
The African American Family

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Introduction

Since the mid-1960s, the African American family has attracted considerable attention from scholars as well as from politicians. Tragically, during this same period, black community members have continued to be victims of increased crime, of substance abuse, of unemployment, and ultimately, of untold poverty. The size of the black community's male population continues to dwindle. The impact of the provocative works by E. Franklin Frazier and Melville Herskovits during the 1940s seems to have opened the debate on the black family. Franklin, after a careful study of the impact of the slavery era and the conditions of the black family in the periods thereafter, concluded that slavery contributed to a loss of traditional African family values within the black community, forcing African Americans to assimilate the values of the white family structure, a trend that was accelerated by continued racism and the deplorable conditions of the inner city (the destination of most urban migration). Alternatively, Herskovits stressed the strength of the black family even in slavery and pointed to the survival factor that Frazier had overlooked.

Unfortunately, Frazier's conclusions were subsequently misinterpreted and misused by Daniel Moynihan who, as a member of the Nixon Administration, argued that the detrimental matriarchal nature of the black family was responsible for the disintegration of the black community. The debate has resulted in a serious questioning and criticism of the methodology used by the students of the African American family and therefore of the validity of their conclusions. Many black sociologists argue against sweeping generalizations based either on the black middle-class family or the premise that the white middle class model—monogamous, nuclear, and self-sufficient—is the model family against which black families should be measured to determine success or failure.

The continuing debate has generated two major schools of thought: one which sees the black family as sick (the pathological theory, advanced by Moynihan and others) and therefore negatively affecting the soundness of the whole black community; and the other stressing the strengths of the black family as an adaptive institution (the adaptability theory, advanced by scholars such as Robert Hill and John Blassingame). Most other scholars can be placed between the two extremes, as they are able to find both positives and threatening negatives in the institution of the black family.

An important often-asked question is: Will the black family be able to survive the onslaught on its stability coming from so many directions? Because the issue has become so prominent and troubling among African American researchers and professionals, particularly social scientists, social workers, public policy makers, and community leaders, the following chapter will be devoted entirely to the black family—its history, its nature, its strength and weakness, and its ability to survive and thrive, as America continues its path throughout the twenty-first century. The author hopes that this introductory treatment of the black family will lead students to pursue more advanced studies on the topic.

Major terms and concepts: slavery, emancipation, family, nuclear vs. extended family, monogamy, African survivals, pathology, adaptability, teenage pregnancy, single-headed household, racism, unemployment, child welfare system, adoption, foster care, guardianship, empowerment, family-preservation services, family-centered services.

The Black Family from Slavery to Freedom

Much of the study that followed Frazier's work and Moynihan's rejoinder has attempted to rehabilitate the black family by exposing the fallacies upon which the pathology and instability claims about the African American families were based. In his several studies, Billingsley, for example, has denied the premise that the black family, even during slavery, was unstable and matriarchal, pushing the argument to the point of almost denying the cultural and psychological destructive nature of slavery in the United States. He has argued that black families, in spite of slavery, kept kinship ties, maintained solidarity, respected their traditional mores, and never abandoned the mutual assistance tradition, much of which, he added, were African survivals. Atwood and Genovese advanced a similar argument when they concluded that commitment to marriage was always present in the majority of black families and that, rather than a matriarchy, there was partnership, flexibility, and equalitarianism in marriage, as a complementarity in household roles, out of which came families that were as stable as white families as America entered the post-World War II era.

Other scholars, including Herbert Gutman, painstakingly made efforts to demonstrate that, contrary to what we have been led to believe, black families, from the Civil War to Civil Rights, even though the large majority were lower class, remained overwhelmingly, both in the urban North and the rural South, two-parent headed households kept together by extended, "multigenerational" kinship networks, just as continental African families have been over the centuries. Allen (1978) and Harriet Pipes McAdoo have also derided the generalizations of the first studies because these were based on the lower-class black family and used the white family or the upper middle class black family as a median model. While Allen stressed variance or the adoption of a "variant perspective," which underscores the diversity but also the normalcy of all types of families, including the African American family, McAdoo has noted that "there are several distinct groups within the African American community, yet when we are able to relate only to mean or median statistics, the wide diversity of family experiences becomes buried." She finds, however, a major common thread in the fabric of black communities, reflected in the crucial role of such African survivals as the importance of "oral traditions, reliance on extended families (consanguineal relationships), spirituality, rhythmic-movements expression, and communalism."

McAdoo further stresses the fact that earlier studies contributed to unproven stereotypes about black families when they failed to differentiate between family stability and marriage stability. She and many other scholars have emphasized the important point that, in the black community, kinship relationships have often kept family relationships stable in the face of rising divorce and separation rates. The most important requisites for stability and proper functioning of the family, scholars add, are love and adequate resources to raise the children.

Historians John Hope Franklin and John Blassingame and the late sociologist E. Franklin Frazier provide a comprehensive view of the black family in antebellum America. Their studies demonstrate and underscore both the obstacles to the continuation of the family traditions brought from Africa and the slaves' resilience in their attempt to maintain a modicum of kinship ties despite the brutal system under which they lived. The picture that comes out of the slavery experience, studied by so many others, has shaped many of the treatises advanced by contemporary social scientists.

When slaves arrived on the shores of America, they were, in most cases, not kept as a family but were split up and sold or auctioned to eager slave masters. Although keeping families together should have been simply a matter of common sense if the plantation productivity through stability of manpower were to be facilitated, masters feared that a stable and close family could become a nucleus for conspiracy based on kinship, culture, and common language. Separating individ-

uals who might have come from the same African region, who spoke the same language, or who were members of the same family was thought to be the safest way to ensure the survival of the “peculiar institution.” It was believed that a slave, placed in a totally new social and physical environment without the solidarity brought about by family bonds, would not be as likely to muster the inspiration and strength to escape or rebel.

