

# Research White Paper

February 2026

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## An Approach to Conceptualizing and Defining Black Family Flourishing to Inform Research, Policy, and Practice

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This white paper, *Conceptualizing and Defining Black Family Flourishing to Inform Research, Policy, and Practice*, is part of a suite of products from the Black Families Flourishing (BFF) project intended to expand knowledge about Black families with children in the United States. The products will serve as the foundation for other work emanating from BFF. Additional foundational products include a conceptual model that serves as a roadmap for how BFF research is designed; a review of research focused on Black families that spans 100 years (1920–2020); a white paper that explores how researchers, policymakers, and practitioners have defined family over time, including how these definitions have facilitated or constrained access to systems for Black families (forthcoming); and the *Fresh Look Series* (a set of six data points accompanied by maps), which sheds light on the landscape of Black families in the United States using existing secondary data.

Across BFF's work, **Black people** refers to individuals who may identify as African American—including those who were primarily born in the United States and are descended from enslaved Africans who survived the trans-Atlantic slave trade—as well as the smaller populations of people living in the United States 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.

**Black families** are defined as a group of at least one self-identified Black adult and/or child(ren), related by birth, marriage, adoption, or choice. Families must have children, and those children can be up to age 25.

## Background

The [Black Families Flourishing \(BFF\)](#) project conducts rigorous and transparent research with Black families in the United States to establish a nuanced understanding of their diversity and well-being, and of how Black families interact with various systems. Our work is informed by six guiding principles that are theory-driven,

anti-racist, collaborative, and systems-shifting. These principles are operationalized via accompanying project objectives\* and equity-focused indicators† that serve as the foundation and guiding compass for our work.

We enact these principles through a set of key project activities: developing and administering a nationally representative survey of Black families; partnering and collaborating with key constituents; conducting additional research to better understand Black family heterogeneity, cultural assets, and strengths, and the ways in which systems serving Black families are working well; building community capacity to translate research findings into action and mobilization; and communicating and disseminating our learnings to ensure accurate narratives about, and portrayals of, Black families.

## Purpose of This Paper

This white paper documents our approach to conceptualizing flourishing in the context of Black family life and shares an emerging definition of “Black family flourishing” as a first step toward developing a more formal BFF project definition. We believe this task to be critically important given the ways in which research, policies, and programs shape definitions of family and play a role in facilitating and/or constraining family autonomy, opportunity, and well-being.<sup>i,ii,iv</sup> For Black families in particular, research focused on problems has had an outsized influence, as has the overwhelming presence of research that portrays Black families negatively. Data that capture Black families’ nuances and variation are also lacking. These challenges have resulted in inaccurate and skewed representations of Black families<sup>iii</sup>—the effects of which have shown up in (and continue to be present in) research, policies, and programs.<sup>iv</sup>

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\* Project objectives include both the things we want to achieve through this project and how we aim to achieve them.

† BFF equity indicators are metrics developed by the project team, in consultation with an external facilitator, to track adherence to work processes (how we are achieving key measures of interest) and content (what we are focusing on to guide our work).

### Black Families Flourishing Guiding Principles

1. Ensure that Black families’ well-being, excellence, cultural assets, and history are elevated in a way that supports their flourishing.
2. Focus on Black people and families in their own right, with limited comparisons to others.
3. Consider Black families from an intersectional, African diasporic lens that draws upon culturally grounded and strengths-based perspectives.
4. Utilize multi- and interdisciplinary lenses, such as history, demography, sociology, developmental science, family science, economics, and lived experience perspectives.
5. Understand that racism is devastating for the entire nation and requires multipronged responses to eradicate inequitable systems and disparate outcomes.
6. Partner with Black families and communities and Black family-supporting organizations throughout the research process—from conceptualization through design, analysis, and dissemination—to ensure data relevance and utilization.

Our conceptualization and draft definition of Black family flourishing are informed by our understanding of Black families, including their history in the United States; their cultural assets and strengths; literature scans focused on flourishing and on racism, oppression, and discrimination; insights from the project team, advisors, and other key stakeholders; and preliminary findings from focus groups with Black families that will inform questions on a nationally representative survey focused on Black family heterogeneity, systems engagement, and flourishing.<sup>‡</sup> Importantly, both our conceptualization and our definition will continue to evolve as we collect additional data and receive input from others.

Below, we name major events in U.S. history that have significantly shaped the experiences of Black families.<sup>v</sup> We also draw on a Child Trends brief and other research focused on Black families' assets and strengths to illuminate cultural capital within Black families. We then provide a high-level overview of what is known about flourishing writ large, underscoring the importance of examining flourishing using family-specific and Black-focused lenses. As a next step, we describe our approach to conceptualizing Black family flourishing, present a working definition based on our learnings to date, and conclude this paper by outlining next steps for finalizing the project definition of Black family flourishing.

