



# Fact Sheet

## Dispelling the Myth: Black Couples Are Not Interested in Marriage

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There are many misconceptions about the success of black marriages. These myths have created several barriers in providing safety-net services to black couples. More than ever, it is time to dispel these myths. The aim of this fact sheet is to highlight the reality of seven common myths about black marriage. The aims of this fact sheet are twofold: (1) to provide accurate information concerning demographic trends in black relationships among low-income persons, and (2) to share strategies social service workers may use to encourage their clients to participate in marriage and relationship enrichment programs.

### Proportion of Black Clients Accessing Select Social Services

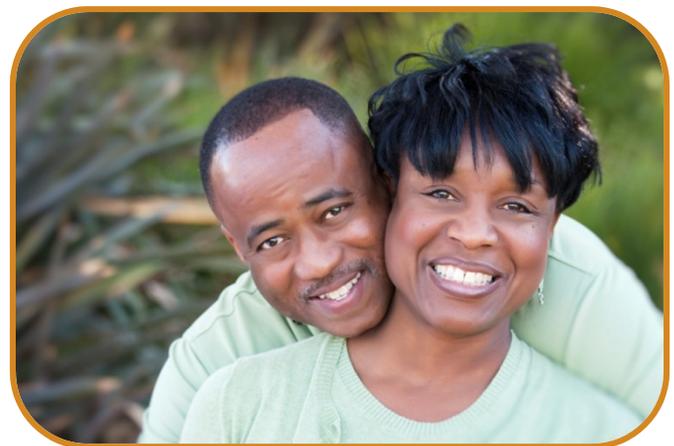
Black clients are disproportionately represented in caseloads across social service agencies. Though blacks were only 14% of the United States population in 2010, they constituted nearly 20% or more of clients being helped by social services.<sup>1</sup>

- For Head Start programs, 30% of children served were black.<sup>2</sup>
- Black children were 21.9% of child welfare and neglect cases.<sup>3</sup>
- Black clients were 33.3% of active Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) cases.<sup>4</sup>
- In nutrition programs, 19.5% of Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) program recipients<sup>5</sup> and 22% of Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) clients were black.<sup>6</sup>

## Straight Talk on Demographic Trends in Black Marriage in Low-income Populations

### Myth 1: Marriage is for white people.

**Reality:** Even in the context of economic disadvantage, nearly one-fifth of low-income black couples are married.<sup>7</sup> These marriages are commonly overlooked in social service circles and infrequently represented in media. Economic stress discourages marriage by destabilizing unions and increasing adversity.<sup>8</sup> Unfortunately, economic inequalities among blacks persist, thereby challenging the probability of marriage formation and maintenance. For example, black citizens suffered the greatest economic losses during the recession when compared to other Americans.<sup>9</sup> Blacks have not yet rebounded economically. In May 2012, the black unemployment rate was still nearly double the rate for whites (13.6 vs. 7.4).<sup>10</sup>



### **Myth 2: Black women do not marry and do not desire to marry.**

**Reality:** Marriage still holds considerable symbolic significance among black adults and in low-income communities.<sup>11,12</sup> Many still desire to marry at the right time. The American Community Surveys (ACS) of 2000-2009 reported 57% of black women have been married.<sup>13</sup> As Banks notes, “If marriage is less a necessity and more...a luxury, then it takes money. It is something that people do after they’ve established a measure of stability and reached other milestones. A job, a house, a car—these all typically come before marriage now.”<sup>14</sup>

### **Myth 3: Black men marry women of other races.**

**Reality:** Though interracial marriage has increased for all Americans, black men and women still marry each other most often. Less than 10% of black men and 5% of black women were married to a spouse of another race in 2010. Black men, however, do marry spouses of another race at more than twice the rate of black women.<sup>15</sup>