John Hope Franklin writes that, among most slave owners who specialized in slave-breeding in such states as Virginia and South Carolina, the tendency was to sell slaves as individuals rather than families, some of which had emerged on the plantations, because retailing individual slaves was more profitable. Although some states had laws prohibiting the sale of children under the age of 10, in most, the laws were “almost wholly disregarded.” In most cases, except among some extremely religious masters' households, slave families were never taken seriously. In those cases where slave unions were somewhat respected, economic rather than moral considerations were the basis. Marriage, the most important aspect of family formation, was not taken seriously by slave masters, even when they allowed a special ceremony to mark the event. Marriage was simply viewed as a search for companionship to make plantation life more bearable. In fact, slave accounts confirm that most of the marriage ceremonies that were allowed turned out to be an entertainment for the master's household.

Slaves wishing to marry always had to have permission from their masters. Because most masters preferred marriages of slaves living on the same plantations, it became extremely difficult for most male slaves to find suitable mates, since the master himself quite often maintained his most attractive female slaves as concubines. The high incidence of concubinage is confirmed by the numbers of mulatto children in the antebellum period: out of 3.2 million slaves in 1850, 246,000 were registered mulattoes, according to John Hope Franklin. By 1860, the figure had risen to 411,000 (or 588,352 according to Du Bois) out of a slave population estimated at 3.9 million. Adding to the difficulties surrounding marriages between enslaved African Americans was the fact that, when marriages were allowed by the slave masters, necessary courtships were often missing. Furthermore, children were not properly cared for because of the work the mother had to perform for her master in the household or in the fields. Slave children, except perhaps among certain mulatto households, were given tasks (errands, fetching water, taking care of the master's other children, traveling with his wife) as soon as they reached the age of seven or eight, spending very little time with their own parents. Lack of prenatal and postnatal care for the mother and care for the newborns resulted in high infant mortality rates, which further destabilized many slave families.

One other factor contributing to the erosion of family ties prior to emancipation was the separation of slaves during settlement even if the slaves were from the same household. In addition, because many slave masters maintained a sexual relationship with their female slaves, particularly those assigned to domestic chores, women became heads of families. They assumed authority over the children while the father, feared and relegated to the fields, was reduced to the role of a breeder. The presumed predominance of a matriarchal system in the slave family prompted Frazier to declare the weakness of the institution within the black community and to posit that mulatto families, favored by slave-owners, were stronger because they were predominantly patriarchal.

Franklin, Frazier, Blassingame, and Gutman are quick to add, however, that even during slavery—in the midst of oppression and repression—the black family remained relatively strong in the North and where it was allowed in the South. Mothers loved their children (the primacy of children has remained one of the major characteristics of the black family); under adverse circumstances, fathers did what they could to protect their households; brothers and sisters took care of each other; and when they were separated, siblings quite often attempted to find one another. Using the Underground Railroad, siblings looked for each other in such large northern cities as Philadelphia and New York. Thus, the family, as an institution, continued to be cherished within the slave community, notwithstanding the legal system that did not recognize it as valid and legal. This reality prompted Blassingame to write:

Although it was weak, although it was frequently broken, the slave family provided an important buffer, a refuge from the rigors of slavery. While the slave father could rarely protect the members of his family from abuse, he could often gain their love and respect in many ways. In his family, the slave not only learned how to avoid the blows of the master, but also drew on the love and sympathy of its members to raise his spirits. The family was, in short, an important survival mechanism.

With emancipation, the situation of the African American family was radically altered, and the union of the emancipated could now evolve from an “invisible” and oppressed family to a full-blown, self-sustaining, free family. Several factors assisted the newly freed slaves in starting a new family or reinforcing the one maintained during the slave years. It must be noted that, although a period of theoretical freedom for the slaves, emancipation proved very trying for many former slaves. Many remained on the plantation against their will; others decided to stay with their masters because they had nowhere else to go or owned nothing; and many others, some of whom had families, remained literally hopeless. The federal government and some states

stepped in to protect the freed families and instill in others the sense of building a monogamous household, because many polygynous and polyandrous practices had existed among both the white and black plantation dwellers. Thus, deserting a wife or the children became a criminal offense in many states, and bigamy and polygyny were punishable by law.

In order to allow a smooth transition, beginning in 1866 several states compelled the male ex-slaves to select only one spouse in cases where they may have had several wives. In South Carolina, for example, polygamous slaves had until April 1, 1866, to select a spouse, otherwise their children would be declared illegitimate. Marriage registration was made easier at state, county, and municipal offices. In this effort, the churches (the various independent African American churches) and the missionary schools (especially those run by missionaries from New England) contributed greatly to the stabilization of old and new marriages. As Jessie Bernard (in *Marriage and Family Among Negroes*) notes on the role of the Church, "in many cases the idea of marriage dignified by a minister appealed to the newly freed Negroes, for it implied equality with whites. Official marriage became a status symbol, and weddings became occasions of great gaiety." The Church was empowered by states to dissolve polygamous or abusive marriages whenever it made sense to church officials.

The military establishment also had a positive role in this endeavor, as it insisted on marriage registration and family responsibility toward wife and children, and often returned any fees charged to the soldiers who attempted to obtain marriage certificates. This was reinforced by the establishment in 1866 of the Freedmen's Bureau. The bureau was an early, significant, government-sponsored child welfare service that had a positive impact on African American families. Not only did it clarify and facilitate rules governing marriage for the newly freed slaves, it often secured land, work, and direct relief to poor children within their families. Within the context of the time, the creation of the bureau was a revolutionary development in child welfare services since it was financed by the federal government and provided in-home service to African American children and their families. Its demise in 1871 came too soon and was a result of inadequate financial support and the belief that, Andrew Billingsley and Jeanne Giovannoni state, the bureau's work encouraged "the natural slothfulness of the Black race."

Other early community efforts in the late 1800s were led by African American organizations such as lodges (e.g., the Masons, the Odd Fellows, and the Knights of Pythias); women's clubs (e.g., the National Association of Colored Women); and educational institutions which were instrumental in meeting the needs of freed or newly established African American families. These measures certainly strengthened the post-emancipation African American family. Thus, although Billings-

ley calls emancipation “a catastrophic social crisis for the ex-slave,” and the Reconstruction period “a colossal failure,” he is compelled to add that “at the same time, there were some ‘screens of opportunity’ which did enable large numbers of families to survive, some to achieve amazingly stable and viable forms of family life, and a few to achieve a high degree of social distinction.”

