcomes for Black children and youth across gender, age, socioeconomic status, and disability status. Studies also examined the role of family processes and attitudes on Black adolescents' peer interactions, school engagement, high-risk sexual behaviors,^{773,774} and youth obesity.⁷⁷⁵ Several studies examined the role of Black parents in the sexual⁷⁷⁶ and racial^{777,778,779,780} socialization of their children, along with differences based on parents' and children's gender and racial identities.

Methods and approaches

This research summary is based on 94 journal articles, book chapters, and reports on Black families published from 2010 to 2019. Fifteen (16.0%) of the publications were non-empirical, mainly literature reviews and conceptual and historical analyses. Eighty-four percent were empirical studies; of these, 57.0 percent were quantitative—mostly survey studies. Thirty-eight percent were qualitative studies, employing interview and ethnographic designs, and 5.0 percent were mixed methods studies, drawing primarily on interview and survey data. Research on Black families in the 2010s continued to examine themes present since the 1970s and to expand the research focus on Black people to include Black immigrant families, Black LGBTQ+ parents, and Black biracial families and children. Studies published during the decade also continued to challenge the deficit framing of Black mothers and fathers that characterized much of the research on Black families prior to the 1970s. Scholars used feminist/womanist and critical race frameworks to reconceptualize and represent Black motherhood and fatherhood in more comprehensive and nuanced ways. Studies also addressed challenges disproportionately faced by Black people and families during the decade, including the continued impact of mass incarceration, economic inequality, depression, and access to high-quality health care.

Research, Policy, and Practice Connections

As Black people in the United States became more ethnically diverse⁷⁸¹ and racial inequality and violence continued, research on Black families in the 2010s helped reexamine and broaden America's discourse on race and equity. Scholars continued to examine the diversity of Black people and families beyond differences in socioeconomic status and family structure. Centering critical theories, several studies during the decade explored intersections of race, gender, and sexual orientation, and how these affected Black people's and families' identities, experiences, and wellness. Across research disciplines (e.g., family science, education, child welfare, sociology, and psychology), these studies explored how systems of power and oppression such as racism, sexism, and heterosexism impact family processes and outcomes in often overlapping and complex ways.

Policies during the second decade of the 21st century also shifted toward systems change. National policies—such as the Fair Sentencing Act, First Step Act, and Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act—began to follow state and local policies enacted during the previous decade to address inequities in the criminal justice and health care systems. By 2019, same-sex marriages were legalized, incarceration rates and racial disparities in incarceration rates were reduced,⁷⁸² and all states and the District of Columbia had lower uninsured rates than in 2010.⁷⁸³ Yet Black people in the United States continued to face systemic racism that diminished their opportunities to flourish—evidenced in the gross inequities in education, economic, and health outcomes for Black families.⁷⁸⁴ As we enter the 21st century's third decade, the persistence of racial inequality in the United States demands that research on Black families continues to employ new and existing frameworks and methods that authentically represent Black families and produce evidence that can advance their well-being.⁷⁸⁵

Volume 2: 1970-2019

Conclusion

This review of the literature on Black families published from 1970 to 2019 has highlighted both consistent and changing patterns in how families have been depicted, their structures and functions, and their evolution and experiences in the United States. It has also highlighted consistent and changing patterns in the research designs and methods used to study Black families. Here, we summarize these patterns and propose future directions for applied research that deepens existing knowledge and contributes new evidence to promote the well-being of Black families.

Black family demographics have shifted in significant ways in the last 50 years.

For example, since the 1970s, the Black population in the United States has become more ethnically diverse, with nearly 10.0 percent of the country's Black population born outside the United States as of 2019 (compared to 1.1% in 1970). Over this same period, Black marriage rates have declined from over 50.0 percent for Black men and women in 1970 to about one third in 2010; fertility rates among Black women have also significantly declined. While the poverty rate for Black people has declined since the 1970s, poverty and unemployment rates, on average, have remained in the double digits. Black home ownership has also remained consistent at an average rate of 44.1 percent. Among the years included in our analyses, Black home ownership peaked at 46.0 percent in the first decade of the 2000s, compared to the national rate of 66.2 percent in 2000.⁷⁸⁶ Ensuring accurate collection and analysis of Census and other demographic data on Black people (a significant challenge before 1970) is important for showing areas of progress and the persistent effects of systemic racism that demand continued attention from researchers, policymakers, practitioners, and society at large (see demographic tables in Appendix B).

Theories and methods used to study Black families have expanded over the last 50 years.

