

A MACRO PORTRAIT OF HAWAIIAN FAMILIES

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This article examines demographic information derived from population-based surveys relating to contemporary Hawaiian families living in the state of Hawai'i. Six characteristics of strong families are considered: time, commitment, appreciation, communication, shared values and beliefs, and coping with stress. Data show that compared with Hawai'i's population norms, Native Hawaiians have larger families and live in households with more members. Native Hawaiians also exhibit greater family-centered characteristics and have more contacts among extended family members, particularly between grandparents and grandchildren. Recommendations and implications are provided for programs that target Native Hawaiians.

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One of the distinctive features of Hawaiian culture is the important role of the family. The *'ohana* (family) extends beyond the nuclear family and encompasses a central force that integrates the past, present, and future by the inclusion of deceased and spiritual ancestors with extended family members now and to come who are bound by blood, marriage, and adoption. There are bonds of mutual acceptance, support, sharing, and obligation that operate within these families. Often, anecdotal references are made that allude to the viability of the *'ohana* among Hawaiians today. For example, it is not unusual for an individual to comment on the large number of Hawaiian family members living together, to note a Hawaiian student's absence from school to care for a parent who is ill, or to observe the respect accorded to *kūpuna*, or elders, among Hawaiian children. Are these observations confined to specific cases, or are there measurable qualities that generally characterize contemporary Hawaiian families?

This article reports on Native Hawaiian families living in the state of Hawai'i. The findings are derived from population-based surveys, including Hawai'i Family Touchstones, a study conducted by the Center on the Family at the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa. We begin with a demographic profile that addresses the family composition, income, and educational attainment of Native Hawaiians. This is followed by a discussion of the qualities of strong families and a comparison of Native Hawaiian versus non-Hawaiian families on these measures. We conclude with a discussion and recommendations.

DEMOGRAPHIC PROFILE

Almost 20% of the population in Hawai'i identified themselves as Native Hawaiian to some degree in the last census (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000a). Its members are younger on average, with the median age for Native Hawaiians being 25.3 years, compared with 36.2 years for the general population (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000b). Children constitute 38.5%, whereas those age 65 and over constitute 6.1% of all Native Hawaiians (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000c). In the general population, 24.4% are children and 13.3% are seniors (see Figure 1).

