

# Supporting African American Families: Dispelling Myths, Building on Strengths

By Robert B. Hill

Many observers wrongly believe that the problems of inner-city families are intractable. The news media devotes considerable space documenting the crisis with negative statistics about African American families. By blaming the victims—attributing the crisis to internal deficits or weaknesses such as female-headed families, poor work ethics, and underclass values, rather than to such external constraints as racism, recessions, inflation, the exodus of industries from inner cities, and anti-poor public policies—they focus on identifying problems and not on generating solutions.

African American families have many assets: strong work orientations, flexible family roles, strong kinship bonds, and strong religious orientations. Although these attributes characterize many racial and ethnic groups, they have manifested themselves differently in African American families because of their unique history. Family-support practitioners can work more effectively with families of color by building on these strengths.

## HIGH ASPIRATIONS

Research has found that, although they score lower than Caucasian children on standardized tests, African American children often have higher educational and occupational aspirations than Caucasian children of similar economic status. Unfortunately, many studies have revealed that bright inner-city children in the public schools encounter “misguidance” counselors who lower their aspirations and self-esteem to such an extent that they drop out in record numbers. Inner-city children need educators who can help them attain their high aspirations.

One of the most successful educational initiatives that reinforces the high-achievement orientation of inner-city children and their parents is Head Start. This preschool program emphasizes parental participation and has encouraged higher achievement among thousands of low-income children.

## STRONG WORK ETHIC

Despite popular belief that most African Americans are on welfare, U.S. census data revealed that only about one-fifth of all African American families—and only half of low-income African American families—received public assistance in the 1980s.

Even so, African American groups have developed numerous innovative programs to reduce welfare dependency. Some of the most effective come from resident management corporations of public housing. These groups maintain safe, pleasant, and comfortable living environments more efficiently and cost-effectively than can local housing authorities. As a result of tenant management, vandalism, welfare dependency, school dropout, teenage pregnancy, and unemployment have declined sharply.

One key to the success of public housing is the hiring of former welfare recipients to operate local small businesses. Maintenance, day care, laundry, tailoring, barbering, beauty care, catering, reverse commuting, and thrift shop initiatives abound throughout the nation.

## FLEXIBLE FAMILY ROLES

In African American families, mothers and fathers often assume some of the traditional roles of the other, and the children perform some parental functions for younger siblings. This role adaptability has contributed to the stability and advancement of two-parent African American households.

Role flexibility is most evident in the disproportionate number of African American families headed by women. Traditionally, single-parent families headed by women are depicted as broken or pathological, whereas two-parent families are described as intact or healthy. But such characterizations mistake family structure for family functioning. One-parent families are often more intact or cohesive than two-parent families.



## KINSHIP BONDS

According to conventional wisdom, the extended family has declined sharply in urban areas. Research reveals, however, that the proportion of African American extended families has increased. U.S. census data reveal that, between 1970 and 1980, African American extended family households rose from 23% to 28%. By 1992, according to the University of Wisconsin's National Survey of Households, two out of five African American households were three-generation. Further, African American extended families often reach beyond individual households and may include members who are not related by blood or marriage.

Social welfare policies and family support programs are making better use of kinship networks. Policymakers and child welfare systems must recognize the range of services that kinship networks provide in such areas as day care, support to unwed mothers, informal adoption, and foster care.

Kinship networks often provide short-term childcare, especially for working parents. About two-fifths of working African Americans depend on responsible relatives for day care. Kinship networks also provide support to unwed mothers. Nine out of 10 babies born to African American teenagers live in three-generational households. Studies have found that adolescent mothers who have the support of kin are more likely to avoid welfare dependency, and their children's development is healthier, than teenage mothers who raise their children without assistance from relatives.\*

Informal adoption has been a major support in African American families since antiquity, with children living with grandparents or aunts and uncles for varying lengths of time. During slavery, grandmothers reared thousands of African American children. According to U.S. census data, the number of African American children living with relatives has risen from 1.3 million (13%) in 1970 to 1.6 million (16%) in 1990.

Even though African American families provide extensive informal adoption and foster care services, many child welfare systems have not targeted kinship networks for such services until recently. Of the one million African American children who live in households without either parent present, kin informally adopts 80%; the remaining 20% are in foster care. Yet, because children of color still account for most children in foster care, there is an urgent

need for public policies that encourage relatives to take in children and motivate systems to use kinship networks as major placement resources.

## RELIGIOUS ORIENTATION

Religion plays a strong role in the lives of African Americans. In a 1981 Gallup poll, 67% of African Americans said that religion was "very important" in their lives. A 1980 National Urban League survey found that 76% of African Americans belong to churches and 67% attend church at least monthly.

As the most dominant institution in the African American community, churches provide a range of social services to strengthen families and enhance child development. African Americans with strong religious orientations achieve higher socioeconomic levels than those with little religious commitment. A 1980 study of young males in low-income communities, conducted by the National Bureau of Economic Research, concluded that a deep religious commitment was strongly correlated with lower rates of school dropout, delinquency, out-of-wedlock births, and drug abuse.

Clearly, African American families have many unique and powerful assets. By dispelling myths about African American families and building instead on their strengths, family support practitioners have at their disposal major resources to help support African American families.

\* F. Furstenburg Jr., J. Brooks-Gunn, and S. Philip Morgan. (1987). *Adolescent Mothers in Later Life*. Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press.

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