SC Commission on Minority Affairs
Strategic Issues facing African Americans

Issue 1: Rebuilding Strong Families

"The African-American family is neither dead nor dying, nor vanishing. Instead, the family remains a resilient and adaptive institution reflecting the most basic values, hopes, and aspirations of the descendents of African people in America. "

--Andrew Billingsley PhD, <u>Climbing Jacob's Ladder</u>, 1992

Some scholars argue that the African American family structure is weak and characterized by poverty, dysfunction and general powerlessness. Without doubt, the adverse effects of slavery and the disregard for the family by "white slave masters" and plantation owners have had an overriding impact on the African American family including trauma, conflict, dislocation and the loss of tradition. This narrative promulgates the belief that African American families are **strong** and that their strengths contain the seeds for their survival and rejuvenation.

The family is considered the most important group that a person can belong to not only because it establishes the foundation for one's identity but also it forms the anchor for one's values. In their *Tenth Anniversary Report* (2003), USC's Institute for Families in Society notes that the family is expected to "teach mutual support practices and promote resilience in times of struggles, which help individuals become resourceful members of their own communities by sharing these capacities. In a strong and healthy society, families care for members from "the womb to the tomb" and send forth individuals who weave the fabric of sustainable communities and organizations. They farm, build, barter, teach, nurse, play, worship, explore and provide support and resources that enable families to nurture their members." In other words, families are biological, social and psychological units.

One common definition of family used in the United States, Canada and other industrialized countries is "a small group of people, related to one another by birth, adoption or marriage, sharing a household, and caring for one another." The African-American family is described as "a group of people who are biologically and spiritually bonded or connected and whose members' relations to each other and the outside world are governed by a particular set of cultural beliefs, historical experiences and behavioral practices" (Dr. Wade Nobles, Goodard, Cavil & George in *"African American Families: Issues, Insights and Directions"*).

In the African American community, "family" is broadly defined and based on relationships and functions. Relationships by formal and informal marriage (step parents, half-brothers, half-sisters, etc.) and the full range of blood kin (encompassing all cousins—without regard to degree and paternal relatives of children born outside of wedlock) are acknowledged and accepted. This African-based definition of family extends to a broad range of non-relatives or fictive kin (godparents, friends, neighbors, community parents) who provide very important emotional support and tangible

assistance to the children and their parents. In addition, the African American "family" extends beyond the people who live in the same household and includes persons who live in different households, but perform important family support functions. The "extended family" is an integral part of the African American community and reflects the African tradition and well-known proverb, "It takes a village to raise a child."

A family made up of parents and children is usually referred to as the "traditional" or "nuclear" family. Nuclear comes from the term "nucleus" meaning a central or basic part. The nuclear family generally lives in a single household, tend to be of the same race and religion and are part of a kinship web made up of close relatives and friends who give the nuclear family a sense of special closeness and provide help in time of need. According to the 2000 Census, less than 40 percent of the African-American households have both parents living with them, compared to 80.0 percent of both parents being present in the households in the 1900s.

Nicholas Puiia in his book, <u>Rules for the Traditional Family: Start Your Own Family Tradition </u>(1998) alleges that the "strength" of the family depends greatly on the "strength of the mother" who is charged with long-term planning, structuring of the family's activities, motivating family life and shaping the lives of her children. Whether this observation is valid or reliable, it emphasizes the societal pressures that are placed on the mother. Research has documented that there is a direct correlation between the education of the mother and the educational attainment of the child. Puiia also asserts that the major role of the father is to provide a shelter, a home, and a place where the family feels secure.

The majority of families in the 21st Century fall into a category called "nontraditional" families and differ from the norms and characteristics described by Puiia. Examples of nontraditional families include but are not limited to single-parent families, blended families, unmarried partners (heterosexual and homosexual), grandparents as parents, extended families, racially and culturally mixed families, and families with transracially-adopted children. Like traditional families, nontraditional families share one important quality: the family represents the "single most important influence" in their children's lives.

Early childcare providers and educators concede, "Parents are a child's first and most important teacher." Capable parents and strong families encourage learning by creating home environments that are warm and nurturing and afford ongoing opportunities for meaningful learning. Parents and family become positive influences on young children through their caring and consistent interactions, bonding with their children through many different experiences, encouraging children's exploratory learning, making provisions for their children's safety, health and security, and fostering inquiry and growth during their children's preschool years.   According to the South Carolina Kids Count 2002 data, children are 28.3 percent (1,135,778) of the total state population. Of these children, approximately 40.5 percent (460,567) are non-white children. Therefore, the importance of early childhood education cannot be over emphasized, especially in a state where family poverty continues to be highest among African Americans.

