African-American Families - Historical And Cultural Influences On African-american Family Life, Contemporary Social Influences, African-american Families In The New Millennium

In 1998, there were approximately 8.4 million African-American households in the United States. With a total population of approximately 34.5 million, African Americans made up 13 percent of the population of U.S. families. African-American families are not very different from other U.S. families; they, too, are chiefly responsible for the care and development of children. However, African-American family life has several distinctive features related to the timing and approaches to marriage and family formation, gender roles, parenting styles, and strategies for coping with adversity.

African-American Families - Historical And Cultural Influences On African-american Family Life

African-American Families - Contemporary Social Influences

African-American Families - African-american Families In The New Millennium

Citing this material

Please include a link to this page if you have found this material useful for research or writing a related article. Content on this website is from high-quality, licensed material originally published in print form. You can always be sure you're reading unbiased, factual, and accurate information.

Highlight the text below, right-click, and select "copy". Paste the link into your website, email, or any other HTML document.

African-American Families - Historical And Cultural Influences On African-american Family Life

These explanations include contemporary economic hardship, the historic constraints of slavery, and integration of African culture in American life. Accordingly, three sets of forces account for the forms and manifestation of African-American family life as it exists in the contemporary United States. These forces include (1) integration into family life of cultural practices adapted from West Africa; (2) structural adaptations to slavery, especially the disruptions of family ties and the overall lack of control over life; and (3) past and current discrimination and economic inequality.

Pre-slavery influences: culture and family life in West Africa. Over the years, fierce intellectual struggles have been waged over the extent to which Africans brought to the United States as slaves were able to retain their culture. That debate has largely been settled by a preponderance of evidence demonstrating structural, linguistic, and behavioral parallels between African Americans and West Africans. Most African Americans are descended from people brought to the United States as slaves from West Africa after a period of reprogramming in the Caribbean. Their families in Africa were tightly organized in extended family units, which by most historical accounts were social units that functioned effectively. Their marriages involved contractual agreements between families as much as agreements between the men and women. What is most distinctive about family life in West Africa is that individuals traced their ancestral lineage not through their fathers, but through their mothers. The matrilineal organization of family was evidenced by the practice of children belonging solely to the family of the mother, and by the role accorded to the mother's oldest brother, who was the most responsible for his sister's children. In these families, mothers' brothers were accorded the same respect as a father; maternal cousins were regarded as siblings. Unlike patriarchal societies, marriage did not sever the

ties between a woman and her family, nor did it end the obligation of the mother's family to her and her offspring.

The West African family, viewed as a clan, is arguably a predecessor or model for the extended family structures found in contemporary African-American communities. During slavery, the family remained a principal base for social affiliation, economic activity, and political organization. Family traditions in Western Africa served as the model for family life during the period of slavery. The family lives of Africans brought to the American colonies as slaves retained some of the same qualities particularly the matriarchal focus (Franklin and Moss 1988). Nevertheless, the biological father was responsible for ensuring physical and psychological well-being. In West Africa, ties to a common female ancestor bound members of a clan to one another. Indentured servants brought this template of family life, with its mores, customs, and beliefs to the New World, and retained them during the long period of slavery to pass them on to their children.

Family life during slavery. Although some early ancestors of African Americans came to the United States as free or indentured servants and maintained their free status over the generations, the majority were forced into a long life of servitude. To exact involuntary labor from African slaves, European Americans used generous portions of both physical and psychological violence. However, European Americans understood that they would only be able to consolidate their control if they stripped Africans of their identity, language, and the culture that bound them to their past in Africa (Franklin and Moss 1988). This was accomplished by undermining and replacing family structures with transient relationships built around identity as slaves owned by others, rather than with a family unit. These efforts were not entirely successful. In spite of the obstacles, many slaves organized themselves into family structures remarkably similar to nuclear family structures in the rest of America. Intact and committed marital relationships were commonplace among slaves. Men and women joined in monogamous relationships through explicit ceremonies. The children born of these relationships had paternal and maternal relationships, even when the

parents could not exercise complete control over their children's lives. Throughout the period of slavery in the United States, strong family ties and committed marital relationships were evident even among couples forced to live apart. When men and women were able to purchase their freedom or to secure it through the beneficence of the slave owner, they would work for money to purchase the freedom of their spouses and their children. These and many other efforts to bring family to live in the same household suggest strongly that African Americans strove to create the ideals of family life made difficult by the institution of slavery (Gutman 1977).

