Changing the Narrative About Black Families

An anti-racist guide for avoiding the inaccurate and biased language that turns society against Black families

October 13, 2020

family story

COLOR OF CHANGE

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Introduction

Identifying & Tackling Biased Narratives

In America, we routinely punish certain families for experiencing the same challenges that have elicited support and compassion when others experience them. Structural racism is at the root of this pattern, and its legacy runs deep. Political leaders, law enforcement and judges, employers, banks, educators, realtors, and even everyday people treat Black families and white families differently. And it's destroying millions of lives.

In very real terms, people in power have blamed Black families for conditions they didn't create, mischaracterized Black culture and maligned Black parents, and punished Black people—often criminally—for the impossible choices that systemic economic inequality and racism have forced them to make. All while offering white people in the very same circumstances far more support, understanding and freedom. All while treating white people as the standard-bearer for family life and treating Black people as deviants who need to be controlled and deserve whatever abuse they get.

White people are "consciously uncoupling" while Black families are creating "broken homes." The list of double-standards and biases in framing and treatment goes on and on—unchecked and widespread. How did we get here? And how do we stop it?

This guide helps explain how we got here. More importantly, it provides a set of concrete, actionable recommendations for shifting away from language and narratives that reinforce racial bias, and for shifting toward the language and narratives that can disrupt it.

Millions of people have taken to the streets—in fact, the largest series of demonstrations in American history—to demand that we look at the biases and injustices of police practices and criminal justice policies. We must also challenge the practices and policies that encourage corporations, local governments and the federal government

to attack Black families rather than support them. But that cannot happen if we do not challenge the myth-making machine that serves to rationalize the racism Black families face.

White people are "consciously uncoupling" while Black families are creating "broken homes." The list of double-standards and biases in framing and treatment goes on and on—unchecked and widespread.

Racial bias against Black families is sewn into every fiber of our society—from the news media to politics and popular culture. In a report co-commissioned by Family Story and Color Of Change in 2017, *A Dangerous Distortion of Our Families: Representations of Families, by Race, in News and Opinion Media*, we demonstrated the pattern of media bias in undeniable terms.

Through a quantitative examination of both the words and images of news and opinion media, the research found that media generally:

- Overrepresented welfare recipients as Black and underrepresented welfare recipients as white;

- Overrepresented Black families as being associated with criminality while under-representing white families as being associated with criminality; and

- Framed Black families as socially destabilizing while portraying white families as a force of social stability.

These misrepresentations are not only inaccurate, they are dangerous. Over time, they breed hostility toward Black families and create public demand for neglecting and even "disciplining" Black families—for treating Black families not only differently but unfairly, with grave consequences. Allowing this pattern to persist also undermines the very social policies that benefit all families and strengthen all communities across America.

We have been taught to judge the same family dynamics differently based on the race of the family. These "teachings" are all rooted in blatantly inaccurate misconceptions about families, exacerbated by blatantly inaccurate ideas about race: promoting baseless ideas about differences between Black people as compared to white people, and building on centuries of racist portrayals of Black families, people and culture.

These misrepresentations are not only inaccurate, they are dangerous.

These false representations aid decision-makers in rationalizing the exclusion of Black families from government assistance, the practice of family separation, the expansion of anti-Black police brutality and abuse in the criminal justice system.

This bias has real consequences for Black families:

- Social policies and government inaction have allowed COVID-19 to ravage Black communities. Black people are denied medical treatments and equal access to testing, forced to work in front line jobs far more than others, and forced into segregated communities that are fundamentally separate and unequal.

- Black families are denied benefits[1] that help people exit poverty. As just one example, Black people are denied benefits under the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) at a much higher rate as compared to white families, which includes living in states that maintain the lowest TANF benefits.

- Black families are seperated by the child welfare system in large part because of the way poverty is criminalized. Child protective services are more forgiving and understanding in the cases of white parents, and far more punitive toward Black families. As just one example, in Peoria County, Illinois,[2] the foster care system took Black children from their families at a rate nearly 8 times as high as in cases involving non-Black families.[3]

- Black families are separated by the bail and bond system that has become so central to our system of mass incarceration. On average, Black people receive 20% longer sentences than white people for the same crimes and are 1.75 times more likely to face those charges as compared to white folks, with the net result of forcing Black families apart at much higher rates than other families.

We develop the biases and myths that lead to these realities by the history we are exposed to, the social scientists we listen to, and ultimately, the news and cultural media

we are immersed in. All have driven us to the same inaccurate and distorted assumption that Black families are less deserving and wholly responsible for their hardships, while white people have good reason to be helped and supported. With this mentality in mind, we can begin to understand why different people in power treat Black families differently, and how our social policies are stacked against Black families.

But it also becomes clear how we can move toward a more honest, accurate, and productive way of understanding families and how family issues intersect with race. And that begins with understanding where these false narratives come from, who reinforces them, and how we can replace them with more accurate and honest narratives that lead to fairer and more effective social policies and cultural norms.

Here's Where You Come In:

01
Educate Yourself
Read the guide and start using language and framing that serves to dismantle systemic racism rather than reinforce it.

02
Share
Share this resource with your networks, and advocate for shifts in language and framing within your spheres of influence.

03
Follow Up
Keep the conversation going by asking the people you engage what they think, what they learned, what resonates with them, and what questions they have.

04
Stop the Spread of Harmful and Inaccurate Narratives & Language
Avoid sharing any media that use these terms or reinforce biased narratives—or add a clear disclaimer or comment when you do. In addition, publicly call out media outlets when they use inaccurate language (e.g., on your social media channels, in letters to the editor, by making a direct complaint).

05
Take Action
To hear about campaigns and other actions you can take to change the coverage and content you see in the media, sign up at colorofchange.org and follow Color Of Change (@colorofchange) on Instagram, Facebook and Twitter.

Follow Family Story's work on dismantling family privilege in America: sign up at https://familystoryproject.org/changing-the-narrative-about-black-families and follow Family Story on Instagram and Twitter (@familystoryproj) and on Facebook (@familystoryproject).

06
Speak Up
Silence is complicity. When someone in your community uses one of these words or repeats one of these myths, engage them in a conversation about why they are communicating that way and the effects it can have. We are all learning: try to steer clear of shaming people—call people into conversations that are constructive, rather than just calling them out.

Questions to Help You Start a Conversation:[4]

- Could you clarify what you mean by that and why you used that term?

- Where did you get the information you are sharing, or learn about the assumptions you are making?

- How is the relationship status, race, neighborhood, or family structure of the person you are talking about relevant to the story you are telling or the point you are making?

- Can I tell you about something I learned that really changed my perspective?

- Do you have a moment to talk about our last conversation? Something you said made me uncomfortable. Here's why...

- As your friend/colleague/consultant, I feel obligated to let you know that remark was racist. Here's why...

- Although that statistic you shared is true, I want to call attention to a supporting statistic or context that often gets ignored.

Executive Summary

Overview

This guide identifies inaccurate and biased terms and narratives that are used to undermine the success and well-being of Black families in society. These are terms and narratives that result in real harm: society unfairly judging and punishing Black families according to a set of rules that white people in similar situations are not held accountable to; and society unfairly denying the recognition, care, compassion and support that white families in similar situations benefit from receiving.

Part 2 of this guide provides detailed context on each term (summarized in the chart here), and provides an outline of the specific social policies and norms that those terms reinforce—policies that have institutionalized systemic racism across society:

- **Redlining**
- **Mass Incarceration**
- **Health Inequities**
- **State Regulation of Family**
- **Voter Suppression**
- **Family Policy Harm**
  - □ Single/Unmarried Motherhood Penalties
  - □ Federal Family and Medical Leave Act
  - □ Social Security
  - □ Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF)

This guide also summarizes findings from past research on the misrepresentation of families in news and opinion media (Part 1), and provides a basic historical overview of the origins of terms and narratives that have been weaponized against Black families: biased and inaccurate social science, racist dog-whistling strategies forged in politics,

and the rationalizing logic of racism tracing back to slavery (Part 3).

Harmful Terms to Understand and Avoid

"Broken Family" / "Broken Home"

Black families are not "broken" and do not need to be fixed. In the context of describing families facing challenges, the "broken family" term aims to ascribe blame to family structure, rather than the social structures, institutions and policies that have failed those families. This term is most frequently assigned to Black families and is part of the larger set of narratives that hold white and non-white people to different standards.

In reality, family structure (i.e., a family's "brokenness" or "intactness") has nothing to do with whether or not a family is healthy or harmful. There is no correlation between family structure and crime, but rather between poverty and crime.

Many family structures can provide nurturing family conditions. Like all types of families, even some two-parent nuclear households can be harmful environments for children: research has shown that this is particularly true when there is parental conflict.

"Absentee Fathers"

"Absentee fathers" only seem to come in one color: Black. Though there are fathers of all races and ethnicities who have a minimal presence in their childrens' lives, "absentee" isn't used to describe most of them. This racialized term uniquely targets Black fathers, inaccurately (and often purposely) signaling that they willfully abandon their children.

In reality, data from the Center for Disease Control and Prevention show that Black fathers are equally as likely to be involved in their children's care as fathers of other races. There is, however, evidence that systemic racism has taken many Black fathers away from their families and communities through mass incarceration and early death.