Single, female-headed households of African ancestry seemingly face insurmountable hurdles to child rearing that often include the lack of a support system, time for parenting and the economic stability/income to meet basic needs. A working female earns about a third less of the pay of her male counterpart; thus, the children of a single working mother are almost destined to deprivation and poverty. It is no coincidence that black children from single, female-headed households are at risk of truancy, school dropout, delinquency, crime, teen pregnancy, illegitimate births, and experimentation with drugs, tobacco and alcohol. Poor, deprived youngsters tend to become poor, deprived adults and the vicious cycle of poverty is perpetuated into the next generation.

Poverty also contributes to overcrowded and unsafe housing that may lack amenities such as plumbing facilities, air conditioning washing machines and freezers. The lack of privacy results in children's early exposure to overt sexual activity and sexual trauma. Rape and other sexual crimes are often associated with poverty and other socio-economically, depressed conditions. The problem of child maltreatment and abuse in the United States has reached the proportion of a National Emergency. Low-income persons are often trapped in decaying cities and dilapidated, unfit rental units or remote, rural areas. There is a significant gap between homeownership by African Americans and whites. Carl T. Rowan, noted journalist, wrote in his book, Just Between Us Blacks (1974), "Obviously, ...we lift a death sentence from a lot of black people when we lift them out of poverty."

The absence of African American men also introduces a myriad of social and economic implications that affect the well being of the family. Dr. Jacquelyne Jackson, an associate professor at Duke University Medical Center, conducted a 20-year study of black men. She concluded that the ratio of black men to black women is declining. One explanation is that black males generally die earlier than black females from heart and lung diseases, diabetes, chronic alcoholism, auto and industrial actions, homicide, suicide and drug addition. The leading cause of premature death among black men may be violence. In addition, Dr. Jackson notes that the availability of black males is further reduced by those who are in prison, those killed in war and those who marry whites.

It is commonly held belief that the great number of matriarchal families is due to the fact that most black men are unemployed, poorly educated or staying away because of welfare regulations. Dr. Jackson disputes this stereotype. She points out that there are just "not enough black men available" for the number of black females and that the black matriarchal family is a "product of necessity and reality."

Alarmed by the number of absent fathers, the Sisters of Charity Foundation of South Carolina has joined with others across the nation to instill a mindset that "Dads do make a difference in their children's lives" and have dedicated millions of dollars and resources to successfully launch a Fatherhood Engagement Initiative in South Carolina. The Sisters of Charity calls on communities to support fathers and their families as they seek ways to connect more strongly to their children. Under the Administration of SC Governor Jim Hodges, the Department of Social Services implemented a paternity acknowledgement program called "Putting First Things First" which encouraged child-bearing adults to follow four simple steps: (1) get an education; (2) get a job; (3) get married and (4) then, get pregnant.

3

According to the US Department of Health and Human Services (2002), as of September, 2001 over 556,000 children are in foster care and over 40 percent of these children are of African ancestry. Children are more likely to be removed due to neglect than abuse. This suggests that child removal and class considerations, such as poverty, poor housing, and lack of access to health care, is key to understanding why some children are removed from the home and others are not (Lewit, Terman, & Behrman, 1997).

While substance abuse is identified as a factor in many removals, race is the most consistent factor contributing to the decision to remove children and place them in foster care (Billingsley & Giovannoni, 1972; Brissett-Chapman, 1997; Chand, A. 2000; Everett, Chipungu, & Leashore, 1997). When substance abuse is an authentic factor, the time for sobriety and the availability of effective substance abuse programs is generally longer than the timeline for reunification.

Kinship care is a continuation of the African tradition of caring, supporting and providing cultural continuity for families and has manifested over generations by an enduring tradition of informal adoption of children by extended family members. It provides cultural and historical continuity for children who are unable to live with their parents. Kinship care is a viable component of family preservation, reunification and permanency for African American children. It should be noted that kinship care is not uniformly recognized by many states and efforts to legislate kinship care have resulted in challenges for child welfare practitioners. (*Kinship Care Position Paper*, NABSW, 2002)

The National Association of Black Social Workers (NABSW) adopted a policy on preserving families of African ancestry in 1972 which was expanded in 1994 *(Preserving African American Families)*. The policy statement calls for an end to "unnecessary out of home placements", the "reunification of children with parents", the "placing children of African ancestry with relatives or unrelated family members of the same race and culture for adoption", "addressing the barriers that prevent or discourage persons of African ancestry from adopting", "promoting culturally relevant agency practices" and emphasizing "transracial adoption of African American children" as a last alternative.