Citing this material

Please include a link to this page if you have found this material useful for research or writing a related article. Content on this website is from high-quality, licensed material originally published in print form. You can always be sure you're reading unbiased, factual, and accurate information.

Highlight the text below, right-click, and select "copy". Paste the link into your website, email, or any other HTML document.

```
<a href="http://family.jrank.org/p
```
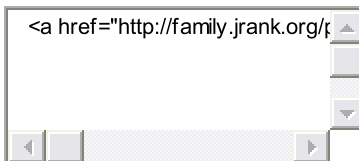
User Comments **Add a comment…**

about 1 year ago
Therese Avant
Very helpful info, need a local expert in African American family life, preferably on local university staff, for possible testimony in a legal case. Please call me at work 877-933-7533, or ask for Rachel Buck. Thanks. --Therese Avant, Litigation Paralegal, Frank S. Buck, P.C., Birmingham, AL. 1/21/08

Other Free Encyclopedias :: Marriage and Family Encyclopedia :: Marriage and Family Encyclopedia (A-At)

African-American Families - Contemporary Social Influences

Historical and cultural forces cannot account for every aspect of African-American family life. Contemporary social forces exert very powerful influences over the formation and nature of family life in black America today. For example, successive waves of migration from rural to urban areas during the twentieth century, racism, poverty, urbanization, segregation, and immigration from outside the United States have profoundly reshaped family life.

Rural to urban migration. When the Civil War ended, and former slaves were free to move, an overwhelming majority of African Americans resided in the rural South. In later decades, however, in response to economic downturns and the absence of opportunity in rural areas, African Americans moved to cities in the northeast and to urban midwestern areas to seek economic advancement. This twentieth century wave of migration out of the rural South was so massive that by 1998, only 55 percent of African Americans lived in the South. They make up one-fifth of that region's population. Nationwide, 54 percent resided in the central cities of metro areas. Half of the ten states with the largest African-American populations were outside of the deep South. New York (3.2 million) tops the list of states with the largest African-American population, followed by California (2.4 million).

As a consequence of these migrations, families moved from relatively cohesive rural communities to cities where they were anonymous. Not all families were able to re-create networks by moving close to relatives and people they had known in the South or to establish new ones with fictive kin. Urbanization with its fast-paced life, long work hours, multiple jobs, and neighborhoods, proved destructive to family life. Because women had access to the labor market, men assumed domestic responsibilities and shared in the care of children. African Americans encountered new and virulent forms of racism and discrimination, which were less obvious in the northeast, midwest, and west than those of the

South. This new racism, however, had more subtle and deleterious effects. Residential segregation was enforced not by law, but by informal covenants and economic discrimination. Although many families had access to better paying jobs than were available in the South, their ability to advance their socioeconomic status (SES) on the basis of merit was often limited by the same racial discrimination they had experienced in the South.

Poverty. The transition from the rural South to urban life, often in northern cities, offered no guarantee of relief from poverty for African-American families. Poverty has remained the most pressing issue adversely affecting family life among African-Americans. Family life among African Americans is adversely affected by a tightly related set of adverse social conditions. These conditions include low SES and educational achievement, underemployment, teenage pregnancy, patterns of family formation, divorce, health problems, and psychological adjustment. In 1998, 88 percent of African Americans ages twenty-five to twenty-nine had graduated from high-school, continuing an upward trend in the educational attainment of African Americans that began in 1940. Despite this increased achievement, however, the median income for African-American households in 1997 was $25,050. Thus, the number of African-American families living below the poverty level stood at 26.5 percent in 1998. Poverty is important in its own right for the material hardship it brings. It has multiple adverse effects because it is implicated in marital distress and dissolution, health problems, lower educational attainment and deficits in psychological functioning, and prospects for healthy development over the life course (Barbarin 1983).