"Out of Wedlock"

It would be unthinkable for journalists today to use the terms "illegitimate" or "bastard" to refer to a child born to unmarried parents, yet "out of wedlock" is no different. It's an antiquated, sexist term that suggests that children born to unmarried parents are less valuable and less viable.

"Out of wedlock" is often used to cast judgment on single mothers and is a dog-whistle that elicits racist "welfare queen" stereotypes—it is rarely applied to people of wealth and privilege, even when all other factors are the same.

"Thug"

"Thug" is used to elicit stereotypes of dangerous Black male criminality and to blame Black people for social unrest and violence while publicly declaring property is more valuable than Black lives. Similar actions taken by white men are often met with compassion and calls for civil conversation, and defended as the rightful exercise of freedom. Moreover, it is often used to undermine or de-legitimize behavior among young Black men that is threatening to people in power, such as maligning protestors or those who speak out or express anger about racism.

There is never a good reason for white people to use this term in the context of discussing social issues, in news coverage, or in conversations in which white people are talking about Black people, etc.

"Ghetto"

Ghetto is a racist and classist term that has become shorthand for a poor and Black neighborhood that white people should disparage, dismiss and fear— one that government policy has had no role in creating and cannot do anything to "save." It is a way of giving society permission to neglect or punish Black families. It should not be used by people who do not live in those communities, not even in jest or for "ironic" effect.

"Baby Mama" / "Baby Daddy"

What's the difference between having a "blended family" and having "baby daddies" or "baby mamas"? Typically, it's the race of the family members. These terms have a context-specific meaning within Black culture. But when used by people who are not Black, and especially when used by white people or anyone in an official capacity (such as a newscaster) the meaning changes. These terms, which may masquerade as playful and harmless, have the effect of undermining the seriousness of a relationship or implying lack of personal responsibility, and are especially aimed at women.

"Working Class" / "Working Families"

While other terms in this section are harmful in the ways they *target* Black families, this term is harmful in the way it *excludes* them. The image of "working class" families is one that is largely coded as "white" within the public imagination, frequently associated with rural, suburban and exurban communities.

Rather than eliminating the use of this term, it is important to continue to expand its meaning, and the range of people whose image it evokes. One way to do that is to explicitly insert Black people into the narrative it carries, for instance, by talking about *Black, white and other working class*

communities, or by talking about *Black, white and other working families.*

Past Research on Racial Bias in Media Coverage

Family Story and Color Of Change previously investigated the extent to which national and local news and opinion media outlets misrepresent Black families and engage in racially biased coverage. The report, *A Dangerous Distortion of Our Families: Representations of Families, by Race, in News and Opinion Media*, provided several illustrative examples of consistent patterns of misrepresentation, racial bias and racist myth-making, while also presenting the findings of a quantitative analysis:

- Media outlets were 1.5 times more likely to represent a white family as a portrait of social stability, and Black families as sources of social instability.

- Media outlets were 1.32 times more likely to associate Black family members with criminality compared to white family members, while underrepresenting white families' association with criminality altogether.

- Media outlets misrepresented Black families as comprising 60% of welfare recipients—in reality, Black families make up just 42% of welfare recipients.

- Media outlets incorrectly suggested that Black fathers are uninvolved and generally not present for their families compared to white fathers: Black fathers were shown spending time with their kids in news images (14%) almost half as often as white fathers (26%).

An earlier research report commissioned by Color Of Change, *Not To Be Trusted: Dangerous Levels of Inaccuracy in TV Crime Reporting in NYC*, demonstrated that local news outlets in New York City showed violent criminals as being Black 75% of the time, when even the NYPD's own arrest data showed that of those arrested for violent crime only 50% were Black. Additional research and reading on the effects of racially biased media can be found at the end of Part 1 on page 18.

Historical Overview of the Origins of Anti-Black Terms and Narratives

News and entertainment media may be the greatest propagators of dangerous myths about families, but they do not operate in a vacuum and have not invented racial bias all on their own. They are often merely reflecting and amplifying false narratives that have been developed in other fields, often for very specific purposes.

Bias and Inaccuracy in the Field of Family Science

The discipline of family science has tended to ignore or minimize the systemic inequalities at play for Black families. Many influential poverty scholars have spent decades debating how much of the persistence of Black poverty can be attributed to "cultural" versus "structural" issues, without providing any broader historical context, and while ignoring historical and contemporary forms of racism and discrimination. Moreover, the field has treated families outside of a white, married, traditional nuclear household as less desirable and inferior, despite any real evidence of those differences having an adverse impact. Much like anthropology and other disciplines that grew out of it, as well as social work and other fields of practice that are intertwined with it, family science has been led by mostly white researchers who have looked at their subjects through

the biased lens of race and have largely ignored the obligation to correct for it.

The Southern Strategy: Anti-Blackness as a Political Strategy

When campaigning and running ads during and after the civil rights era, Republicans used coded language to play on people's racial biases, as well as racial resentment, in order to break away Southern white working class voters from the Democratic base, an approach that came to be known as the Southern Strategy. The Southern Strategy laid the foundation for the most harmful race-based policies in the United States: the War on Drugs, mass incarceration and anti-Black police brutality. A Nixon aide admitted in 1994 that the War on Drugs was, in fact, a ploy to criminalize Black people. Reagan continued and escalated this approach, in service of the deregulation and privatization of government: he popularized the "welfare queen" myth to turn the public against social programs and to dismantle them, especially those perceived to benefit Black people (even as they mostly benefited white people).

Slavery: Understanding How Patterns of Racism Inform Our Bias

Slavery is a necessary starting point to understand the American narrative of what constitutes family. Slavery relied on the dehumanization and trading of humans as property. Slavery depended on extreme physical, emotional and sexual abuse. And this misogynistic, racially charged behavior was accepted as the norm. Slavery was a legal institution. To justify it, American political leaders spread the idea that enslaved people benefited from slavery because slaveholders provided food and shelter—paternalistic figures who "helped" Black people. The idea was that the institution of slavery was necessary because Black people could not think for themselves, which is similar to the logic used today to justify the control and punishment of Black people.
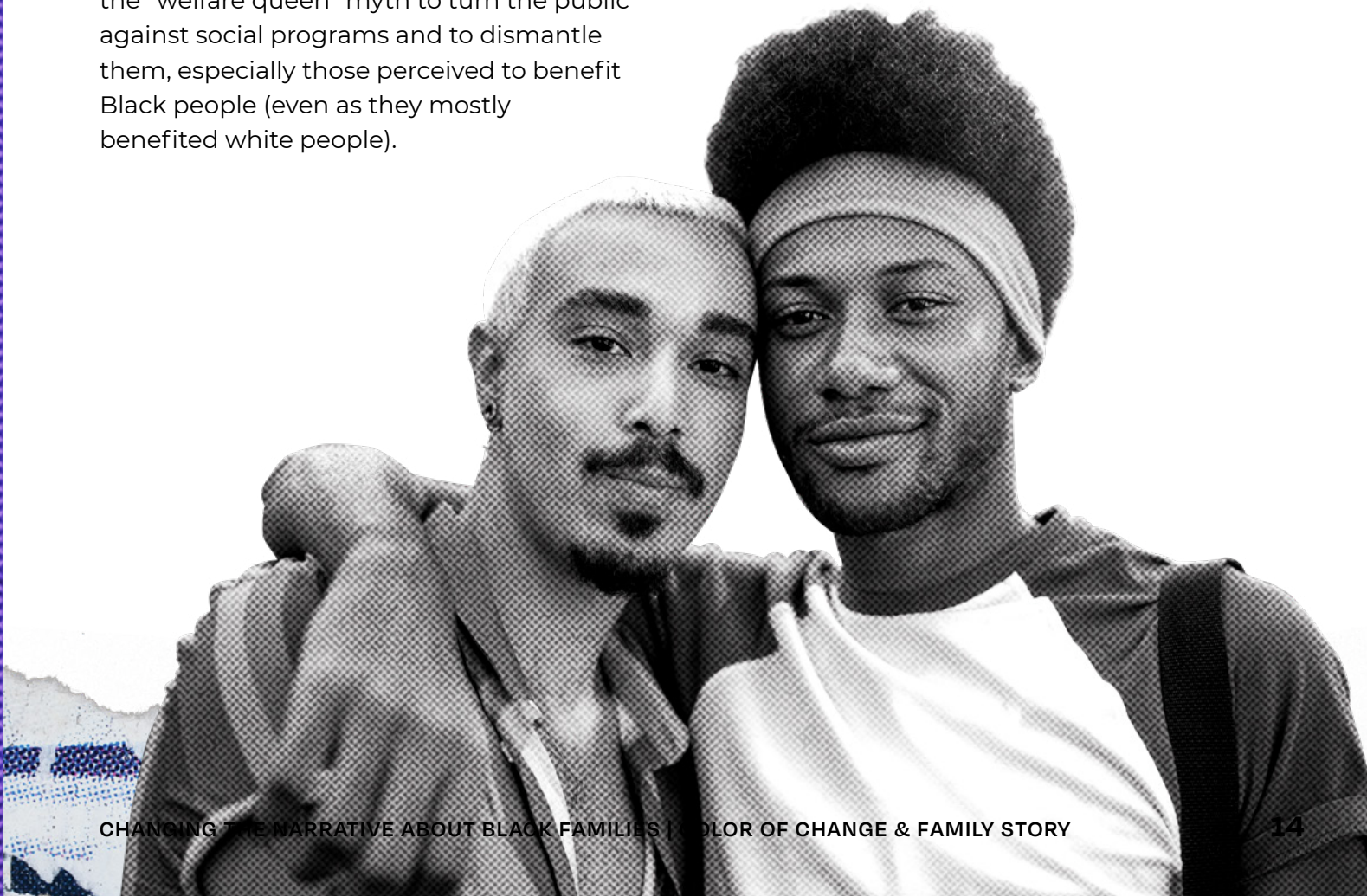
PART 1
Past Research on Inaccurate and Harmful Media Coverage

Misrepresentations of Black Families in News and Opinion Media

As mentioned above, Family Story and Color Of Change previously investigated the extent to which national and local news and opinion media outlets misrepresent Black families and engage in racially biased coverage.

