

Family, Economic, and Geographic Characteristics of Black Families with Children

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Issue Brief Series Overview

This issue brief is one in a series examining timely topics that are relevant to Black families and children in the United States. The series identifies key information and opportunities for consideration by policymakers, researchers, practitioners, philanthropists, and others interested in supporting the progress of Black families and children—and, by extension, the country as a whole. The series examines the role of structural racism in various U.S. systems, considering the historical and contextual factors that facilitate or impede access to these systems for Black families. The issue briefs also provide recommendations for developing, implementing, and sustaining effective policies, research, and programming that address structural racism to better support the stability and prosperity of Black families and children.

The first brief presents data on the family structure, employment status, and geographic location of Black families with young children in the United States. We also explore contextual factors, such as structural barriers or inequities that have shaped the experiences of these families over time. In the second brief, we shed light on the role of federal policies in creating, maintaining, and addressing these structural inequities, with a specific focus on access to early care and education for Black families. The third brief uses national, state, and local data to examine housing access and other available supports for Black families, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The information presented across all three briefs is important to the development of federal, state, and local policies and infrastructure to buffer and protect Black families and children, particularly the most economically disadvantaged, from the effects of structural racism. Importantly, the COVID-19 pandemic has further exposed the deleterious impact of structural racism and its disproportionate impact on Black people,

Definitions

Due to the pervasive nature of structural racism in the United States, no Black person in America (regardless of their country of origin or ancestry) is immune from the effects of racism. However, the historical context of an individual's country of origin or identification may vary; this, in turn, has the potential to differentially impact the experiences of Black people in the United States.

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

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

providing an opportunity to reimagine U.S. support systems to promote the health and stability of Black people and the country's economic recovery.

Introduction

This issue brief, the first in the series, provides a brief summary of recent data and historical context on family structure, employment and income, and geography for Black people with young children in the United States. Other briefs will draw on these and other data, when relevant, to highlight facilitators and barriers to access for key family support systems that can help Black families and children thrive, particularly those who are economically disadvantaged.

Family Structure, Employment, and Geography of Black Americans

Black Americans' social standing in the United States has been shaped by a long history of racism in laws, policies, and practices that has built racist institutions and created and exacerbated inequality. This inequality is built into the infrastructure of our country and has formed the foundation for structural racism—a system that privileges White people and results in intentional disadvantage for Black Americans. These inequalities negatively impact the lives of Black people in a number of ways, including where they live;¹ the education they receive;^{2,3} their employment opportunities,^{4,5} access to child care,⁶ mental and physical health outcomes,⁷ and political standing and power;^{8,9} and the way they are treated in our systems of law and justice.^{10,11} Virtually every facet of the lives of Black people in the United States—both adults and children—is shaped by race. America's racist laws and policies have long impacted Black Americans, regardless of their socioeconomic status or social standing.

Family structure

Culturally, Black Americans have long highly valued romantic partnerships, marriage, and children. However, institutional and structural barriers often prevent them from being able to realize these values,^{12,13,14} particularly for those who have low incomes.¹⁵ From 1987 to 2017, the rates of cohabitation among Black women ages 19 to 44 increased from 36 percent to 62 percent, a rate similar to that seen among women from other racial groups.¹⁶ The percentage of Black women ever married, however, is lower than those who have cohabitated, at 37 percent.¹⁷ While there are many explanations for lower levels of marriage among Black women, an overwhelming number of theories focus on economics—specifically, the earning potential and availability of Black men.^{18,19} For instance, a lack of employment opportunities for Black men, higher workforce participation among Black women than among Black men, a lack of wage parity between Black women and Black men,²⁰ and the disproportionate representation of Black men (particularly from low-income backgrounds) in the criminal justice system²¹ may result in a lack of marriageable partners (e.g., men who are perceived by women as attractive marriage prospects because of their financial or social standing). Importantly, each of these theories—implicitly, and sometimes explicitly—acknowledges the potential role of systemic racism and its impact on the marriage rate of Black Americans.

