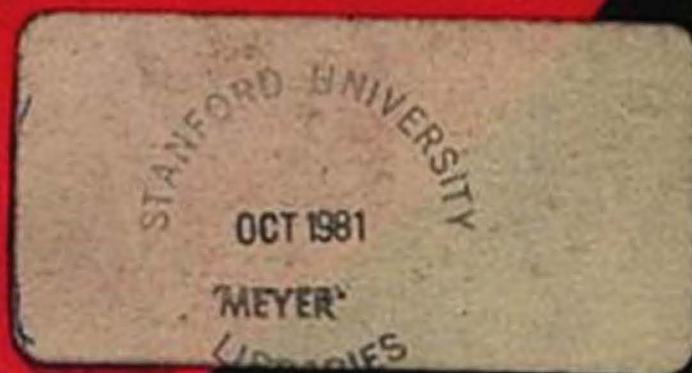


The Social
and Economic
Status
of the

BLACK
POPULATION

in the
United States:
An
Historical
View,
1790 - 1978



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have a higher life expectancy. The lower death rate for the Black population is due to the young age distribution of the Black population (table 87).

Causes of Death

Early in this century, the principal causes of death were the infectious diseases of tuberculosis, pneumonia, influenza, and typhoid fever, and the principal childhood diseases such as scarlet fever, diphtheria, whooping cough and measles. In 1910, these diseases accounted for 37 percent of all Black deaths and 26 percent of all White deaths. By 1974, their proportion of the total number of deaths had fallen to only 3 percent for both races (tables 88 and 89).

Tuberculosis, once called the "great white plague," was the chief cause of death for the Black population in the early 1900's. With an improved standard of living, X-ray examinations to detect the disease in its early stages, and the use of antibiotics and other drugs, death rates from tuberculosis have declined sharply among both the Black and White populations.

As the diseases of infancy, youth, and middle age were increasingly brought under control, diseases of old age became proportionately more important among the causes of death. In 1910, deaths due to malignant neoplasms (cancer) and diseases of the heart accounted for 12 percent of all Black deaths and 16 percent of all White deaths; these same diseases constituted 46 percent of all Black deaths and 58 percent of all White deaths in 1974.

A diverging trend in rates of accidental death can be seen in tables 88 and 89 depending on the type of accident. Deaths due to motor vehicle accidents, which climbed rapidly for both Blacks and Whites between 1910 and 1930, have stabilized between 21 and 29 deaths per 100,000 population since 1940 for both races. Accidental fatalities excluding motor vehicle accidents have continuously fallen for both races and by 1974 were only 30 percent of the level recorded in 1910. For both the Black and White populations, death rates due to homicide have approximately doubled between 1960 and 1974; the rate for 1974 was 39.7 deaths per 100,000 for the Black population and 5.8 deaths per 100,000 for the White population (tables 88 and 89).

FERTILITY

Estimates of fertility rates for the United States, based on annual numbers of registered births, do not exist for the years prior to 1915,⁴ and estimates for Black women are not available prior to 1960. However, statistical reconstruction through demographic methods can provide estimates of fertility for the years before information was available from vital statistics. According to these estimates (not shown in the tables), the total fertility rate for Black women in the 1850's was about 7.9 per woman. This measure means that if the birth rates which prevailed in the 1850's at each year of age for women in the childbearing ages were to prevail

⁴National Center for Health Statistics, *Vital Statistics of the United States 1973*, Vol. I—Nativity, p. 4-3.

throughout the reproductive life for a particular group of women, they would bear an average of 7.9 children during their lifetime.⁵ One hundred years later, in 1950, the total fertility rate for Black women was about 3.6 births per woman (table 90). However, the 7.9 figure for the 1850's was recorded in a period in which fertility rates were declining from even higher levels at the beginning of the 19th century, whereas the rate for the 1950's occurred at the time when fertility rates were rising—during the "baby boom" after World War II.

After a century or more of decline, fertility rates among Black women, as was also true among White women, reached a low level during the depression years of the 1930's. In that decade, the annual total fertility rate for Black women averaged about 2.7 births per woman. In 1960, just 3 years after the peak year of the "baby boom," the total fertility rate for Black women was 4.5 births per woman (table 90), an increase of 66 percent from the average in the 1930's. By 1975, the total fertility rate for Black women had fallen to an all-time low of 2.3 births per woman, a decline of 50 percent in a decade and a half (table 90).

The increases and decreases in the total fertility rate occurred during the same time periods for Black and White women, although the levels for White women have always been substantially below those of Black women. In the middle of the 19th century, when the total fertility rate for Black women was 7.9, the corresponding rate for White women was about 5.3, an average of over 2.5 children per woman less than among Blacks. During the 1930's, the average annual total fertility rate for Whites was about half a child per woman lower than that of the Blacks; by 1960, the difference between the races had increased to almost one child. Currently, with both races posting record lows, the annual total fertility rate for White women is still averaging over half a child less than that for Black women.

Whereas the total fertility rate is a summary measure of birth rates for all years in the reproductive period, the rates shown in table 91 are specific to designated 5-year age groups. Unlike the rates in table 90 which are on a per-woman basis, the age-specific rates of table 91 are averages per 1,000 women. For all ages shown, the rates for Black women are almost always higher than those for White women. An exception to the general rule occurs for women 25 to 29 years old in 1970 and in 1975.

Although fertility rates have declined since 1960 for both Black and White women, the rate for Whites appears to have declined slightly more rapidly than that for Blacks.⁶ In 1960, the total fertility rate for Black women was 128 percent of

⁵For estimates of fertility for Black women see Ansley J. Coale and Norfleet W. Rives, Jr., "A Statistical Reconstruction of the Black Population of the United States: Estimates of True Numbers by Age and Sex, Birth Rates, and Total Fertility," *Population Index*, Vol. 39, No. 1 (January 1973) pp.3-36; for estimates for White women see Ansley J. Coale and Melvin Zelnik, *New Estimates of Fertility and Population in the United States* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1963).

⁶For a different view on the relative difference in the decline of White and Black fertility rates, see James A. Sweet, "Differentials in the Rate of Fertility Decline: 1960-1970," *Family Planning Perspectives*, Vol. 6, No. 2 (Spring 1974), pp. 103-107.