A *Fresh Look* at Employment Among Teens and Young Adults in Black Family Households

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. (Read an introduction to the *Fresh Look* Data Point Series here.) 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

As young adults transition into adulthood, employment often becomes both a pathway toward long-term career development and a potential source of financial support for their families. Many young adults balance work with postsecondary education or training,[1] while others enter the workforce full time to meet personal and household financial needs.[2] Research from the Pew Research Center shows that young adults today are reaching financial independence later than previous generations, with many remaining in multigenerational households longer because of rising housing, education, and living costs.[3] As a result, employed young adults are increasingly contributing to multigenerational household expenses such as rent, utilities, groceries, child care, and caregiving responsibilities. For young adults pursuing education, balancing these responsibilities can be particularly challenging as they navigate competing academic and work demands, financial pressures, and increased stress.[4] Importantly, earnings from employment[i] and job opportunities for young adults often vary by factors like education level,[5] occupation,[6] and geographic location.[7] Despite this variation, employment remains a key factor in economic stability during the transition to adulthood.

Using data from the American Community Survey, this data point describes three employment-related characteristics for teenage and young adult children ages 16–25 in Black family households:[ii] the

[i] In addition to work, young adults also generate income from other sources like investments and social security benefits.
[ii] Black family households are defined as a household that includes at least one child up to age 25, in which either the youngest child in the household or a primary caregiver (i.e., biological parent, stepparent, adoptive parent, grandparent) is Black.

employment rate, the proportion of those employed who attend school, and the earnings teens and young adults bring into their households. Almost half (47%) of all Black family households with children ages 0–25 include a child aged 16–25 (see Table 1), thus understanding employment characteristics among working-age teens (ages 16–19) and young adults (ages 20–25) may offer insight into important aspects of economic well-being for Black families. Our analyses included a sample of 3.66 million households and explored employment characteristics for working-age teens and young adults living in urban, suburban, and rural areas.

Table 1. *Number and Percentage of Black Family Households with Children by Age*

Age group	Number of Black family households with children	Percent of Black family households with children
All children (0–25 years)	7,786,134	100%
0–5 years	2,878,704	37%
6–11 years	3,179,533	41%
12–17 years	3,213,243	41%
18–25 years	2,784,139	36%
Working-age teens and young adults (16–25 years)	3,660,692	47%
16–19 years	2,043,038	26%
20–25 years	2,070,655	27%

Source: The BFF team's analysis of 2019–2023 five-year American Community Survey (ACS) microdata from IPUMS USA, University of Minnesota.
Note: Households could be counted in more than one age group if they have multiple children of different ages. We calculated the percentage by dividing the number of households for each age group by the total number of Black family households with children (0–25). The working-age category overlaps with the 12–17 years and 18–25 years age groups and is presented separately because individuals ages 16–25 years are the focus of subsequent employment analyses. We group teens as individuals ages 16 to 19 years and young adults as individuals ages 20 to 24 years in alignment with the youngest reporting age groups in the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics' data on employment status of the civilian noninstitutional population by age, sex, and race from the Current Population Survey.[8] We included age 25 in our young adult category to be consistent with the BFF team's definition of a child in Black family households.

Background on Employment Among Black Teens and Young Adults

There has been a shift since 2000 in the rate of teens and young adults (ages 16–24) who participate in the workforce.[9] Specifically, participation in the labor force has declined nationally since 2000, with an acute decline for teens ages 16–19 from an annual average of 52% in 2000 to an annual average of 37% in 2023.[10] Reasons for the decline include increases in school enrollment—particularly at the postsecondary level—and decreases in summer work participation among teens,[11] resulting in fewer earnings overall.

Employment trends among Black teens and young adults have also varied over time. For example, Black 16—24-year-olds accounted for 17% of the Black labor force in 2000 and 13% of the Black labor force in 2023.[12] By 2026, Black workers ages 55 and older were projected to outnumber Black workers ages 16–24 in the Black labor force for the first time in 40 years.[13] This shift highlights a decreasing representation of younger workers in the Black labor force. More recently, the COVID-19 recession disrupted employment among Black young adults ages 18–24.[14] These long-term demographic shifts and recent labor market disruptions underscore the importance of understanding the experiences of young Black workers.