A Dangerous Distortion of Our Families: Representations of Families, by Race, in News and Opinion Media found that media outlets are 1.5 times more likely to represent a white family as a portrait of social stability, and Black families as sources of social instability.

The research uncovered the following findings:[5]

Exaggerating the Association between Black Families and Violent Crime while Underrepresenting White Families as Perpetrators

News and opinion media are 1.32 times more likely to associate Black family members with criminality compared to white family members, while under-representing white families' association with criminality altogether.

In an earlier research report, *Not To Be Trusted: Dangerous Levels of Inaccuracy in TV Crime Reporting in NYC*, Color Of Change research demonstrated that local news outlets in New York City showed violent criminals as being Black 75% of the time, when even the NYPD's own arrest data showed that of those arrested for violent crime only 50% were Black. Our more recent research found this pattern to be consistent across all types of stories about crime and representations of people presented as criminal.

A Dangerous Distortion of Our Families:

Representations of Families, by Race, in News and Opinion Media found that media outlets are **1.5 times more likely** to represent a white family as a portrait of social stability, and Black families as sources of social instability.
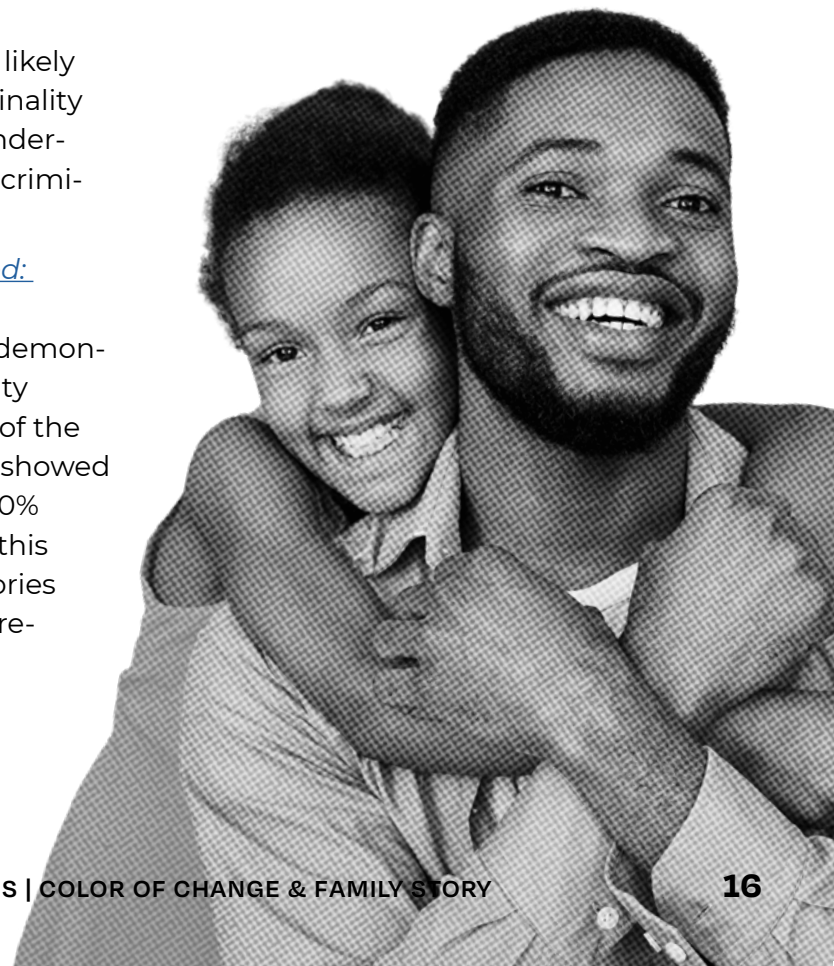
This is not true. Black people are no more likely to commit crime, given the same set of circumstances. Poverty, not race, is the biggest factor in determining violent crime rates. Studies show that deprived neighborhoods that see reductions in poverty see reductions in crime rates in exactly the same way in both Black and white areas.[6] Moreover, Black people are 3.64 times more likely to be arrested for marijuana use despite equal usage rates, even in states that have decriminalized marijuana.[7]

Consistent, widespread propagation of this myth is used to justify anti-Black police violence as being necessary to keep white people safe, despite the fact that white people are more likely to be armed.[8] Meanwhile, police officers are 3 times more likely to kill Black people than white people, and 4 times more likely to use force against Black people because they fit a racist profile.

Moreover, research found that on average, judges give Black people 20% longer sentences than white people for the same crimes, and prosecutors are 1.75 times more likely to charge Black people as compared to white people.[9]

When news and opinion media incessantly exaggerate Black people's involvement in crime, public attitudes embrace the idea that anti-Black police brutality is not only okay, it's mandatory to address white racial fear. Broadcast media are heavily responsible for the way the public thinks about, talks about and treats Black families.

Misrepresenting the Black/White Proportion of Recipients of Welfare Benefits

News and opinion media represent Black families as comprising 60% of welfare recipients, but in reality, Black families make up just 42% of welfare recipients.

Poor white people receive the most welfare out of any economically-disadvantaged demographic, by a longshot. When it comes to Black families who actually do receive welfare benefits, fewer than 10% of news stories reference structural, historic, or systemic barriers to Black wealth acquisition. Instead, news and opinion media often depict Black people as lazy and inept welfare recipients. However, since the beginning of slavery, social policies have been specifically designed to prevent Black families from accruing wealth, receiving loans, owning property, and benefiting from social security. Moreover, social policies and norms have encouraged widespread discrimination and thereby prevented equal access to education and employment, both of which contribute to the racial wealth gap.

The consequence of promoting the myth that Black people who are in need are over-relying on the system—or even trying to fraudulently milk it—encourages the public at large to scorn the welfare system, which is disadvantageous to all families that rely on welfare benefits to survive. When news and opinion mediancontinue to inaccurately misrepresent welfare recipients, spread toxic narratives that the Black families that receive benefits do so unfairly, and fail to explain the structural barriers that have caused the racial wealth gap, the public is left with feelings of distrust and contempt toward Black families.

This stigma continues to maintain the deepening racial wealth gap. Overall, white families still hold 10x as much wealth as compared to Black families. The steady

dismantling of welfare programs, greatly driven by this stigma, is working against the ability of Black families to gain wealth: preventing them from accessing the baseline support they need to build healthy lives and achieve economic progress.

Promoting Inaccurate Claims about Black Fathers

News and opinion media incorrectly suggest Black fathers are uninvolved and generally not present for their families compared to white fathers. News media often misrepresent Black fatherhood by omission and through imagery. Images are especially powerful because the brain processes them at a deeper level compared to narration. Black fathers were shown spending time with their kids in news images (14%) almost half as often as white fathers (26%).

Let's unpack.

In truth, CDC data shows that Black fathers are just as likely to be involved in their children's lives as those of other races in the same living situations.[10] However, more Black fathers live apart from their children, often because they have been taken from their families due to early deaths and mass incarceration. There are over 1.5 million Black men missing from everyday life, leaving many communities without men to be parents or partners, which says more about the racism of the criminal justice system than about Black fathers themselves.[11]

Nevertheless, this myth has real life consequences when it comes to American policy. The Moynihan report's specious 1965 warning that Black families were "crumbling" thanks to single mother-led homes and absent fathers is still hailed as legitimate and instructive by many media commentators. Three decades later, the 1996 push for welfare reform effectively maligned social insurance programs for rewarding mythical "welfare queens" for "out-of-wedlock" births and irresponsible fatherhood.

Even today, unchecked right-wing commentators blame police violence on mythical "absent" Black fathers. In each case, the underlying, racially distorted narrative is the same: nuclear white families are superior and should be free of government interference, and everyone else's families are morally corrupt and should be disciplined and controlled.

Additional research and reading on the prevalence and effects of racially biased media.

Dixon, T. L., & Linz, D. G. (2000, spring, June). Overrepresentation and underrepresentation of African Americans and Latinos as lawbreakers on television news. *Journal of Communication*, 50(2), 131-154. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1460-2466.2000.tb02845.x

Entman, R., & Rojecki, A. (2000). *The Black image in the white mind: Media and race in America*. University of Chicago Press.

