

A 100-Year Review of Research on Black Families

Overview

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

The family is one of the most central and enduring influences in the lives of children. Families' importance is connected to their many roles and functions, including the provision of love, safety, identity development, socialization, economic support, and education;^{1,2,3} and to their role in transmitting monetary wealth and resources,⁴ language,^{5,6,7} culture,⁸ and other assets^{9,10}

Families in the United States are diverse and everchanging, with different demographic characteristics (e.g., race and ethnicity, gender, age, education level, income, religion), compositions (e.g., two-parent, single-parent, step-parent, multigenerational), and forms (married, unmarried, or cohabitating partners; opposite-sex or same-sex partners; nuclear, extended, adoptive, or foster). Angst often accompanies changes in families, with researchers and others declaring that families are falling apart¹¹ or even failing.¹² Despite these worries, families continue to persist, evolve, and endure. Given the family's importance as a social unit, it has been the subject of much social science research and social policy.

This report examines 100 years of social science research focused on Black families. The report was conceived and launched to provide a foundation for an applied research agenda on Black children and families that deepens understanding of their diversity, contextualizes their experiences within systems and institutions, and produces evidence to inform policies and practices that promote their well-being.¹³ Research focused on Black families has a long history, and building an understanding of this history was a critical aspect of writing this review, as it is important to understand the past to inform the future. Drawing links and understanding patterns and parallels between past and current research helped to ensure that our applied research agenda was informed by and situated within prior contexts. In this way, our report draws on lessons learned from previous generations of scholars to advance the field and set the stage for future research focused on understanding the complexity and nuances of Black families with children.

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.

About the primary authors

Our review builds on the tradition of Black scholars who have sought to understand Black family issues for the benefit of Black families with children (see Volume 1 for a brief accounting of early Black scholars and their influences on Black family research). Chrishana M. Lloyd¹⁴ (lead author of Volume I) is a Washington, DC-born and Virginia-raised Black woman with academic training in communications (bachelor’s), social work (Master’s), and family studies (PhD) from both Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs) of higher education and a Historically Black College and University (HBCU). Dr. Lloyd has worked as a clinically licensed social work practitioner with Black families across many U.S. systems, including those focused on economic and social support, health, and housing. She has also served as research staff on large-scale, federally funded evaluations and projects focused on families who are economically disadvantaged, including Supporting Healthy Marriages^{15,16,17} and Building Strong Families.¹⁸

Mavis Sanders¹⁹ (lead author of Volume II) is a Black woman born and raised in Birmingham, Alabama with training in urban affairs/political science/education (bachelor’s), sociology (Masters), and social sciences, policy, and educational practice (PhD) from Barnard College/Columbia University and Stanford University. Before joining Child Trends, Dr. Sanders served as professor of education at both a private PWI and a public Minority Serving Institution. Her research on school, family, and community partnerships; education reform; and Black student achievement has been funded by federal agencies, including the Department of Education, and by private grantmaking organizations like the Spencer Foundation. Her work is further informed by her various roles in pre-K-12 schools, from teacher and teacher-educator to parent and volunteer.

Drs. Lloyd and Sanders have both worked in academia—teaching, mentoring, and training students in specific topical areas of Black family studies, social policy, and practice. Currently, they are colleagues working at a primarily White, nonprofit, applied research organization that has developed infrastructure and invested resources in supporting scholars and developing a research agenda dedicated to the study of Black families with children. For this report, the authors agreed on the importance of not just exploring and presenting research focused on Black families, but also situating it within a historical and policy context. Their work is also committed to including forward-oriented recommendations for applied scholarship on Black families that acknowledges and includes attention to the past.

What we hoped to learn

From this 100-year review of the research, our goal was to understand how research on Black families evolved over time, including in the following ways:

- Areas of substantial knowledge about Black families (as well as gaps in evidence and understanding)
- The state and availability of demographic data on Black families
- Methodological strengths and weaknesses

In examining each of these areas, we sought to contextualize trends—as much as possible—in Black family research, including the “who,” the “what,” and the “when” of developments. By “who,” we mean the scientists pursuing the research, the funders supporting research projects, and policy and practice audiences utilizing research findings. By “what,” we refer to the focus areas of research, including not only the topics but the populations of interest. And by “when,” we mean the political, social, economic, and demographic contexts in which research was taking place.

Ensuring the centrality of Black families in our review

To complete this 100-year review of research on Black families within the context of policy and practice, we centered Black families within the history of the United States. This centering includes acknowledging that Black people were largely brought to this country to be enslaved and produce wealth for White people. Among other things, enslavement included labor and financial exploitation; deculturalization and dehumanization; reproductive oppression and coercion, including rape; forced illiteracy; violence and terrorism; and the squashing of political voice and power. These evils occurred and were justified by White people because Black adults and children were widely considered inferior to their White enslavers and other White people.