Population

Black Americans currently number about 42 million, making up about 13 percent of the total population in the United States.¹ As of 2019, there were 2.68 million Black children from birth to age 4 in the United States.²

1. Tastogi, S. Johnson, T.D., Hoeffel, E.M., & Drewery, M.P. (2011). *The Black Population: 2010*. United States Census Bureau. <https://www.census.gov/prod/cen2010/briefs/c2010br-06.pdf>

2. The Annie E. Casey Foundation, KIDS COUNT Data Center (2020). *Child population by race and age group in the United States*. <https://datacenter.kidscount.org/data/tables/8446-child-population-by-race-and-age-group?loc=1&loct=1#detailed/1/any/false/1729,37,871,870,573,869,36,868,867,133/68,69,67,12,70,66,71,13/62/17077,17078>

Fertility rates for Black women have declined slightly over the past 10 years, from 70.8 births per 1,000 women in 2008 to 62.0 per 1,000 in 2018.²² Thirty-seven percent of Black women have a first birth between age 20 and age 24,²³ and birth rates for Black women are highest from ages 25 to 29.²⁴ **This indicates that Black women are having children at the same ages at which they may be enrolled in school or entering the workforce.** At the end of their childbearing years (ages 15 to 50), Black women have had an average of 2.1 children.²⁵

Black children live in a variety of family structures, including married, cohabiting, coparenting, and single-parenting households. Sixty-four percent of Black children live in single-parent families, which may include single parents living with an unmarried partner or with another family.²⁶ Among Black women ages 15 to 50, approximately 60 percent were married or living with an unmarried partner at the time of their first birth, and roughly 40 percent were neither married nor living with an unmarried partner.²⁷ The distinction between “single” and unmarried but living with a partner or co-parent is important because it indicates that, despite declines in formal marriage rates, nearly 60 percent of Black fathers (close to 2.5 million of 4.2 million) live with their children, a fact often in contrast with public perceptions of Black men with children.²⁸ Within these households, **Black couples generally subscribe to egalitarian and flexible gender roles.**^{29,30} While American fathers of all races and ethnicities are generally more involved with the care of their young children than in decades past, Black fathers—both those who live with and live apart from their children—are more likely than White or Hispanic fathers to feed or eat meals with, bathe, diaper or dress, and play or read to their children on a daily basis.³¹

Extended family and kin networks, a source of social support and an enduring legacy of African cultures and heritage, have also played a key role in childrearing within Black communities. For example, **among children living in a grandparent’s home and being cared for primarily by a grandparent, with no parents involved, more than one quarter are Black.**³² Black grandparents play instrumental roles in childrearing and child care even when children live with their parents.³³ Family and kin networks also serve as an important buffer for some of the negative impacts of structural and institutional racism experienced by Black families,^{34,35} and frequently provide emotional support³⁶ and instrumental assistance such as help with transportation and finances.³⁷

Employment and income

As with family structure, **families’ economic standing can affect their access to services and resources that can impact the quality and stability of their relationships with their children, as well as their children’s social-emotional and cognitive development.**³⁸ For example, higher parental earnings (more common in married and/or two-parent households) have been associated with increased stimulation and response among infants and young children; this, in turn, has direct links to brain development.^{39,40,41} In addition, children from families of middle and lower socioeconomic status have shown reduced levels of language development from as early as 18 months, compared with their more affluent peers.^{42,43} Hypotheses suggest that upper-income parents who generally have higher levels of education may have more free time and/or ability to invest time and resources in their children than middle- and lower-income families.^{44,45} In addition, higher-incomes facilitate better access to stable and safe housing, which is a determining factor for a number of child outcomes.⁴⁶

