A 100-Year Review of Research on Black Families

Executive Summary

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The Black family in the United States has been the subject of intense scrutiny and debate as public officials, advocates, researchers, and others grapple with the nation's legacy of enslavement, economic exploitation, terror, and disenfranchisement of Black people. Research has played an important role in the country's scrutiny of and debates about Black families. In fact, the formal study of Black families harkens back to the late 19th century and has close ties to the federal government and its policies, with some of the first writings commissioned by the American Council on Education and the Department of Labor.[1, 2]

This continued focus on Black families over time reflects the unique importance of families for the well-being of children and society.[3] The family's value is connected to its many roles and functions, which include the provision of love, safety, identity development, socialization, economic support, and education.[4,5,6] However, public attitudes and beliefs about families can vary based on families' demographics (e.g., race and ethnicity, socioeconomic status), structures (e.g., nuclear, single parent, extended), and other characteristics. These views, in turn, affect how family policies, programs, and practices are conceptualized, funded, designed, implemented, and evaluated, and how well or poorly families fare under these policies.[7]

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.

Research on Black families—as with all social science research—mirrors our nation's beliefs and priorities but is also capable of exerting its own influence on public attitudes and policies. Over time, this research has influenced how Black families are framed in policy discourse (e.g., resilient, intact, fragile, broken) and which policies and practices have been enacted—or have failed to be enacted—to support them.[8, 9] Understanding this interplay, and how it has shifted over the decades, can inform investments in new research priorities and approaches needed to create policy environments that are supportive of Black families' health, wealth, self-determination, and flourishing.

The last 100 years represent a sea change in how Black families live their day-to-day lives; in the policy environments Black families must navigate; and, necessarily, in how researchers study Black families. The period from 1920 to 2019 includes key historical events affecting Black families—including the Great Migration beginning in 1910, the Great Depression that extended through the 1930s, the Civil Rights Movement in the 1950s and 1960s, the intensification of the "War on Drugs" and mass incarceration that disproportionately impacted Black youth and men in the 1980s and 1990s, 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 that began in 2013 and ushered in a new era of Black-led activism for social justice.

We have undertaken a review of social science research focused on Black families that spans this historical period, from 1920 to 2019. Our review describes key scholars, the funders of research on Black families and the goals of the research, and the methods and approaches used to conduct it. We have organized the review into two volumes. Volume I covers the period from 1920 to 1969 and Volume II covers 1970 to 2019. Across each volume, we take care to situate our review of past research in that era's social, political, and economic context. As such, our review of research on Black families reaches into the past to glean lessons for the future.

A key goal of our review is to inform the development of an applied research agenda focused on Black families with children that is appropriate for the 21st century.[10] This agenda aims to produce evidence for policymakers, practitioners, and the public that can be used to advance Black families' well-being. Our review also illustrates how such research—and its connection to and implications for public policy—has evolved over time. In doing so, we have identified specific lessons for researchers, research funders, and policymakers to strengthen ties between research and policy on behalf of Black families.

Lessons learned from 100 years of research on Black families

Our review offers key insights into how research, policy, and practice can promote the well-being of Black families. Here, we provide a summary of these findings, which are described in greater detail in each of the two volumes.

Lesson #1: Black scholars have been critical to the evolution of Black family research, even if they have not always been the primary influencers of policy and policy discourse on Black families.

- In the early 1900s, research on Black families was fostered by a community of Black scholars at historically Black colleges and universities with research learnings and approaches passed down from scholar to scholar.

- Research on Black families grew substantially after the civil rights era, due to a wave of renewed interest from social scientists. These researchers included a generation of Black scholars who received their doctoral degrees in the 1960s and 1970s and who led efforts to counter prevailing stereotypes related to Black families.

- Despite the significant contributions of Black scholars to research focused on Black families, social policy and programming have been heavily influenced by the acceptance and promotion of research conducted by White scholars. Over time, this scholarship has presented Black families as deficient (e.g., Moynihan's *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action*, 1966) and also questioned the efficacy of

government-funded social supports for economically vulnerable Black families that were initially designed and primarily provided to economically vulnerable White families (e.g., Murray's *Losing Ground*, 1984).