In his book, Climbing Jacob's Ladder: The Enduring Legacy of African-American Families (1992), Dr. Billingsley notes that there are four measures of a strong black family:
1) the ability to raise its own generation;
2) the ability to meet the basic needs of a child (food, clothing, shelter, identity, belonging, etc.);
3) the ability to meet the demands placed on it by society; and
4) the ability to mediate relations between members and the larger society.

These indicators closely parallel those functions that every healthy family, regardless of race or structure, must provide to its members as outlined by Dr. Arlene Bowers Andrews in Helping Families Survive and Thrive: Call to Action for Citizens Who Want to Help (1996):
1) Social support through stable relationships and positive connections among people who care for one another, help each other solve problems and celebrate accomplishments;

4

2) Money or secure, predictable adequate income;
3) Housing that has basic utilities of water, electricity or gas and free from physical hazards
4) Material resources including food, clothing, books and educational supplies and access to transportation
5) Care for dependent family members
6) Knowledge and skills about positive family life
7) Flexibility in out-of-home obligations, particularly work
8) Esteem, cultural identity
9) Time to be together
10) Safety and protection from harm at home and in the community
11) Freedom from alcohol and other drug dependence

Spirituality and religion are key to understanding the strengths of African American families. Not all African Americans engage in formal worship at a local church or belong to a particular denomination; however, the majority acknowledge a strong spiritual allegiance and adherence to a set of faith-based principles that influence and direct their beliefs, attitudes and behavior.

In the Millennium Edition (2000) of the Columbia Urban League publication, *The State of Black South Carolina: An Action Agenda for the Future,* Rev. Joseph A. Darby eloquently describes in his paper, "The Role of the Historically Black Church in the 21st Century," the many roles that the historically black church has played and continues to play in shaping of black family values and life. These span the early years of slavery to the present and include being "instruments of education - establishing schools across the American South, source of sustenance and hope, guardian of the faith, preserver and conveyor of the culture and heritage, the keeper and monitor of normative behavior, and the agent for economic action, social well being and positive change." Since 1988, the Columbia Urban League has published the *State of Black South Carolina*, which serves as a blueprint for identifying and addressing public policy and community issues essential for improving the state of African Americans and the overall quality of life for all South Carolinians. The Columbia Urban League, in collaboration with the USC College of Social Work, is also responsible for initiating the National Black Family Summit in 1986. The Summit is an annual conference that provides a forum for the presentation of scholarly papers and workshops on the Black Family at the local, state and national level.

The newly released 2003 report, *Facing Facts: A Study of Issues that Shape our Region*, identifies the five most pressing community issues in the Midlands in hopes of stimulating discussion/action to address them: "Building Strong Families, Individuals and Children" is listed among the top five issues. The strategies suggested in the report include (1) supporting effective parenting; (2) Increasing service coordination to address needs of citizens; (3) Enforcing safety net for children and families; and (4) Reducing family violence. It cites concerns facing the family such as underemployment, violence, low family literacy and unsafe housing - all of which are applicable to every family and clearly not limited to color. These concerns also take on new dimensions and proportions in the African American community due to the disparities of race, law enforcement and the criminal justice system and require culture sensitivities and different intervention strategies that may not be relevant to the majority community.

5

Approximately 30.0 percent of the total population of South Carolina is African American. This population significantly impacts the financial well being of the State's economy and the potential opportunities for the State to advance. Thus, failure to establish public policies that support and help build the infrastructure for strong families, inclusive of fathers, mothers, children, and other family caregivers and particularly, African American families, undermines the State's goal of economic prosperity for all South Carolinians.

