

# The State Of Black Children & Families

## Black Perspectives On What Black Children Face And What The Future Holds

### Research Findings

Based on qualitative and quantitative research conducted among Black adults, caregivers, young people, and national leaders

*Conducted For The Children's Defense Fund On Behalf Of:*

*The Black Community Crusade For Children*

***By Hart Research Associates***



THE BLACK COMMUNITY CRUSADE FOR CHILDREN

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Hart Research Associates  
1724 Connecticut Avenue, NW  
Washington, DC 20009

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## Introduction

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In 1994 Hart Research was asked by the Children's Defense Fund to conduct a research project on behalf of the Black Community Crusade for Children among Black Americans. The research explored attitudes and opinions about the circumstances facing Black Americans, as well as perceptions of the problems and challenges confronting Black communities in general and Black youth in particular. The 1994 research revealed a troubling portrait of life for Black young Americans, growing up in communities plagued by poorly performing schools, drugs, guns, and for many, a movement away from unified families and a strong moral underpinning that provides much needed guidance and support for young people.

Through this research project, we return a decade and a half later to many of the same questions to see what has changed:

- Have the situations that Black Americans face changed?
- Have circumstances improved for Black Americans, and in particular for Black children and young people?
- Are things easier for Black children today than two decades ago?
- What are the major problems and challenges that Black Americans and Black communities face?
- What is the outlook for the future of Black children in America?

This report presents the findings of this important study.

## Overview Of Research Methodology

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During the Fall of 2010, Hart Research Associates undertook an extensive research project for the Children's Defense Fund on behalf of the Black Community Crusade For Children. The research's goal was to better understand Black Americans' current views on the circumstances facing Black Americans and Black communities and perceptions of what the future holds for Black children growing up in America today. The project includes the following quantitative and qualitative research components:

- A nationwide survey among 801 Black adults, including 475 caregivers, defined as parents, grandparents, other relatives, and guardians with responsibility for raising at least one child under age 18, conducted November 10 to 23, 2010.
- A nationwide survey among 403 Black children and young people ages 11 to 17, conducted November 10 to December 2, 2010.
- Four focus groups in Washington, D.C., conducted November 29 and 30, 2010, among the following groups:
  - Middle-income parents and caregivers
  - Low-income parents and caregivers
  - Children ages 11 to 14
  - Children ages 15 to 17
- Three focus groups in Memphis, TN, conducted on December 4, 2010, among the following groups:
  - Parents and caregivers
  - Children ages 11 to 14
  - Children ages 15 to 17
- Two telephone focus groups among national Black leaders and activists.

## Key Take-Away Findings

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- Black adults, caregivers, and leaders see these as very difficult times for Black Americans in general and especially for Black children and young people.
  - Roughly seven in 10 adults and caregivers describe these as tough or really bad times for Black children.
- The prevailing view among Black adults, caregivers, and leaders is that things have not improved significantly for Black children in recent years and they see poor and disenfranchised Black youth falling further and further behind.
  - In fact, two-thirds of adults and caregivers say that things have improved for just some or a few Black children, compared with 16 years ago.
- Black children and young people are generally more optimistic than their adult counterparts when assessing their current circumstances.
  - Two-thirds of Black young people characterize these as very good or okay times for Black children, compared with one-third who characterize them as tough or really bad times.
- New issues emerge as very serious problems that are having devastating effects on Black communities and the children growing up in them, including the following issues:
  - Economic isolation and unemployment
  - Disproportionately high Black imprisonment rates, especially among Black young men
- Many of the same issues and challenges defined as serious problems over a decade and a half ago continue to plague Black communities, including the following issues:
  - Violence
  - Drugs and addiction
  - Failing schools
  - Negative cultural and media influences
  - Fractured Black families and communities
  - A loss of moral values
  - Teen pregnancy
- In terms of the prescription for change, Black leaders are viewed as important, but the most important influencers of change are parents, grandparents, and others at the local levels who are involved in the day-to-day lives of Black children and young people.

- Most adults, caregivers, and leaders look to the future with guarded optimism. They are struck by the magnitude of the challenges, yet hope for a better future.

**“I guess the best way to say it is that I play the blues but I sing gospel. So I’m always merging the two, and the universe in so many ways still has an arc toward that which is just, and there’s a way that we have to acknowledge our tragedy, but yet still anchor ourselves to hope. So we are rooted in that kind of tradition.”**

**- Black leader**

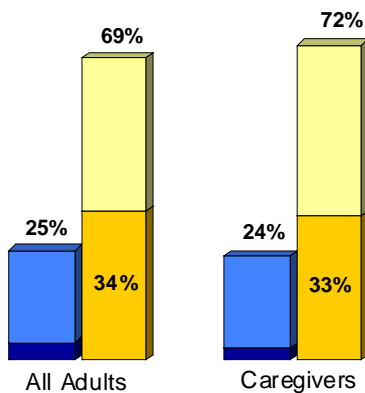
## The Current Landscape: Tough Times For Black Children In America

Black parents, caregivers, and leaders continue to see these as very tough times for Black Americans in general and especially for Black children and young people. Only 2% of Black adults characterize these as very good times for Black people generally. In contrast, seven in 10 characterize these as tough (40%) or really bad times (31%) and 19% feel these are okay times for Black Americans.

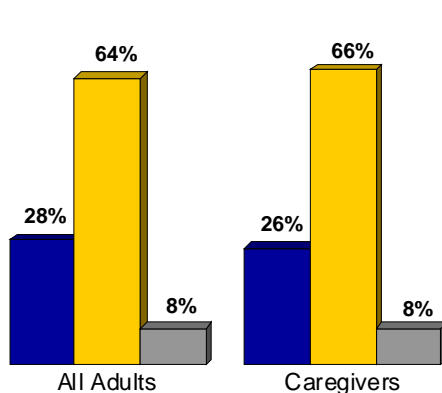
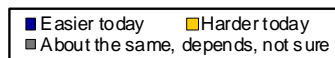
Black adults have an equally bleak outlook on the current situation Black children face. The overwhelming majority see these as tough (35%) or really bad times (34%) for Black children, and by a large margin Black adults and caregivers believe times are harder for Black children growing up today than they were when they were children.