Gilens, M. (1996). Race and poverty in America: Public misperceptions and the American news media. *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 60, 515-541. https://doi.org/10.1086/297771

Gilens, M. (1999). *Why Americans hate welfare: Race, media and the politics of antipoverty policy*. University of Chicago Press.

Peffley, M., Hurwitz, J., & Sniderman, P. M. (1997). Racial stereotypes and whites' political views of Blacks in the context of welfare and crime. *American Journal of Political Science*, 41, 30-60. https://doi.org/10.2307/2111708

Tukachinsky, R., Mastro, D., & Yarchi, M. (2017). The effect of prime time television ethnic/racial stereotypes on Latino and Black Americans: A longitudinal national level study. *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media, 61, 538-556*. https://doi.org/10.1080/08838151.2017.1344669

PART 2
Rewriting Family Narratives: A Guide for Eliminating Inaccuracy & Bias

In 2020, the nation is finally beginning to come to terms with the real, lived consequences of anti-Black systems of oppression: modern-day lynchings in the form of extrajudicial killings; widespread anti-Black police brutality, control and occupation; disproportionate deaths and killing of Black trans women; and the governmental and corporate policies that put Black people in harm's way—economically, educationally and medically—in the face of COVID-19.

The words we choose to use and not to use when talking about Black people, communities and families may not be the sole cause of anti-Black violence and oppression. Yet, our language invariably reinforces and helps to normalize our biases, which shape and rationalize our individual and collective behavior. Whether we intend it to or not, our use of language can promote the assumptions and attitudes that defend racism as an institution, and that actively prevent the dismantling of racism in our society.

Words Matter

When we talk about Black people and their families in ways that dehumanize them, we put them at risk. When we create a separate set of rules for white families and non-white families, we put all people—especially Black people—in danger.

In both obvious and not-so-obvious ways, the inaccurate and biased terms below contribute to those realities. These terms originate in the histories of biased social science, racist dog-whistling in politics and the rationalizing logic of slavery that we discuss in *Part 3: Racial Bias and Racist Narratives: Origins in Science, Culture & Politics*.

Eliminating these terms in the way we talk about families is an important step toward restoring balance and fairness in social norms and policies, and in moving toward an anti-racist society.

This guide is intended to help you challenge dangerous myths and racist language that—intentionally or not—encourages anti-Black discrimination and violence toward Black families.

Harmful Terms

Absentee Father

Broken Family/Broken Home

Thug

Welfare Queen

Ghetto

Out of Wedlock

Working Class/Working Families

Baby Mama/Baby Daddy

Origins Run Deep

The inaccurate and harmful terms outlined below are deeply ingrained in the ways we talk about families — Black families, in particular. Part 3 of this guide provides an overview of the origins and history of these terms:

"Broken Family" / "Broken Home"

Black families are not "broken" and do not need to be fixed. Some non-nuclear families need social support, just as many two-parent households do, while other non-nuclear families are far more stable and healthy than their counterparts.

In the context of describing families facing challenges, the "broken family" term aims to ascribe blame to family structure, rather than the social structures, institutions and policies that have failed those families. This term is most frequently assigned to Black families and is part of the larger set of narratives that hold white and non-white people to different standards. It wrongly signals that the challenges Black people face are of their own making, the result of dysfunctional or irresponsible choices.

As this logic goes, families are broken because the people in them are broken: it's not that social injustice has broken them, it's that they are inherently inferior as people, as evidenced by their class and race.[12] It's always about them, not the system. (For more on the effects of not being clear about who is responsible for the injustices we see, please see page 22 of Color Of Change's paper, _Telling the Right Story on Race During Covid-19._)

Using this term, especially in the context of Black families, infuses any conversation with this entire line of thinking and judgment—whether explicitly or unconsciously. It also presents Black families as hopeless: perpetually broken and unable to be set right, people who get what they deserve given the "choices" they have made.

This term serves to distinguish a so-called "intact" and "normal" home from a hopelessly deviant home, in which the lack of a married, two-parent, cohabitating structure is fundamentally unsustainable and can only lead to adverse outcomes for children.

Dressed up as a clinical term, it falsely suggests that having two married parents is what makes a family complete, whole and successful, and that any other type of family is deeply lacking. Yet, there is no correlation between family structure and crime. The correlation is always between poverty

and crime—how society has failed people and not how people have failed an arbitrary norm.[13]

Public opinion rooted in conservatism and religious values has never accepted families that deviate from the traditional two-married-parent nuclear family home, and punishes families that do not fit into this model. But in the context of talking about Black families, the term runs deeper: the idea that Black people are incapable of creating successful family structures and that Black children raised by single mothers are delinquent.[14]

The term "broken home" not only lacks empathy and accuracy, it lacks specificity. While highly racialized, it is used to describe everything from divorce and single-parent homes to abuse or poverty, rendering it practically meaningless.

In reality, family structure has nothing to do with whether or not a family is "broken" or harmful to the people in it.

In reality, family structure has nothing to do with whether or not a family is "broken" or harmful to the people in it. Unmarried parents, divorced parents, single parents, separate living arrangements, community-driven living arrangements, and caretakers who are not blood related are all valid types of intimate association and can all provide nurturing family conditions. Like all types of families, some two-parent nuclear households can be harmful environments for children, as well, and research has shown that this is particularly true when there is parental conflict present. Yet cultural narratives persist in trying to persuade couples that sticking together is always "what's best

for the children," despite the proven harm of maintaining high-conflict couple relationships under the same roof where children are present.

> Example:
>
> **"Chicago is a very high, heavily taxed city with low employment numbers. So when you have people that are overtaxed and underemployed, you have <u>broken families</u>. So it's easy to blame the <u>broken family</u>, but can we fix the system that can repair our families? I don't think [Mayor Rahm Emanuel]should be talking about social issues. I think our mayor should be invested in policy that invests in families and in communities."**
>
> –CHE "RHYMEFEST" SMITH (Grammy and Oscar-Winning Hip Hop Artist, CNN, 9/23/16)

The easier examples to point out are those in which someone uses the "broken family/home" term in the context of an explicitly racist "society is falling apart" diatribe. It goes without saying that those examples are almost always fact-free, racially driven, politically motivated attacks on Black families and progressive social policies.

The more complicated examples are those such as the interview excerpt on the left. On the one hand, it's a sign of progress that someone is making the case that economic conditions—specifically, disinvestment in certain neighborhoods and communities—create stresses on families in ways that significantly hurt them.

The reinforcement of the "broken family" idea, however, is actually working against the larger argument that the person is making. Unfortunately, the main takeaway for someone listening to him may be the reinforcement of that idea and not his larger point: a listener is yet again hearing that the real problem—the worst possible outcome there can be—is "broken" families who are in need of repair, a situation that shouldn't be tolerated, a situation that results in a wide range of social problems. It's ultimately another instance of blaming families, especially Black families, even as the speaker may think he is trying to defend them.

THE BOTTOM LINE:

Using this term—in any context—implies family pathology due to bad decision-making, even in the context of highlighting social policies that undermine families and make life harder for them. The term creates a false and artificial hierarchy between "intact" families (another word to avoid!) and "broken" families, reducing the most important thing about families to their structure.

For more information: "The 'Broken Home' or Broken Society: A Sociological Study of Family Structure and Juvenile Delinquency" by California Polytechnic State University, Winter 2010; and "Why I Hate The Term 'Broken Home'" by Mary Widdicks, *Huffington Post*, October 13, 2015.

"Broken Family" / "Broken Home"

Saying What You Mean

Questions to consider when someone uses the term "broken family" / "broken home":

- Is anything about family structure actually relevant to the story? If not, what is the likely effect of using this term? Will it project the idea that nothing but a two-parent home is an acceptable norm or outcome?

- What conditions is this term shorthand for describing (e.g., violence, poverty), and is it better to simply name what those problems are instead of linking those problems to family structure?

- Is the term "broken home" merely serving as a short-hand for race and/or class, and holding non-white and/or poor families to a different standard? Would it be used if the family in question were wealthier and white?
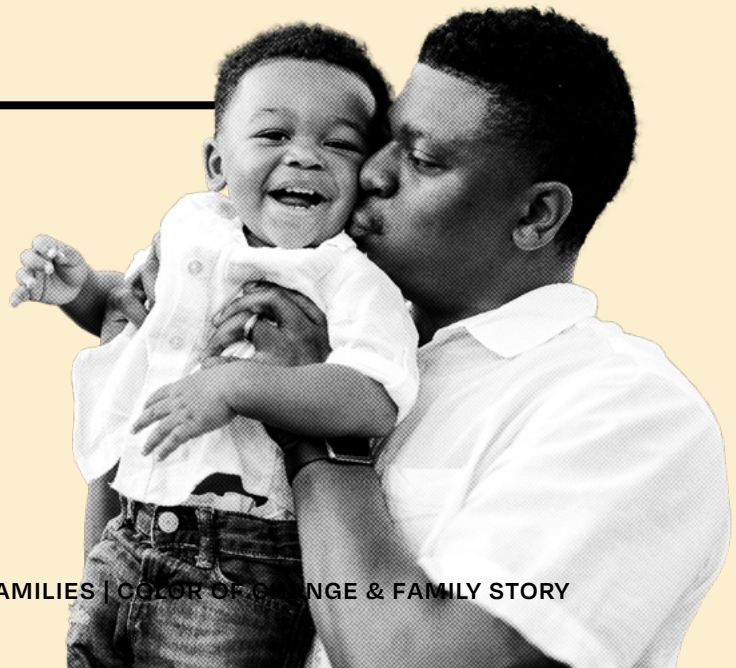
"Absentee Father"

"Absentee fathers" only seem to come in one color: Black. Though there are fathers of all races and ethnicities who have a minimal presence in their childrens' lives, "absentee" isn't used to describe most of them. This racialized term uniquely targets Black fathers, inaccurately (and often purposely) signaling that they willfully abandon their children.