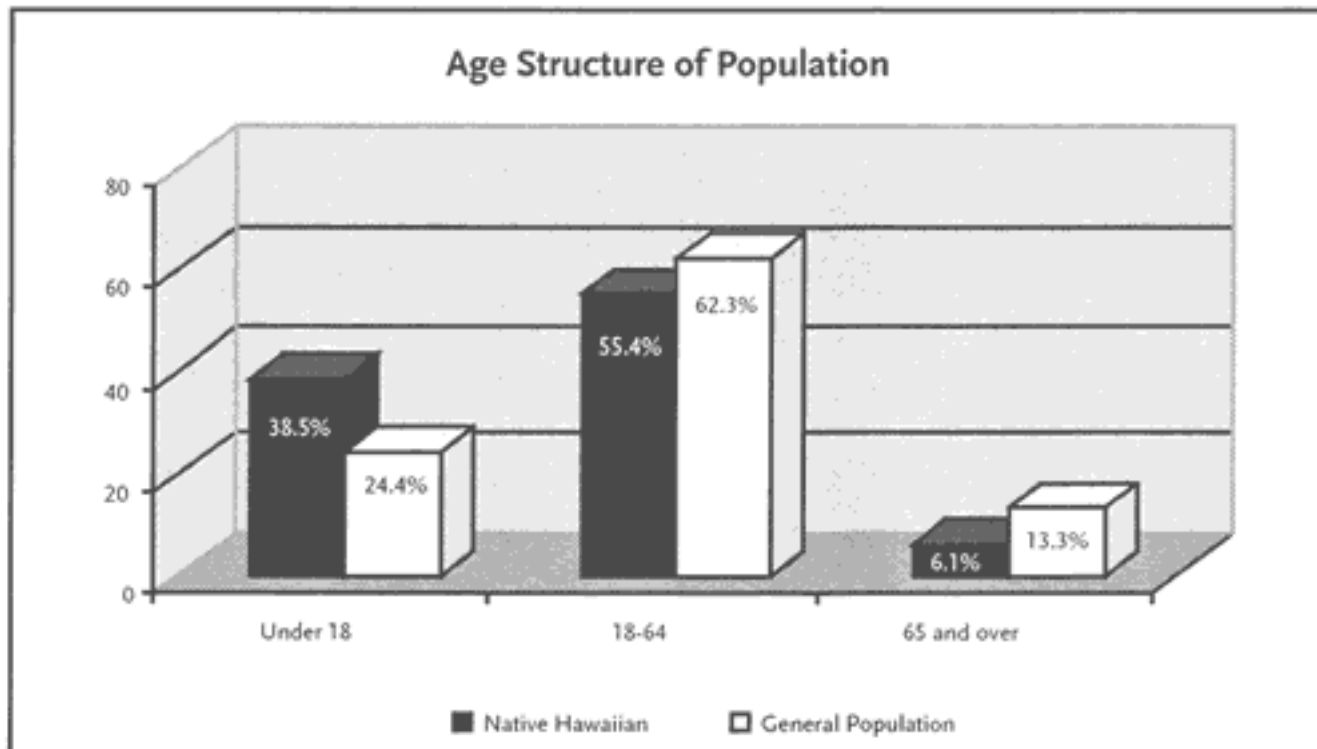


Figure 1. Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Census 2000 Summary File 2 (various tables).

The average size of Native Hawaiian families is 3.8 members, and Native Hawaiian households average 3.4 members (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000c). These figures are slightly larger than, but similar to, the average size of all families and households in Hawai'i (3.4 and 2.9 members, respectively). Many more Native Hawaiian households contain individuals under 18 years (52.9% compared with 37.9% for all households), whereas fewer contain individuals over 64 years (19.1% compared with 27.4%).

Native Hawaiian families are less likely to be headed by two married parents. Nearly 75% of all family households with children are in this category in contrast to the 63.3% of Native Hawaiian families (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000c). Of the single-parent family households, about one-fourth are headed by males (see Figure 2).

Native Hawaiian families are slightly more likely to have grandparents present: 21.5% of families that have grandparents living with grandchildren are Native Hawaiian (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000f), and Native Hawaiians make up 19.8% of the population. However, of these, Native Hawaiian grandparents are