### Tough Times For Black Children

*How are things going in the country these days for Black children?*



*Is it easier or harder to be a Black child today, compared with how things were for parents' generation?*



In contrast to their adult counterparts, Black children have a more positive perspective on the current lay of the land and the opportunities that are available to help them succeed and this outlook is significantly more upbeat than it was 16 years ago. By three to one, Black young people overwhelmingly believe that they have it easier (72%) versus harder (23%) than when their parents' generation was growing up. Two-thirds characterize these as very good (11%) or okay times (54%) for Black children and an overwhelming majority (75%) feel that if they work hard and try their best they can be successful, compared with 21% who feel it will be difficult to be successful even if they work hard and try their best. Likely informing this optimistic outlook is the belief held by 60% of the young people surveyed that a lot of opportunities exist these days for Black young people.

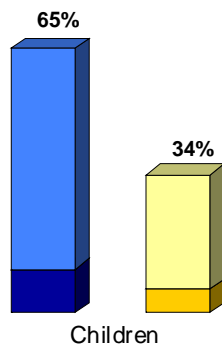
**“Yes, there are opportunities, like my mom grew up in the ‘80s, and so one of the things that she always talks about is at her school, they never told her about college. She didn’t think that was an option. She just thought when she graduated, she had to get a job, and that was it. But I know that there are more options out there. So that’s inspiring.”**

**-Young person, age 15 to 17, Washington, D.C.**

## **Black Children Are More Optimistic About Current Landscape**

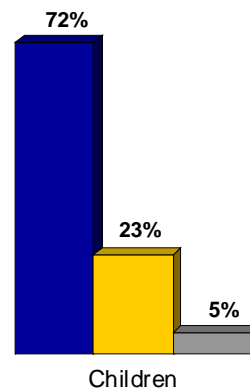
*How are things going in the country these days for Black children?*

■ Very good times    ■ Okay times  
■ Tough times    ■ Really bad times



*Is it easier or harder to be a Black child today, compared with how things were for parents’ generation?*

■ Easier today    ■ Harder today  
■ About the same, depends, not sure



It is important to note that while Black young people generally are more optimistic than Black adults, young people from lower-income households are more pessimistic than those from middle- and upper-income households. They are more likely than their higher-income counterparts to feel it is tougher growing up today than when their parents’ generation was growing up and they are less likely to view these times as good times with many opportunities for Black young people.

However, when Black leaders and adults reflect on the past 15 to 20 years, there is little sense that things have changed much at all for Black children growing up in America.

**“I would say overall that our children are not significantly better off today than they were 20 years ago or even 30 years ago. I think the challenges are still there that were facing them then.”**

**-Black leader**

Two-thirds of Black adults see improvements for just a minority of Black children. This belief spans the Black population regardless of age, education level, income, and region of the country in which one lives, with majorities of Black adults holding this view. Overwhelmingly, Black adults, caregivers, and leaders believe conditions have stayed about the same or worsened, not



gotten better, for both middle- and low-income Black children, and in fact many see poor and disenfranchised children falling further and further behind.

**“Well, in some ways, definitely for those who are poor, it’s gotten worse. But overall, I would say it’s [worse] for the person whose children don’t have support. And that goes across all socioeconomic levels, because you can be upper-middle class and still not have the support that you need. And so I think that there’s really an important piece around the value system that really needs to be revisited, in terms of how we make education or make careers important for those who we’re trying to shape and bring up behind us.”**

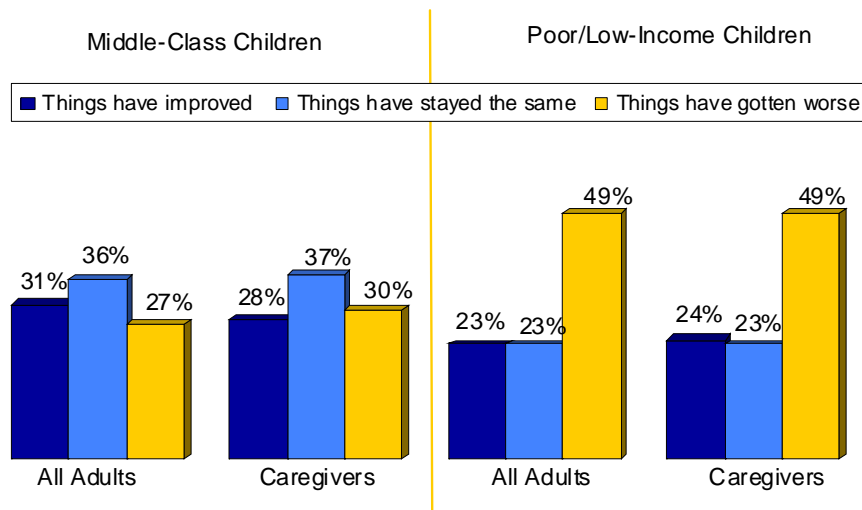
**-Middle-income caregiver, Washington, D.C.**

**“Where there are communities of opportunity, kids have done fairly well, but with the economy in the state that it’s in, but even before that, that group of kids who should have moved in what I call the three generation to four generational movement from the lower-, upper-lower income groups to the middle-income group, too many of them didn’t move, in part because of the schools, in part because the communities didn’t support them and the families couldn’t support their development, and so they’re stuck.”**

