

## Introduction to the *Fresh Look* Data Point Series from the Black Families Flourishing Project

The *Fresh Look* Data Point Series is part of a suite of products produced by 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 is 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 conceptualizes and defines Black family flourishing](#); and 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).

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.

### Introduction

Families play a vital role in children’s development, caregiving, and economic well-being, yet national survey data often fail to accurately reflect the varied characteristics and/or experiences of family life and are frequently designed to focus on specific populations of interest to the survey developers. For instance, the Future of Families and Child Wellbeing Study (FFCWS) is a widely used and frequently cited data source for research focused on Black families.<sup>i,ii</sup> FFCWS is valuable in that it is longitudinal, and it includes the perspectives of multiple family members and caregivers. It was, however, designed specifically to support understanding of “fragile families,” defined as new unmarried parents in urban environments, and the children born into these families. Other surveys such as the Gallup-UNC Black Family Experiences Study include a wider variety of Black families (diversity exists in family structure, residential geography, and families’ socioeconomic status).<sup>iii</sup> It, however, has a limited data collection period by design (i.e., four consecutive months of surveying families in 2024) and focuses only on parents of young children (i.e., children under age 7). Other nationally representative datasets such as the American Community Survey (ACS) have the potential to shed light on Black families but primarily collect and report data at the individual level (the data collection frequency is annual). In addition, current survey data often constrains the ability to describe Black families, because of narrow definitions that are based on the race of a single householder and/or a person’s marital status.<sup>iv</sup>

As a result of the limits of existing nationally representative datasets, what we know about larger groups of Black families in America is incomplete. These issues result in undercounting and/or mischaracterizations of Black families in research, which then extends to policy and practice.<sup>v,vi</sup> The *Fresh Look* data point series

responds to these issues by drawing on limited but available nationally representative data in ways that enable us to center Black family households as the unit of analysis and expand how racial categories are used to define Black families.

## Importance and Usefulness of the *Fresh Look* Data Point Series

The *Fresh Look* series adopts a caregiving-centered definition of Black family households that expands beyond traditional family and household classifications. Our project’s definition of Black families (see text box above) acknowledges multiracial identities, recognizes that families take varied forms, and includes children up to age 25. This definition intentionally captures the variation in Black families, including caregiving arrangements (e.g., parents, grandparents, extended kin) that are often invisible in typical conceptualizations and analyses of families. By using a definition of children that includes young adults and that goes up to age 25, the series also recognizes connections and interdependence among family members, including families’ engagement in activities and actions such as co-residence, post-secondary education and/or training, sharing of fiscal and other resources, and participation in programs available to families such as health insurance.

Our series also focuses on where Black families with children live. Geography influences exposure and access to systems such as education, health care, housing, labor markets, social services, and the policy environments that govern family life.<sup>vii</sup> While data on where Black individuals reside are widely available at the state and local levels, far less attention has been paid to the geographic distribution of Black family households. Understanding where Black families are located relative to the overall Black population not only reveals where Black family life is most prevalent, but also helps understand patterns of opportunity, access, and support as well as where family-focused policies and programs may have the greatest reach and/or impact.

In short, the *Fresh Look* series contributes to our understanding of Black families by

- Addressing gaps in family-level analyses by expanding how Black families are conceptualized and defined at a national level;
- Shedding light on Black family variation across geography, age composition, family structure, income, and other characteristics; and
- Providing accessible research, policy, and programming insights grounded in transparent and rigorous research.

We anticipate that the data points in this series will be useful for a broad range of individuals—researchers, policymakers, service providers, philanthropists, advocates, and others—and can be drawn on to inform policy discussions, guide program planning, contextualize local data, and identify areas for future inquiry.

## National Data Set Used for the Data Points and Methodological Considerations

As mentioned in the Introduction, our team needed to make decisions about which data to use and how best to use them, given our intentions behind the development of the data points. While ACS microdata has limits, we ultimately decided to draw on it because it is one of the only nationally representative data sources that allows for consistent, population-level analysis of household composition, caregiving relationships, and demographic characteristics across states. ACS microdata also enabled us to create a racial category for families based on the race of the survey respondent or child in the household, offering a level of flexibility in defining Black families that is somewhat closer to the BFF definition.

For analytic purposes we define Black families at the household level. Black family households are those that include at least one child or young adult up to age 25, where either the youngest child or a primary caregiver (such as a biological parent, stepparent, adoptive parent, or grandparent) identifies or is identified as Black. This expanded definition increases inclusivity and more accurately reflects the diversity of Black family structures (including the ways in which care is provided), but it also introduces additional complexity in classification and interpretation. See Table 1 for more details.

**Table 1.** Family Household Definitions for the American Community Survey and the Black Families Flourishing Fresh Look Data Point Series

Definition considerations	American Community Survey <sup>viii</sup>	Black Families Flourishing
<b>Black family household definition</b>	Black family households consist of a householder who identifies as Black and one or more other people living in the same household who are related to the householder by birth, marriage, or adoption.	Black family households include at least one child or young adult up to age 25, and where either the youngest child or a primary caregiver (such as a biological parent, stepparent, adoptive parent, or grandparent) identifies as Black.
<b>Race</b>	Household race is assigned based on the race of the householder.	Household race is assigned based on the race of the householder or the race of the youngest child.
<b>Child presence in household</b>	There is no requirement that a child be present in the household.	At least one child must be present.
<b>Child age</b>	The family definition does not specify an age range for children.	Children are included up to age 25.

Our series also combines household-level analyses with individual-level population data, which address related but distinct questions. For example, individual-level population estimates describe the share of people who identify as Black within a state, whereas household-level estimates describe the share of families with Black children and/or where child-focused caregiving relationships are present between Black people. Differences between these categories should not be interpreted as discrepancies but rather reflect different units of analysis.

Finally, because these analyses rely on already existing survey data, the findings are subject to sampling variability and reporting limitations inherent in the ACS. Awareness of these issues is essential for appropriately interpreting and using the findings presented in the *Fresh Look* series. As such, we encourage readers to couple the data point findings with other sources of evidence such as local knowledge and community perspectives, recognizing that the ACS does not capture the full complexity of Black family experiences.

## Looking Ahead

The *Fresh Look* series is an initial step in a broader effort—including a nationally representative survey of Black families and other research—to better understand and document the diversity of Black family households in the United States. Upcoming data points in the series include the topic areas below, which may change or expand based upon ongoing learning and opportunity:

- **Black family households**, including variation across geography and caregiving arrangements
- **Child age and number of children**, examining how family composition varies across developmental stages
- **Family structure and ethnicity** highlighting differences across multigenerational and multiethnic households
- **Family health characteristics**, including indicators related to physical health and access to care
- **Mental health**, with attention to family-level contexts and caregiving environments
- **Characteristics of Black immigrant families**, capturing variation within the Black population that is often overlooked

Together, these data points, along with other BFF activities including a nationally representative survey of Black families, will help deepen understanding of Black family life in the United States.

## Suggested Citation

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