Immigration. Beginning in the 1990s and stretching into the twenty-first century, African-American family life has been subject to an influx of new immigrants from the Caribbean and parts of Africa. This movement is oddly reminiscent of the immigration pattern three centuries earlier. Arrivals from the Caribbean and East and West Africa have expanded the diversity of African-American families as they reconnect African Americans with their distant
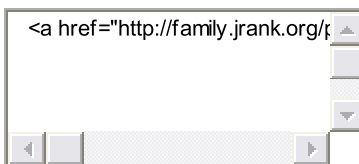
relatives who themselves have been transformed by modernity and urbanization. These new immigrants make for an African-American community that is even more diverse in language. The range of languages spans from the Creole patois of Haiti and French-speaking Africa to the Spanish of Panama.

Immigrants of African descent give new meaning and flavor to the American melting pot as they create their own blend of lilting cadences of Caribbean English, plus an added spice of French-speaking Senegalese. In one manner, these new groups of voluntary immigrants represent assimilation without accommodating the customs of American mainstream values and beliefs. While Africans and West Indians come to the United States to seek opportunities and freedom, they retain national pride and also the languages and customs associated with their countries of origin. As the issue of assimilation into the African-American community takes place, new tensions and promises will arise, as newcomers and long-time residents establish their relationships with one another and grope to find their areas of common ground.

Citing this material

Please include a link to this page if you have found this material useful for research or writing a related article. Content on this website is from high-quality, licensed material originally published in print form. You can always be sure you're reading unbiased, factual, and accurate information.

Highlight the text below, right-click, and select "copy". Paste the link into your website, email, or any other HTML document.

```
<a href="http://family.jrank.org/
```

User Comments Add a comment…

African-American Families - African-american Families In The New Millennium

Historical and cultural influences, racism, urbanization, migration, discrimination, segregation, and immigration have profoundly shaped contemporary African-American family functioning. The new millennium brings with it striking differences in contemporary African-American functioning families and those of the past. These differences are specifically marked by the timing of family formation and stability of marriages, the flexibility of its gender roles, patterns of paternal involvement in child care, the fluidity of household composition, and the cultural resources the family has available to cope with adversity.

Timing of the formation of African-American households. The formation of African-American households often originates not in marriage but in the birth of a child. Fifty-six percent of African-American children were born in families in which the mother was not married to the biological father. Of 8.4 million African-American households, slightly less than half are presided over by a married couple. About 4 million African-American children (36 percent) reside with both their parents. Not surprisingly, women head a majority of the families formed by unmarried parents. For example, in 1998, single women headed 54 percent of African-American households. Unfortunately, mothers living with their children without ever having been married face decreasing prospects of marriage and thus look to a future in which they will spend much of their adult lives as unmarried caregivers of their children and their children's children. However, such demographic data taken alone paint a misleading portrait of African-American families.

Marriage. Historically, strong marriages and commitment to family life have been central features of African-American families. In the last decade of the twentieth century, however, marriage rates among African Americans declined

significantly. In 1998, for example, 41 percent of all African-American men over the age of eighteen had never been married and 37 percent of African-American women over the age of eighteen had never married (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1999). Experts on the African-American family have attributed the declining rates to the shortage of marriageable African-American males (Wilson 1987) and to structural, social, and economic factors (Tucker and Mitchell-Kernan 1995).

Throughout history, the population of African-American women has outnumbered the population of African-American men. By 1990, there were only 88 males for every 100 females (Tucker and Mitchell-Kernan 1995). The shortage of African-American males is further exacerbated by the large percentage of men who are unemployed, underemployed, users of narcotic drugs, or mentally ill, and thus fall into the undesirable category (Chapman 1997). That is, few African-American women would consider these men suitable for marriage. Thus, the chances of ever getting married are dramatically reduced by the overall sex-ratio imbalance among African Americans and the relatively low percentage of available marriageable males.

Although the basic determinants underlying the high rates of singlehood among African Americans are structural and ideological preferences, definite patterns also exist along class and gender lines (Staples 1997). For low-income African Americans, the structural constraints appear to be primarily that of unavailability and undesirability. However, among middle-class African Americans, the desire not to marry is more prevalent. Because African-American women have long been in the workforce, their earning power is similar to that of African-American men, and thus many African-American females do not feel a need to marry for economic support. Staples (1997) believes the greater a woman's educational level and income, the less desirable she is to many African-American men.

Despite the problematic aspect of finding a mate, many single African Americans continue to dream of marrying and living happily. However, the probability of staying together in a marital relationship is low because of the high divorce rate among African Americans. Although African Americans continue to have higher

divorce rates than those in the general population, there was a slight decrease in divorce rate from 1990 to 1998 (U.S. Bureau of Census 1999).