While employment indicators are important, earnings and workforce participation are not a panacea for facilitating Black children’s positive development. **Black parents participate in the U.S. workforce in high numbers, with three in four Black children under age 6 having all residential parents actively engaged in employment.**⁴⁷ Half of Black female workers are mothers and more than two thirds of working Black mothers are single.⁴⁸ These high rates of workforce participation, however, do not translate to higher earnings.⁴⁹ Among all full-time workforce participants in 2018, Black men earned 70.2 cents for every dollar earned by White men and Black women earned 61.9 cents; in contrast, White women earned 78.6 cents for every dollar earned by White men.⁵⁰ In addition, **Black men and women are overrepresented in jobs that are have nonstandard hours of employment.** Thirty-four percent of young Black children living in

a single-parent, low-income household—and 70 percent of young Black children living in a two-parent, low-income household—have parents who work a combination of standard and nonstandard hours.⁵¹ Nineteen percent of Black children living with two parents had one parent who worked overnight hours, and 6 percent had both parents working overnight hours. Furthermore, 23 percent of those living in a single-parent household had a parent working weekend hours.⁵²

In addition to working nonstandard hours, **Black men and women have less secure employment.** Due to difficulties entering and staying in the labor market, Black men tend to work fewer hours than White and Hispanic men, while Black women work as many hours as White women but experience higher reductions in work hours when the economy slows.⁵³ In fact, despite high rates of workforce participation, Black workers had the highest unemployment rate nationally in the first quarter of 2020, at 6.3 percent.⁵⁴ This disparity increased as the COVID-19 pandemic slowed the economy and led to job loss for thousands of Americans.⁵⁵ **In turn, greater job insecurity may result in higher rates of poverty for Black Americans.** In 2019, the poverty rate for Blacks was 18.8 percent, in comparison to 15.7 percent for Hispanics and 7.3 percent for both Asians and Whites, and Black female-headed households had a poverty rate of 31.7 percent.⁵⁶ Furthermore, 34 percent of Black children from birth to age 5 live in households with incomes below the federal poverty line.⁵⁷

In sum, **Black Americans have experienced employment-related challenges and structural barriers that make it difficult to maintain adequate income or accumulate wealth despite active participation in the workforce.** Between the last recession (which began in 2007) and 2016, the wealth gap between Black families with children under age 18 and both White and Hispanic families with children under age 18 widened, despite the income gap remaining relatively constant.⁵⁸ In 2019, median household income for Black households was \$45,438, compared to \$56,113 for Hispanic households, \$76,057 for non-Hispanic White households, and \$98,174 for Asian households.⁵⁹

Geography

The enduring legacy of slavery, in addition to subsequent discriminatory and racist housing policies, is evident in the geography of where Black people live across the country. During the Great Migration, from 1916 to 1970, millions of Black Americans left the rural South for Northern and Western cities to get away from the oppression of racism and White hostility and to search for better employment opportunities. In the past 30 years, however, more affluent Black Americans have participated in a “reverse migration,” moving back to the South to settle in cities with lower costs of living and better economic and educational opportunities.⁶⁰ **As a result, Black American families and children across all economic strata are currently highly concentrated in the Southern parts of the country and along the East Coast.**

The relative size of the population of young Black children in the 50 states and the District of Columbia reflects this trend. In 2019, the District of Columbia had the highest percentage of children from birth to age 4 who were Black, followed by Mississippi, Louisiana, Georgia, and Maryland.⁶¹ The table below shows the 10 states with the highest percentage of Black children in 2019, along with the total number of Black children from birth to age 4 in that state.

Table 1. 10 states (and DC) with the highest percentage of young children who are Black, 2019

State	Percentage of children birth to age 4 who are Black (2019)	Number of Black children birth to age 4 (2019)
1. District of Columbia	44%	19,791
2. Mississippi	41%	75,632
3. Louisiana	35%	105,503
4. Georgia	33%	218,702
5. Maryland	30%	107,446
6. Alabama	29%	85,741
7. South Carolina	29%	83,399
8. Delaware	24%	13,368
9. North Carolina	22%	135,543
10. Florida	20%	224,875

Source: KIDSCOUNT. Child population by race and age group in the United States, 2019.