In fact, data from the Center for Disease Control and Prevention show that Black fathers who live with their children are equally as likely to be involved in their children's care as fathers of other races.[15]

There are many social factors stacked against Black fathers, however, which present barriers to the very parenting role that media, politicians and others then blame them for not playing. Police, prosecutors and judges are more likely to charge, try, convict and incarcerate Black men, compared to white men, overwhelmingly for non-violent crimes. The targeted racism of our criminal justice system will send 1 in 3 Black men to prison, separating Black fathers from their children at disproportionately higher rates as compared to white men (among other life-altering effects). Police are also 2.5 times more likely to kill Black men as compared to white men.

Our healthcare system treats Black men just as harshly and unequally, which leads to just as many adverse outcomes as those linked to racism in the criminal justice system.

Currently, there are over 1.5 million Black men missing from everyday life largely due to early deaths, mass incarceration and extrajudicial killings. It has left many communities without men to be parents or partners, whether living with their children or not.[16]

Throughout history, the United States has had an obsession, driven by politics but also by profit, to dehumanize Black families to justify slavery, inequality, and police violence.

The absentee father myth reinforces the stereotype that Black men lack humanity and responsibility, and willfully abandon their children. In reality, of course, many Black fathers never even get the opportunity to be the fathers they are able to be and want to be.

There are over 1.5 million Black men missing from everyday life largely due to early deaths, mass incarceration and extrajudicial killings.

Example:

"Interesting. Well, the mayor also—he pointed—he said <u>absentee fathers</u> are in part to blame for Chicago's gang problem. And I want to ask you about that. He also wants some 7,000 mentors, you know, in place of those absentee fathers, to go into middle and high schools and mentor young men. Good ideas?"

–CAROL COSTELLO (Host, CNN)

THE BOTTOM LINE:

In this example, the speaker is doing double duty on myth-making: explicitly and falsely reinforcing the debunked myth of absentee Black fathers (i.e., the false claim that they are not in the picture at all, or not doing their job as parents, and should be replaced by others). She is also explicitly and falsely indicating this is a uniquely Black phenomenon that leads to unique problems for Black kids.

In this case, the narrative is explicit in its goal: under the guise of supporting Black children through mentorship (not a bad thing unto itself), the speaker is actually placing the blame on families rather than on government disinvestment, corporate job discrimination and other factors of the system that control their lives and shape the conditions of their neighborhoods. Moreover, the speaker is de-legitimizing Black parents and advocating that they be replaced, which is a reinforcing argument in support of harmful child separation, harmful child discipline and many

other policies enforced against Black families at disproportionate rates as compared to white families living similar lives.

There is no reason to believe that Black fathers are any more willfully absent from their children's lives than are fathers of other races. There is, however, evidence that systemic racism has taken many Black fathers away from their families and communities and that when Black fathers do live with their children, they are as involved in their children's care as fathers of other races.

The term "absentee father" reinforces racist narratives about Black men without providing relevant details that help people understand the actual truth of Black families. It is inherently biased and should not be used. More importantly, the idea behind it is a false idea that should not be reinforced, regardless of the language used to do so.

For more information: "_They're Dragging Out The 'Absent Black Fathers' Myth Again. Can We Give It A Rest?_" by Josh Levs, Newsweek, June 5, 2020; and "_How Much In-Kind Support Do Low-Income Nonresident Fathers Provide? A Mixed-Method Analysis_," _Journal of Marriage and Family_, February 28, 2015.

"Out of Wedlock"

It would be unthinkable for journalists today to use the terms "illegitimate" or "bastard" to refer to a child born to unmarried parents, yet "out of wedlock" is no different. It's an antiquated, sexist term that suggests that children born to unmarried parents are less valuable and less viable. It's often used to cast judgment on single mothers and is a dog-whistle that elicits racist "welfare queen" stereotypes.[17] It is rarely applied to people of wealth and privilege, even when all other factors are the same.

In terms of its impact, out of wedlock plays a specific function in advancing right-wing politics that most people who use the term would probably not be aware they are endorsing. Over the past several decades, right-wing Christian ministries and conservative think tanks have spent incredible amounts of money to reinforce the idea that society must shame and penalize single mothers and women who have children "out of wedlock." Their use of this term is part of their larger agenda of so-called "family values." It is rooted in their mission to defend patriarchy (male dominance and privilege) and their fears about the changing roles of women in society. It is also part of a clear political strategy to gain power by controlling all aspects of family life: choices about marriage, work life, having children, education, child care and more.

Fear-mongering about "out of wedlock" births has been influential in diverting well over a billion dollars[18] of taxpayer money toward ineffective marriage promotion programs intended to reduce births to unmarried women.

Single parents, co-parents, divorced parents, "together but living apart" parents, chosen families, foster families and kin families all deserve to be validated and supported. Yet social acceptance of these choices or realities is still greatly restricted by class and race.

It is a direct response to the fact that families who feel free to make their own choices about their lives are, in fact, doing so. There is more diversity in family structures today than ever before. Single parents, co-parents, divorced parents, "together but living apart" parents, chosen families, foster families and kin families all deserve to be validated and supported. Yet social acceptance of these choices or realities is still greatly restricted by class and race. "Out of wedlock" reinforces social stigma for everyone else, and positions families and children who vary from the so-called norm as less deserving of support, and more deserving of punishment. It leads to a deeply cynical and completely inaccurate *"Well, what did you expect? They get what they deserve."* attitude when assessing the needs and rights of families in the crosshairs of attacks from conservatives.

Neither marriage nor children legitimize a family. In fact, parents who should be separated (e.g., due to domestic violence) suffer greatly when social pressures or social policies prevent separation—as do the children who remain trapped in that environment.

Example:

"White people do not force black people to have babies out-of-wedlock."

–BILL O'REILLY
  (Host, The O'Reilly Factor, Fox News)

THE BOTTOM LINE:

The term "out of wedlock" reinforces racist "welfare queen" stereotypes without providing any meaningful details about a family situation. It is simply the modern-day equivalent of expressing patriarchal and racist fears about "illegitimacy." It is also used to judge and blame Black families for social instability in order to distract people from an honest analysis of the real factors driving any family's struggles and to stigmatize children in ways that cause harm.

For more information: "Black Kids Aren't 'Illegitimate,' But Your Data Comprehension Is," by Tim Wise, *Medium*, February 12, 2018.

"Out of Wedlock"

Saying What You Mean

Questions to consider when someone uses the term "out of wedlock":

- Is anything about marital status at the time of the child's birth that is relevant to the story?

- Would this same term be used if the race or class of the family were different?

- It should not be used, and the reference to whether not a marriage exists will likely only serve to undermine the image and standing of the family being discussed. If the context requires it, the term "non-marital birth" is slightly preferable because it carries less stigma.

"Thug"

This racially charged word is used to wrongly associate Black people with criminal behavior, to taint the reputations of Black victims of police brutality by suggesting they deserve violence and mistreatment, and to smear Black people engaged in protests and demonstrations. It stands in contrast to descriptions of white violence and misbehavior: the crime and destruction committed by white people (e.g., following sporting events, domestic violence, college sexual assault, general neighborhood mischief and fights) is often labeled as the product of "rowdy revelers"[19] who are "letting off steam" or the product of "boys being boys" and so on.

The word "thug" originated in India and was used to describe people who belonged to a religious cult that robbed and killed travelers to please the goddess of death.[20] Later, the word was adopted by British colonizers and Westerners to describe indigenous groups: to insinuate that their place in society is illegitimate and unwanted, similar to how the word is used today. Its roots are deeply racist, and its use invariably reinforces racist characterizations of Black people and communities in (false) contrast to others.

The textbook definition of a thug is a criminal, but the word has largely become a replacement for racial slurs that are no longer acceptable to say in public.[21] Thug is used to describe poor Black and Brown folks regardless of whether or not they are criminals, based purely on superficial characteristics such as the way they are dressed or carry themselves, or even just their size. The use of the word continues to provide ammunition for racial discrimination, for white supremacists upholding the Southern Strategy and capitalizing on racial fear, and for expanding unjust, increasingly violent and often illegal policing and prosecutorial practices, particularly playing off of the age-old specter of threatening the safety of white women.

Thug is used to describe poor Black and Brown folks regardless of whether or not they are criminals, based purely on superficial characteristics such as the way they are dressed or carry themselves, or even just their size.

Moreover, it is also used to undermine or de-legitimize behavior among young Black men that is threatening to people in power, such as maligning protestors or any youth who speak out against racism and express anger about injustice.

Example:

[In response to Black Lives Matter protests] "These <u>THUGS</u> are dishonoring the memory of George Floyd, and I won't let that happen. Just spoke to Governor Tim Walz and told him that the military is with him all the way. Any difficulty and we will assume control but, when the looting starts, the shooting starts. Thank you!"