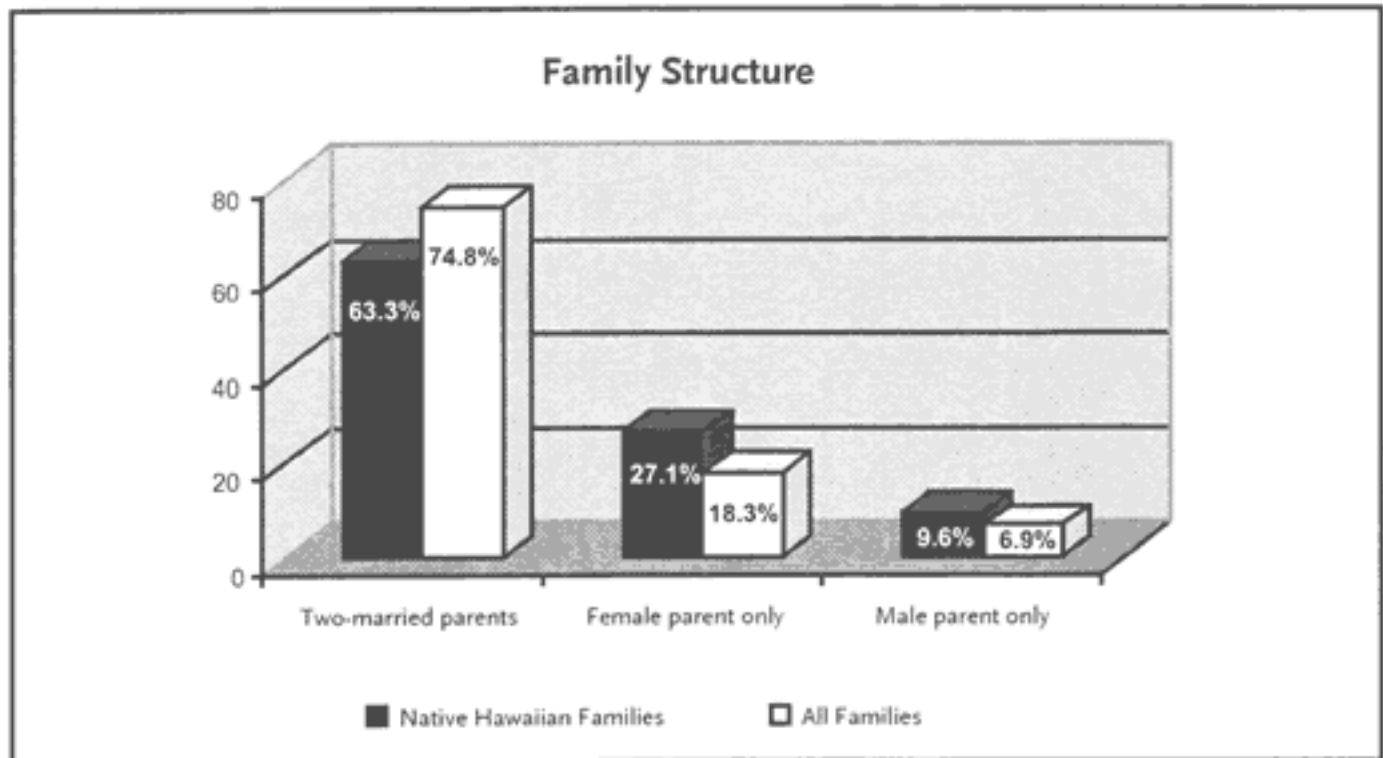


Figure 2. Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Census 2000 Summary File 2: Profile of general demographic characteristics: 2000 (Table DP-1).