Because labor market conditions differ across communities, where teens and young adults live may shape their employment opportunities and outcomes. Those in metropolitan areas may have greater access to jobs, public transportation, and workforce development opportunities because of larger labor markets, though these benefits are not experienced equally across racial and economic groups.[15] Structural inequities in hiring, education, and neighborhood opportunity continue to contribute to higher rates of unemployment and disconnection from both work and school among Black young adults.[16, 17]

At the same time, employed Black young adults often play significant roles in supporting household financial stability, especially in families facing economic hardship.[18] These financial contributions are not limited to young adults. In a nationally representative study of family social support among adolescents (ages 13–17), 44% of African American adolescents and 29% of Black Caribbean[iii] adolescents reported contributing financially to their household very or fairly often.[19] Together, the literature suggests that employment among Black teens and young adults has implications not only for their own economic well-being but also for the financial well-being of their family and household.

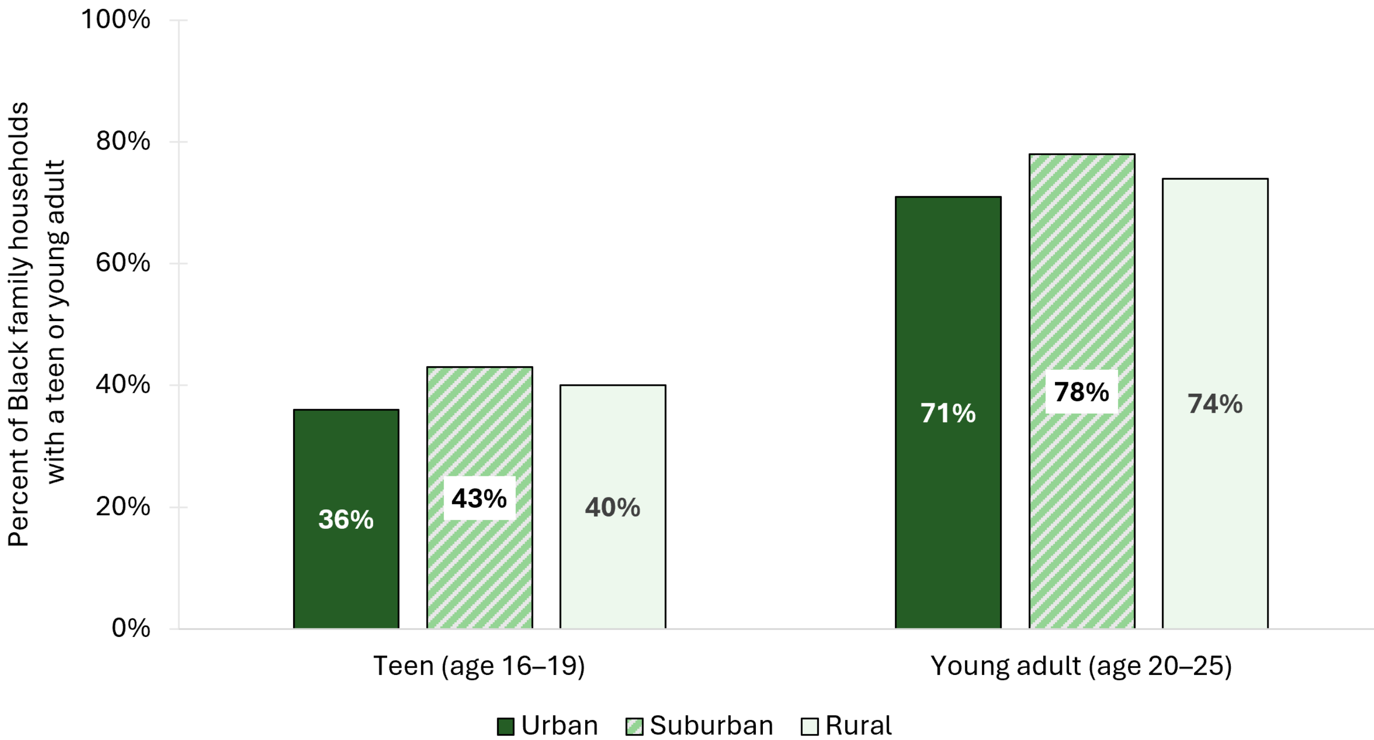
Key Findings

Less than half of Black family households with a working-age teen (age 16–19) nationally have at least one teen who is employed. In contrast, over three-fourths of Black family households with a young adult (age 20–25) have at least one young adult who is employed. Specifically, 42% of all Black family households with a teen and 76% of all Black family households with a young adult have a child who is employed.