–DONALD TRUMP (President of the United States)

Example:

[In response to Michigan anti-lockdown of protestors who were armed with guns] "The Governor of Michigan should give a little, and put out the fire. These are very good people, but they are angry. They want their lives back again, safely! See them, talk to them, make a deal."

–DONALD TRUMP (President of the United States)

THE BOTTOM LINE:

As these two side-by-side tweets show, the term "thug" is used to elicit stereotypes of dangerous Black male criminality and to blame Black people for social unrest and violence while publicly declaring property is more valuable than Black lives. Similar actions taken by white men are often met with compassion and calls for civil conversation, and defended as the rightful exercise of freedom.

The term "thug" is often used as a pejorative to fuel racial discrimination and is uniquely applied to Black men or other men of color. There is never a good reason for white people to use this term in the context of discussing social issues, in news coverage, or in conversations in which white people are talking about Black people, etc.

For more information: "A Brief History of the Word 'Thug,'" Newsweek, April 29, 2015; and "'Thug' Is the New N-Word," *Ebony*, May 27, 2015.

"Ghetto"

Throughout history, ghettos have been defined as places certain ethnic groups were forced to live. Originally, "ghetto" was an Italian word for the restricted area in which Jews were compelled to live. In the United States, the word has almost always been applied to places where Black people live, whether enforced by government policy, discrimination by neighbors and local businesses, or racist corporate practices such as redlining by banks. In the present day, the term is used almost exclusively as an insult to describe a Black community experiencing poverty.[22] Moreover, the term is used to promote the idea that all people living in a particular neighborhood behave in the same (inferior) manner, and should be socially and physically isolated from everyone else.

This racist and classist term is most often used as an insult to describe the behavior, lifestyle and clothing in a Black community, bearing little in common with the historical legacy of ghettos. Harlem and Chicago's ghettos housed the transformative literary and cultural movement, as well as the emerging Black professional class. It signified forced separation, but not always inferiority and hopelessness. But the common usage today does not make room for any of these histories. In a modern context, "ghetto" does little more than mark a neighborhood as a dangerous place white people should fear and avoid, while stigmatizing the people who live in them as people with substandard values, cultures and lifestyles who should also be avoided—people who are not worth investing in.

Example:

"**Underclass behavior, things like having kids out of wedlock, failure to stay consistently in the workforce. Drug and alcohol abuse. Criminal involvement. Father-absent homes. Those are some of the behaviors that Black subculture behavior in many of these American ghettos I'm talking about...**"

–DAVID CLARKE (Milwaukee Sheriff, 6/6/15)

THE BOTTOM LINE:

Ghetto is a racist and classist term that has become shorthand for a poor and Black neighborhood that white people should disparage, dismiss and fear—one that government policy has had no role in creating and cannot do anything to "save." It is a way of giving society permission to neglect or punish Black families. It should not be used by people who do not live in those communities, not even in jest or for "ironic" effect.

For more information: "'Ghetto:' Five Reasons to Rethink the Word," *DCentric*, May 13, 2011; and "Is The Word 'Ghetto' Racist?" *BBC News*, January 15, 2016; and, "Segregated From Its History, How 'Ghetto' Lost Its Meaning," *Code Switch,* NPR, April 27, 2014.

"Baby Mama" / "Baby Daddy"

What's the difference between having a "blended family" and having "baby daddies" or "baby mamas"? Typically, it's the race of the family members. These terms have a context-specific meaning within Black culture. But when used by people who are not Black, and especially when used by white people or anyone in an official capacity (such as a newscaster) the meaning changes. These terms, which may masquerade as playful and harmless, have the effect of undermining the seriousness of a relationship or implying lack of personal responsibility, and are especially aimed at women.[23]

Both terms can invalidate and oversimplify complex relationship dynamics while echoing a historical disrespect for the role Black people play as partners and parents.

Pop culture has been complicit in treating "baby mama" and "baby daddy" as lighthearted forms of cultural appropriation that are acceptable for white people to use. In reality, the terms are rooted in a dangerous stereotype that suggests Black people make casual and irresponsible family planning decisions, whether they are married or not.

It is also impossible to ignore the racist respectability politics at play when, given the same situation, unmarried white women are often said to have "co-parents," while unmarried Black women are said to have "baby daddies."

Example:

"Outraged Liberals: Stop Picking on Obama's <u>baby mama</u>!"

–FOX NEWS CHYRON

THE BOTTOM LINE:

These terms may seem harmless and lighthearted but they carry heavy racialized baggage. The terms "baby mama" and "baby daddy" reinforce racist narratives without providing relevant details that help people make meaning.

The fact that says it all: Fox News would never refer to President Trump's wives as "baby mamas" but Michelle Obama, a Black woman, was fair game. By reducing her to her intimate relationship with President Obama, and making light of her role as partner and parent, we strip her of her own complex identity, while implying her family is less-than.

For more information: "Please Don't Call Her My 'Baby Mama,'" *Medium*, October 17, 2017; and, "Where Do 'Baby-Daddies' Come From?" *Slate*, May 7, 2006.

"Working Class" / "Working Families"

While other terms in this section are harmful in the ways they target Black families, this term is harmful in the way it excludes them. The image of "working class" families is one that is largely coded as "white" within the public imagination, frequently associated with rural, suburban and exurban communities.

Even within cities, the specific neighborhoods that are predominantly inhabited by white low- and middle-income families are considered "working class," a term rarely applied to their Black peers who are living in the same economic strata in neighboring communities and who are making equally strong contributions to the sectors in which they work. At the same time, the term is applied to white people whether or not they are actually working, even in white communities devastated by unemployment, whereas Black communities are rarely granted that status.

The benefits to white people are clear: being considered part of the "working class" marks them as independent and self-sufficient, even as significant numbers of white people in this economic group receive public assistance and other forms of public support.

The negative impact of excluding Black families from this narrative are stark. Black families are rarely included in—let alone central to—the archetypal American working class hero story of the people who "built this country" and are the bellwether of its success. In fact, it undermines the image of Black people as working at all, in favor of incessantly identifying Black people by social condition rather than social contribution.

The term unfairly and inaccurately sets up a contrast of Black people as dependent, reinforcing inaccurate stereotypes of Black families as takers in comparison to white people who are makers, irrespective of how much social support is actually required to sustain white working class communities. Erasing the importance and necessity of

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these social supports to a "working class" or middle class lifestyle ultimately undermines them and helps justify their slow but steady dismantling by conservatives.

Sadly, conservative pundits alone are not driving this dangerously racist narrative. It is commonly reinforced even by liberal politicians, media and others who remain unaware of its unintended consequences.

For more information: "Understanding the Working Class," *Demos Report*, April 16, 2018; and "What about the black working class," *CNN Money*, November 23, 2016.

"Working Class" / "Working Families"

Saying What You Mean

Questions to consider when someone uses the term "working class" / "working families":

■ Rather than eliminating the use of this term, it is important to continue to expand its meaning, and the range of people whose image it evokes. One way to do that is to explicitly insert Black people into the narrative it carries, for instance, by talking about ***Black, white and other working class communities***, or by talking about ***Black, white and other working families***.

■ Over time, by being explicit in challenging the default image or understanding of who the "working class" is, the term will take on a more inclusive meaning and erode the distinction that is often implied between white working class families (framed as heroes whose needs should be met) and Black and other nonwhite working class families (framed as heroes whose needs should be ignored).
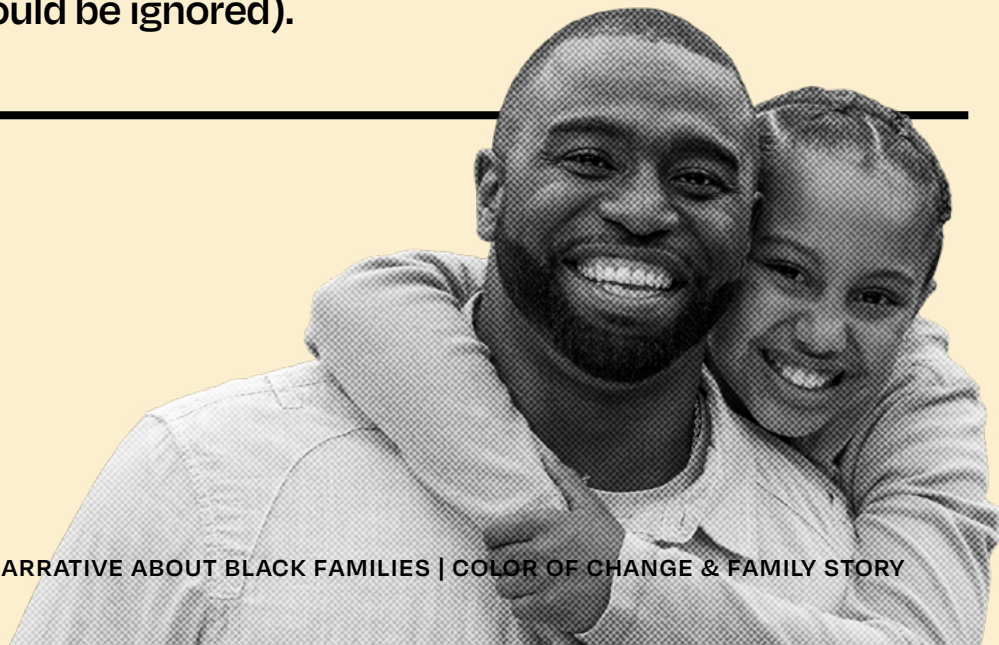
The Consequences of Bias: Examples of Unjust Treatment of Black Families

Anti-Black Police Brutality and Less Obvious Forms of Racial Exclusion and Harm

As the country reckons with how centuries of anti-Black racism have been used to justify dehumanization and violence against Black people by law enforcement, it is important to acknowledge how myths about Black families help sustain this system.

