The African American Child

Development and Challenges

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Preface

The desire to write this book developed when the first author was teaching a course one semester on African American Child Psychology. While putting together the material for the course, she realized that there was a need for a comprehensive text on African American children. This book is designed to fill that need and introduce social science students (developmental psychology, social work, sociology, Black World Studies) and other related disciplines (family sciences, education, and nursing) to African American child development.

We had four goals in mind while writing this book. First, we wanted to introduce students to issues that impact the lives of African American children that typically are not discussed in child development textbooks or are relegated to a paragraph in most developmental textbooks. Second, we wanted to present a balanced discussion of the challenges that impact the lives of African American children as well as emphasize their strengths and their resiliency. Third, we wanted to familiarize students with a sampling of research that moves beyond a deficit view of the development of African American children and takes into account the historical, cultural, and social factors that influence developmental outcomes for African American children. Fourth and perhaps most importantly, we wanted to stimulate critical thinking in social science students about future directions for research on African American children and their families.

The book is divided into nine chapters. Each chapter begins with an overview of the material to be covered, continues with an Insider’s Voice, which offers a personal story or a personal viewpoint about the issues discussed in the section or chapter and concludes with a discussion of current perspectives on African American child development, and suggestions for additional readings.
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CHAPTER 1

Demographics: A Portrait of African American Children

OVERVIEW

The word dynamic aptly describes the socio-environmental-economic changes that have occurred in the lives of African American children for the past 40 years. One focus of this chapter is to describe those changes, specifically highlighting changes in the population demographics, changes in their living arrangements, and changes in the economic conditions of their families. This 40-year time period has been selected because the changes that occurred represent a pivotal and important time period in the sociopolitical history of the United States (i.e., Civil Rights Movement, Black Power Movement). Furthermore, these sociopolitical changes have had a profound impact on the quality of life experienced by African American children.

The chapter is divided into four sections. Sections one through three provide statistical information on African American children, focusing on their numbers relative to their peers from other racial and ethnic groups, their living arrangements, and the economic conditions of their families. The data presented in this section come from a variety of statistical sources including Statistical Abstracts of the U.S., Demographic and Government Documents, Statistical Record of Black Americans, and Statistical Abstracts of Children. Section four, Perspectives on Demographics and African American Children, posits the question what do the changing demographics tell us about African American children for the new millennium? The chapter ends with an overview of the topics to be covered in the book.

We now begin with a discussion of population statistics on African American children.
SECTION ONE: POPULATION STATISTICS ON AFRICAN AMERICAN CHILDREN

In 1960, there were 55,723,000 children under the age of 15 in the United States. White children represented 88% of that number and African American children represented 12% of that number (data were not available on children from other ethnic groups during that time period; see Figure 1.1).

In the past 46 years, the number of children under the age of 15 in the United States has increased to 71,341,000 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2006). Of that number, White children comprise 65%, Hispanic children 16%, Asian American children 3%, Native American children 2% and African American children 13% (see Figure 1.2).

The African American population in general and the population of African American children in particular have grown at a faster rate than the national average for the past 10 years.

During the 1990s, the number of African American children under the age of 15 steadily increased (see Figure 1.3). As illustrated by the figure, in 1990, there were 8,296,000 African American children under the age of 15. That number increased by 632,000 to 8,828,000 in 1995; and increased by 675,000 to 9,606,000 in 2000. Currently, there are 9,415,000 African American children in the United States. The population growth rate for African American children is due in part to the swell in the number of children who were either born to parents of African descent from the
Caribbean, South America, or Africa, or who immigrated to this country with their parents.

Demographers and population growth experts predict that this population growth rate will continue for the next several decades, and that by 2040, African American children and Hispanic children will constitute the majority of American children.
SECTION TWO: LIVING ARRANGEMENTS
OF AFRICAN AMERICAN CHILDREN

While the living arrangements of all children in the United States have undergone significant changes since the 1960s, the changes in living arrangements of African American children have been the most dramatic.

We begin our discussion of living arrangements with a focus on comparing mother-headed households with two-parent households. Figure 1.4 provides an illustration of the changes that occurred in those living arrangements from 1960 to 2004.