A discussion of the African American community following Reconstruction, particularly in the South, must take into account the devastating psychological and social impact of racism and violence on the family unit. In its worst form, violence against blacks and the black family manifested itself in lynching, which became an all-too-common occurrence. Available records suggest that between 1882 and 1968 some 4,700 cases of lynching of African American men, women, and children took place in the United States, including 581 cases in Mississippi, 531 in Georgia, 493 in Texas, and 347 in Alabama, as the following table illustrates.

Added to the terror of lynching, was the fact that little was done by the government to protect by law and through enhancing programs the African American community and its family units.

During the early and mid-1900s, authorities continued to exclude African American families from the formalized child welfare service systems. As a result, national black community organizations, such as the National Urban League, founded in 1911, and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, created in 1909, struggled for the provision of economic opportunity and civil rights for African American families. Since that time, African American families have become more visible in the child welfare system. However, adequately meeting African American families' and children's service needs in the current system of service delivery remains inadequate.

Table 1: Incidence of Lynching in the United States (1882–1968)

| States | Total | States | Total | States | Total |
|--------|-------|--------|-------|--------|-------|
| Ala. | 347 | Md. | 29 | Ore. | 21 |
| Ariz. | 31 | Mich. | 8 | Pa. | 8 |
| Ark. | 284 | Minn. | 9 | S.C. | 160 |
| Calif. | 43 | Miss. | 581 | S.D. | 27 |
| Colo. | 68 | Mo. | 122 | Tenn. | 251 |
| Del. | 1 | Mont. | 84 | Texas | 493 |
| Fla. | 282 | Neb. | 57 | Utah | 8 |
| Ga. | 531 | Nev. | 6 | Vt. | 1 |
| Idaho | 20 | N.J. | 2 | Va. | 100 |
| Ind. | 47 | N.M. | 36 | Wash. | 26 |
| Iowa | 19 | N.Y. | 2 | W. VA. | 48 |
| Kan. | 54 | N.C. | 101 | Wis. | 6 |
| Ky. | 205 | N.D. | 16 | Wyo. | 35 |
| La. | 391 | Ohio | 26 | | |
| Maine | 1 | Okla. | 122 | TOTAL | 4,709 |

Source: *USA Today*, September 25–27, 1992, pp. 1, 2, 4A–5A (from 1990 U.S. Census figures).

The Black Family from Freedom to Civil Rights

The past four to five decades have also witnessed broad societal changes that influenced the status of the African American family—the Civil Rights movement, urban unrest, political discontent, the War on Poverty programs of the 1960s, school busing to achieve integration, the Voting Rights Act of 1965, affirmative action and the affront to its existence, and an employment-focused child and family welfare system. The United States has also experienced the numerical predominance of African Americans in major cities, the expansion of the black middle class and a stable working class, and the achievement of a nearly one million-plus enrollment of African American youth in higher education, in addition to the exponential increase in the number of African Americans holding elected office. The Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies released its 2000 figures, showing a six-fold increase since 1970 to 9,040 of black elected officials. Perhaps surprisingly, the top five states with the largest number of black elected officials are Mississippi, Alabama, Louisiana, Illinois, and Georgia. Furthermore, *Black Issues in Higher Education* has reported the striking progress of African Americans in degree attainments. Specifically, the number of blacks earning bachelor's degrees has doubled over the past two decades and includes more than 100,000, while the number of blacks earning master's degrees is up 141 percent since 1985.

The most frequent degrees awarded to blacks were business management and social sciences, such as psychology, education, and health sciences. In 2002, according to census information, 17 percent of young blacks received bachelor's degrees. Although black women are

mental health and development, including drops in intelligence quotient (IQ) and increases in learning disabilities, depression, suicides, delinquency, and drug and alcohol abuse.

During the 1980s, African Americans experienced a growing “underclass,” high rates of unemployment and underemployment, and a high rate of school drop-outs. Clearly, the African American community is in transition. Yet, African American families are retaining their strength to “make it against all odds.” In 2002, there were 8.8 million black families and 53.6 million white families in the United States. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, also in 2002, the Hispanic population became the largest population of color in the U.S., with about 13.5 percent of the population. This was up from about 4.5 percent in 1970. Simultaneously, the black population comprised about 13 percent of the total population, comparable to the 1990 percentage, although the black population increased faster than the population as a whole, at 21.5 percent for African Americans versus 13 percent for the entire population. Yet, black families faced odds that have been difficult to overcome, as the following statistics underscore.

The income for African American households increased 4.3 percent between 1996 and 1997 and has not drastically changed since. The real median income rose from \$24,021 to \$25,050, making the income surpass 1989 levels. However, in 2016, the median household income for a black family still remained around \$20,000. While the median white household income was \$60,000 that of a black household family rose only to \$40,000, according to the Brookings Institution.