## What We Know About Black Families, Including Their History, Cultural Assets, and Strengths

Understanding Black family flourishing requires a grounding in the history of Black families in the United States, as well as an understanding of their cultural assets and strengths. Scholars from a range of disciplines have noted the impact of significant events such as the Transatlantic slave trade,<sup>xvii</sup> the institution of chattel slavery,<sup>vi</sup> Reconstruction,<sup>vii,viii</sup> Jim Crow,<sup>ix</sup> the Great Migration,<sup>x,xi,xii</sup> the Civil Rights Movement,<sup>xiii</sup> and the “Whitelash” era<sup>§,xiv</sup> on the lives of Black people, families, and communities in the United States. Researchers—and Black researchers in particular—have also played an instrumental role in identifying and communicating Black families' cultural assets and strengths.<sup>xv</sup> While these assets and strengths are not universal across Black families,<sup>xvi</sup>

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‡ Focus groups were designed to gather participants' perspectives on potential domains that shape Black family flourishing, including facilitators and barriers to flourishing, family strengths and sources of resilience, and experiences with systems such as education and health care. Focus group participants ranged in age from 18 to 75 and included 53 parents or primary caregivers of at least one child or young adult (infants through age 29) who lived with them at least half of the time. These individuals represented suburban, rural, and urban communities across the Midwest, Northeast, South, and West regions of the United States and reflected diversity in household structure, income (less than \$30,000 to more than \$100,000 annually), educational attainment (less than a high school degree to postgraduate or professional study), race and ethnicity (Black, non-Hispanic; Hispanic; and two or more races, non-Hispanic), political affiliation (Democrat, Independent, and Republican), and languages spoken besides English, including French, Spanish, and Yoruba.

§ A term coined by journalist Van Jones to describe backlash from white Americans following the election of the nation's first Black president. Researchers have also noted that periods marked by racial progress in the United States are often followed by strategies and tactics to negate said progress (e.g., the Jim Crow era that came on the heels of post-Civil War Reconstruction policies).

many have been attributed to the survival and thriving of Black people in America in the face of systemic racism, oppression, and discrimination.<sup>xvii</sup> They have also been identified as commonplace and frequently shared among Black people, even when accounting for the different characteristics (e.g., ethnicity, family structure, geography, income, national origin) of Black families.<sup>xviii</sup> Below, we summarize five of these assets, which are described in further detail in [this Child Trends brief](#)<sup>xviii</sup> and in the work of other scholars<sup>xix,xx,xxi</sup> interested in Black family cultural assets and strengths.

- **Extended kin and social networks play important roles in Black family life.** Black families and children tend to value family networks, which include both consanguineal (blood) relatives and “fictive” kin,<sup>xxii</sup> as well as social groups and organizations.<sup>xxiii</sup> These networks may facilitate the receipt of support and resources that enable families to address members’ immediate needs, weather crises, and care for those unable to care for themselves (e.g., children, people with disabilities, the elderly). They have also been found to contribute to Black families’ psychological well-being<sup>xxiv</sup> and survival<sup>xxv</sup> in racist and hostile environments.<sup>xxvi,xxvii,xxviii,xxix</sup>
- **Black families draw on religion and spirituality as sources of instrumental and intangible support.** Religiosity and spirituality refer to the role of faith and a belief in<sup>xxx</sup>—and connection to—a higher power. Both religion and spirituality functioned as important supports for Black people who were enslaved in the United States and those confronting the negative impacts of enslavement; both continue to play an important role in the lives of Black people today,<sup>xxxi</sup> although this role varies to some extent by generation and immigration status.<sup>xxxii</sup> Research indicates that the Black church has provided Black families with spiritual, social, and economic support, and has promoted racial progress.<sup>xxxiii,xxxiv</sup> Spirituality has been found to support positive racial socialization with members of Black families.<sup>xxxv,xxxvi,xxxvii,xxxviii,xxxix,xl</sup>
- **Black families practice optimism. Across a range of circumstances and economic conditions, Black families share a belief that conditions will improve in the future,<sup>xli</sup> even in the face of challenges like unsatisfactory living arrangements or finances.<sup>xlii</sup>** Feelings of optimism have also been associated with positive mental and physical health outcomes for Black Americans,<sup>xliii,xliv</sup> although the mechanism by which these outcomes occur is not well understood.
- **Black families flexibly adapt their roles and responsibilities.** An individual’s responsibilities in a family adapt and change with circumstances and needs.<sup>xxv,xlv</sup> Within Black families, primary responsibilities related to household earnings, child care, housework, and other duties may shift between family members based on contextual factors, such as the availability of work.<sup>xlvi</sup> Maintaining this flexibility has allowed Black families to challenge affronts to their livelihood, such as labor force exclusion—a commonly cited employment barrier for Black people seeking work that has been attributed to discrimination and systemic racism.<sup>xlvii,xlv,xlviii</sup>
- **Resistance has been and remains a cornerstone of Black families’ ability to survive and flourish in the face of systems that devalue, harm, and disadvantage them.** In the face

of ongoing injustice, Black people, families, and communities draw on shared identities, meaning, and collective power to fight against historical and present-day conditions in ways that restore their agency and assert control over their life outcomes.<sup>xlix,l</sup> Resistance strategies have been embedded in daily life and in larger movements, and are dynamic, individual- and systems-focused, and passed down across generations.