The percentage of teens and young adults in Black family households who are employed varies by the household's metropolitan status (see Figure 1). For teens, a lower proportion of urban Black family households have employed teens (36%) as compared to those in rural areas (40%) and suburban areas (43%). Similarly, fewer Black family households with employed young adults are in urban areas (71%) compared to those in rural areas (74%) or suburban areas (78%). The largest difference in the proportion of employed teens and young adults (7 percentage points) was between those in urban and suburban households.

[iii] Consistent with study authors, we used the terms "African American" and "Black Caribbean."

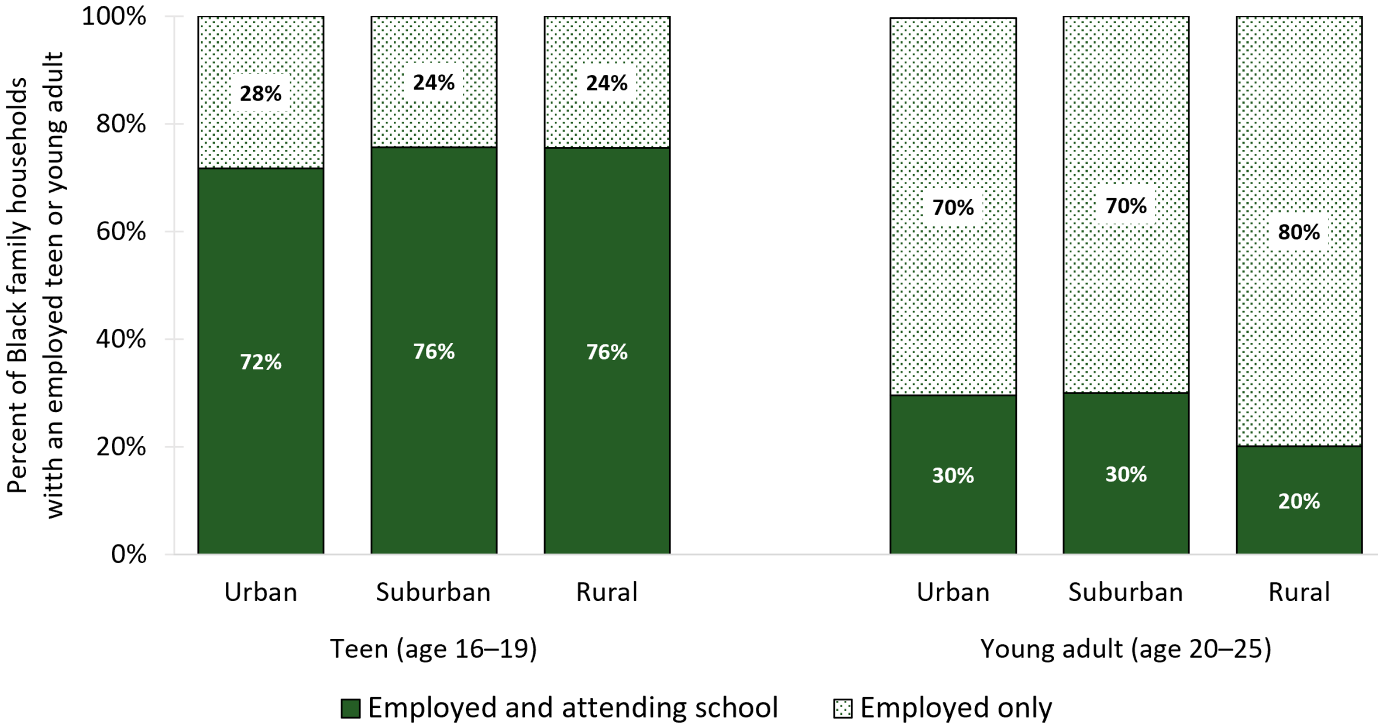
Figure 1. *Percent of Black Family Households with an Employed Teen or Young Adult, by Metropolitan Status*



Source. The BFF team's analysis of 2019–2023 five-year American Community Survey (ACS) microdata from IPUMS USA, University of Minnesota. **Note.** We calculated the percentage of Black family households with an employed teen in each metropolitan status by dividing the number of Black family households with at least one employed teen in the metropolitan status by all Black family households with a teen in the metropolitan status, regardless of their employment status. We used the same calculation for young adults. See the Methodology box at the end of the data point for additional information about creating these groups.