Thus, while our review of research on Black families covers a period after the enslavement of Black people in the United States ended, we are compelled to highlight this history and its legacy. This recognition includes the role of slavery and related history in creating distinctions between worthy/deserving and unworthy/undeserving people and families—with Black people and families falling squarely in the unworthy/undeserving category. Importantly, these distinctions became the foundation from which family policies, practices, and (eventually) research in the United States originated, and the ways in which they were (and are) often enacted.

Our review is also guided by a set of principles designed to ensure the centrality of Black families. These principles include:

- Summarizing and producing knowledge about Black families to acknowledge strengths, humanity, and intersecting identities
- Ensuring that Black families are visible, prioritized, and attended to in their own right—this includes avoiding comparisons to non-Black families unless necessary to illustrate issues of significance
- Examining historical, social, political, and cultural contexts to provide holistic perspectives
- Prioritizing knowledge that can reduce racism and inform shifts in systems, policies, and practices that affect Black families

Our approach

The historical timeframe (1920-2019)

The timeframe of our review, from 1920 to 2019, provided us the opportunity to capture key historical periods affecting Black families—including the Great Migration beginning in 1910; the Civil Rights Movement in the 1950s and 1960s; the election of former President Barack Obama and the first Black family to occupy the White House in 2008; and the growth of the Black Lives Matter movement, which ushered in a new era of Black-led activism for social justice beginning in 2013. We cover these historical periods in two volumes, divided roughly by the modern Civil Rights Movement.

Overview of Volume 1 (1920-1969). The first volume covers five decades: the 1920s to the 1960s. It highlights seminal works from researchers such as Edward Franklin Frazier, author of *The Negro Family in the United States* (1939), one of the first works to study the organization, structure, culture, and class of Black families; and Daniel P. Moynihan's *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action* (1965)—a publication that prompted a firestorm of theoretical and methodological critiques because of its framing of and conclusions about Black families. This volume reviews over 300 publications, emphasizing key authors

and institutions and the ways they shaped discourse on Black families, as well as policies that influenced Black families' social and economic opportunities. The emphasis on individual scholars—including their characteristics and affiliations—was intentional and gives voice to those who may have gone unrecognized. This focus also highlights the ways in which researchers and research approaches today build on earlier work.

Overview of Volume 2 (1970-2019). The second volume covers more than 500 publications on Black families from the five decades extending from 1970 to 2019, a period with a proliferation of research focused on the study of Black families. While seminal works of key authors are described, the volume of publications produced during this timeframe—coupled with the resources for the review—limited in-depth analyses of these works. Rather, Volume 2 highlights new and recurring themes in the research on Black families; developments in theoretical and methodological approaches; and how research on Black families reflected, responded to, and at times influenced public discourse and policies that affected Black families.

Methods

Our review focuses primarily on research specific to Black families, but, when necessary, also draws on a broader base of family-focused scholarship. For example, to understand general familial and societal trends, we examined and included learnings from summaries, meta-analyses, and other scholarly reviews conducted in family studies, demography, sociology, social work, and other fields.

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 scholarly literature across multiple disciplines. We used several search terms—"Negro family," "Black family," and "African American family"—to identify publications from the 1920s through 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 only included publications that had Black families as a key population of focus. Additional details about the volumes' methodologies, including the types of sources drawn on for this review and strategies for its completion, are included in the introductory sections of each volume.

Volume organization

Each volume includes an Introduction, Conclusion, and five chapters—with each chapter dedicated to a different decade. Each decade chapter includes three sections: Context; Overview of Select Research Topics, Methods, and Approaches; and Research, Policy, and Practice Connections. The context section briefly describes national political, social, and economic trends of the decade, with a particular focus on the events and policies affecting families broadly and Black families specifically. The section also includes demographic data on Black families for that decade. The demographic information largely draws on U.S. Census data or vital statistics data, although we cite data from sources other than the Census when Census data were not available. Throughout each decade, we include the following statistics on Black families: demographics (i.e., population, gender, number of children, information on marital status, and fertility rates), geography (i.e., where Black Americans lived in the country and their nativity), and economic outlook (i.e., income, employment/unemployment, poverty, and home ownership). The availability and quality of the data, however, varied greatly from the 1920s to the 2010s. As such, there are differences in the types of data reported across decades—especially earlier in our Volume I study period, when inconsistencies in Census data collection occurred more often. Specific information about how data were disaggregated by race and/or ethnicity are included in chapter footnotes, and in the Technical Appendices that accompany this review.