**-Black leader**

## Adults And Caregivers See Little Progress

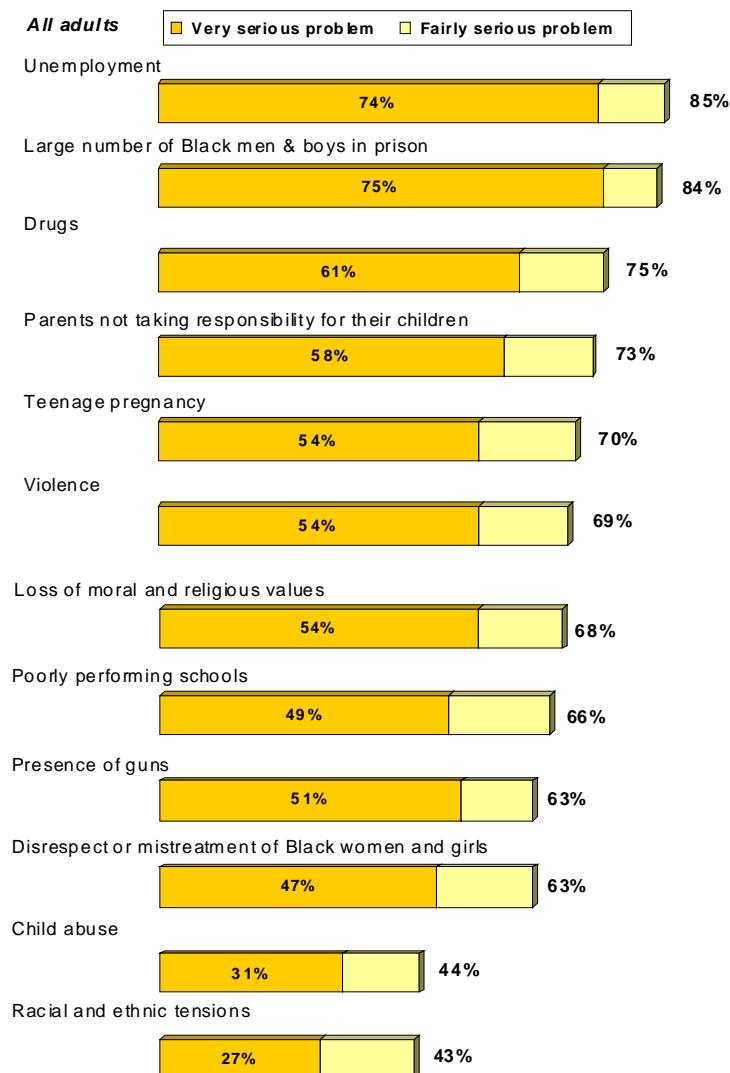
*Compared to 15 years ago, what is the situation for Black children from middle-class and poor and low-income backgrounds?*



## Issues And Challenges Black Communities Face

Many of the same issues and challenges that were identified as serious problems more than a decade and a half ago—violence, drugs, failing schools, negative media influences, parents and communities falling down on the job, teen pregnancy, and a loss of moral values—continue to plague Black communities and make life an uphill struggle for many Black children. Several additional problems that are macro in nature emerge from this research as very serious challenges affecting Black communities and children. Some are structural problems, such as economic isolation and an unfair criminal justice system. Others are more community-based in nature, such as fractured Black communities and families and a splintering larger Black community that no longer is united by common goals or a common purpose.

### Problems Facing Black Communities Today



## **Economic Isolation And Unemployment**

One of the most significant changes since 1994 is the degree to which economic isolation and unemployment are recognized as extremely serious problems that are having a devastating, long-term effect on Black families and communities throughout the country. Three in four (74%) Black adults identify unemployment as a very serious problem today, compared with 57% in 1994. Black caregivers are all too familiar with the new set of challenges that prolonged economic hardship has created for Black families. It is harder to keep families intact, keep young people on track, and everyone in the family working together toward common goals when the opportunities for a job, a better future, and success simply are not there.

**“I think the connection has to be made between what’s going on with our children and what’s going on with their parents. The truth of the matter is, even if that mother, that single mother, is doing her best to provide for her children, she still faces the reality that she might not have a job at a living wage.”**

**-Black leader**

Parents and grandparents worry that too many children grow up in homes that lack positive adult role models who get up and go to work every day. They see first hand the impact that this has on young people in their communities.

## **An Unfair Criminal Justice System And Other Racial Injustices**

Another area that the research reveals is perceived to be a very serious problem within our larger society that has a profound effect on Black communities and children is the unequal treatment of Black Americans within our criminal justice system. Whether referring to racial profiling by law enforcement, unfair sentencing guidelines for crack versus powder cocaine, or the prison industrial complex that disproportionately incarcerates Black Americans, this fact of life spans urban, small town, and rural communities, as well as the socioeconomic spectrum within Black America.

Among many Black leaders, adults, caregivers, and their children, there is a very well-articulated critique of the different and much more severe treatment that young Blacks receive in the criminal justice system compared with their White counterparts.

**“A lot of Black people have a sense that there are two different systems of justice, one for Blacks and one for Whites, and this has existed since the time of slavery, and we still are dealing with that.”**

**- Black leader**

Adults and caregivers are more likely to believe that the police and the criminal justice system are doing more to hurt Black youth in America than to help them and a majority of Black young people (55%) feel that the police care just some or very little about Black youth. Both Black adults and children have a very clear sense that the rules of the game are different for young Blacks; that in essence, Black youth, especially boys and young men, are not allowed to make mistakes, and if they do the consequences are harsh and often life-altering.

**“And that’s what happens with our kids, overcharged in the system. You know, they don’t get treated as adolescents who can make mistakes—charged as a felon when it could be a misdemeanor.”**

**-Black leader**

**“They have criminalized adolescence.”**

**-Black leader**

Three in four adults (75%) and caregivers (76%) characterize the large number of Black boys and men who are incarcerated as a very serious problem and half (48%) of the children surveyed say that ending up in prison is a very serious problem for the Black young people they know.