Over the past four decades, American families have undergone important demographic changes. The South Carolina Commission for Minority Affairs (CMA), created in 1993 by the General Assembly, publishes a statewide statistical abstract on minority affairs and profiles several factors that impede minority economic growth and development. A few significant trends worth mentioning are as follows: (1) an overall decline in the rate of marriages and later ages at the first marriage; (2) a higher proportion of births to unmarried mothers, (3) increases in female-headed households, and (4) larger percentages of children living in poverty. Below are other statistics that shed light on the status of African American families in South Carolina:

Poverty
- South Carolina ranks 41 among the 50 States in terms of per capita personal income. Most of the state's lower-income residents, a disproportionately large number of whom are African American, have low levels of education." (Miles to Go: South Carolina. Southern Education Foundation. 2002).
- 18.5 percent of related children (less than 18 years) live below poverty. (South Carolina Kids Count 2002 data - as of 6/3/02)
- The US Census Bureau defines "poverty" as a single person living alone with an income of less than $8,667 in 1999 or a family of four with a 1999 income of Less than $17,029.
- Females earn $.71 to the males $1.00 in South Carolina.

High-Risk Pregnancies, Lack of Prenatal Care and Higher Death Rates Before 1st Birthday
- South Carolina ranks 45th among states in child well-being according to the National 2002 Kids County Data Book issued by the Annie E. Casey Foundation (SC Kids Count – sckidscount.org/report02.)
- According to the South Carolina Kids Count 2002 Report: 26.0 percent of South Carolina's mothers get less than adequate prenatal care, leading to health risks for newborns. In 1999, 236 Caucasians and 328 non-Caucasians died before their first birthday. The rate for Caucasians is 6.8 percent per 1,000 births and 16.4 percent per 1,000 births for non-Caucasians.

Births to Teen Mothers
- According to the 2001 South Carolina Kids Count Report, in 1998, 9.9 percent of all babies born to African American and "Other Race" mothers, were born to mothers younger than age 18. Of the babies born to these teens in 1998, 91.1 percent were born to single mothers, including babies whose fathers formally

6

acknowledged paternity but had not married the mothers. (SC Kids Count 2001 – kc/kcs01.html)

- In 1998, 20,891 South Carolina babies were born to single mothers. That was 38.8% of all babies, 22% of White babies and 67.8% of African-American and other babies. (SC Kids Count 2001 – kc/kcs01.html)

Educational Attainment
- Fifty-five percent of the State's students are White, and 42.0 percent are African American. Approximately 46.0 percent of all students are poor or near poor. Approximately 16.0 percent of the state's teachers are African American. (Miles to Go: South Carolina. Southern Education Foundation. 2002).
- Regardless of income, school districts with high percentages of African American students have $313 fewer state and local dollars to spend on each student than those districts with the lowest levels of African American enrollment. This inequity translates into a gap of about $8,000 a year for a typical classroom. (Miles to Go: South Carolina. Southern Education Foundation. 2002).
- Rates of participation in advanced placement courses show significant White/Black disparities. (Miles to Go: South Carolina. Southern Education Foundation. 2002).
- According to the South Carolina Kids Count 2002 Report, 33.0 percent of children in South Carolina do not graduate from high school. Girls are most likely to graduate, but a quarter of African American girls fail to graduate while 35.0 percent or more of African American boys do not graduate. (Young Adults in South Carolina: 2000, South Carolina Kids Count).

Child Abuse and Neglect
- In 1999-2000, there were 18,635 investigations into reported cases of abuse and neglect involving children. Through its investigations, the Department of Social Services (DSS) determined that 7,067 of the investigations were indicated for abuse or neglect: 13.7 percent for physical abuse, 6.6 percent for sexual abuse, 0.5 percent for mental injury, 33.1 percent for physical neglect, 6.2 percent for educational neglect, 3.8 percent were for medical neglect, and 36.1 percent for threat of harm for physical/sexual abuse. (SC Kids Count 2001 – kc/kcs01.html)
- In 1999-2000, in the indicated cases of abuse and neglect, DSS determined there were 9,836 children that were victims of abuse or neglect. Of these, 48.7 percent were male, 51.3 percent were female, 52.1 percent were white and 47.9 percent were African American and Other. (SC Kids Count 2001 – kc/kcs01.html)
- In the indicated cases in 1999-2000, 30.3 percent of the children lived in two-parent families, 48.3 percent in single parent families, 15.9 percent with unmarried couples and 5.6 percent in other circumstances. (SC Kids Count 2001 – kc/kcs01.html)
- According to the South Carolina Statistical Data on Child Abuse/Neglect (State FY 1996-1997), Black children make up 2.0 percent more of the indicated reports – and continue to be indicated at a higher rate than those made on white children. (state.sc.us/dss/cps/index)