Before the 1970s, research largely depicted Black families from a deficit perspective, as exemplified in the 1965 Moynihan Report. Despite the persistence of such depictions, since the 1970s, a significant body of research has challenged deficit perspectives and focused on the diversity and complexity of Black families and the systems that affect their opportunities to thrive. These depictions have been undergirded by new theories, including critical cultural, race, and feminist frameworks. Likewise, methods and approaches to studying Black families have also expanded. For example, the percentage of qualitative studies represented in our sample increased from less than 10.0 percent in the 1970s to nearly one third in the 2010s (see Appendix A). Adding new racial equity approaches to research on Black families—including participatory designs and methods—can further expand the knowledge base required for responsive and meaningful change.⁷⁸⁷

There have been consistent themes in the literature on Black children and families over the last 50 years.

While there are clear variations in themes explored in research on Black families from 1970 to 2019, there are also common areas of focus, including the following:

- Dating relationships and marriage
- Family structures and functions
- Parenting and child socialization practices
- Extended kin and social networks

- Culturally responsive social and health interventions, supports, and services

Given their relevance to the viability and well-being of Black families, these themes are likely to remain among researchers' areas of focus. Yet, to be most useful, the questions posed within these areas must change to reflect Black families' adaptations to new and evolving social, political, and economic conditions.

Developments in research on Black families over the last 50 years are promising.

The last 50 years have seen social and political gains for marginalized communities. As the United States has arguably become more diverse and inclusive,^{788,789} these changes have led to new developments in the research on Black families. In addition to the traditional focus on mothers and fathers in single- and two-parent heterosexual nuclear families, studies have examined (albeit in limited numbers) other critical caretakers and family structures, including grandmothers, aunts, and other extended kin, as well as LGBTQ+ couples and parents. Research studies have also begun to explore ethnic diversity among Black families through studies of Black immigrant families in the United States. While studies of Black families continue to largely focus on those experiencing economic disadvantage, especially in urban communities, more studies have begun to explore differences and similarities in the structures, functions, challenges, and needs of families who have incomes at, near, and above the poverty threshold, as well as Black families in suburban and rural contexts. These developments are promising and should be continued. Research on families also must expand to explore new areas, as described below.

Research on Black families conducted over the last 50 years highlights areas for new and continued focus.

Despite developments in research on Black families since the 1970s, empirical studies exploring the diversity and complexity of these families remain limited. The resulting gaps in the knowledge base on Black families' strengths, experiences, and needs contribute to the continuation of oversimplified depictions, policies, and practices that fail to advance systemic change. Moving forward, addressing the following gaps can help promote the well-being of Black families:

- **While U.S. families' composition, structures, and functions have changed in significant ways since the 1970s, much of this change has been invisible in the research on Black families.** For example, there is limited research on Black families who have children with special needs, on "sandwiched" families (i.e., families that include a middle generation of parents/caregivers who care for both their children and their own parents),⁷⁹⁰ and on the role of grandfathers in grandparent-led households. Moreover while there has been a notable increase in the number of interracial relationships and marriages and in the population of multiracial children with Black parents in the United States, this trend has not been fully explored in the literature on Black families. Research on Black families' parenting practices and strategies during middle and late childhood (ages 6 to 11) and late adolescence (ages 18 to 24) is also limited, highlighting the need for studies that span all ages and stages of child development. Expanding the research on Black families to include their continued changes and adaptations will help advance efforts to ensure that all families are visible and have what they need to thrive.
- **Understanding Black family and community assets remains a critical area of research.** The strengths and assets of Black families have been a significant part of the literature since Andrew Billingsley's pioneering work of the 1960s and 1970s.⁷⁹¹ As part of this work, he and others wrote about the Black church as a community organization that has positively affected Black family functioning and well-being. However, the ways in which family assets and community assets (including the Black church) are changing as Black families respond to shifts in societal norms and demands are not well understood. This gap in knowledge limits the development of policies and practices that can build on strengths that reside in Black families and communities, and thus constitutes a key area for continued research.

- **The past 50 years of research on Black families has shown that connections between research, social policy, and professional practice are complex.** At times, research may inform the development of new policies and practices. At other times, research and scholarship may provide critiques of policies and practices, offering alternative ways to conceptualize both. And at still other times, research may measure the costs and benefits of policies and practices and their impacts on specific populations—sparking renewed advocacy, leading to policy shifts, or contributing to a combination of both. It is clear that research can play a vital role in promoting social change. Studies examining the implementation and outcomes of research-policy-practice partnerships—especially for racially and ethnically diverse populations, and others who are underserved—can deepen understanding of these connections and maximize the impact of research on individuals' lives. Such understanding is particularly important when trying to dismantle systemic barriers to Black family well-being.

By addressing current gaps in the literature, researchers today can build on past progress to recognize Black families as vital social units that are, in the words of Andrew Billingsley, “highly interdependent with other aspects” of U.S. society,⁷⁹² depict Black families accurately and authentically, and produce actionable evidence that can contribute to their sustained progress.

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