**“And one boy came up behind, and he was minding his business and talking and hollering out to somebody to tell him where he was going. So the police grabbed him by his arm and threw him against the car. And he said, don't you see me talking to this man? You are interrupting us while we were talking. And he said, yes, sir. So the police let him go and said if you do it again, I'm going to take you to jail.”**

**-Young person, age 11 to 14, Memphis, TN**

Large majorities of adults and caregivers believe that half or more of all Black children in America will experience the following events before reaching adulthood:

- Racial profiling by law enforcement
- Getting in trouble with the law
- Serving time in jail or prison
- Being denied important opportunities because of their race

Three in five of the young people surveyed say that racial profiling is a very (38%) or fairly (23%) serious problem for the Black young people they know.

## **Violence And Drugs**

Violence and issues related to it—drugs, addiction, guns, and gangs to name a few—continue to be issues of grave concern for Black children and adults alike. Seven in 10 children believe that violence is the number-one (23%) or a very important problem (46%) facing Black young people today.

Two-thirds of caregivers worry a great deal (45%) or quite a bit (20%) about their child or children they know being victimized and a large majority believe that many Black children will be victimized before reaching adulthood.

**“I asked a 17-year-old the question you asked me: What do you see in 10 years? How do you [see your life] in 10 or 15 years? And the bottom line was he said I don’t think I’m going to be living after four years. Now that blew me away, because I knew the young man was serious.”**

**-Low-income caregiver, Washington, D.C.**

This belief is not unique to Black adults who live in disenfranchised communities, rather it spans the Black population, with large majorities of every subgroup of the population holding this discouraging outlook for the future of Black children.

**Adults Who Think Half Or Less Than Half Of Black Children Will Reach Adulthood *Without* Being The Victim Of Violence**

	<u>%</u>
All adults	74
Caregivers	74
Men: age 18 to 49	73
Men: age 50 and older	72
Women: age 18 to 49	77
Women: age 50 and older	69
Large city	75
Medium city or suburb	72
Small town or rural	75
High school degree or less	73
Some college	70
College degree	76
Income: less than \$20k	76
Income: \$20k to \$50k	78
Income: more than \$50k	74
Northeast	71
South	73
Midwest	77
West	75

Fueling these concerns is the reality that for too many Black young children, there are too few safe harbors from these ills that plague their neighborhoods, schools, and for some, their homes. Children and adults alike identify neighborhood violence, drug-related violence, gun violence, and violence in schools as areas of significant concern. When a young girl in Memphis was asked to name one thing that if changed would help her to achieve her goals for the future, she replied:

**“To help me live through this dangerous world today so I can [grow up] to be a marine biologist.”**

**- Young person, age 11 to 14, Memphis, TN**

Three in five adults (61%) and caregivers (62%) and more than half (53%) of Black young people identify drugs as a very serious problem in their communities. Half of adults (51%) and caregivers (51%) and slightly less than half (46%) of the young people surveyed live in communities where guns are a very serious problem.

**“Drugs go with violence. Okay? Violence goes with drugs. And drugs are a multi-trillion-dollar business.”**

**-Low-income caregiver, Washington, D.C.**

The reality is that for many Black children there simply are not safe places to hang out and spend time. More than three in five Black young people characterize the following as very or fairly serious problems:

- Neighborhood violence, including drug-related violence
- Living in a dangerous neighborhood
- Violence in schools
- Not having safe and clean places to play and hangout

A majority (55%) of Black girls surveyed say that dating violence is a very or fairly serious problem.

Too many Black children have been forced to become experts in the art of navigating the dangerous neighborhoods in which they live. During a focus group, a young boy calmly described the responsibility he has to protect his sisters when they are out and about in their neighborhood:

**“Even when I’m walking with my sisters, even my older sister, you know, I tell her to walk on the inside of me because you never know. You never know what can happen at any moment. I just always try and be attentive to, you know, my surroundings, who’s walking behind me, who’s walking in front of me, you know, just being attentive to everything that’s around you.”**

**-Young person, age 15 to 17, Washington, D.C.**

### **The Negative Influence Of The Media And Hip Hop Culture**

The media in general and rap and hip hop music and culture more specifically are nearly universally seen as powerful negative influences that glamorize and therefore perpetuate many of the ills that afflict Black communities, including violence, drugs, and the objectification and denigration of young girls and women.

**“I think more than any other generation, young people are exposed to recreational violence, that is television, movies, video games, etc. The constant exposure to that kind of violence, I think, it diminishes the value that’s placed on life and sanctions violence and taking lives.”**

**-Black leader**

Two-thirds of caregivers (66%) believe rap and hip hop music and culture is doing more to hurt Black youth in America compared with just 8% who say it is doing more to help them.

**“I mean, something as simple as the movies that come on TV, the messages that they hear in just simple TV. ... There are messages that our children are exposed to that we weren’t necessarily exposed to that are going to impact not only their decisions but their moral aptitude and their moral intelligence.”**

**-Middle-income caregiver, Washington, D.C.**

In the focus groups, participants discussed how hip hop culture travels across communities and socioeconomic lines, luring young people to the streets.

Many express fear that even “good kids who have been raised in good homes” can be tempted by the trappings and find themselves in trouble.

**“And now a number of the middle-income kids are getting caught in what I call a vital but non-mainstream community and also a drug culture, and too many of them are getting caught and trapped. ... They associate with kids who are bright and able, but outside the mainstream. And they become a part of it, because those are exciting kids. And so these kids are very vulnerable, because strong personalities can pull them in and what appears to be quick money can also pull them in.”**

**-Black leader**

Yet despite all these negative influences, 70% of Black young people feel that it is pretty easy to stay on the right path and not get involved with things that are dangerous or wrong.