The second section of each chapter provides an overview of select research topics, methods, and approaches that characterized studies of Black families during the decade. This section includes research content highlights to promote understanding of common and divergent trends in the literature on Black families. We also review select research methods and approaches used to study Black families during each decade. In the final section of the chapters, we discuss research, policy, and practice connections to help readers understand the ways in which research affected policy and practice and vice versa, as well as the complexities in and impacts of these connections.

Our work moving forward

Our work, while expansive, does not cover the entirety of research on Black families from 1920 to 2019. It does, however, provide a firm foundation from which to understand and design research that draws on lessons from the past to inform present knowledge. This review also significantly informs a multi-year, applied research agenda on Black children and families at Child Trends. This agenda builds on prior work from this review's key authors and others associated with the agenda, and on lessons from more general family-focused research and research on Black families specifically. Our end goal is to produce new knowledge that can help create a society in which Black families have what they need to flourish.

Suggested citation (full report): Lloyd, C. M., Sanders, M., Shaw, S., Wulah, A., Wodrich, H., Harper, K., & Balén, Z. (2024). *A 100-year review of research on Black families*. Child Trends. DOI: 10.56417/5408y773j

References

- ¹ Masten, A. S., & Shaffer, A. (2006). How Families Matter in Child Development: Reflections from Research on Risk and Resilience. In A. Clarke-Stewart & J. Dunn (Eds.), *Families count: Effects on child and adolescent development* (pp. 5–25). Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511616259.002>
- ² Masten, A. S. (2018). Resilience theory and research on children and families: Past, present, and promise. *Journal of Family Theory & Review*, 10(1), 12–31.
- ³ Gadsden, V. L. & Hall, M. (1996). *Intergenerational learning: A review of the literature*. University of Pennsylvania.
- ⁴ Chiteji, N. & Hamilton, D. (2002). Family connections and the Black White wealth gap among the middle class. *Review of Black Political Economy*, 30(1):9–27.
- ⁵ Gadsden, V. L. & Hall, M. (1996). *Intergenerational learning: A review of the literature*. University of Pennsylvania.
- ⁶ Tam, K.P. (2015). Understanding intergenerational cultural transmission through the role of perceived norms. *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology*, 46(10), 1260–1266. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022022115600074>
- ⁷ Bau, N. & Fernández, R. (2023). Culture and the family. In *Handbook of the Economics of the Family* (Vol. 1, No. 1, pp. 1–48). North-Holland.
- ⁸ Yosso T. J. (2005). Whose culture has capital? A critical race theory discussion of community cultural wealth. *Race Ethnicity and Education*, 8(1), 69–91.
- ⁹ Smith, J. (2021). Transmission of faith in families: The influence of religious ideology. *Sociology of religion*, 82(3), 332–356.
- ¹⁰ Bau, N. & Fernández, R. (2023). Culture and the family. In *Handbook of the Economics of the Family* (Vol. 1, No. 1, pp. 1–48). North-Holland.
- ¹¹ Edleman, M.W. (1987). *Families in peril: An agenda for social change*. Harvard University Press.
- ¹² Raspberry, W. (2005). *Why our Black families are failing*. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/opinions/2005/07/25/why-our-black-families-are-failing/727f31fa-ba74-4568-964c-bb642c12abb4/>
- ¹³ Sanders, M., Lloyd, C.M., & Shaw, S. (2022). *An applied research agenda on Black children and families to advance practices and policies that promote their well-being*. Child Trends.
- ¹⁴ Child Trends (2022) *Meet our researchers: Chrishana M. Lloyd*. <https://www.childtrends.org/blog/meet-our-researchers-chrishana-m-lloyd>
- ¹⁵ Lloyd, C. M., Weech, A., & Gaubert, J. (2014). *Perspectives of low-income African American and Latino couples on relationship education*. MDRC
- ¹⁶ Lundquist, E., Hsueh, J., Lowenstein, A. E., Faucetta, K., Gubits, D., Michalopoulos, C., & Knox, V. (2014). *A family-strengthening program for low-income families: Final impacts from the Supporting Healthy Marriage evaluation*. OPRE Report 2014-09A. Washington, DC: Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.
- ¹⁷ Miller Gaubert, J., Gubits, D., Principe Alderson, D., & Knox, V. (2012). *The Supporting Healthy Marriage Evaluation: Final implementation findings*. OPRE Report 2012-12. Washington, DC: Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.
- ¹⁸ Wood, R. G., Moore, Q., Clarkwest, A., Killewald, A., & Monahan S. (2012). *The Long-Term Effects of Building Strong Families: A Relationship Skills Education Program for Unmarried Parents*, OPRE Report # 2012-28A, Washington, DC: Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.
- ¹⁹ Child Trends (2022) *Meet our researchers: Mavis Sanders*. <https://www.childtrends.org/blog/meet-our-researchers-mavis-sanders>