Lesson #2: Historically, entities that have funded research focused on Black families and communities have taken a problem-centered approach to understanding them, which has limited ways of identifying and addressing systemic challenges.

- In-depth case studies focused on understanding Black families and communities, although focused on select populations of Black people and specific geographies (e.g., E. Franklin Frazier's *The Negro Family in Chicago*, 1932), have served as the foundational knowledge base from which local and national policies have been developed, critiqued, and adapted.

- Most large-scale studies with a significant focus on Black families have been funded by federal and state agencies and focused on addressing societal problems, including living conditions and housing in the earlier part of our century of analysis (1920–2019), to drugs and crime in the latter. Such research sought to explore the "why" behind societal problems, and many studies presumed the challenge was within Black individuals and families rather than in U.S. systems that diminished their opportunities to thrive because of discrimination and racism embedded in the systems.

- While individual scholars have sought to challenge deficit perspectives and focus on the diversity and complexity of Black families across decades, there have been limited opportunities for asset-based, systems-focused research on Black families that is designed to inform policy and practice.

Lesson #3: Research focused on Black families has illustrated the necessity of using a variety of methods to build a comprehensive knowledge base and promote meaningful change.

- In the 1920s and 1930s, research strategies used to understand Black families were often qualitative in nature and included interviews, case studies, brief observations, and ethnographies. Quantitative strategies included analysis of household, Census, and/or administrative data from social service programs. Qualitative and quantitative data typically came from specific geographic locations—often from Southern rural communities or Northern and Midwestern urban cities.

- Quantitative studies on Black families dominated empirical research from the 1970s through the 1990s, as the social sciences vied for the same legitimacy as the "hard" sciences.[11] The creation of more robust datasets and statistical methodologies facilitated better understandings about the heterogeneity of Black families because of the range and diversity of findings.

- Since the 2000s, qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches have become commonplace in the research on Black families. This development has expanded the types of research questions that can be asked and answered, broadened opportunities for greater impact in both policy and practice, and paved the way for innovative research designs and methods, including those that center Black families' priorities, voices, and lived experiences.[12]

Lesson #4: Approaches used to guide scholarship focused on Black families have shifted over time, but there is still a need for research that highlights their changing diversity.

- Over the past 100 years, research on Black families has often explicitly or implicitly included comparisons of Black families against White, middle-class families, with White cultural norms as the standard by which Black families are judged. This comparative lens limited understanding of the broader socio-historical context in which Black families existed, as well as the ways in which this history resulted in disparities for Black families.

- Since the civil rights era, an increasing number of studies have begun to examine Black families as important social units in their own right. Some have explored the diversity among various ethnicities, including studies of Black immigrant families in the United States, while others have examined the increasing numbers of heads of household who are LGBTQ+ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer/questioning) and gender non-conforming.

- Families in the United States, however, continue to change in significant ways and much of this change remains invisible in the research focused on Black families. For example, there is limited research on Black families with children who have 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), and on the role of grandfathers in grandparent-led households of grandchildren. The resulting gaps in knowledge about Black families' strengths, experiences, and needs contribute to oversimplified depictions that lack depth, breadth, or nuance.

Implications for future applied research on Black families

To build social systems and policies that are supportive of the heterogeneity of 21st-century Black families, a 21st-century applied research agenda is needed. Our review of past research suggests three priorities for such an agenda: (1) elevating the voices of Black communities in research and policy discourse, (2) documenting the demographics and diversity of Black families, and (3) reframing research questions to focus on sources of both systemic risk and community protection.

Achieving these priorities requires research that shifts away from the presumption of deficits within Black families toward approaches that shift how research questions are asked, centers Black family and community strengths, identifies and attends to deficits and racism within U.S. systems, and redefines how research and research-to-policy translation occurs. A research agenda that encompasses these priorities will help the nation better understand how, why, and under what conditions organizational and systemic changes can support and strengthen Black families, including potential variations based on family attributes such as structure, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, geographic background, and/or other demographic and social characteristics.

Research Priority #1: Strengthen Black voices in research, policy, and practice.