## What the Literature Tells Us About Flourishing and Black Families

To better understand existing conceptualizations of flourishing, the BFF team completed an extensive literature scan of academic articles and gray literature published from 2015–2025 on flourishing, generally; and on Black family flourishing, specifically. We identified potential articles using pre-determined search terms, including “thrive/thriving,” “flourish/flourishing,” “well-being/wellbeing,” “happiness,” “life satisfaction,” “positive development,” and “quality of life”; paired with terms such as “definition,” “conceptualization,” “framework,” “measure,” “instrument,” and “scale”; focused on “Black,” “African,” “African American,” “Latino,” “Hispanic,” “Afro-Latino,” and “immigrant” populations. We searched across multiple databases, including APA PsychNet, EBSCO, ERIC, Sociological Abstracts, ProQuest, and Web of Science. We uploaded all results into Zotero, a citation management tool, and removed duplicate articles as well as articles that were missing key information (such as the title or abstract) or that were inaccessible. The remaining abstracts were reviewed using artificial intelligence (AI), specifically GPT-4o. We developed an initial query to tag articles and later refined it (based on human review) to ensure the criteria for including and excluding resources in the review were accurate. In total, we identified more than 125 relevant resources on flourishing that we drew upon for the review and this white paper. Our analysis of the literature highlighted several important considerations for understanding and conceptualizing flourishing in the context of research and other efforts focused on Black families:

- **Most previous work on flourishing focuses on individuals, rather than families, as the unit of analysis.** This focus prioritizes the role of personal attributes, traits, choices, and behaviors, potentially misaligning with the inherently collective nature of families, which—based on the BFF definition—operate with more than one person and in a group.
- **While literature on flourishing gives some attention to context, we did not often find explicit examination of the role of history and systems in families’ lives.** Black families’ disenfranchisement in the United States—including factors such as racism, oppression, and discrimination—has resulted in systemic disadvantages that have created significant obstacles to resource access; this, in turn, affects families’ well-being and flourishing. In the face of these challenges, Black families have developed and drawn on a set of support systems and cultural assets and strengths that have helped to

buffer against these risk factors and supported their ability to flourish. Understanding how these barriers and facilitators to family flourishing play out across time (i.e., history), systems, and other contexts is critical for understanding Black family flourishing in the United States. When reflecting on systems that are supportive of Black family flourishing, one focus group participant specifically named the Black church as a unique and culturally specific system:

*“A Black church will pull together to help any of their members out ... any way possible. And then not only that ... they also reach out to the community a lot more. And they're more involved in different aspects of the community, the surrounding community ... Black churches tend to have something going on all of the time ... not only [to] recruit members. [but] ... to ... keep community going and [let] the community know we're not just a church, but we're also all family.”*

- **Flourishing literature lacks explicit attention to the integrated roles of race, ethnicity, culture, and nationality specific to Black people and families.** While research on flourishing gives nod to characteristics specific to varied groups, including examinations of universal and culturally specific aspects of flourishing,<sup>li</sup> there is a gap in knowledge about intra-racial distinctions among Black people in the United States and a limited holistic understanding of flourishing (whether individual- or family-focused) across the African diaspora. This lack of understanding extends to factors such as ethnicity, cultural assets and strengths, and nationality, which may shape what flourishing looks like, serve as facilitators or barriers to flourishing, and play a role in how flourishing is pursued.
- **Analyses indicate that while measures of flourishing are often multidimensional, there is limited attention in the literature to tangible factors such as finances (e.g., acquisition of adequate fiscal resources and wealth<sup>lii,liii</sup> has been a challenge for Black families in the United States) and to more intangible characteristics such as optimism or resilience (emphasized as cultural assets and strengths for Black people and families<sup>liv</sup>).**<sup>lv</sup> Additional reviews of flourishing and other research suggest that, while income may not be the key to flourishing, it may be important to facilitating dimensions of flourishing such as optimism.<sup>lvi</sup> One focus group member helped shed light on these issues:

*“I think the financials are of course important, but at least to me, I feel like family is just about being there for each other, loving each other, being healthy. And I feel like everything else will fall into place.”*

Another reflected on optimism and resilience as characteristics specific to Black family flourishing:

*“I think one of [the] major things that really helps the Black family in terms of flourishing in the American society, [is] resilience ... Black people are so resilient despite the fact they face racial discrimination. There are more limited chances for Black people to flourish in America. We all know we're discriminated against, but despite ... [this] fact we still have*

*Black families flourishing, being excellent ... in different sectors ... the spirit of being resilient despite our challenges is ... a key factor ... that's unique about Black family.”*

- **Temporal aspects of flourishing, such as aspirations of well-being and/or the transfer of flourishing across generations, are not prevalent in literature.** Research and measures focused on flourishing aim to understand flourishing over time, with measures designed to be administered across longer rather than shorter intervals (e.g., no more than monthly).<sup>lvii</sup> There appears to be less attention, however, to aspects of flourishing that focus on aspirations or future-focused indicators of hope—for instance, documenting and measuring an individual’s longer-term desires for themselves and their family. There is also a gap in our understanding of how the transfer of flourishing occurs in families in the present day and across generations. Focus group data highlight the importance of aspirations and time as issues to explore in relation to flourishing. One person stated:

*“When I think of [a] flourishing family, I look at ... [the] generational aspect ... my father only graduated from high school. If I graduate from college [then] if I can advance my kids to get ... [more] education. So ... when it comes to family ... How do we advance the family? Family as a whole, generational wise.”*

- **Much flourishing research neglects families’ role in engaging with, shaping, and resisting systems that affect flourishing.** Flourishing is not a passive or predetermined concept and families have agency and change over time. When examining the concept of flourishing alongside families’ interactions with systems, it is important to acknowledge the bidirectional relationship between systems and families. In short, systems affect families and families affect systems, although influence and power varies—with systems generally having more influence and power over Black families than vice versa.<sup>lviii</sup> Black families’ engagement in activities of resistance (e.g., acquisition of education and employment, advocacy, civic/political engagement, refusal of harmful conditions, voting, etc.) are expressions of agency directed toward systems that have been designed to exclude and disempower them. Importantly, participation in many of these activities (i.e., education, civic engagement) are seemingly benign. However, because Black people and families were never intended to have access to systems like education or engage in activities or actions such as civil/political engagement, their mundanity is precisely what makes them critical aspects of what it means to flourish.

# Conceptualizing Black Family Flourishing and Offering a Working Definition

Based on learnings from our literature scan and focus groups, we next identify several specific, unique considerations that have not been captured in previous understandings of Black families' flourishing, which are often individually focused. These considerations, in turn, inform our conceptualization of Black family flourishing.

## Considerations for Conceptualizing Black Families Flourishing

- Understand that family members operate as individuals and as a collective unit. Actions and decisions may be made based on individual and collective perspectives and interests.
- Include the role of history and context, as well as the examination of cultural assets and strengths.
- Center families' lived experiences and variation, including characteristics such as their race, ethnicity, culture, and nationality.
- Recognize and document that systems (and other entities and organizations) are not neutral and can facilitate and constrain flourishing.
- Include multiple measures and indicators of flourishing.
- Understand that flourishing can be aspirational and may occur across generations.
- Incorporate resistance as an important and key facet of flourishing.

Our conceptualization of Black family flourishing has led to an initial definition that we will continue to refine. We will also use this definition to inform and guide our work.

## Working Definition of Black Family Flourishing

“Black family flourishing is the sustained capacity of Black families to love, care, and thrive together over time and generations, and is grounded in families' agency, cultural assets and strengths, diversity, and voice. Black family flourishing is shaped by history, individual and collective actions, and the systems with which families interact. Black family flourishing can be assessed in multiple ways, including behavioral, observable, physiological, and self-report measures.”

## Next Steps

We will continue to refine our conceptualization and definition of Black family flourishing through BFF project activities, including ongoing consultation with key constituents, partners, and collaborators; developing, fielding, and analyzing data from a nationally representative survey of Black families; and implementation of research that explores topics such as the policies and practices that support Black family flourishing and well-being, and the various supports Black families use and the systems with which they engage. At the conclusion of this work, we expect to contribute a conceptual framework and definition of Black family flourishing to the field that includes the uniqueness of flourishing conceptualizations among Black families and distinctions between indicators of flourishing (i.e., what flourishing is), predictors of flourishing (i.e., what makes flourishing more or less possible), and practices of flourishing (e.g., how families enact flourishing in daily life). We also expect that our work will inform research, policy, and practice focused on Black families—for instance, the development of constructs and measures that capture varied dimensions of flourishing and can be used to inform policy and programming in support of Black family flourishing over time.

**Funders:** Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, Child Trends

**Suggested citation:** Lloyd, C.M., Ramos, M.F., Falletta, K., Rodriguez, Y., Omonuwa, K., & Caballero, S. (2026). An approach to conceptualizing and defining Black family flourishing to inform research, policy, and practice. Child Trends.

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