On ownership, receipts for all African American businesses represented 10 percent of the more or less firms of the 27 million existing in the US in 2018. For interested readers, following are the richest African Americans in the US (see <https://www.ranker.com/list/the-20-richest-african-americans/worlds-richest-people-lists>): In 2013, the top 10 African-American-owned businesses netted more than \$185 billion in total gross receipts, distributed as follows: World Wide Technology: + \$6 billion; ACT-1 Group, Inc: \$2.2 billion; Bridgewater Interiors, LCC: \$1.5 billion; Modular Assembly Innovations, LLC: \$1.2 billion; Manna Inc: \$630 million; Anderson-Dubose Company: \$545 million; Detroit-Based Global Automotive Alliance: \$520 million; Thompson Hospital-ity: \$485 million; Radio One, Inc: \$450 million; SET Enterprises, Inc: \$400 million; and Patti LaBelle: \$1 million (Thangavelu, 2015). The richest black individuals in the United States include: Aliko Dangote \$14.4 billion; Mike Adenuga \$9.9 billion; Robert Smith \$4.4 billion; Oprah Winfrey \$3.1 billion; Byaruhanga Kimberly Junior \$2.1 billion; Femi Otedola \$1.85 billion; and Strive Masiyiwa \$1.8 billion (from Zimbabwe); Michael Jordan \$650 million; Sean Combs \$620 million; Tiger Woods \$590 million; Robert Johnson \$580 million; Mariah Carey \$510 million; Magic Johnson \$500 million; Jay-Z \$475 million; Sheila John-

son \$400 million; Tyler Perry \$400 million; Bill Cosby \$380 million; Shaquille O'Neil \$350 million; Dr. Dre \$350 million; Master P \$350 million; Donahue Peebles \$350 million; Berry Gordy \$345 million; Russell Simmons \$340 million; Quintin Primo III \$300 million; Beyonce Knowles \$300 million; Prince (d. 2016) \$300 million; Janice Bryant Howroyd \$250 million; Diana Ross \$250 million; Herman Russell \$200 million; Ulysses L. Bridgeman, Jr. \$200 million; Kobe Bryant \$200 million; Will Smith \$200 million; Lionel Richie: \$200 million; and Tina Turner \$200 million.

Poverty has declined over the years but continues to be high among African Americans compared to white Americans and to other races, except American Indians. Between 1996 and 1997, for example, the number of poor African Americans dropped to 9.1 million and poverty rates among them dropped from 28.4 percent to 26.5 percent. In 2001, census statistics indicated that an estimated 32.9 million people in the US lived below the poverty level, including 8.1 million blacks, and 15.3 million non-Hispanic whites. Unfortunately, while poverty among black people was 22 percent in 2017 from an overall US poverty level of 12.7 percent, among African American women the level of poverty was higher, namely, 34.2 percent. Poverty and hunger among African Americans was 22.5 percent, according to the US census.

Thus, the attainment of economic parity with white American families in the 2000s continued to elude African American families. As the Census Bureau indicates, over one-half (52 percent) of all black married-couple families had incomes of \$50,000 or more and 27 percent of them had incomes of \$75,000 or more; conversely, 64 percent of non-Hispanic white families had incomes of \$50,000 or more, while 40 percent of white families had incomes greater than \$75,000. Clearly, black married couples fare better economically than all variations of black family structures combined, as indicated by the lower percentages of all black families with incomes reaching \$50,000 (only 33 percent) annually and those attaining a \$75,000 (only 27 percent) yearly income.

Indeed, notwithstanding the above, still a larger proportion of black married-couples (8 percent) than their white counterparts (3 percent) were poor in 2001. There were 6.8 million families in the United States with incomes below the poverty level, and 1.8 million of these families were black. Twenty-one percent of families in poverty were black. In 1997, the nation's African American population consisted of 12.109 million households of whom 3.85 million were married couples, 3.94 million were headed by women, and 757,000 were led by men. Furthermore, also in 1997, African American families with children under 18 were comprised of 1.97 million married couple families, 2.59 million female-headed families, and 1.70 million were headed by males. Among African American families, which consisted of families with children less than 18 years of age, 58 percent were headed by females

who had no spouse present and had never been married, as compared to 41 percent of mother-child family groups in the total population.

The number of families headed by African American women and women in the general population has increased dramatically over the past several decades. For example, Family Services America reported that the number of families headed by African American women significantly increased, from 30 percent in 1970 to 42 percent in 1987. In 1997, all married couples with children less than 18 years of age had declined to 25 percent, down from 40 percent in 1970. With the growing unemployment, single female heads of families in the black community were likely to increase. Robert Hill notes that the poverty rates among female-headed African American families edged upward by 1 percent, from 51 percent to 52 percent, between 1978 and 1987, while recent census reports (2001) indicate that 35 percent of black families maintained by women were in poverty and 19 percent of black families maintained by men with no spouse present lived in poverty. The comparable rates for white families were 19 percent and 10 percent, respectively.

Statistics also prove that both African American males and females are likely to be employed in lower paying occupations and to receive lower wages within many occupations. According to Jesse McKinnon, in 2002, the unemployment rate for blacks was twice that for non-Hispanic whites, 11 percent and 5 percent, respectively. Recent history shows that the African American community lost about \$15.2 billion in income due to high rates of unemployment (from 6 percent in 1969 to 12 percent in 1988). This increase from 570,000 unemployed to a record high of 1.7 million resulted in zero earnings for a significant number of black American individuals and families. African American males and teenagers were the hardest hit by unemployment. Overall, the most recent census figures reveal that the number of black families under the poverty level was 20 percent in 1969 and 21 percent in 2001, thus emphasizing that the economic racial divide for a significant minority of the black population continues. These adverse circumstances have also been detrimental to the life expectancy of the black population, particularly for males, whom death prematurely takes from the family. Life expectancy for black males has declined over the years, from 69.7 years in 1984 to 69.5 in 1985 and to 69.4 in 1986 and, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) in 2000, to 68.2 versus 74.8 for white males. However, have changed slowly over the years. In 2017, blacks had slightly gained in life expectancy, having moved up to 75.6 years compared to 79 among their white counterparts. The CDC notes, in fact, that a black boy born in 2013 had a life expectancy of 72.3 years in contrast to his white counterpart, who showed a life expectancy of 76.6 years.

As though these misfortunes were not enough, the African American male has been hardest hit by drug abuse, crime, unemployment, lack of educational opportunities, prison, and diseases, conditions that have created severe shortage of prospective spouses within the black community. In 1983, it was estimated that, although the black male population accounted for only 6 percent of the U.S. population, about 50 percent of the U.S. prison population was black—about 80,671 black male prison inmates (contrasted to 6,836 black females). Delgado, in 2001, reported that, although blacks were 13 percent of the U.S. population, they represented 45 percent of those arrested for violent felonies and roughly half of those held in state and federal prisons. Ergo, no decrease in the percentage of blacks in the prison population over the past two or more decades is discernible. African American overrepresentation in prisons and jails is nothing less than startling. Even worse, historically, men of color have been overrepresented on death row, comprising 50 percent of the total of 5,416 persons sentenced to death from 1877 to 1997. This period also witnessed an overwhelming number of those who were executed—181 of the 432 men and women, or 44.2 percent.