### **Failing Schools**

Attitudes about our schools and the job they are doing educating Black children is an area where Black leaders, parents, and caregivers have somewhat divergent views. Parents and caregivers have very low expectations for the schools. The prevailing view among them is that half or fewer of all Black children will get the kind of education they need and most expect that half or more will dropout before getting a degree. Half of caregivers (52%) say that poorly performing schools are a very serious problem in their community.

**“I look at the kids as far as the education system. They’re cutting the budget, there’s so many cuts, and so I don’t know where it’s going to lead. [Are they] going to be able to get an education or get a job or be able to take care of themselves when they need to? I don’t know. I don’t know. I got so many concerns. I don’t know....”**

**-Low-income caregiver, Washington, D.C.**

Yet even with this critical assessment, caregivers still are significantly more likely to feel that the education system is doing more to help Black children than to hurt them. Parents and caregivers overwhelmingly believe that the most important thing that must happen to improve the schools and student achievement is to increase parental involvement.

Black leaders are much more critical of the schools. In fact, failing schools that do not provide Black students with the tools they need to succeed is one of the main areas of criticism and concern among them.



**"In certain school districts in Mississippi, the education curriculum has only advanced within the last three years, and children have missed out on so much in between the changes in curriculum. They're not able to compete. So as a result of that, African-American children have become frustrated, began to fail, and later become dropouts. And so our curriculums don't measure up to the demands of today, whether [the children] are poor or less poor or more poor than they were 15 years ago."**

**-Black leader**

Black young people have a range of attitudes when it comes to their schools. While young people point to problems within their schools, including violence and teachers who do not care or keep students engaged, in every focus group, a special teacher or coach was highlighted as a role model who has played an important part in helping a young boy or girl succeed.

### **Fractured Black Communities And Families**

Communities and families are viewed as central to many of the challenges confronting Black communities today and their ability to combat them.

**"Volunteers, little leagues, Boy Scout troops, you know, churches that were providing activities that really brought in a lot of kids from the neighborhood and connected people up and down the class and educational ladder. A lot that was the result of segregation, but there was some social capital there that we've, I think, lost, and I don't think we've quite figured out how to regain it."**

**-Black leader**

The need for parents—both mothers and fathers—to be more involved and engaged in their children's lives is seen as paramount to improving conditions for Black children and young people. In fact, 58% of adults believe that parents not taking responsibility for their children is a very serious problem in their community.

The prevailing view among Black adults and caregivers is that half or fewer of all Black children actually have a strong family support system as they grow up or will grow up to feel confident in their ability to succeed.

**"I think with my upbringing and the sense of the family we had, we had such a connection to family, and, I mean, that motivated us, that pushed us [to do] the best that we could. Whatever we did, we had the backing of the family. Now it seems a lot of the kids don't have that. There's a disconnect."**

**-Low-income caregiver, Washington, D.C.**

The research reveals that the absence of Black fathers is an area of especially serious concern for Black Americans. Leaders, adults, and caregivers alike acknowledge the detrimental impact that the absence of fathers has on both the economic and social well-being of the children these fathers leave behind.



**"I think we can't skip the fact that we need fathers in the house too, because we can raise our son to teach him to be everything, but we cannot teach them to be men."**

**-Low-income caregiver, Washington, D.C.**

**"Seventy-two percent of African-American children are born out of wedlock. The vast majority of that 72% end up living with mom and grandmom. And what we have found in the work that we're doing particularly with single mothers who are raising African-American males, while mom might have the best intentions, she is so overwhelmed trying to teach this boy or raise this boy to become an educated, responsible African-American man that the deck is stacked against him."**

**-Black leader**

They express grave concern about the long-term impact of multiple generations of children growing up without fathers and other positive Black male role models.

**"Just by virtue of not having a sober, responsible, spiritually-guided father in the life of a child sets up a whole number of different scenarios, whether it's high likelihood that they will end up in the juvenile justice system, or a high likelihood that they will not develop the kind of health and coping strategies to grow up in neighborhoods that are absolute war zones."**

**-Black leader**

A movement away from traditional moral and religious values within Black communities is viewed as an issue that is having a harmful effect on Black children and young people. A majority of adults (54%) and caregivers (56%) identify the loss of moral and religious values as a very serious problem within their communities.

**"Ten years ago kids in poverty were better off in a way than the kids today who are at the same level of poverty. Ten years ago, there was more community support. They focused more as a community, and there were certain standards that the community didn't tolerate, and those communities were just as poor resource-wise as many of our communities today, but the communities of today are more tolerant of deviant behavior, and that affects the children."**

**-Black leader**

**"I see a whole generation that's growing up, that don't have a good sense of right and wrong, don't know the difference between good and bad, and so I think that we need to figure out a way to bring some of these programs that's been talked about to scale, but also to reach many of these people who are not being touched by the moral institutions that exist in our communities."**

**-Black leader**

A perceived consequence of this weakening moral compass in many Black communities and young people's lives is teen pregnancy. A majority of adults (54%) and caregivers (53%) characterize teen pregnancy as a very serious

problem in their communities. In fact, most adults and caregivers expect that half or more of Black boys and girls in America will become parents before reaching adulthood.

**“One of the big pieces in the Black community is around parenting skills and children having children. And I speak because I [know]. I had my first child at 17, but I had a parent, a structure, a mother who really taught me to be a mom. In fact, then I taught my daughter to be a mom, and she’s in the skill-building process too, so parenting is a big thing.”**

**-Low-income caregiver, Washington, D.C.**

In the focus groups, young people commented on the prevalence of young girls in their communities having babies and the negative consequences associated with it.