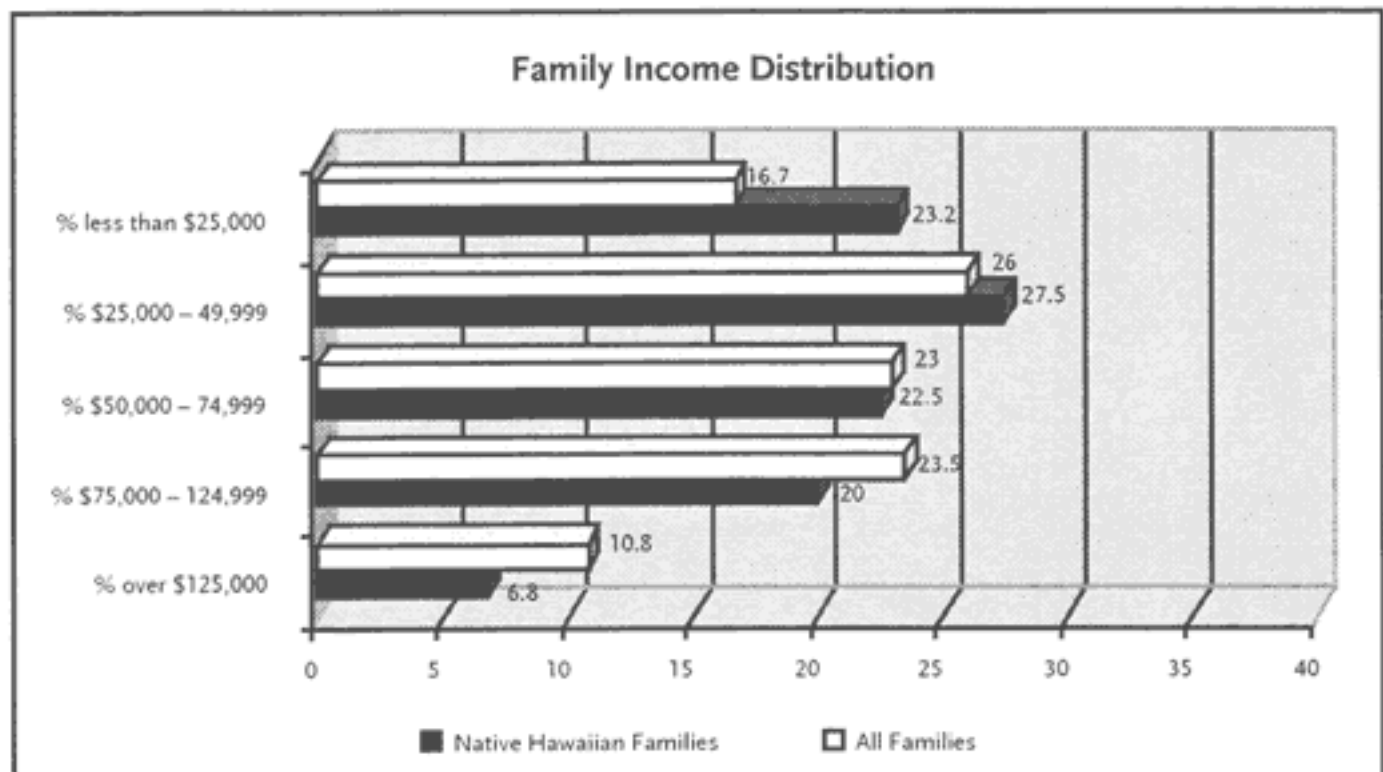


Figure 3. Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Census 2000 Summary File 4: Income in 1999 by selected household, family, and individual characteristics: 2000 (Table QT-P33).