In Black family households with an employed working-age teen (age 16–19), three-fourths (75%) have an employed teen who is also in school. Less than one third (30%) of Black family households with an employed young adult (age 20–25) have an employed young adult who is also in school. Most working teens in Black family households are balancing jobs alongside academic responsibilities, while most working young adults are not. This finding is consistent across metropolitan status (see Figure 2). Seventy-two percent of working teens in urban Black family households attend school compared to 76% of those in suburban and rural Black family households. For young adults, a different pattern emerges. There is a 10 percent difference between the proportion of working young adults in rural Black family households who also attend school (20%) and those in urban or suburban Black family households (30%).

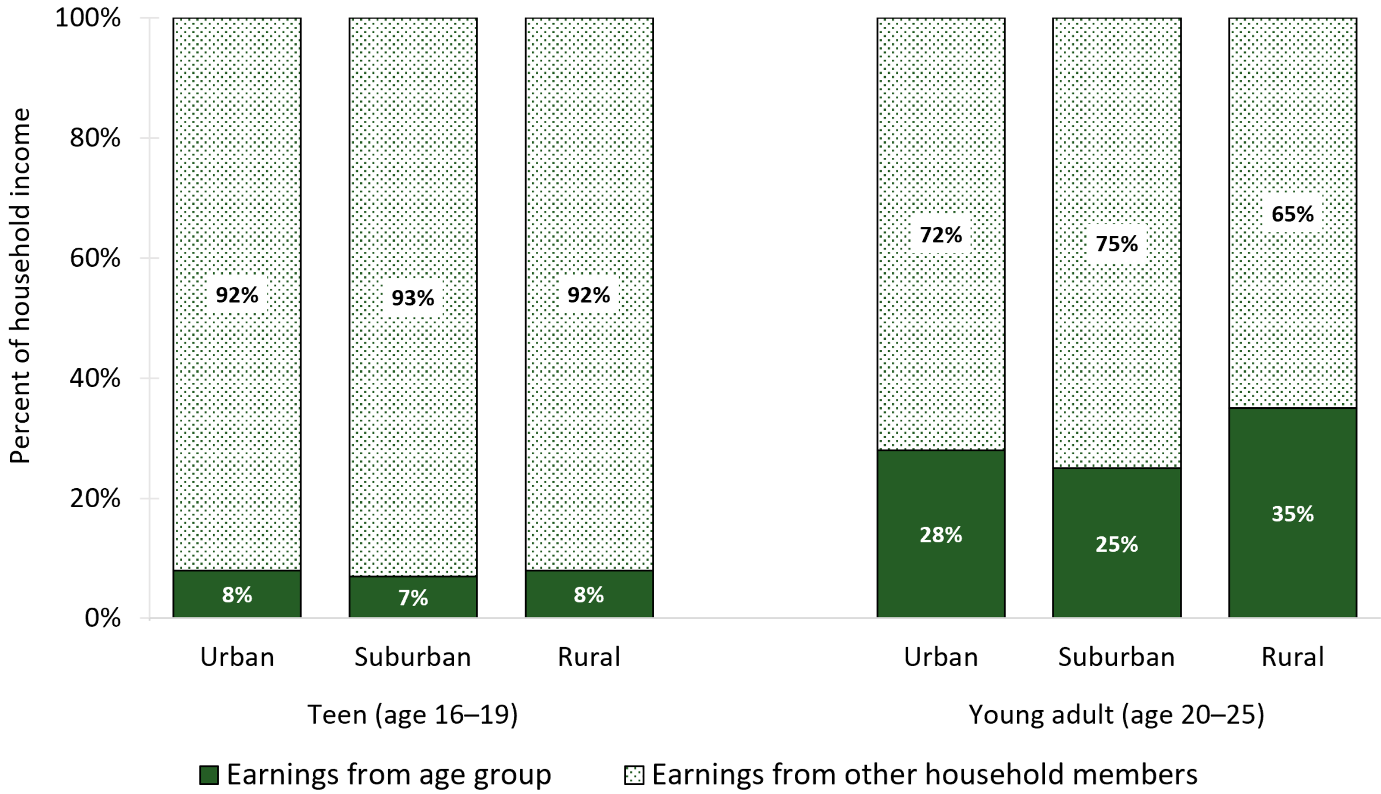
Figure 2. *Percent of Employed Teens and Young Adults, by School Attendance and Metropolitan Status*