**“In my school, a baby is like an accessory these days.”**

**-Young person, age 15 to 17, Memphis, TN**

**“Teens having kids. . . and then the fathers can’t even support their child. The mother will do what they can do, but it’s hard for them to go to school while they’ve got a child.”**

**-Young person, age 10 to 14, Washington, D.C.**

## **The Splintering Black Community**

There is broad recognition among Black leaders as well as parents and caregivers that a unified “Black community” no longer exists in America and the lack thereof is a fundamental obstacle to improving the conditions in Black communities and the opportunities of Black children and young people growing up today. In the focus groups both leaders, parents, and caregivers reflect back on a time when Black Americans were united behind a common struggle.

**“When my mother and them was growing up, people helped one another. [We] don’t do that anymore.”**

**-Memphis caregiver**

They speak about a time, not so long ago, when Black Americans worked together in their communities, across class lines for a common purpose—to protect and improve conditions for all Black Americans. They regret that this sense of common purpose no longer exists. There is a clear perception that poor, Black Americans have been left behind, not just by White Americans, but also by Black Americans who have achieved upward mobility in recent decades.

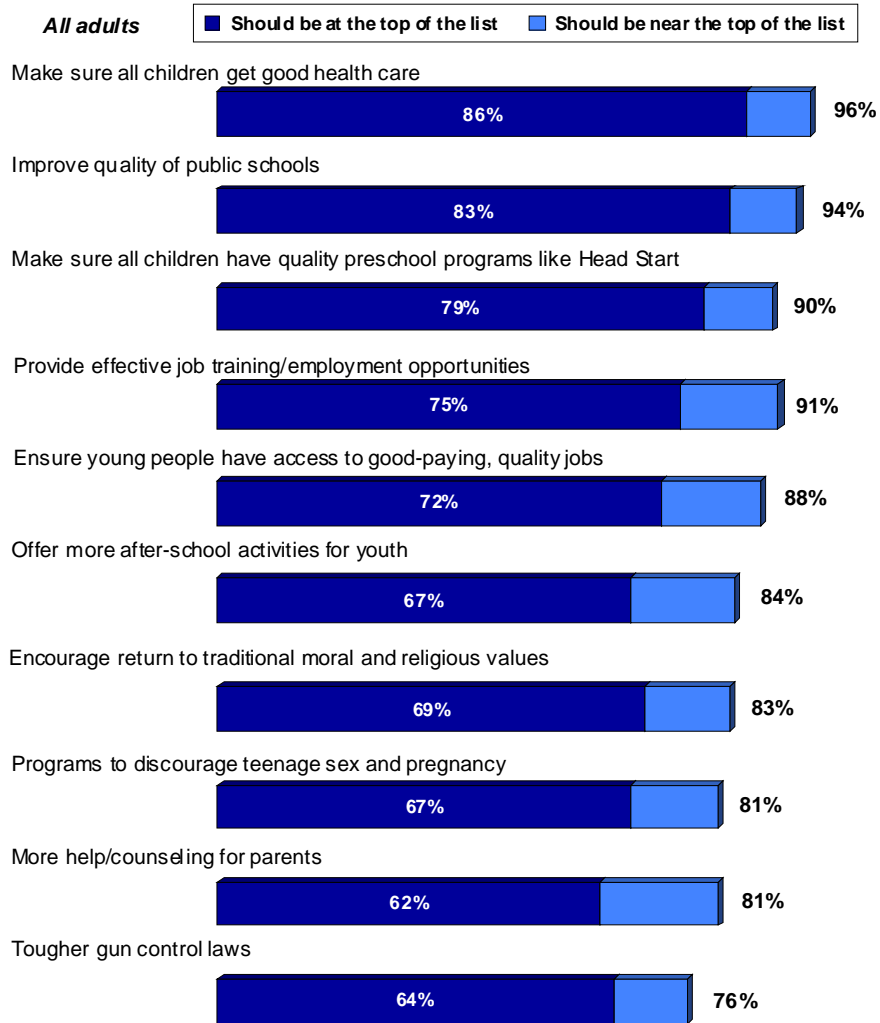
**“It’s very sad to see that we’re not as unified as a group of people, sort of a culture, as we once were. Diversity has taken on an ugly form right within our own group, and it is sad, because we have so much more to [accomplish] than we’re willing to acknowledge for whatever reason. You know, we’re separatists. We want to be in our group with our people. We don’t want to do that mixing and mingling anymore, and it’s really to our detriment as a whole.”**

**-Middle-income caregiver, Washington, D.C.**

## Strategies To Make Things Better

When survey respondents were asked to react to 10 different strategies to improve conditions for Black children, overwhelming majorities indicate that each one of the 10 strategies is important enough to be placed at or near the top of the list of priorities that must be pursued to improve conditions for Black children in America. Whether it is access to health care, improving the public schools and access to preschool programs, providing job training and access to good paying jobs, or several other strategies, more than four in five adults put each at or near the top of the priority list.

### Much Work To Do To Make Things Better



The bottom line is that while broad solutions are easy to articulate—improve the schools, bring more jobs to inner cities, teach young people to respect their elders, each other, their communities, and themselves—identifying the concrete steps necessary to accomplish these goals is extremely difficult.

When reflecting on the many problems and challenges facing Black communities, parents and caregivers tend to be much more inward looking than Black leaders and focus on problems within their communities, their families, and for some, even within themselves, that they feel they must address. Many express a strong belief that Black communities have fallen asleep at the wheel and need to do a better job of taking care of their own. While racism and discrimination persist, the criminal justice system is unfair, and the schools certainly could be doing a better job, most believe that one of the most critical elements to improving things in *their* communities and giving *their* children a better shot at success is adults stepping up and setting higher standards and boundaries for what is and is not acceptable in their families and communities.

**“The community will have to be community again. We’re going to have to begin to know our neighbors again and care about their well-being just as much as we care about our own, and see them as an extension of ourselves, and know your neighbor’s name, and know what your neighbor’s children are doing because they’re with your child.”**

**-Middle-income caregiver, Washington, D.C.**

They believe that an absolutely necessary first step in the long path to improving conditions for Black youth is for Black adults to serve as better role models for the young people they encounter in their day-to-day lives.