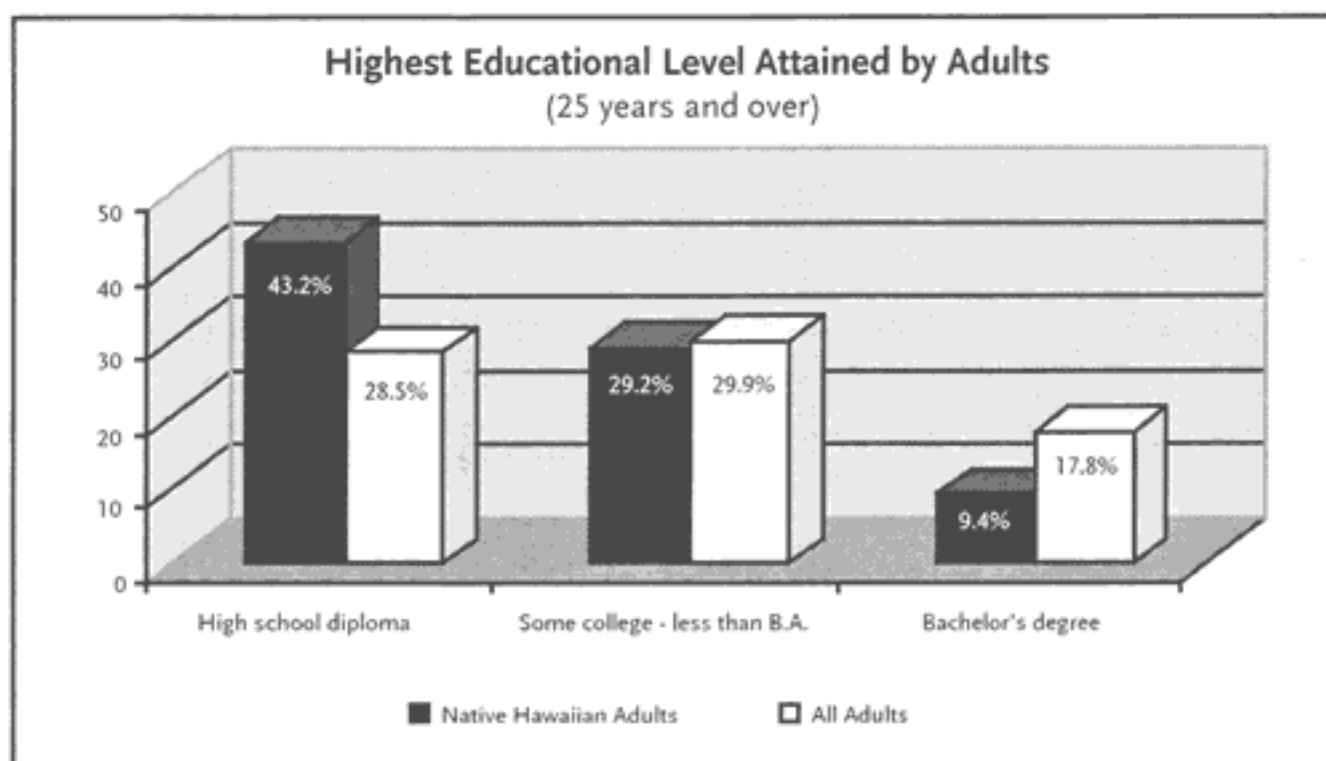


Figure 4. Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Census 2000 Summary File 4: Educational attainment by sex: 2000 (Table QT-P20).

much more likely than non-Hawaiian grandparents to be responsible for their grandchildren (38.1% vs. 28.5%), providing for their shelter, clothing, educational, and other needs.

The median family income for Native Hawaiians is \$49,282, whereas that of the general population is \$56,961 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000e). Although there is a greater proportion of Native Hawaiian families in the lower income category and a slightly smaller proportion in the higher category, the family income patterns of both groups are somewhat similar in the middle categories (see Figure 3). In keeping with the lower income for Native Hawaiians, nearly one-third of this cultural group's participants in the Hawai'i Family Touchstones survey (Center on the Family, 2002) identified financial strain as the greatest challenge facing their families, compared with 26% of the non-Hawaiian families.

There is greater difference between Native Hawaiians and other groups in terms of educational attainment. Although the percentage of Native Hawaiians and all adults age 25 and over who lack a high school education is the same, 15% (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000d), the former are less likely to pursue further education. Only 12.6% of Native Hawaiians have a bachelor's or graduate degree,