Source. The BFF team's analysis of 2019–2023 five-year American Community Survey (ACS) microdata from IPUMS USA, University of Minnesota.
Note. We calculated the percentage of Black family households with at least one employed and school-attending teen in each metropolitan status by dividing the number of Black family households with at least one employed and school-attending teen by the number of Black family households with at least one employed teen. We used the same calculation for young adults. See the Methodology box at the end of the data point for additional information about creating these groups.

On average, employment earnings from working-age teens (ages 16–19) in Black family households represent 7% of their households' income. Earnings from young adults (ages 20–25) represent 26% of their households' income. Employed teens in Black family households have median earnings of $4,800 annually while annual median earnings for young adults are about $20,000. Employed teens' earnings represent a similar percentage of their household income regardless of their household metropolitan status (see Figure 3). The annual median earnings for employed teens in urban, suburban, and rural households are $4,720; $4,956; and $4,998, respectively. Earnings of young adults in rural households represent a higher percentage of their household income (35%) compared to Black family households in urban (28%) or suburban areas (25%). The annual median earnings for employed young adults in urban, suburban, and rural households are $19,822; $20,259; and $19,114, respectively.

Figure 3. *Employed Teen and Young Adult Employment Earnings as Represented in Black Family Household Income, by Metropolitan Status*



Source. The BFF team's analysis of 2019–2023 five-year American Community Survey (ACS) microdata from IPUMS USA, University of Minnesota.
Note. We calculated the percent of household income represented by teen or young adult earnings by summing the personal wages from all teens and young adults in a household and dividing it by the household's total income. We then took the median of that value for each metropolitan status. See the Methodology box at the end of the data point for additional information about these calculations.

Implications

This data point describes three employment-related characteristics of teens and young adults in Black family households: the employment rate, the proportion of those employed who attend school, and the share of household income earned by employed children. We found that fewer teens are employed compared to young adults, and employed teens are more likely than employed young adults to also be enrolled in school. Additionally, employed young adults tend to earn more than employed teens, resulting in their earnings representing a larger share of their households' income.

When considering the role of household metropolitan area, we found slight differences in employment characteristics for employed teens and young adults in urban, suburban, and rural households. The largest proportion of employed teens and young adults live in suburban households. Compared to employed teens in suburban and rural households, a greater number of employed teens in urban households were not enrolled in school. In contrast, compared to employed young adults in urban and suburban households, more young adults in rural households were not enrolled in school. Teen employment earnings were consistent across household metropolitan status; however, there was a 10 percentage point difference between the employment earnings of young adults in suburban and rural households.

This data point reveals research, policy, and practice considerations that are worth examining to better understand employed working-age teens and young adults in Black family households.

- **For research, our findings emphasize the value of exploring different types of employment-related characteristics of young earners in Black family households.** Having data on employment among Black teens and young adults is an important first step; however, understanding the context in which these teens and young adults work, including household metropolitan status, educational responsibilities, and earnings, is a requisite next step to identify where unmet needs may exist. While we did not distinguish among types of employment (e.g., summer versus academic year, full-time versus part-time, traditional versus gig work), future research should consider how these employment arrangements may shape household economic well-being. Given that current research highlights how peer, familial, and workplace supports are critical for teens and young adults who are working and in school, [20, 21] future research could investigate how systems can better support individuals who are balancing academic pursuits and workforce participation. Finally, our analyses focused on earnings from employment; future research could examine other sources of non-employment or passive income such as investments or social security benefits that may also be of benefit to Black family households. Research questions to consider include: What types of employment arrangements do teens and young adults in Black family households engage in? How do teens and young adults in Black family households allocate their earnings (e.g., toward personal expenses or savings, household expenses or savings, education)? How does access to social support and access to employment opportunities vary by household metropolitan status (e.g., Do teens and young adults living in higher socioeconomic settings like the suburbs have more social capital, connections, or access to personal or household vehicles, thereby facilitating opportunities for employment?; Are teens and young adults in urban areas more likely to be in school and not working or to be disconnected from both school and work?)?