Out of Home Placements/Foster Care
- In 1997, 7,424 children were served through the Foster Care System. Over 52.0 percent were placed for reasons relating to neglect, 25.2 percent were placed as a result of physical abuse and almost 3.6 percent were placed due to abandonment. Substance abuse, known at the time of placement, had a significant increase from 2.5 percent to 3.4 percent of the children placed. The remaining children were placed due to family instability, hospitalization of parent, disruptive behavior, etc. (The Department of Social Services – state.sc.us/dss/foster/)
- As of June 2000, 4,650 children lived in foster care. The median age at first placement in the state is 7.5 years. (SC Kids Count 2001 – kc/kcs01.html)

African American Children Waiting for Adoption
- A large number of children needing adoption services are older, black or racially mixed, have physical or emotional handicaps or are members of sibling groups. Of the 484 children placed for adoption by department staff in FY 1997-1998, nearly all (472) had special needs.
- Approximately 64.0 percent of the children placed for adoption were minority children and 36.0 percent were white children. (The Department of Social Services – state.sc.us/dss/adoption/).

Single Parenthood and Fatherless Families
- In 1989, 50% of children in single-parent families lived in poverty but only 9.3% of children in married-couple families were poor.
- Since 1960, births to single mothers have grown from 12.0 percent of all births to 39.0 percent in 1998. In addition, in 1999, the rate was 22.0 percent for Caucasians and 68.0 percent for non-Caucasians. (South Carolina Kids Count – sckidscount.org/census/sk3pov)
- This means that according to the 2000 Census, less than 40% of African American households have both parents living with them.
- In contrast, according to the 1970 Census, 25.2% of African American children resided in single parent households as compared to the 2000 Census, which reported 52.0 percent of African American children residing in single parent households. Perhaps this change can be attributed to a loss of core values, a loss of identity as a community, a loss of community connectedness and a loss of community support systems that were once critical for the success of African American families. (SouthCarolinaKidsCount–sc.kidscount.org/report02singdata)
- According to "Father Absence: A South Carolina Crisis," the Palmetto Family Council linked father absence to a variety of multigenerational social problems that increase "the price of fatherlessness." The cost to the community includes: intergenerational poverty, teen pregnancy, crime, psychological problems, homelessness, child health problems, suicide, sexual and physical abuse, drug and alcohol abuse and poor academic performance.
- In addition, noncustodial fathers often face significant barriers that prevent consistent access to their children, including navigating the child support system.
- In South Carolina, over one in three babies is born without an acknowledged father and over half of all children live part of these lives in households without fathers. (Perceptions of Fatherhood: Survey of SC Households, Fall, 2000)

Divorce and Separation

In 1998, 42,380 marriage licenses were issued, while 15,083 divorce decrees involving 12,158 children were filed. This compares to only 6,741 children were in families involved in divorce in 1970. (SC Kids Count 2001 – kc/kcs01.html)

Ongoing Health Issues for African American Families

- Health problems continue to plague the African American community.
- In an analysis of data collected by the National Survey of Black Americans (1992), Dr. Andrew Billingsley identified over a dozen health problems among African Americans "that regularly inflict large numbers of African American families," which include the following: hypertension, arthritis, nervous conditions, kidney problems, hardening of the arteries, ulcers, diabetes, stroke, cancer, liver problems and sickle cell anemia (Billingsley, Andrew, Climbing Jacobs Ladder: The Enduring Legacy of African-American Families. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1992).
- HIV/AIDS is at an all-time high especially among African-American women.
- Black Americans tend to delay obtaining medical attention at the onset of health problems.

Incarceration

- African Americans youth are over-represented in the criminal justice system.
- The incarceration rate of young African American males is higher than those of white males, e.g., 5% of black men versus 1% of white men in their twenties were institutionalized.
- Black males serve longer sentences than their white counterparts for the same crimes.

The demographic changes of the past four decades should cause every parent, policy maker, educator, and citizen of the State to stop and examine how these changes have occurred and whether they reflect progression or digression for African Americans and the State. It is evident that positive steps must be taken to ensure the continuation of strong African American families and finding resources and culturally appropriate techniques to address their plight. Apathy, indifference and the lack of knowledge by African Americans to take responsibility for their own destiny are not viable options nor is failure by elected officials and state leaders to enact public policies that foster and support strong family units acceptable. Inaction means that South Carolina will continue to lag behind in family wellness and overall prosperity.

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SC Commission for Minority Affairs
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