Appropriately, critical conversations about police violence and defunding the police are happening in the face of extrajudicial killings of Black people. Perhaps more quietly, Black families are still "regulated" through child protective systems, which disproportionately target poor Black families. Despite its name, the criminal justice system does not protect Black families, ensure Black people are treated justly or seek justice for Black people who are wronged by individuals, government officials or corporations. Similarly, despite its name, Child Protective Services (CPS) does not work to protect Black families and children, and instead puts Black families

> **American policy has structurally disadvantaged Black families for decades, enabled by myths suggesting Black people are less deserving, lack ambition and are wholly responsible for conditions that are, in fact, outside of their control.**

in danger and largely increases their instability. More often than not, these government agencies separate children from their families without addressing the root cause of their hardships, and without any goal or concern for ultimately keeping families together and keeping children healthy.[24]

American policy has structurally disadvantaged Black families for decades, enabled by myths suggesting Black people are less deserving, lack ambition and are wholly responsible for conditions that are, in fact, outside of their control. Here are a few of the most egregious race-based policies that have shaped the reality for Black families today.

Redlining

For decades, U.S. banks denied mortgages to Black families, preventing Black people from buying homes in certain neighborhoods, getting loans, and building any type of home equity, the greatest source of wealth for most Americans. On average, the net worth of a typical white family ($171,500) is nearly 10x greater than that of a Black family ($17,500).[25]

Mass Incarceration

Police and judicial officials are more likely to charge, try, convict, and send Black men to jail as compared to white men—overwhelmingly for non-violent crimes. Police are 2.5x more likely to kill Black men as compared to white men. Currently, there are over 1.5 million Black men missing from everyday life largely due to early deaths, mass incarceration, and extrajudicial killings—leaving many communities without men to be parents or partners.[26]

Health Inequities

The cycle of poverty is the leading factor for poor nutrition in Black communities, leaving families with few options for healthy, affordable food. That results in Black people having higher rates of diabetes, hypertension, and heart disease than other groups. This issue is compounded by predatory fast food corporations and the tobacco industry,

which specifically target Black families.[27] Since Black families have been segregated in particular neighborhoods, these areas typically have restricted access to adequate education, employment, housing, healthcare, fresh foods and outdoor spaces—all of which contribute to adverse health outcomes. In addition, the daily lived experience of systemic racism, including in law enforcement, is an experience of fear, anxiety and trauma that impacts both physical and psychological health in real terms.

State Regulation of Family

Separating Black, Brown and Indigenous families has been integral to CPS. The foster care system forcibly removes children from their homes to be placed in foster care and detention facilities. The majority of welfare investigations involve allegations of neglect related to poverty, while white families living in poverty are not seen as a threat to society or punished nearly as often for the realities and challenges they face.[28] Black families live in constant fear of being torn apart by CPS.

Voter Suppression

- **Felony Disenfranchisement:** Felony disenfranchisement disproportionately affects the ability of Black Americans to participate in the political process and influence the decisions that shape their lives, due to racial bias in the criminal justice system that is linked to explicit strategy hatched by conservatives to disenfranchise Black voters. The United States is the only place in the world to deprive citizens of their right to vote after they have completed their sentences. Black Americans of voting age are more than four times as likely to lose their voting rights than the rest of the adult population, with one of every 13 black adults disenfranchised nationally.[29]

- **Barriers to Voter Registration:** Many states have eliminated same-day voter-registration, have limited voter registration drives and have reduced opportunities for voters to register—policies that are knowingly crafted to disenfranchise Black voters.

- **Voter ID:** Thirty-six states have identification requirements at the polls, which can be costly and inaccessible. Approximately 1 in 4 Black Americans do not have a government-issued photo ID nor do 15% percent of Americans who earn less than $35,000 a year.[30] It is the modern incarnation of the poll taxes that were designed to disenfranchise Black voters generations ago.

Family Policy Harm

Many of our social policies penalize unmarried people, regardless of why they are unmarried. This policy bias, which is based on a definition of family that does not take into account differences in culture and history among different groups of people, has long discriminated against Black families, LGBTQIA+ families, immigrant families and others, impacts people's lives adversely in many ways.

- **Single/Unmarried Parent Penalties:** About seventy percent of Black women who give birth are unmarried. There are many reasons why Black women may not be married or do not necessarily associate being a mother with being part of a nuclear family. But government programs paternalistically designed to "prevent and reduce the incidence of out-of-wedlock pregnancies" stigmatize these decisions, despite the fact that the problem of poor children with single parents is a problem of poverty much more than it is one of family structure.[31]

- **Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA):** Under this federal law, most employees have the right to take job-protected leave to care for a spouse, parent or child who has a serious health condition. But employees have no right under FMLA to take job-protected leave to care for their unmarried partners, siblings, aunts or uncles, grandparents, or others who are not only "like family" to them but also play an essential role in their family life that is no different than a spouse or parent. Thankfully, many States are filling in some of these gaps[32] by using inclusive definitions of family within their State paid leave laws.

- **Social Security:** Social Security spousal and survivor benefits are not available to unmarried partners or other close relations. Various other retirement and disability programs also provide spousal benefits exclusively, excluding everyone else.[33]

- **Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF):** The intent of this program, originally, was to provide financial assistance to children so that they can remain in their own homes. But TANF has drastically reduced the number of low-income parents and children who receive assistance and has spent well over a billion dollars[34] on marriage promotion programs, taking resources directly away from low-income families that need it most. Only 1 in 4 parents and children who are financially eligible for TANF income assistance actually receive it.[35]

Black families aren't the only ones at risk—every type of family that does not conform to white two-parent married nuclear families, including immigrants and undocumented families, and those currently detained in ICE detention centers, are in harm's way.

Additional research and reading on the effects of anti-Black policies:

The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness by Michelle Alexander

Race for Profit: How Banks and the Real Estate Industry Undermined Black Homeownership by Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor

Race and the Politics of Welfare Reform by Sanford F. Schram, Joe Soss, and Richard C. Fording, Editors

Killing the Black Body: Race, Reproduction, and the Meaning of Liberty by Dorothy Roberts

PART 3
Racial Bias and Racist Narratives: Origins in Social Science, Culture & Politics

News and entertainment media may be the greatest propagators of dangerous myths about families, but they do not operate in a vacuum and have not invented racial bias all on their own. They are often merely reflecting and amplifying false narratives that have been developed in other fields, often for very specific purposes. This overview provides a quick introduction to some of those sources of false narratives—in particular, social science and politics.

Bias and Inaccuracy in the Field of Family Science

Family science is a social science discipline that studies families and interpersonal relationships, with an emphasis on improving outcomes, particularly for families it views as "disadvantaged." For far too many people working in the realms of media and policymaking, family science scholars are the professors of all things family: teaching them how to think about family and its relationship to society, what research subjects to focus on, what "good" and "bad" families look like, who should be judged and who should be praised, which social policies are helpful or harmful and what types of family behavior and conditions are helpful or harmful. In this way, social science has served as a direct pipeline for fueling the propagation of debunked and biased narratives about families in general—and Black families, in particular—that we see across the media landscape.

The discipline of family science has tended to ignore or minimize the systemic inequalities at play for Black families.[36] Many influential poverty scholars have spent decades debating how much of the persistence of Black poverty can be attributed to "cultural" versus "structural" issues, without providing any broader historical context, and while ignoring historical and contemporary forms of racism and discrimination. Moreover, the field has treated families outside of a white, married, traditional nuclear household as less desirable and inferior, despite any real evidence of those differences having an adverse impact.[37]

Much like anthropology and other disciplines that grew out of it, as well as social work and other fields of practice that are intertwined with it, family science has been led by mostly white researchers who have looked at their subjects through the biased lens of race and have largely ignored the obligation to correct for it.

Many family scholars approach the study of Black family life and inequality with a focus on Black family structure. But as some scholars, including Dr. Deadric T. Williams, have persuasively argued, family structure simply illuminates racial inequities, it does not cause them. Nor is "correcting" family structure an effective means of eliminating or compensating for the racial inequalities that put Black families in harm's way.

Family structure simply illuminates racial inequities, it does not cause them.

When it comes to the question of structure, family scholars tend to minimize the historical context of centuries of policy that either intentionally eroded Black family structures or unintentionally had the same practical impact. This includes everything from family separations, rape and forced labor innate to slavery, but also modern policies, such as mass incarceration, which continue to tear

Black families apart. And then, in turn, those same scholars demonize the ways in which communities have adapted to those conditions, judging them as adversely deviant rather than positively adaptive, which less-biased research has shown them to be.

