

# Center for Marriage and Families

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## **Responding to the Black Marriage Crisis** *A New Vision for Change*

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### **Abstract**

*By nearly every measure the culture of Black marriage in America is in crisis. Declines in rates and quality of Black marriages have profound, well-documented negative effects on Black adults and children, their communities, and the broader society. But in the midst of crisis there are manifold reasons for hope. Large majorities of African Americans continue to aspire to marriage, and Americans generally yearn to have healthy marriages. This research brief lays out a positive vision and tangible steps that will help us create a new, healthy Black marriage culture in America.*

### **The Black Marriage Crisis**

**B**LACK MARRIAGE in the U.S. is in crisis. During the last several decades the rates of marriage in the Black community have declined while the rates of divorce, separation, cohabitation, out-of-wedlock births, and children residing in female-headed households have increased. Between 1950 and 1996, the percentage of Black families headed by married couples declined from 78 percent to 34 percent.<sup>1</sup> Between 1940 and 1990, the percentage of Black children living with both parents dropped from 75.8 percent to 33.2 percent, largely because of increases in never-married Black mothers.<sup>2</sup> During this period African American couples reported more spousal abuse and singles and couples reported less connection to relatives.<sup>3</sup> Most striking, Blacks who do marry (and stay married) are increasingly indicating less marital satisfaction, but researchers do not know why.

Even though increasing numbers of African Americans have not married or have been unable to achieve healthy and lasting marriages, most African Americans still value and desire marriage. One survey reports 77 percent of Black adults ages 19-35 said they wished to get married.<sup>4</sup> In a 2006 Gallup Poll, Blacks were more likely than Whites to say that marriage is very important; yet, anecdotal evidence suggests that young Blacks may be losing hope that a good marriage is attainable.<sup>5</sup>

Visit <http://center.americanvalues.org> for more on the future of the Black family.

## **The Consequences of Marriage for African Americans**

**D**ECLINES IN THE NUMBER of married family households and in reported marital quality have serious implications for the well-being of African American children, adults, families, communities, and society. They leave African American children and adults vulnerable to increasing economic hardship and poverty and to social, psychological, and health-related problems.<sup>6</sup>

Marriage itself—and particularly healthy marriage—is associated with a wide range of economic, psychological, and social benefits. Married African Americans earn more, have higher levels of occupational prestige, and are more likely to own their own homes compared to their unmarried peers.<sup>7</sup> Married Black adults report more happiness, satisfaction, and fewer emotional problems than unmarried Blacks.<sup>8</sup> Compared to Blacks who are unmarried, married Black men and women report that they are more likely to reject illegal and unethical behavior,<sup>9</sup> and married Black men are less likely to be involved in criminal activity.<sup>10</sup>

Research shows that compared with children in single-parent families, African American children living with their own married parents are less likely to live in poverty, typically benefit from greater parental involvement, are less delinquent, have higher self-esteem, are more likely to delay sexual activity, have lower rates of teen pregnancy, and have better educational outcomes. Infants of married Black mothers are healthier on average.<sup>11</sup> While parental marriage is associated with important benefits for Black boys and Black girls, it appears to be especially important for the well-being of Black boys.<sup>12</sup>

The evidence clearly indicates that marriage is highly associated with improved economic standing of Black families. For families with children the difference in economic benefits is even more pronounced, with marriage itself, not just the addition of a male into the household, producing benefits.<sup>13</sup> Research also suggests that higher Black marriage rates appear to inhibit crime in largely Black communities.<sup>14</sup>

## **The Unique Positive Characteristics of Black Culture**

**W**HILE AT TIMES the picture seems bleak, there are many reasons for hope. One reason is the way in which Black cultural values can be uniquely supportive of families. This strength helps explain the resilience of African Americans and the countless examples of healthy and thriving Black marriages and families we see now and in the past.

Although more research is needed, scholars have identified five major cultural strengths or core values of African American marriages and families. An intentional embrace of these five strengths would be essential to marriage promotion programs in African American communities: (1) collectivism, which is the primary concern for survival of the group and the valuing of group identity and belonging above individualism; (2) spiritualism, or the valuing of a supreme being and recognizing the role of that being in one's own life; (3) role flexibility, which is the sharing and changing of family roles as needed; (4) “diunital” views of the world, or integrating all elements in life and striving for balance; and (5) kinship-like bonds, which means developing family-like relationships with people outside of the biological family.<sup>15</sup>

The more Blacks identify with and live by constructive cultural values and strengths, the better prepared they will be to support healthy marriages. One way to begin this work is to articulate a shared, marriage-inclusive vision for what Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King called the “beloved community.”

## A New Vision for a Healthy Beloved Community

**W**HAT DOES A HEALTHY African American community and marriage culture look like? And who will help create and communicate a shared vision for healthy marriage? One vision is this: A healthy Black community is one in which most African Americans who desire marriage for themselves are able to develop healthy marriages and rear their children in caring communities.

Developing, communicating, and translating a shared vision for a marriage-inclusive Beloved community will require collaborative strategies for society, communities, individuals, and couples.