The impact of these conditions on the number of males has been well documented. Thus, for example, in 1989, there were 95 white men to every 100 white females but only 90 black men to 100 black females. This shortage was most acute within the 24–45-year-old range, where the ratio was 85 for every 100 females. Interracial marriages have also had their impact on the black family and the availability of male partners. According to Lee, in 1990, black males were 2.5 times more likely to be married to a white female than black females married to a white male. The author reports from the official 2000 census count that black men are 2.82 times more likely to marry outside of their race, predominantly to white women, than black women are to marry outside of their race. According to the Bureau of the Census, in 1985, among black-white interracial married couples in the United States, the number of black male-white female unions was more than double the number of black female-white male unions." From 1970 to 1985, the number of black husband-white wife marriages rose from 41,000 to 122,000 respectively, while that of black wife-white husband grew from 24,000 to 47,000 respectively during the same period. The interracial marriage trend continues, while drug use erodes the community and the black family. At the height of the war on drugs, from 1986 to 1991, the number of white drug offenders in state prisons increased by 110 percent. The number of black drug offenders grew by 465 percent. African Americans account for 14 percent of the nation's drug users, yet they make up 35 percent of those arrested for drug possession, 55 percent of those convicted for drug possession, and 74 percent of those sentenced to serve time, according to Charles Shaw. According to the Federal Bureau of Prisons (2003), males represent 71.8 percent of those

sentenced to serve time. In his study of the ratio between black males and females, Michael Williams warns of ominous consequences for the future of the black family and concludes by noting:

When the numbers of black men who are homosexual, already married, uninterested in marriage, and for other reasons, unacceptable as mates, are excluded from the official Census Bureau statistics, the male-to-female ratio in the African-American community, in real terms, declines even more. In fact, Robert Staples has suggested that, in practical terms, there may be no more than one black man for every five single women in the United States.

The impact of disease on the black community, particularly HIV, has become clearer as more studies are completed. According to the CDC, in 2001 African Americans accounted for more than 833,000 estimated AIDS cases diagnosed since the beginning of the epidemic. As a result, by the end of December 2001, more than 168,000 African Americans had died from AIDS. That year, African Americans accounted for about 21,000 or 50 percent of the more than 41,000 estimated new AIDS cases diagnosed among adults. In this area, the rates have changed but African Americans are still not doing as expected compared to other groups in the US. In 2014, for example, some 471,500 African Americans were diagnosed with HIV, representing 43 percent of “everyone living with HIV in the United States,” but 16 percent of them did not realize they had an infection. In 2015, 3,379 African Americans died from HIV, which represented “52 percent of the total deaths attributed to the disease that year.” By 2016, the new rate, according to CDC, was estimated at 44 percent of the United States total cases but the proportion was still higher compared to that of the white population. This means that greater collaborative intervention efforts on the part of stakeholders in the African American community, including spiritual and religious leaders and organizations, educational systems, family systems of diverse structures, professional practitioners, and those directly impacted by HIV or AIDS must become involved in preventive efforts to reverse the situation. Recently, HIV/AIDS has not become a death sentence, as several treatments have proven to be effective in prolonging life.

A Look at the Present Conditions

The preceding figures were provided not only to underscore the dire needs of the black family to survive and strive but also to highlight how far it has come since the end of slavery in 1865. As demonstrated in the table below, with figures provided by the Pew Research Center for the period 2014–2017, the dogged persistence of problems related to poor college education, unemployment, and poverty are emblematic of the

work that still needs to be done to rescue the African American family. There has been, in fact, a precipitous drop in the number of African American married couples (35 percent as opposed to 60 among whites, respectively, and 68 percent among Asian Americans), and the percentage of children living in a single-parent household (54 percent as opposed to 19 percent among white families) is alarming.

Other experts note that, while in 1962 only 12 percent of black children were raised in single-parent homes, in 2015 the number has climbed as high as to 70 percent rather than the 54 percent noted above. As if to add insult to injury, the rate of poverty among blacks in female singled-headed households is 37 percent. While in households where both parents raise a child, only 8 percent live in poverty, in households where both parents have full-time employment, the level of poverty is even less, namely, 5 percent. This prompts George Mason University Professor Walter E. Williams (a conservative) to assert that “the bottom line is that the black family was stronger the first 100 years after slavery than during what will be the second 100 years.” The following selected data published by the Children's Defense Fund in 2014 is a stark indication of the precarious state of black families' children in the United States.

Table 2: Comparative Percentages of Racial Inequality among Four Major Ethnic Groups in the U.S. (2015)

| Variable | Racial/Ethnic Group (White) | Racial/Ethnic Group (Black) | Racial/Ethnic Group (Hispanic) | Racial/Ethnic Group (Asian) |
|--|-----------------------------|-----------------------------|--------------------------------|-----------------------------|
| 1. College Completion | 36 | 23 | 15 | 53 |
| 2. High School Completion | 93 | 88 | 67 | 89 |
| 3. Household Income | \$71,300 | \$43,300 | \$43,300 | \$77,900 |
| 4. Poverty Level | 10 | 26 | 24 | 12 |
| 5. Wealth (2014) | \$144,200 | \$11,200 | — | — |
| 6. Home Ownership (2015) | 72 | 43 | 45 | 57 |
| 7. Unemployment (2015) | 4.5 | 10.3 | 7.2 | 3.6 |
| 8. Non-Marital Births (2014) | 29 | 71 | 53 | — |
| 9. Children in Single-Parent Household | 19 | 54 | 29 | 13 |
| 10. Marriage Status Decline | 60 | 35 | 54 | 68 |

Source: Adapted from “Demographic Trends and Economic Well-Being,” Pew Research Center, June 27, 2016: 1–12.