Black families are not (innately) drawn away from their communities nor do they (inherently) turn to a life of crime. Still, many poverty scholars continue to point to Black children born to unmarried mothers as the primary driver of inequity between Black and white communities. In actuality, access to resources, more than family structure, is what actually matters for the success of Black children.[38]

Another fraught area of study within the family science discipline is the study of "multi-partner fertility," a term for women who have children with more than one partner, which largely explores (and stigmatizes) behaviors of low-income women of color. However, the parallel study of "blended families"—the same phenomenon among white parents and children—is differentiated by very little except that the subjects tend to be wealthier, whiter and more likely to be married. The behaviors are not so different—what's notable is that a trend among upper classes is typically legitimized, while those correlated with poverty and race are marked by stigma.

Given a long history of enslavement, Black families persevered by creating extended families. As scholar Robert B. Hill has shown, Black families have, among other things, strong kinship bonds and flexible family roles that transcend blood and legal bounds.[39] Black families have had to figure out ways to form bonds without legal recognition from the U.S. justice system, which is why Black families typically include non-biological, extended and chosen family members.

The Southern Strategy: Anti-Blackness as a Political Strategy

In the 19th century, politicians justified slavery as a necessary evil to keep the "social order." This idea still permeates our media landscape and the language we use, and it influences the attitudes and treatment that people exhibit toward Black families.

In the 20th century, American political leaders began appealing to these racist perceptions as a matter of strategy. When

campaigning and running ads, Republicans used coded language to play on people's racial biases, as well as racial resentment, in order to break away Southern white working class voters from the Democratic base, an approach that came to be known as the Southern Strategy. The Southern Strategy laid the foundation for the most harmful race-based policies in the United States.

In the 20th century, American political leaders began appealing to these racist perceptions as a matter of strategy.

The Nixon Administration doubled down on the notion that Black families were destructive to society and responsible for crime, and even that Black families were jeopardizing the "American Dream" and were responsible for social chaos and financial ruin in America.

Nixon's strategy was explicit: undermine the communities that could undermine his own power. It was never actually about crime. But under the guise of keeping the country safe, the Nixon administration declared the War on Drugs. The so-called war licensed local law enforcement to occupy communities of color, to incarcerate Black people at alarming rates for non-violent offenses, and to increase the lengths of their sentences in comparison to white people.

As it continued into the 1980s under President Ronald Reagan, it included creating different classifications for different types of cocaine. The intent was to allow cocaine use among white people to continue largely unencumbered while making use among Black people a life-long punishment, and a driver of mass incarceration and disenfranchisement. To this day, Black people are 3.6 times more likely to be arrested for cannabis even though usage rates among white and Black folks are comparable.

The policies that came out of the Southern Strategy show up in the War on Drugs, mass incarceration and anti-Black police brutality. One of Nixon's aides, Baum Ehrlichman, made a shockingly candid acknowledgement in 1994, admitting that the War on Drugs was, in fact, a ploy to criminalize Black people and hippies:[40]

> "*We knew we couldn't make it illegal to be either against the war or black, but by getting the public to associate the hippies with marijuana and blacks with heroin, and then criminalizing both heavily, we could disrupt those communities. We could arrest their leaders, raid their homes, break up their meetings, and vilify them night after night on the evening news. Did we know we were lying about the drugs? Of course we did.*"

The Reagan Strategy: Anti-Blackness as an Attack on the Social Safety Net and the Promotion of Tax Breaks and Privatization

One particularly enduring and influential stereotype is the "welfare queen"—a myth popularized under President Ronald Reagan. He based this myth off a highly skilled con artist named Linda Taylor, who was obviously not representative of poor people at large. According to John Levin's book, *The Queen: The Forgotten Life Behind an American Myth*, "Taylor's mere existence gave credence to a slew of pernicious stereotypes about poor people and Black women. If one welfare queen walked the earth, then

surely others did, too." The myth served to discourage voters from supporting welfare programs while stereotyping Black women as poor, lazy and eager to steal hard-earned taxpayer dollars.[41]

By introducing a devious Black caricature who stole hardworking taxpayers dollars, the "welfare queen" myth was used to undermine social policy. If political leaders were able to frame being poor as a character flaw and a byproduct of being Black, rather than the result of government or corporate policies, they could continue to control and police Black families and dismantle social programs in favor of tax cuts and privatization.

The function of the myth is simple: convince society that Black people deserve to be left out of social policy because they are freeloaders and cause social unrest. However, in reality, Black families were (and still are) disproportionately excluded from economic opportunities, making it significantly harder to achieve upward mobility. In 2016, the median net worth of a white household ($171,000) was 10 times as high as that of a Black household ($17,150).[42]

Even before the "welfare queen" myth, redlining made it illegal for the Homeowners Loan Corporation to distribute loans to Black neighborhoods. This meant that Black families could not buy a home or build equity. To this day, Black families are 40% less likely to own homes as compared to white families. Redlining lasted for nearly an entire century and led to over-policing and increased crime because these neighborhoods did not have the basic resources they needed to survive, and could not assert control over their communities because, largely, they did not actually own them. Even though the Fair Housing Act was passed in 1968, it was too late: Black families were already stuck in a cycle of poverty making it harder and harder to get out.

Stereotypes about Black families as "takers" continue to play an outsized role in American politics, underlying racist judgments about who is deserving or un-deserving of public assistance, even today. Just months ago, the first Republican stimulus plan in response to COVID-19 proposed giving only $600 to families without a taxable income (half of what was being offered to families with taxable income), leaving 64 million of the poorest families without the full benefit, signaling the belief that poverty is a character flaw, and poor people are undeserving of assistance.[43] Not coincidentally, a significant number of families without taxable income are Black.

Slavery: Understanding How Patterns of Racism Inform Our Bias

Of course, narratives about families trace back to slavery. This formative period shapes our temperament and treatment of Black families.

Slavery is a necessary starting point to understand the American narrative of what constitutes family. Slavery relied on the dehumanization and trading of humans as property. Slavery depended on extreme physical, emotional and sexual abuse. And this misogynistic, racially charged behavior was accepted as the norm. Slavery was a legal institution.

To justify it, American political leaders spread the idea that enslaved people benefited from slavery because slaveholders provided food and shelter. One 19th century historian, Urlich Bonnell Phillips, was a major influence on academic writings about slavery. He described the institution of slavery as a necessary tool for racial control. And, he described slaveholders as paternalistic figures who "helped" Black people. His writings spread

the false, dehumanizing notion that the institution of slavery was necessary because Black people could not think for themselves.

Sadly, the perverse logic that enslaved people benefited from enslavement is still alive and well today, and consistently deployed against Black families. As recently as 2016 on broadcast television, Bill O'Reilly regurgitated this line of thinking on his Fox News show, stating:

> "Slaves that worked [at the White House] were well fed and had decent lodgings provided by the government…"[44]

As we unpack these narratives, we see the language of "helping Black people" continue today as a way to rationalize racist behavior. We also see the idea that Black people don't know what's best for them, and ultimately do not deserve an equal place in the economy and do not deserve self-determination in politics or social life.

Slaveholders broke up enslaved families

> "And what of my father? What of the master of Lockless? I knew very early who he was, for my mother had made no secret of the fact, nor did he…I knew I had a brother up there, a boy who luxuriated while I labored, and I wondered what right he had to his life of idle pursuit, and what law deeded me to the Task."
> (Excerpt from, *The Water Dancer*, Ta-Nehisi Coates)

One of the most common forms of resistance for enslaved people was the act of creating a family. Marriage among enslaved people was illegal and slaveholders broke up over a third of families. Slaves who were couples were specifically sold and separated. Enslaved women were forced to serve as their slaveholders' concubines. Yet, against the odds, family remained a source of refuge, and a space for healing from centuries of intergenerational trauma. Family reaffirmed the humanity and intimate connection for slaves in a world that was designed to be incompatible with their existence and survival.

Slaveholders often tore families apart by sale, leaving children with one parent, or sometimes none. In response, enslaved communities took on the responsibility of ensuring these children were cared for after their parents were taken. Today, this type of family would be defined as kin, extended family, or chosen family. Slaveholders, meanwhile, had as many children with as many enslaved women as they wanted, largely without judgment or consequence. In a cruel irony, Black families today are uniquely stigmatized for having children with multiple partners, and worse, treated as though it's a norm they invented.

In 2020, the U.S. justice system continues to separate Black families through mass incarceration and "family regulation" systems such as CPS. CPS forcibly removes poor Black children from their homes at disproportionate rates, punishing families for experiencing poverty and not conforming to an idealized white, married, two-parent, nuclear household. Yet, white people who do not conform to the very same norms face less judgment and a more relaxed set of standards.[45]

About Us

Color of Change

Color Of Change is the nation's largest online racial justice organization.

We help people respond effectively to injustice in the world around us, design campaigns powerful enough to end practices that unfairly hold Black people back and champion solutions that move us all forward. As a national online force driven by 7 million members we move decision-makers in corporations and government to create a more human and less hostile world for Black people in America.

Family Story

Family Story works to address and dismantle family privilege in America. We conduct cutting-edge research to expose the ways family privilege causes harm and create cultural and political strategies to advance equity for all types of families. We believe everyone has a unique journey and that all adults and families deserve support and respect.

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