What can we do? We can work together to raise public awareness about the significance of healthy marriages for the well-being of African Americans. We can develop comprehensive efforts that connect influential Black institutions and leaders—including Black churches; Black institutions of higher education; Black media outlets, experts, and icons; and leading scholars on Black marriages—with one another. We can collect, synthesize, and distribute empirically-based and experience-based information about how to nurture healthy Black marriages. We can help provide African Americans with greater access to marriage skills training and highlight notable couples who are achieving healthy marriages. We can inspire hope in the Black community, particularly among young people, that healthy Black marriages are attainable.

*If we work together, it can be done.*

## Five Ways to Bring about Change

**1. Spark a National Conversation about Black Marriages.** To date lack of knowledge, misunderstandings, accusations of divided loyalties, unnecessary politicization, limited paradigms for Black improvement, and unwillingness to explore expanded paradigms have unfortunately characterized the public discussion of Black marital decline. Current research needs to be broadly disseminated. As more Blacks become informed, they can write and speak about Black marriages. As more Blacks speak out, a vigorous, articulate, and widespread public conversation will develop.

This conversation can increase awareness among Black youth of the sequence and role of marriage for overall success, such as this: “Finish high school, or better still, get a college degree; wait until your twenties to marry; and have children after you marry. Teens who follow this sequence are likely to avoid poverty and do well economically. Those who depart from this sequence are at much greater economic risk.”<sup>16</sup>

**2. Set a Research Agenda.** To date there has been little investigation into what factors detract from and contribute to marital quality and happiness among African Americans. In particular, more research is needed with representative samples of African Americans that explores differences (and similarities) between Blacks and other racial/ethnic groups as well as diversity within African American populations. More rising Black scholars also need to be mentored and encouraged to consider marriage and family research as their field of specialization.

**3. Inspire Leaders and Organize Communities.** There is an immediate need to excite and mobilize Black intellectual leaders, community activists, and institutions (particularly Black churches and colleges) around the goal of strengthening Black marriages.

Discussions about the challenges in Black marriages and families have been stifled, in part, by the controversial and sensitive nature of this topic even within the Black community. There is, for example, among some Blacks a resistance to acknowledging publicly that there are major problems in Black marriages and families. Those who do acknowledge the problems have at times been criticized for being condescending to Black people, blaming the victim rather than the victimizer, and being out of touch with the challenges facing African American, particularly low-income, families. This resistance is due, in part, to the propensity in the past of some White scholars to define as deficient and devalue the legitimate, functional, and adaptive aspects of African American family life. Resistance also stems from concerns about stigmatizing large segments of the Black community—especially single mothers—and devaluing the adaptive strategies used by single mothers, extended family and “fictive kin” in single-parent households. Some leaders worry that certain political groups or parties are using a focus on Black marriages and families as a technique to divert attention from the real, systemic American society problems that disadvantage African Americans. Others are concerned that focusing on Black marriages as one strategy for Black advancement will replace or diminish advances needed in other areas, such as strengthening fathers’ relationships with their children whether or not they are married to the child’s mother, improving parenting skills for all kinds of parents, reducing domestic violence, increasing employment opportunities, and improving children’s health care and education.

Implicit in these concerns is a fear that trying to inspire African Americans (particularly low income African Americans) to strive for healthy marriages is somehow irresponsible because it gives them a false hope that they can achieve something that is likely to be unattainable for them. It is clear, however, that Black leaders—and other national leaders—cannot truly serve the Black community if they do not believe in the potential and capacity of Black people to attain their greatest aspirations, including their marriage dreams.

**4. Develop, Implement, and Evaluate Marriage Programs.** Outside of the federal government and a few local initiatives, there are no nationally cohesive efforts that aim to strengthen African American marriages and to provide Black couples with the skills they need to develop lasting relationships. The nation must improve the development of and access to marriage programs (including marriage education, counseling, and mentoring) that are designed to strengthen Black marriages and promote child and family well-being. Because adolescence and young adulthood is an important developmental period when relationship choices with lifelong consequences are made, youth relationship and marriage education programs are especially needed in secondary schools, community colleges, and four-year colleges. Once these programs are in place they must be evaluated specifically for how they impact Black marriage rates and Black marital quality.

**5. Renew Social and Cultural Supports for Marriage.** Supporting healthy Black marriages also means working for social justice in politics, economics, education, health care, child care and the legal system. Advances in social justice and opportunities for African Americans provide crucial social contexts in which to support the development of healthy Black marriages and families.

No one should be exempt (including government and market institutions) from responsibility in removing obstacles from and creating good policies for African Americans to develop healthy marriages and families. The mass media, with its powerful influence on our social environment, especially for the young, must be encouraged to present positive messages and images of African Americans and their relationships, culture, and lifestyles. These media outlets might also be encouraged to provide Blacks (as well as other groups) with healthy marriage information and resources, in part by articulating the unique positive core values and attributes that characterize the Black community.

## Conclusion

**T**HIS AGENDA will ultimately help many African Americans have what they yearn for—families that are inspired and stabilized by loving and lasting marriages. It will help reduce one major source of despair in the Black community—hostile, distressing, and lifeless marriages and complex, disrupted, and broken families. This effort will help give African Americans not only the hope that loving and lasting marriages are possible but also better access to relevant information, skills, and supports that foster healthy marriages and more examples of how to develop committed relationships and stable families. This work is extremely important. As we work together to improve the quality and stability of Black marriages we will improve and advance the lives of Black people and ultimately realize the Beloved community that Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King envisioned for us all.

## Endnotes

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