The Survival of the African American Family

Many of the problems within the black community have economic and racial bases. Thus, to understand and appreciate the economic difficulty of African American families, four social and economic disadvantages that have plagued African Americans must be understood.

First, African Americans own or control few businesses or other wealth-enhancing or job-creating institutions. Second, African Americans have had little accumulated wealth. Third, they have historically experienced racial discrimination in their attempts to gain equal access to education and employment opportunities controlled by whites. Finally, African Americans have traditionally had lower levels of formal training and education than their white counterparts. The impact of these economic circumstances on family functioning is negative. The primary functions of the family are: (1) to provide for the basic physical needs of its members and (2) to nurture them. Adequate income is required to fulfill the provider role which, if accomplished, raises the self-esteem of parents and consequently increases their ability to nurture their children. As job opportunities decline and unemployment gains momentum, a simultaneous decrease in two-parent families, increases in out-of-wedlock births, and the growth of an underclass of families in poverty can be seen.

Table 3: State of African American Children in America in 2014 (Unless Otherwise Specified)

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| 1. In 2012, 73.7 million children lived in the U.S. (2012), of which 10.2 million or 14 percent were black and 38.9 million or 53 percent were white. |
| 2. Each day in the U.S., 597 black babies were born into poverty.* |
| 3. More than 4 million black babies were poor in 2012 (40 percent), compared to 5.2 million white children (14 percent). |
| 4. In six US states, half or more black children were poor (nearly half of the states had black child poverty rates of 40 percent or more). |
| 5. The average wealth of black households in 2011 was 94 percent less than the average wealth of white Households, namely \$6,314 compared to \$110,500. |
| 6. A black baby is born to an unmarried mother every 75 seconds and to a teen mother every 7 minutes (black children living with single mothers were three-and-a-half times as likely to be poor as black children living with married parents). |
| 7. Each day, 1,153 black babies were born to unmarried mothers and 199 to teen mothers. |
| 8. Each day, 19 black babies are prone to die before their first birthday, for a total of 6,973 a year (they were more than twice as likely as white babies to die before their first birthday). |
| 9. A black baby was born at a low birth weight every 7 minutes. |
| 10. More than 80 percent of fourth- and eighth-grade black public school children students could not read or compute at grade level compared to less than 57 percent of white children. |
| 11. Black children had the highest rates of maltreatment of any racial/ethnic group: 14.2 black children maltreated per 1,000 black children, compared to 8 per 1,000 white children and 1.7 per 1,000 Asian children. |
| 12. Gun violence was the leading cause of death among black children ages 1–19. |
| 13. The number of black children and teens killed by guns between 1963 and 2010 was 17 times greater than the number of recorded lynching cases of black people of all ages from 1882 to 1968. |

Source: Children's Defense Fund. "The State of Black Children in America: A Portrait of Continuing Inequality." Washington, DC, 25 E Street, NW (www.childrensdefense.org), Retrieved 1/14/2018.

* Poverty is defined as living on less than \$23,492 a year, or \$1,958 a month, \$452 a week, or \$64 a day for a family of four, while extreme or absolute poverty is living on less than half the poverty level, that is, less than \$11,746 a year or \$32 a day for a family of four.

The federal government has, over the years, provided some assistance to poor white and poor black families. As noted by Prater, the three primary forms of services historically offered by child and family welfare agencies are supportive services, supplemental services, and substitute services. These services are generally mandated at the micro level (individual and family) while using an ameliorative or restorative approach to service delivery for the purpose of improving family functioning. Supportive services, such as child care and counseling, provide help to families that are carrying out the basic caretaking role and providing for the principle needs of their members. Supplemental services are made available to families by the child welfare system to aid them in meeting the basic family functions of feeding, clothing, housing, and ensuring that adequate healthcare services are provided for their members. These services are offered through programs such as Medicaid, the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), and the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) created by the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996. The latter replaces the former Aid to Families with Dependent Children, the Job Opportunities and Basic Skills Training (JOBS), and the Emergency Assistance Programs. Both supportive and supplemental services are usually provided to families in their own homes. Moreover, there is increased overlap of supportive and supplemental services as the federal

earning almost double the baccalaureate degrees as black men, black men earning degrees are also increasing in number. Other striking news is that, during the same period, black doctoral degrees were up 110 percent. Yet, the African American community itself continues to face significant problems. For example, although the African American teen birth rate is reportedly the lowest in the 40 years for which data have been available for African American women, the percentage of births to unmarried teens remains high. In 2000, the birth rate for African American adolescents 15–17 was 50.4 per 1,000 compared to 23.6 per 1,000 for white teens, according to the Sexuality Information and Education Council of the United States. This phenomenon accounts, in part, for the rate of out-of-wedlock pregnancies and subsequently for an increase in single parents.

Further, the number of children in need of child protective services has soared. Maltreatment categories typically include neglect, medical neglect, physical abuse, sexual abuse, and psychological maltreatment. The National Clearinghouse on Child Abuse and Neglect Information revealed that, in 2001, 3 million referrals concerning the welfare of approximately 5 million children were made to child protective services agencies throughout the United States, with two-thirds being screened in and one-third screened out for service. Additionally, more than 2 million children and families were provided services to prevent abuse and neglect. According to the National Child Abuse and Neglect Data System (NCANDS), investigations confirmed over 903,000 children were found to be victims of child maltreatment in 2001. The highest percentage of victims was white (half), African American (one-quarter), and Hispanic (15 percent). Child fatalities are the most tragic consequences of maltreatment. Approximately 1,300 children died of abuse or neglect during 2001, a rate of 1.81 children per 100,000 children in the population. Neglect, difficult to clearly define, usually refers to deleterious acts of omission (inadequate care) rather than commission, and was the largest single discrete category of children noted to be in need of protective services, comprising 57 percent of the total number of abused and neglected children.