- **For policy, consider revisiting the minimum age requirements for specific employment benefits, such as the Employee Retirement Income Security Act (ERISA), given the proportion of employed teens and young adults in Black family households**. ERISA requires companies offering 401(k) plans to extend plans to employees age 21 and older.[22] Because many teens and young adults begin working before age 21, and time is an important investment multiplier, current age requirements may delay opportunities to begin accumulating retirement savings. This missed opportunity may allow more time for employed teens and young adults, including those in Black family households, to accumulate wealth needed for retirement. Possible policy questions include: How do differences in the types of jobs held by workers under age 21 influence access to employer-sponsored retirement plans? How does access to employer-sponsored retirement benefits differ for workers under age 21 compared with those age 21 and older? To what extent do age-based eligibility requirements delay opportunities for young workers to begin saving for retirement?

- **For practice, organizations offering workforce support to Black families should recognize that financial responsibility can vary among people of the same age across Black family households.** Households with employed young adults, for example, may or may not include individuals who are primary household contributors (e.g., a household comprised of two 25-year-olds with an infant is different from a household comprised of a 43-year-old with two children ages 15 and 20). These patterns suggest that workforce support should be responsive to differences in household financial roles among working-age teens and young adults, which may differ within age-based groups. Practice questions include: How do differences in household financial roles shape the types of supports teens and young adults need? How can programs ensure supports are relevant to both primary and non-primary earners within the same age group?

As the second data point in the *Fresh Look* series, our analysis provides an initial and high-level description of teen and young adult employment within Black family households. Our work shows how examining the age of young workers can offer a more nuanced understanding of employment within these households. As our work progresses, we hope to shed additional light on teen and young adult employment in ways that can inform future efforts to characterize employment among Black family households and add to the knowledge base about the ways in which employment, earnings, and contextual issues such as geography have the potential to support Black family flourishing.

Methodology

To better understand Black family households with employed children ages 16–25, we drew on 2019–2023 five-year American Community Survey (ACS) microdata from IPUMS USA, University of Minnesota. The data contain information on individuals, including householders, who self-identified as Black alone or in combination with other races and/or Latino ethnicity. For our methodology identifying Black family households, please see our previous data point on Black family households with children in the United States. The key steps in our analysis of this data point included the following:

- **Identifying Black family households with teens and/or young adults**. We classified households as having a teen and/or young adult if one or more people had an age of 16–25 years on the IPUMS AGE variable.[23] Households could be included in both the teen (age 16–19) and young adult (age 20–25) sample if they had multiple individuals within these age brackets. Households that did not include a person aged 16–25 years were excluded.

- **Identifying Black family households with employed teens and/or young adults.** For a Black family household with a teen to be classified as having an employed teen, they needed to have at least one person in the household listed between the ages of 16–19 years on the IPUMS AGE variable who had earned income in the past year according to the IPUMS INCWAGE variable.[24] Similarly, for a Black family household with a young adult to be classified as having an employed young adult, they needed to have at least one person in the household listed between the ages of 20–25 years on the IPUMS AGE variable who had earned income in the past year according to the IPUMS INCWAGE variable.

- **Identifying Black family households with employed teens and/or young adults by metropolitan status.** We classified households listed as "Not in a metropolitan area" on the IPUMS METRO variable[25] as rural households. We classified households listed as "In central/principal city" as urban households. All other households ("Not in central/principal city," "Central/principal city status indeterminable [mixed]," and "Metropolitan status indeterminable [mixed]") were categorized as suburban households.

- **Identifying Black family households with employed teens and/or young adults attending school.** We classified individuals ages 16–25 in Black family households with at least one employed teen and/or young adult who reported being in grade 9 to grade 12, a college undergraduate, or in graduate or professional school on the IPUMS GRADEATT variable[26] as attending school.

- **Identifying the median employment earnings (in U.S. dollars) and the percent of household income earned by employed teens and/or young adults in Black family households.** To calculate the percent of earnings from other household members to Black family households' income, we divided the sum of child (teen or young adult) wage and salary income from the IPUMS INCWAGE variable by the household income on the IPUMS HHINCOME variable[27] to calculate the proportion of earnings they earned. Median values of proportion of earnings by children and dollar amount earned by children were calculated by metropolitan status. Households with a negative value for HHINCOME were removed from analysis.

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