As shown in the figure, in 1960, the majority of African American children (67%), lived in homes with both parents whereas 20% of African American children lived in mother-headed households. In 1970, over half (58%) of African American children lived in homes with both parents compared to the 30% living in mother-headed households.

The increase in the number of African American children living in mother-headed households and the decrease in the number of African American children living in two-parent families did not begin until the 1980s. As the figure shows, in 1980, 42% of African American children lived in two-parent family homes and 43% in mother-headed households. However, the dramatic change in their living arrangements did not occur until 1990, where 37% of African American children lived in homes with both parents and 51% of African American children lived in mother-headed households.

At present, 48% of African American children live in mother-headed households; this percentage has remained steady for more than a decade. This compares to 16% of White children, and 26% of Hispanic children living in mother-headed households (U.S. Census Bureau, Statistical Abstracts of the U.S., 2006).

What factors have contributed to the increase in the number of African American children living in mother-headed households? Brewer (1988) states that a multiplicity of factors, including the increase in divorce rates, and the increase in the number of African American children born out of marriage, contribute to the increase.

Father-headed households have also become a common living arrangement for African American children in the past 40 years. For example, in 1960, 2% of African American children resided in father-headed households. This percentage increased to 2.3% in 1970, but decreased to 1.9% in 1980 and increased to 3.5% in 1990 and to 4.4% in 2000 and then in 2004 increased to 5.8% (see Figure 1.5).

How do these statistics compare to the statistics of children from other racial and ethnic backgrounds? In 1960, only 1% of white children lived in father-headed households. That percentage decreased to less than 1% in 1970, increased to 1.6% in 1980, to 3% in 1990 and to 4.4% in 2004. A similar pattern is evident for Hispanic children. In 1980, 1.5% of Hispanic children lived in father-headed households, 2.9% in 1990 and 4.4% in 2004 (U.S. Census Bureau, Statistical Abstracts of the U.S., 2006).

While this pattern suggests that more children, independent of race, are living with their fathers, the findings become more relevant for African American fathers because of the myths that surround their low level of involvement in the lives of their children.
During the past 40 years, African American grandparents have also assumed a more prominent care giving role in the lives of their grandchildren and this living arrangement constitutes a more common alternative living arrangement for African American children than do father-headed households. Comparatively, African American children are more likely to be reared by their grandparents, usually their grandmothers, than are their counterparts from other ethnic and racial backgrounds (Ross & Aday, 2006). These grandparents have assumed custodial care for a variety of reasons ranging from death of a parent, incarceration of a parent, parental mental illness, parental drug abuse, child abuse, divorce, family violence, and unemployment issues (Burton, 1992).

As depicted in Figure 1.6, in 1960, 9.5% of African American children lived with their grandparents. In 1990, 12% of African American children lived with their grandparents in comparison to 4% of White children and 6% of Hispanic children.

Presently, 9% of African American children are raised in grandparent-maintained homes. Unfortunately, some of these grandparent-maintained homes experience some form of economic hardship.

Foster care and formal adoptive arrangements represent another family constellation for many African American children. This is due in part to the crack epidemic of the 1980s, and in the 1990s, due in part to parental incarceration, death and a variety of neighborhood and social factors (Burton, 1992). Current and accurate data on the percentage of African American children residing in foster care and adoptive families are sparse, especially for the past 40 years.

![Figure 1.6](image_url)


Based on the available data, from the U.S. Department of Human Services, Administration for Children and Families Report (2006), in 2004 there were 517,000 children in foster care; approximately 34% of children in foster care were African American children. This percentage tends to vary by state. In states such as New Jersey, Louisiana, and Delaware, over 50% of children in foster care were African American and in major urban areas about 80% were African American (McRoy, Oglesby, & Grape, 1997).

The experiences of African American children in foster care differ significantly from their White counterparts. According to Roberts (2002), racial disparities exist at every level in the child welfare system for children of color in general and African American children in particular. That is, they enter foster care at higher rates, remain in foster care longer, experience multiple foster care placements; receive fewer services and have fewer contacts with case-workers than their White counterparts.

To begin to address this issue, a Consortium on Racial Equality in the Child Welfare was formed by a collective of African American social workers who were concerned with the disparate treatment of African American children in the welfare system. The goal of this consortium is to monitor the treatment of children of color in the welfare system, provide cultural competence training to social workers and others who work with African American children, and to assist in the development of community initiatives on adoption and placement of African American children.