As Robert L. Hampton has noted, it is risky to draw conclusions solely from official reports about the rates of child maltreatment among African American families because the poor and racial minorities are typically over-represented in official reports of deviant behavior. Reflecting the high rates of poverty in the black community, African American children do, unfortunately, enter the child protection system in disproportionately large numbers. As the National Center of Child Abuse and Neglect has previously indicated, parental abuse of alcohol and use of other drugs during and after pregnancy and later has been identified as a major factor contributing to child abuse, neglect, and death. Child maltreatment has negative short- and long-term effects on children's

guidelines for states link supportive and supplemental services such as child care with economic assistance such as TANF.

The final primary service category is substitute services. These are generally out-of-home services provided to children and families, when, for a myriad of reasons, families are unable to provide for the basic needs of their members. Examples of these services are foster care, group homes, and other institutional care, adoption, and other permanency planning options such as guardianship. A significant number of African American families interface with the child and family welfare system in the supportive, supplemental, and substitute service areas. Of importance is the fact that African American children are disproportionately represented in the foster and group home and other institutional care arenas. It should be further noted that extensive culturally competent service delivery and policy formulation and implementation are required to reverse this occurrence.

Child care provisions are especially important to support the goal of promoting self-sufficiency through work. The law (PRWORA: P.L. 104-193) is designed to streamline the federal government's role in child care services and increase flexibility to states. Historically, "states' rights" over federal government leadership have often not served the best interests of African Americans. Implementation issues that disproportionately affect black families include the extent to which child-care resources will be adequate to meet the needs of eligible low-income families including those who receive welfare and those who do not. Important factors for analysis and assessment are the specific work requirements developed by the states for welfare recipients, whether states comply with the federal work requirements, the amount of non-federal resources committed to child care, and whether states will use all child-care funds available from the federal government. Child care, including Head Start and Early Start, is especially important for African American low-income and poverty-stricken families, since the key to an economically self-sufficient and stable family in the African American community is usually comprised of both parents working in two-parent families. Further, it is necessary for a low-income female-headed family to maintain a job or participate in education and training for meaningful employment in order to approach sustainable economic self-sufficiency. Therefore, available, affordable, quality child care is necessary if this quest for self-sufficiency and family stability is to be achieved.

There is no doubt that, although the black family will survive, it will continue to face tremendous obstacles, both from within and from without, and solutions must be found to make its path more certain. In his article, "Critical Issues for Black Families by the Year 2000," Robert Hill outlines the problems the institution will face: (1) recessions and inflation which, in the past, have been extremely detrimental to the

black community; (2) industrial shifts, particularly of industrial jobs from the inner city to the suburb, a shift that has always benefited the white middle class; (3) job mismatches, due to lack of adequate training; (4) new immigration patterns, which will see an increase in other minorities such as Hispanics and Asians fiercely competing with African Americans in education, employment, and housing; (5) federal budget cuts and tax reforms which could have an adverse impact on blacks; and (6) uncertain welfare reforms and non-cash benefits, for which the black community must be prepared.

Hill lists several important issues to be addressed by both the public and private sectors in order to strengthen and stabilize the African American family for the twenty-first century. These include: single parenthood, adolescent pregnancy, sensitive child support policies, available quality child-care services, formal foster care and adoption policies that build upon the informal adoption practices of the black community (permanency planning for African American children), family violence, drug and alcohol abuse, and the shortage of marriageable men.

Minimizing the impact of the serious problems that plague the African American family requires resources that build on the strengths of African American cultural experiences. These include strengthening the delivery of services to children and their families (which enhances family integrity and decreases the risk of inappropriate placement) and promoting prevention and early intervention services. Viewing the family as a system that deserves and should receive services based on need is an important philosophical stance to embrace if the goal is to improve the functioning of the African American family. Family preservation services or family-centered services embrace this philosophy and are designed with the intent of keeping families together and preventing out-of-home placement in child welfare protective services, juvenile justice, and mental health systems. The service providers (usually professionally trained social workers) offer intensive, time-limited, family-focused, and home-based services, including concrete and psycho-educational services, and often achieve positive outcomes for troubled African American families.

Empowering families is a common theme used in the family preservation or family-centered therapeutic model. As Carol Williams indicates, the lack of supports for families necessitates reshaping an impoverished policy environment by creating a policy context that is supportive of families and that minimally guarantees access to adequate income through training and employment, prenatal and postnatal health care, adequate housing, early intervention services of improved family functioning, and mental health and drug-treatment services based on need. This form of public policy agenda requires restructuring the delivery of services to abusive and neglectful families

so that families are preserved and reunified whenever feasible, while ensuring protection of the children. It calls for the expansion of the permanency options for children, which would include the following: (1) preservation of the family of origin; (2) adoption, if the former is not feasible; and (3) legal guardianship (a legal guardian is a person who has control over a minor's person or estate or both by decree of the court for purposes of protecting the minor).

Hill sees the "attainment of economic self-sufficiency, strengthening and stabilizing families, and developing viable and healthy communities" as the most important broad tasks of the black community for it to survive during the twenty-first century. Most scholars tend to agree that education, elimination of racism (the problem of twentieth-century America, in Du Bois's view), and the provision of job and wealth creation opportunities (including economic development within the African American community) will go a long way in solving the problems facing the black family today. However, of all culprits that might explain the present conditions of the black family, besides racism and discrimination, lack of adequate education and employment seem to be the two major factors, as both behave like twin sisters that cause poverty and instability.

Racism and discrimination have always been here and will continue to be with us, but the courts and people of good will can minimize their intensity. In this context, however, unemployment is like a cancer, and worsened recently due to the flight of blue-collar jobs to the suburbs, a fixture of the big cities where black families tend to live. Walter E. Williams, quoted earlier, stresses the important negative role unemployment plays as opposed to the impact of racism and discrimination. Williams notes that, in 1900, unemployment for blacks was 15 percent; but, in 2016, it was 30 percent. Indeed, as another expert, Steven Chapman, editorial writer and commentator of *The Chicago Tribune*, emphasizes, "Without decent jobs these men [African American males] are not likely to find wives or support families. They are not likely to get married or stay married. If family breakdown causes poverty, poverty also causes family breakdown." One might also add, and rightly so, that without good education and training, no one can have a secure future, especially in times of rapid technological changes in employment patterns and communication.