For new immigrants and for those who have been in the United States for generations, family units retain important parental functions to care for, socialize, and nurture dependent children and to provide social intimacy that protects adults against loneliness and alienation. In many societies, this latter goal is often carried out through some form of marital relationship. Family units also have an important role in helping individuals to cope with the vicissitudes of life, the adverse life events both expected and unexpected. Thus, the importance of extended family and kin in reinforcing and maintaining connective and strong supportive ties among family members is often overshadowed by these negative portrayals of contemporary African-American family life.

Extended family structure. Census data on the composition of African-American households often overlook the functional and adaptive importance of the extended family structure and supportive kin networks. This is especially true of households headed by single mothers. Even when single mothers and their children do not reside with other kin, the money, time, childcare, and emotional support that family members lend substantially enriches single-parent households. Exchanges across households also mean that membership in a given household may fluctuate as children and adult kin move for a time from one household to another. Although single mothers and children live in close proximity to extended family members, frequent phone calls and face-to-face contact reinforce connections that often involve exchanges across households of social and material resources needed to meet the demands of daily living. Consequently, a majority of African-American family structures are more accurately depicted as extended family units rather than single adult nuclear family units. Snapshots of households from survey studies reveal more than seventy different family structures based on the number of generations and the relationship of people living in a single house. This compares to about forty structures for whites and certainly underscores the variability of African-

American family structure and the flexible roles family members typically engender (Barbarin and Soler 1993).

Fathers. Even with the high proportion of single adult households headed by women, men continue to play key roles in the African-American family and contribute significantly to the effectiveness of family functioning. In African-American families, men adopt more flexible gender roles and take on a much broader array of household duties and responsibility for the care of children than is true in other groups. The relationship between mothers and the biological fathers who do not reside with their children often dictates the level of involvement that noncustodial fathers have with their children. When the relationships with mothers are good, fathers regularly visit or care for children and provide consistent financial support. Even if the biological father is not involved, other men such as stepfathers, grandparents, uncles, cousins and nonmarried partners may be instrumentally and regularly involved with the children.

Parenting and discipline. Another way in which African-American families tend to differ from other ethnic groups is in their style of discipline and parenting. African-American parents tend to be more hierarchical in relationships with their children. They are more likely to be strict, to hold demanding standards for behavior, and to use physical discipline more frequently in enforcing these standards. However, in African-American families the high use of physical punishment occurs within a context of strong support and affection. This combination of warmth with strictness tends to mediate negative impact of physical punishment delivered in other circumstances. Consequently, physical punishment does not result in the same adverse developmental outcomes for African-American children that it does for European-American children (McLoyd, Cauce, Takeuchi, and Wilson 2000).

Grandparents. Grandparents—particularly grandmothers—play an especially important role in African-American families in providing support for mothers and care for children. When mothers are not able to carry out their roles, grandmothers are the surrogate parents of choice. In 1998, 1.4 million African-American children (12%) lived in a grandparent's home (with or without their parents present). Grandparents' contribution to the care of young children is reciprocated at the end of life. Many African-American families care for relatives at the end of their lives in family settings. Rather than to relying on nursing homes or paid live-in care, African-American adult family members are more likely to bring their aging parents into their homes to care for them. Indeed, studies of the burden and psychological results of caring for the elderly show that African-American families are affected less negatively than any other ethnic group that cares for elderly and dying family members.

Siblings. Older siblings also play an important role in African-American families particularly households. When partners, grandmothers, or other adults from the extended kin network are not available in the household, older siblings, especially female siblings, are pressed into service to assist the mother. When single parents are required to work and to be away from home for extended times, older children are asked to monitor, feed, and discipline younger siblings. The placement of older children in these roles is both a source of early maturation and strain for older siblings, who more often than not are the oldest female siblings in the household.

Cultural resources for families. Since their introduction to North America as indentured servants and slaves, African-American families have transcended adversity in part by relying on important cultural and social resources such as spirituality, mutual support, ethnic identity, and adaptive extended family structures. Religious institutions, particularly Christian churches, have been important in the African-American community both for the religious ideology that gives meaning to uncontrollable and distressing life events and for the emotional support and practical aid they often provide. (Lincoln and Mamiya

1990). Also important to coping is the strength of ethnic identity through which African Americans maintain a favorable view of self and a strong group affiliation. These cultural resources, spirituality, ethnic identity, and mutual support contribute greatly to the resilience African-American families.