For many, improving conditions for Black children starts at home.

**“I think that everything starts at home, and if the fabric and foundation at home is not proper, it’s impossible for the tapestry to develop. I always think about the old African proverb, it’s easier to build a child than to repair an adult.”**

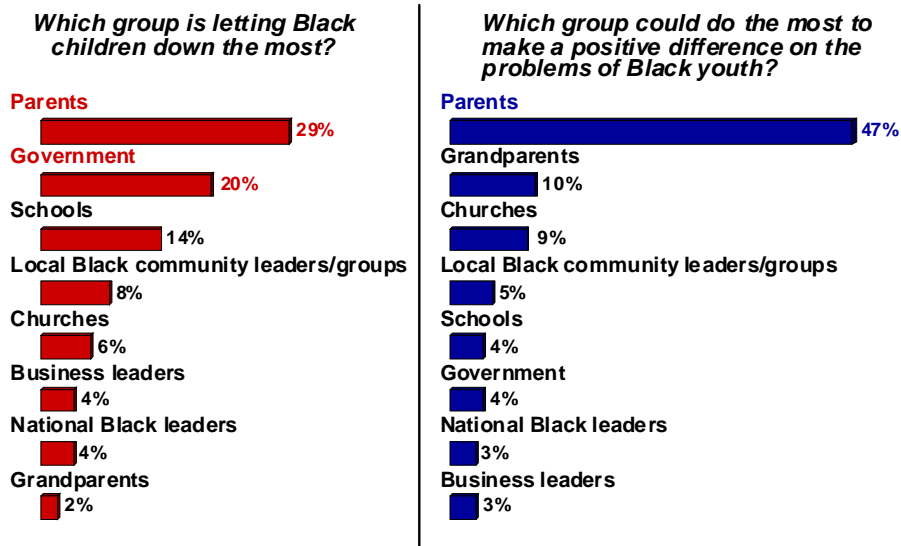
**-Low-income caregiver, Washington, D.C.**

**“I think the challenge is to find a way to support the Black family that includes what might be considered by some a conservative view but a view for the rethinking of what it means to support Black marriage. How do we get young people to see models of same-sex and opposite-sex role models as children? How do they learn how to be a loving father, a loving mother, etc., unless they see those in their own house? ... This is, to me, the number-one issue. There’s no reason to talk about what we’re going to do with our kids if we don’t find a way to support the network or the real institution, which is a Black family.”**

**-Black leader**

Parents are viewed as the group who are letting Black children down the most *and* as the group who could really do the most to make a positive difference in Black children’s lives. While national Black leaders are viewed as important, it is parents, grandparents, and people and organizations at the local level, such as churches and community groups that are viewed as the most important agents of change. The key is having a positive, involved, instructive adult in every child’s life.

## Improving Conditions For Black Children Starts At Home



When asked what the most important thing is that a parent or another adult can do to make a positive difference in a young persons life, the answers are similar, whether coming from children, their parents, caregivers, or adults in general: talk to them and be involved in their lives, listen to them, support and encourage them, teach them right from wrong, and be a good role model.

*“Yeah, I mean, we can sit back and build more recreation centers, we can help make the schools better, but if at your house, at that level, if you’re not getting reached, then we’re not going to change anything. So I guess if I had all the power in the world, I would change the way that kids [are being] raised.”*

*- Young person, age 15 to 17, Washington, D.C.*

Leaders also are very aware of the need for Black communities to step up and do more, but they tend to view these solutions on a parallel track with much needed structural changes, such as school reforms, economic development and job creation, and the need to completely reform our nation’s approach to criminal justice.

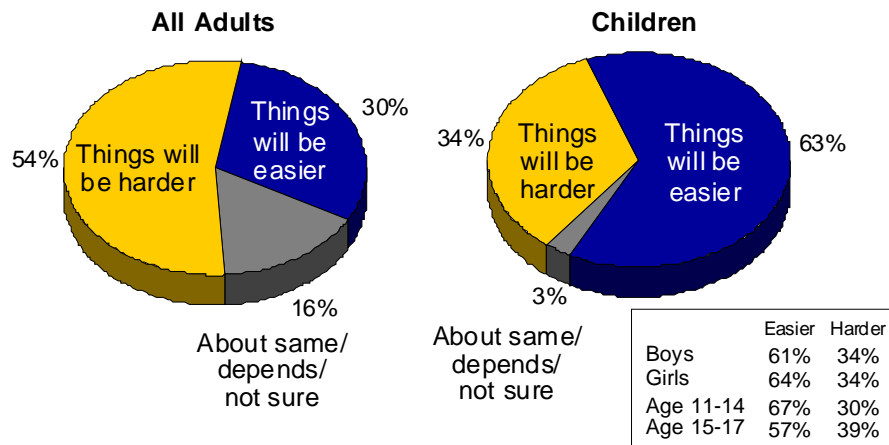
## The Outlook For The Future: Guarded Optimism

Leaders and caregivers express similar views in terms of their outlook for the future for Black youth. Nearly all are struck by the significance of the challenges that lie ahead. Few adults express overt pessimism. Among adults and caregivers, 63% say they feel optimistic when thinking about Black children growing up today, compared with just one in five (19%) who feels pessimistic. Black young people also tend to be more positive than negative, with just over half (53%) saying their Black peers are positive and optimistic compared with 35% who say their Black peers are more negative and pessimistic about the future.

Youthful optimism shows when adults and young people are asked to think 15 to 20 years into the future. Black young people are significantly more likely to think that their lives as adults will be easier than those of adults today, with 63% thinking that things will be easier compared with just 34% who think that things will be harder. This optimistic view is held among both boys and girls and older and younger Black children. In contrast, Black adults are much more likely to think things will be more difficult for young people when they reach adulthood, with a majority (54%) thinking things will be harder and just 30% thinking things will be easier compared with the lives of adults today.