In 2004, 52,000 children were formally adopted from the public foster care system. African American children represented 32% of that number. Figure 1.7 provides comparative information on the percentage of children formally adopted in that year.

In that same year, 118,000 children awaited adoption; 39% of the children were African American. Figure 1.8 provides comparative information on children awaiting formal adoption.

For many years, members of the African American community engaged in the practice of informal adoption of African American children. However, precise information on the percentage of African American children adopted informally, as well as information on the existing status of this practice is virtually unknown.

Presently, African American parents legally adopt the majority of African American children; however, a small percentage of African American children are adopted by White parents. This form of interracial adoption began in the U.S.; after World War II and between 1962 and 1967, approximately 10,000 African American children were transracially adopted. The National Council for Adoption estimates that 12% of all adoptions in 1993 were transracial adoptions, and current estimates suggest that approximately 1,000 African American children are adopted annually by White parents. Unfortunately few states keep detailed statistics on transracial adoption and the federal government issued the last report on transracial adoptions in 1975.

Transracial adoptions are not without controversy and have generated a great deal of debate for the past three decades. Opponents argue that White parents are ill equipped to socialize African American children about racial issues, and as a consequence, their ability to develop a healthy racial self-esteem is compromised (Taylor and Thornton, 1996). Supporters contend that the basic ingredient for healthy psychological development is a stable and healthy relationship with one’s parents and not the race of the parent.

FIGURE 1.8  Percentage of children awaiting adoption, 2004.
SECTION THREE: ECONOMIC CONDITIONS OF AFRICAN AMERICAN CHILDREN AND THEIR FAMILIES

The economic status of African American children and their families has undergone significant changes since the early 1960s. Although the overall economic condition of the nation has improved significantly in the last 40 years (the number of families living below the poverty level decreased from 22.4% in 1960 to 12.7% in 2003), this has not been the case for African American children and their families, especially for African American children residing in mother-headed households.

Figure 1.9 provides information on the percentage of African American families with incomes below the poverty level from 1960 to 2003.

As the figure indicates, in 1960, 55% of African American families lived below the poverty level, this compares to 20% of White families; in 1970, 41.5% lived below the poverty level, in contrast, to the 10.7% of White families living below the poverty level.

In 1980, 28.9% of African American families lived below the poverty level, in contrast, only 8% of White families lived below the poverty level; in 1990, 29.2% of African American families lived below the poverty level, whereas only 8.1% of White families lived below the poverty level. In 2003 the percentage of African American families living below the poverty level decreased to 22.3%, compared to 8.1% of White families living below the poverty level. However, when those percentages are contrasted with the percentages for White families, they suggest that in any given decade, African American families are 2 to 4 times more likely than White families to be poor.

FIGURE 1.9 Percentage of African American families and White families with incomes below the poverty level.
The percentage of African American children living in poor families tends to vary by family structure, parental gender, and child age. That is, the majority of African American children (47.4%) who reside in mother-headed households are poor. This compares to 11% of African American children living in two-parent family homes; 20% living in grandparent homes and 27.5% living in father-headed households. African American children under the age of three are more likely than older African American children to reside in homes with incomes twice below the poverty level (U.S. Census Bureau, 2004). Furthermore, they are more likely than their counterparts from other racial and ethnic backgrounds to experience long-term or persistent poverty (Ellwood, 1990). Consequently, they are at risk for physical, academic, social, emotional and behavioral problems (Hogan & Lichter, 1995).

What factors have contributed to the change in the economic status of African American children? Some social scientists believe that this change in the economic status of African American children and their families corresponds to an increase in the number of African American children residing in mother-headed households. They contend that these households are poor, because the mother is undereducated and must rely solely on public assistance for income (O’Hare, Pollard, Mann, & Kent, 1998). The reduction in cash assistance, and the temporal restrictions placed on the receipt of cash assistance are thought to be contributing factors as well.