Caught in a catch-22 in a society where education plays a preponderant role, the black American family finds itself squeezed in by the few relevant opportunities it has to find a job and still afford going to school. It is a fact that many black youngsters are not ready to face the job market because their skills are not on par with those they need to have when, for example, going for an interview. However, Walter Williams may have been exaggerating when he said that "many black twelfth-graders [for example] deal with scientific problems at the level

of whites in the sixth-grade," and therefore do not qualify for well-paying jobs. Obviously, it is not just the fault of some parents who cannot do better due to lack of adequate education, but also the poor quality and often underfunded schools their children attend. However, by 2018, the level of high school completion for black students had risen as high as 88 percent and unemployment for a few black Americans declined to its lowest in decades, for example, to 4.9 percent in cities like Omaha-Council Bluffs and to 4.5 percent in San Antonio, Texas. Overall, life expectancy for African Americans leveled at 73, with Connecticut registering 77.8 in 2017 (National Urban League, 2017: 13). If the country's economic conditions continue to create more jobs and black family members are able to get the job training and education necessary for self- and family-sustaining employment, then double-digit unemployment for blacks will likely decline, forecasting a better future for black families during the coming decades.

There are also good signs in the educational arena. For example, undergraduate and graduate degree numbers (MAs, PhDs, JDs, and MDs) have been steadily increasing over the years, even though they would most likely be higher if inequalities were not as high. Indeed, though the figures tend to be contradictory, indications are that the number of bachelor's degrees for students 25 years of age or older rose from 8 million in 1960 to 11 million in 1970, to 28 million in 2008, and to 29 million in 2011. Additionally, in 2004, 1,869 doctorates were conferred on African American candidates, of which 43.3 percent were in education, a 9 percent increase over the 2003 doctorates. In 2014, of the 54,070 new doctorates in the US, 6.4 percent (or 3,460) were conferred on African Americans, which represented an increase of 4.1 percent over those conferred on black Americans in 1994. Therefore, if education is the door to success, much more needs to be done by the leaders and policy-makers, both black and white, to increase the number of graduate and undergraduate black students attending and completing their education in the United States of America. Unfortunately, on policy matters, African American representation in Congress has grown at a snail pace over the years. In the 113th Congress, for example, the number was 43 in the House and one in the Senate. In the 115th Congress (2017), however, the number grew to 46 in the House and three in the Senate. This, of course, does not portend a bright future for the education of African Americans, who represent about 14 percent of the American population. This simply means that the struggle must continue.

Summary

The nature and the viability of the black family has been a focus of a heated debate among scholars and community leaders. While a few

see it as pathological and decaying, the majority of the experts view the institution of the black family as vibrant, but facing strong challenges resulting from racism, inner city neglect, low income, and unemployment. Years of indifference on the part of the federal government and state agencies as far as correcting the shortcomings that have resulted from centuries of oppression have also contributed to the difficult plight of the black community.

Among the weaknesses often pointed out are the high rates of unemployment and illiteracy among blacks, drug use and prison occupancy, the shortage of black men, high teenage pregnancy rates, and the increasing number of female-headed households. However, those who believe that the black family is viable emphasize that most black families are resilient and demonstrate considerable strengths; that caring is certainly visible—particularly the love for children (perhaps an African carry-over which puts primacy on children); and that the sharing of responsibilities among the family members ensures its survival.

Some even point to major differences between the nature of the black family and that of the white family: that the black family tends to be an egalitarian unit in the decision-making process and, in the tradition of African families, it is extended and cherishes kinship bonds (no matter how distant they might be), and a sense of community. They further remind us that the successful struggles the black family has endured to survive and provide shelter, food, clothing, and emotional nurturing for each member of the family prove that it is here to stay. The debate is not over yet, and more research is currently being conducted on this critical issue. The methodology used and the assumptions of the researchers have added to the debate, with some arguing that there is no typical African American family, and others rejecting the tendency to view the white middle class or, for that matter, the black middle class, as the ideal family—monogamous, small, and able to provide all the necessities of life, including leisure opportunities for the members of the household. Moynihan, who initiated the controversial discussion that followed on the plight of the black family in America, was criticized for pointing to some of the cultural practices he saw as negative in it, such as what he called “matriarchy,” and the impact of the extended family. However, it appears now that he was a very perceptive politician and sociologist who had a point when he made one statement that has been usually ignored by his critics. He ended his treatise on the problems of the black family by noting that “Three centuries of injustice have brought about deep-seated structural distortions in the life of the Negro American.... The cycle can be broken only if these dislocations are set right.” The question is: How does one solve the problem of unequal land ownership, for instance, when African Americans, who constituted 13.3 percent or 40–43 million of the population in the US in 2017, owned less than 1 percent of the rural land, including farm land worth

only \$14 billion? White Americans, then, owned 98 percent of it, which translated into 856 million acres valued at \$1 trillion. Thus, the cause of the deep-seated problems of the black family in the US cannot be attributed to the impact of racism and discrimination alone; it is the result of many other factors, as pointed out in this chapter, meaning that single-causal explanations of the conditions of the African Americans tend to miss the point.

Study Questions and Activities

1. Compare and contrast the conditions of the black family during slavery and emancipation.
2. What are the factors that account for the high rate of poverty within the black community, and what are some of the solutions proposed by the experts and community leaders?
3. Read the writings of E. Franklin Frazier and those of Melville Herskovits and assess the weight of their positions on African survivals in the black community in America.
4. Why do you think the welfare of children is crucial to the survival of the black community?
5. Would you agree with the view that the African American family is “sick” and in danger of extinction or do you believe that it is alive and will continue to survive and thrive as it adapts itself to new circumstances? Why?
6. What do you think are the areas in which the black family in America is showing its strength?

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