### **Myth 4: Black men do not earn as much as black women.**

**Reality:** In recent years, black women have outpaced black men relative to educational achievement and occupational security.<sup>16</sup> Yet, income is still a more accurate indicator on the issue because a wage gap continues to exist in the black community. Black women only made 89 cents for every dollar black men earned in 2010.<sup>17,18</sup>

### **Myth 5: Black family formation has not been affected by structural conditions.**

**Reality:** Structural inequalities have challenged a black man’s ability to be a stable provider and reduced the probability of marriage.<sup>19,20,21</sup> For

instance, one-third of black men between the ages of 20 and 29 are in prison.<sup>22</sup> The disproportionate incarceration rates among blacks have been closely linked with non-marriage, even more so than the sex ratio.<sup>23</sup> The imbalanced sex ratio in the black community, however, remains a concern. There are 91 black males per 100 black females.<sup>24,25</sup> In communities where females outnumber males, the prospect of marriage for females is poorer.<sup>26</sup> When black men and women do partner, relational challenges attributable to gender role confusion and ineffective communication have been observed. Scarred relations between black men and women can be traced to slavery conditions and contemporary experiences with racism and discrimination.<sup>27,28,29</sup>

### **Myth 6: A single parent can raise a child as well as a married couple.**

**Reality:** Few would argue with the adage that, “two are better than one.” One adult can care for offspring. But two adults, who are partnered in a long-term, healthy relationship like marriage, are better able than one adult to provide needed resources designed to enhance children’s development.<sup>30</sup> Married parents are more likely to be better educated, earn more, live in more stable housing, and have a more supportive partner than single parents. Among black children, 35% dwelled with two married parents in 2010.<sup>31</sup>

### **Myth 7: I do not need any help.**

**Reality:** Black relationships are commonly egalitarian, requiring couples to negotiate roles and expectations more than other couples. Black relationships are also more transient and challenged by chronic life stresses.<sup>32,33</sup> Proactively cultivating communication and conflict management skills and fostering relationship competence before problems arise is cost-effective, prudent, and sensible for promoting long-term relationship well-being. Low-income blacks are receptive to culturally-

sensitive relationship enrichment programs. Improvements in problem-solving more effectively were documented among a sample of black couples from low-income backgrounds in the Building Strong Families program.<sup>34,35</sup>

## **Strategies for Encouraging Healthy Relationship Development and Marriage**

### **1. Challenge your own assumptions about marriages and relationships among low-income blacks.**

Discuss your observations of client experiences, and perhaps your own personal marriage and relationship experiences, with your colleagues. These experiences shape your assumptions and may influence the ways in which you serve your clients. Share positive experiences and develop strategies for overcoming difficult encounters.

### **2. Discuss the 7 myths presented in this fact sheet with your clients.**

Dialogue with your clients about their goals. Focus on understanding the client's life history and how they make meaning of their life experiences (childhood through adulthood). Discuss positive and negative defining moments in their relationship histories. Develop a long-term plan for strengthening clients in the area of relationships and marriage.

### **3. Link your clients with marriage and relationship enrichment programs, relationship-focused community partners, or other needed professional services.**

Connecting clients to others in this manner reflects the spirit of social service work: enhancing quality of life by empowering individuals, encouraging positive pathways of

development, and focusing on the prevention and remediation of problems.

### **4. Contact the training and technical assistance team at the National Resource Center for Healthy Marriage and Families for additional resources.**

Strong families are the foundation of a strong society. One way to encourage marriage – for all populations not just blacks – is to continue to address structural inequalities in American society, one client at a time. Clients are most likely to consider marriage when conditions are favorable for tying the knot (e.g., opportunity to secure well-paying jobs for men and women, fewer chances of being involved in the criminal justice system, increased likelihood of dwelling in safe and stable housing). By connecting families to needed resources, social service workers increase clients' self-efficacy, a key dimension of human agency. In this respect, families are strengthened for the long-term and outcomes can be improved for future generations.

## Notes

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