Build stronger networks to connect policy and practice audiences with Black scholars. Black scholars have long been the architects of research on Black families, but policy audiences have often overlooked their work when considering issues of major significance to Black families and their children. Research funders

should ensure that Black scholars have the long-term funding necessary to develop, conduct, and disseminate their research, and to build networks to effectively engage advocates, public officials, and practitioners. Public officials, advocates, think tanks, and members of the media should take care to include Black scholars when engaging research communities in public discourse and initiatives to reform policies, programs, and practices.

Support research methods and approaches that center the voices and priorities of Black families and communities and engage them as research partners. In past and current research, Black families have often been the subject of research while having limited say in its focus and execution. As a result, studies have often defaulted to deficit framing of Black families, perpetuating harmful stereotypes and ineffective policies and practices. Collaborative research approaches (e.g., participatory research, action research) offer promising ways to address this challenge by engaging families and communities as partners in the development and dissemination of research. However, participatory research is typically more expensive and time-consuming to implement than quantitative approaches such as secondary data analyses. Funding and grantmaking organizations can build on and expand past research by allocating time and resources toward research that values the expertise and experiences that reside in Black families and communities, and among Black scholars.

Research Priority #2: Strengthen data collection, datasets, and research methods to better document Black family diversity and assets.

Support data collection and research methods that show the diversity of Black families, including their family structures, socioeconomic conditions, nations of origin, disabilities, sexual orientations, and gender identities. If family characteristics are invisible in the data, they are likely invisible in policy discourse. Data collection that supports analyses of Black families and their unique characteristics is important for showing areas of progress, as well as the persistent effects of systemic racism that demand continued attention from researchers, policymakers, practitioners, and society at large.

Invest in creating and supplementing large-scale datasets focused on Black families and research that identifies, acknowledges, and investigates Black families' social and cultural assets. Large-scale datasets are an important resource for understanding the status of people living in the United States, as well as shifts over time. The U.S. Census—a significant source of data on families in the country—reflects longstanding biases and racism that limit its capacity to shed light on the complexity of Black families. Moreover, variables in the Census (and other datasets) often do not include indicators of strengths or assets that are relevant to Black families and their importance in facilitating positive outcomes for adults and children.[13] Large-scale national and local datasets that include such indicators are critical for producing knowledge that can promote equity in Black families' experiences and outcomes. Furthermore, while the strengths and assets of Black families have been a focus of research since the 1920s, and began to burgeon in the 1960s and 1970s, there is limited understanding today of how Black family and community assets—such as flexible family roles, strong kinship ties, and the Black church[14]—are changing as Black families respond to shifts in societal norms and demands. Policymakers and social service administrators need direction on how to leverage and strengthen Black family assets—along with an understanding of practices that harm Black families—as they develop and adjust policies and programs that affect them.

Research Priority #3: Examine sources of systemic risk and community protection for Black families.

Continue to encourage research questions that probe systems, policies, and practices for sources of harm and exclusion for Black families. Limited attention to the institutions and systems that produce social challenges has fueled deficit narratives about Black adults, youth, and children. Further, research about the influence of systems, policies, and practices can provide advocates and public officials with clear and actionable options to generate reforms that better support Black families. Such research should include critical analyses of early care, education, juvenile and criminal justice, child welfare, and health and social services systems.

Invest in research that examines community-level conditions—including the local and state contexts that shape them—and their implications for Black families. Cities and states are often incubators for national change, leading the nation in penal reform, family leave, early care and education, guaranteed income programs, and universal health care—policies that have had significant consequences for families generally and for Black families specifically. Cities and states have also enacted exclusionary policies harmful to Black families. Studies that examine Black families and communities within and across specific geographic locations and policy contexts can highlight conditions that facilitate or diminish their flourishing. These types of investigations also have the potential of moving the United States closer to a racially just and equitable society in which all families can thrive.

Conclusion

This 100-year review of studies on Black families informs an ongoing research agenda at Child Trends focused on Black children and families. In addition to informing our work, we are excited to contribute to the field more generally, and hope this review and learnings are helpful to others interested in transforming the ways in which research focused on Black families is undertaken and used to support the flourishing of Black families in the United States.

Acknowledgements

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