While the 10 states with the largest percentages of Black children from birth to age 4 were the same in 2019 as in 2010, the size and share of the Black child population has shifted within states.⁶² For example, the District of Columbia had the highest share of Black children in both 2010 and 2019, even though that share dropped from 54 percent to 44 percent. This is part of a broader demographic shift in the District, which is no longer majority Black.⁶³ The *number* of Black children, however, actually increased by 8 percent in the same time. The other nine states saw little change in their percentage of Black children, but the number of Black children decreased in eight states, ranging from 2 percent (Delaware) to 17 percent (Mississippi). Changes in specific counties, metropolitan areas, and even neighborhoods may or may not be reflected in state-level changes. For example, while Georgia saw a small decrease overall (3%) in the share of Black children from birth to age 4, Atlanta’s Black population grew by more than 20 percent from 2010 to 2018; in nearby Rockdale County, the share of the overall population that is Black grew from 18 percent to 55 percent in the same period.⁶⁴ In terms of newer migration flows among Black people, areas receiving more young couples or young single adults may see more changes in the child population in the years that follow.

Similarly, despite large concentrations of Black people living in the Southern and Eastern United States, **several states in the Midwest and West experienced large increases in the number and share of Black children from 2010 to 2019**, including Washington, Minnesota, Iowa, and Nevada.⁶⁵ The table below shows the 10 states with the largest growth in the number of Black children from birth to age 4 from 2010 to 2019.

Some states with small populations of Black children (less than 2,000 children in 2010) saw growth of 40 to 42 percent (Montana, Wyoming, and South Dakota), and North Dakota’s population of Black children from birth to age 4 more than doubled (181%). While changes in smaller populations will be proportionally larger than similar changes in large populations, such changes still represent demographic shifts that—especially if concentrated in specific communities—may have implications for the infrastructure needed to support the provision of early care and education services for Black families.

Table 2. 10 states with the highest percent change in the population of young children who are Black, 2010-2019

State	Number of Black children birth to age 4 (2010)	Number of Black children birth to age 4 (2019)	Percent change 2010-2019
1. North Dakota	1,003	2,823	181%
2. Hawaii	1,389	2,022	46%
3. South Dakota	1,281	1,819	42%
4. Wyoming	340	479	41%
5. Montana	314	439	40%
6. Idaho	844	1,141	35%
7. Nevada	14,952	20,187	35%
8. Iowa	8,926	11,595	30%
9. Minnesota	29,991	36,706	22%
10. Washington	17,486	21,115	21%

Source: KIDSCOUNT. Child population by race and age group in the United States, 2019.

Looking Ahead

Structural racism in the United States has negatively impacted the nation’s social and economic fabric and has been especially damaging to Black Americans. In addition, the COVID-19 pandemic is disproportionately affecting those who have historically experienced disadvantage in the country, including Black individuals and families.⁶⁶ This brief has provided a demographic overview of Black families with young children in the United States, highlighting three areas of consideration for policymakers focused on family support services: family structure, employment and income, and geography. We understand that no single solution can undo the harm of hundreds of years of racist policies and practices, and that moving forward will require solutions from a wide range of places, organizations, and individuals across generations and with a variety of lived experiences. The remainder of this series will use family structure, employment and income, and geography to shed light on how policies specific to early care and education and housing can address some of the historical wrongs perpetuated against Black individuals and families.

Additional readings

Below, we have identified additional readings that may be useful in further exploring the ideas presented in this brief.

Alexander, M., & West, C. (2012). *The new Jim Crow: Mass incarceration in the age of colorblindness*. The New Press.

Frey, W. H. (2019). *Six maps that reveal America's expanding racial diversity: A pre-2020 census look at the wide dispersal of the nation's Hispanic, Asian, and Black populations*. Brookings Institution.
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