### Expectations For Young People's Future As Adults

*Thinking 15 to 20 years ahead, when today's Black youth/when you are adults, do you think things will be easier or harder than for Black adults today?*



Black caregivers and children's hopes and dreams for the future are very much in line, with a good education being the most frequently cited top-of-mind aspiration for the future by both groups. They also hope for success professionally. In the focus groups, many children spoke about their professional aspirations, which ranged from doctors and veterinarians to lawyers, restaurateurs, professional athletes, and becoming the president of the United States.

**"I want to have a nice job, just a nice-paying job, live in a nice house in a nice community, with a child and a husband."**

**-Young person, age 15 to 17, Washington, D.C.**

Many parents and caregivers talk about simply wanting their children to make it to adulthood—to grow up safe and to avoid getting involved with others who are bad influences and avoid making bad choices, such as involvement in crime, drugs, and gangs.

The prevailing sentiment among adults, caregivers, and leaders is that Black Americans have no choice but to be hopeful for the future. But many admit they are unsure whether progress will be made and things will actually be better two decades into the future.

**"Our voice, I think, is not as loud as it used to be when we had concerns, social concerns or any other concerns, as a community. I think our voice is softer. And so it might not be getting heard, and change might not be coming."**

**-Middle-income caregiver, Washington, D.C.**

**"There is every reason for the poorest of the poor Black folk who are so isolated to be pessimistic because I don't see this being important on the national agenda, and we've been dealing with these issues for generations. And for some folks this is a spiral downhill. But I choose to be optimistic. I think hope is a choice, and we've got to keep working on these issues. I'm not going to say in a rosy way that I can see the path to light at the end of the tunnel right now. I don't see it, but we got to keep slugging away."**

**-Black leader**

Several Black leaders articulate a very serious concern that perhaps the moment has passed, and that the opportunity to truly address these many daunting challenges in a way that will improve the lives of Black Americans and the future life chances of Black children has passed us by. They are skeptical about whether it is possible to shore up the political will necessary among Black Americans and Black political leaders and they question whether the nation as a whole is willing to address these challenges in racial terms.

**"I'm not sure it shouldn't be characterized as hopeless in this sense. There's no doubt our children can, could have, should have, will be able to be successful if the proper systems are in place to do it. We've known that for centuries. There's nothing new about that. We know how to be successful. The problem is, I don't know of any political will or focus that will allow it to happen. In that context, it is hopeless, because without that, it cannot happen."**

**-Black leader**

**"We're talking about Black agendas here. I think we have to figure out how in the context of politics, if you will, we find a way to get our agenda as a part of the broader [national] agenda and why that's important to the bigger picture, because alone, I don't think we stand a chance. As a part of something, I think we do stand a chance, but we have to understand that."**

**-Black leader**



## **Doing Right By Our Children: Getting From Here To Where We Need To Be**

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In many respects, it is staggering how little has improved in the perceptions and real-life experiences of Black Americans and particularly Black children in the past decade and a half. Continued structural racial inequities in many of our institutions and social systems, the long-term economic decline that has disproportionately affected Black Americans, the breaking apart of a unified national Black community, and the deterioration of a coordinated Black movement have exacerbated many of the problems that a decade and a half ago were already ravaging Black communities throughout the country and creating tremendous obstacles to the future well-being and success of Black children.

The voices of Black Americans reflected in this research are a call to action that cannot be ignored. There is simply too much at risk.

**“We need to demonstrate the richness of our youth, and we need to do that through children and convince people that we are worth saving, convince ourselves and convince others that we are worth saving, because there’s this sense that we are not worth saving, and I think we suffer from that.”**

**-Black leader**

A combination of internal healing within Black communities and the building up of political will is needed if, 16 years from today, we are to live in a country where all Black children grow up in safe communities free of drugs and violence and have the opportunity to pursue their dreams and achieve their potential.

Structural and institutional changes within our society are needed, including serious commitments to:

- Improving public schools so they are safe places that provide quality education that prepare our children for the future.
- Training beyond high school to provide usable skills that prepare young people for success in the workforce.
- Reinvesting in our communities, including economic development and job creation in Black communities that have been devastated by the economic decline that has been underway for several decades.
- A complete retooling of our criminal justice system.

We must commit to working together, across class lines to heal and repair our communities and our families that live and raise children in them. We need to:

- Restore a sense of community, unity, and common purpose within our communities.
- Address the negative impact of multiple generations of economic and social isolation for many Black communities.



- Begin to heal Black families by modeling and encouraging healthy relationships and good parenting and instilling in young men the important role they play within their communities and families, and their children's lives.

Essential to making progress on these challenges is the emergence of a new coordinated Black movement that promotes justice for *all* Black Americans in working toward these ends. As one Black leader put it, we essentially need a Marshall Plan for America's cities and the Black communities and families that have been left behind.

The work of the many different organizations, groups, and individuals that are dedicated to making the world a better, safer place for Black children must be truly integrated. Black leaders, academics, and activists must be better connected to the thousands of hardworking people who work in schools, churches, and community-based programs. And just as important, Black Americans of all classes, and others who are committed to equality and social justice must be mobilized to become a part of the movement.

It will take this kind of committed and coordinated effort to make the world a better, safer place for Black children and all children to grow up. It will not be easy by any measure, but it is achievable with a caring, organized and vocal adult community.

**"I'm still hopeful ... because every day in my work, we're building political capacity. We're building organizing capacity. We're saying to folks, start to own your own narrative and understand how you, at the very grassroots level, can transform Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama, this nation. And so because I believe, and I've seen the transformation at that grassroots level, I'm very hopeful that the change will come from the people. And so I'm very, very hopeful."**

**-Black leader**