Resilience and coping. To appreciate how African-American families survived slavery, rampant racial discrimination, and chronic poverty, it is helpful to focus on several cultural resources they *The extended family structure, in which members of a family provide assistance in the form of the money, time, childcare, and emotional support to each other, is an important characteristic of many African-American families.* BILL BACHMANN/INDEX STOCK IMAGERY have historically counted upon in the face of adversity. These resources include culturally based spirituality, strong ethnic identity, social support from extended kin and community, and the capacity to apply externalizing interpretive frameworks to problems in daily living (Barbarin 1983). African-American families are grounded, and extended family and communities' social support systems provide resources, both emotional and practical, to assist in coping with life problems. Moreover, religion and spirituality provide a foundation for coping by extending to them a providential and protective God with whom they developed a personal relationship (Taylor and Chatters 1991). In addition, religion provides additional benefits through participation in a social network of church members who became important sources of practical aid and emotional support. The development of strategies for coping with racial slights and discrimination also forms an important part of children's socialization experiences. By knowing that they are identifying strongly with their ethnic group African-American family members, children forge a strong sense of identity by which they buttress themselves and see themselves as part of a larger group that must face and overcome the challenges of racism. With a keen awareness of the reality of racism in their lives, African-American children are exhorted to recognize what they are working against and understand the necessity of working twice as hard as European Americans to get what they want and need. This perspective on the self and sensitivity to discrimination helps them to sustain efforts when times are difficult. Cultural resources such as kin

support, spirituality, and ethnic identity over time have been important factors in protecting and strengthening African-American families in coping with their lion's share of adversities—before, during, and after slavery.

See also: ETHNIC VARIATION/ETHNICITY; UNITED STATES

Bibliography

Barbarin, O. (1983). "Coping with Ecological Transitions by Black Families: A Psycho-social model." *Journal of Community Psychology* 11:308–322.

Chapman, A. B. (1997). "The Black Search for Love and Devotion: Facing the Future Against All Odds." In *Black Families,* 3rd edition, ed. H. P. McAdoo. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.

Franklin, J. H. and Moss, A. A. (1988). *From Slavery to Freedom: A History of Negro Americans,* 6th edition. New York: Alfred A. Knopf.

Gutman, H. G. (1977). *The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom: 1750–1925.* New York: Vintage Books

Lincoln, C. E., and Mamiya, L. H. (1990). *The Black Church in the African American Experience.* Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

McLoyd, V. C.; Cauce, A. M.; Takeuchi, D.; and Wilson, L. (2000). "Marital Processes and Parental Socialization in Families of Color: A Decade Review of Research." *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 62:1070–1093.

Staples, R. (1997). "An Overview of Race and Marital Status." In *Black Families,* 3rd edition, ed. H. P. McAdoo. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.

Taylor, R. J., and Chatters, L. M. (1991). "Religious Life of Black Americans." In *Life in Black America,* ed. J. S. Jackson. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.

Tucker, M. B., and Mitchell-Kernan, C. (1995). *The Decline in Marriage Among African Americans.* New York: Russell Sage Foundation.

U.S. Bureau of the Census. (1999). *Selected Social Characteristics of the Population by Region and Race*. Washington, DC: Author, April.
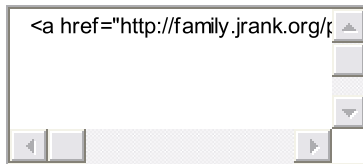
Wilson, W. J. (1987). *The Truly Disadvantaged: The Inner City, the Underclass, and Public Policy*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

OSCAR A. BARBARIN TERRY MCCANDIES

Citing this material

Please include a link to this page if you have found this material useful for research or writing a related article. Content on this website is from high-quality, licensed material originally published in print form. You can always be sure you're reading unbiased, factual, and accurate information.

Highlight the text below, right-click, and select "copy". Paste the link into your website, email, or any other HTML document.

```
<a href="http://family.jrank.org/;
```

User Comments Add a comment…