It may be that independent of family structure, the number of African American children residing in homes with incomes at or below the poverty level is a result of geographical factors (i.e., African American families tend to live in regions that have experienced the most economic decline), employment opportunity factors (i.e., African American children tend to reside in regions where there are few opportunities for employment for their families) and wage level factors (i.e., African Americans tend to live in communities with lower wage levels; see Box 1.1). Perhaps, a more plausible explanation is that an interaction of all of these factors has contributed to the current economic status of African American children and their families.

**BOX 1.1**

**Who are the Welfare Families?**

The racial composition of welfare families has changed over the past 10 years. In 1990, 38% of whites, 40% of blacks, and 17% of Hispanic families were recipients of welfare support. Today, 31% of Whites, 38% of Blacks, and 25% of Hispanics are recipients of welfare.
While a disproportionate number of African American children live in families with incomes at or below the poverty level, the number of African American children residing in middle- and upper-middle-class families has increased. This is due to the improving economic conditions for some African American families and due to the increase in the number of college-educated African American parents (McAdoo, 1992). Social science research rarely focuses on the experiences of African American children from upwardly mobile or middle-class African American families (McAdoo, 2000).

**PERSPECTIVES ON DEMOGRAPHICS AND AFRICAN AMERICAN CHILDREN**

What does the demographic pattern just described in the preceding section tell us about African American children?

In general, the pattern informs us of the obvious as stated at the beginning of the chapter: the lives of African American children have been dynamic and undergone noteworthy changes in the past 40 years. It is our hope that these demographics will serve to frame and guide research on African American children in this new millennium.

Research on African American children, regardless of the issues, must be grounded in theories germane to African Americans. A full discussion of those theories is presented in chapter 2. Furthermore, in order to accurately assess the experiences of African American children, measures and designs must be selected for their cultural relevance as well as their internal and external validity. Finally, future educators, scholars, and practitioners must become familiar with the political, historical and contextual factors which influence the functioning and development of African American children.

The goal of this book is to stimulate thinking, reflection, and action in students of human development, who will eventually become the researchers and practitioners involved in the lives of African American children in the 21st century.

The remainder of the book is divided into eight chapters.

Chapter 2, Research Issues with African American Children, begins with a discussion of the problems inherent in current research on African American children, continues with descriptions of how different data collection methods (e.g. interview, survey, naturalistic observations) and designs (e.g. cross sectional, longitudinal, ethnographic) may influence the research conducted on African American children as well as the interpretation of the results and concludes with a discussion of issues of reliability, validity and ethics as they pertain to African American children and their families.
Chapter 3, African American Children and Health Issues, is divided into two major sections. The first section provides information on the health challenges that confront African American children and the second section discusses access to health care.

Chapter 4, Mental Health and Racial Identity, is divided into two broad sections. Section one identifies the risk factors that predispose African American children to mental health problems, and includes a discussion of resiliency, assessment, diagnosis, and treatment for some African American children. The last half of the chapter focuses on the development of racial identity in African American children.

Chapter 5, Education and African American Children, presents information on the education of African American children. The chapter starts with a discussion of the impact of desegregation on their educational attainment. The chapter continues with a discussion of both private and public schools that enable African American children to excel academically. The chapter concludes with a discussion of African American children and early educational programs.

Chapter 6, Language and Literacy, begins with a discussion of the controversial decision by the Oakland School Board to use African American Vernacular English (AAVE) as a tool to improve students' standardized test performance. The chapter includes a comparison of the features of AAVE and Standard English, a discussion of the specific language and literacy issues confronting African American children, and a description of the language and literacy intervention programs designed for African American children. The chapter concludes with a discussion of language assessment and children and perspectives on language issues.

Chapter 7, Moral Development, begins with a general discussion of the pros and cons of using Piaget's, Kohlberg's and Turiel's theories to explain the moral development/behavior of African American children. This chapter includes sections on the prosocial, aggressive, and violent behavior among African American children. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the sociopolitical ramifications of moral development, especially as it relates to African American juvenile delinquents and incarcerated youth.

Chapter 8, Social Contexts in the Lives of African American Children: Family and Peers, presents information on the various theoretical perspectives guiding research on African American children and their families, including a discussion of the research on African American children within their family and peer groups.

The book finishes with chapter 9, Epilogue: Where Do We Go From Here?, which highlights the critical issues discussed in the text and offers suggestions for future research on African American children in the 21st century.
ADDITIONAL READINGS