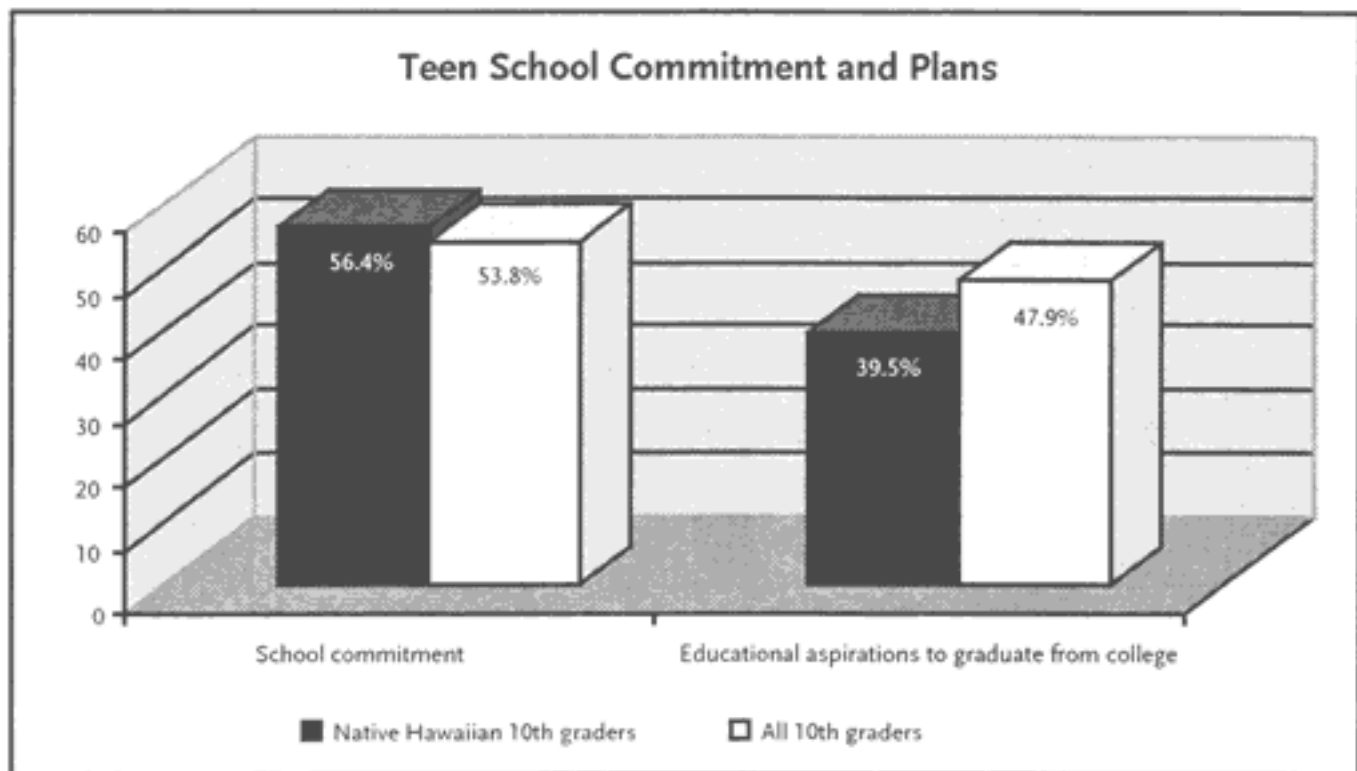


Figure 5. Hawaiian and statewide breakdown for 10th-grade students. Source: *The 2002 Hawai'i Student Alcohol, Tobacco, and Drug Use Study: Adolescent Prevention and Treatment Needs Assessment* by R. S. Pearson & C. M. Oliveira, 2002, Hawai'i Department of Health, Alcohol and Drug Abuse Division.

compared with 26.2% of the general population (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000d). It is interesting and hopeful to note from the Census 2000 that a slightly greater proportion of Native Hawaiians over age 35 are enrolled in school than is true for the general population, 4.8% and 4.1%, respectively (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000g; see Figure 4).

Parental education has implications for children's commitment to school and teens' educational aspirations. There is evidence that Native Hawaiian students struggle in areas of formal educational achievement: 29% of Native Hawaiian third graders score below average on the SAT reading test, compared with 20% of non-Hawaiians (Hawai'i Department of Education, 2002). Commitment to school, as evidenced by recognizing the value of what they are learning, liking school, and seeing their role as a student as an important one, is very similar for 10th-grade Native Hawaiians and all other 10th graders (Pearson & Oliveira, 2002). However, fewer Native Hawaiian teens expect to attend and graduate from college (see Figure 5).

QUALITIES OF STRONG FAMILIES

Although some families clearly face greater adversity than others, *all* of Hawai'i's families face problems, crisis, and suffering. What helps some families move through the everyday challenges, as well as the larger transitions, with greater ease than others? Why do some families fall apart when faced with crisis, whereas others grow from such experiences? What are the qualities of strong families? And how do families acquire these strengths? For several decades now, family researchers have worked to answer these questions. Their studies have ranged from identifying the qualities of healthy and strong families to identifying the factors that help families from various backgrounds and risk groups face and recover from adversity (e.g., see McCubbin, McCubbin, Thompson, Han, & Allen, 1997; Silberberg, 2001). This section focuses on the broader end of this continuum, the qualities found in families from all walks of life.

Strong, healthy families are found in all cultures and socioeconomic backgrounds. These families offer positive support, teach their members problem-solving skills, and provide a sense of unity which, in turn, develops resilience to stress and crisis. A well-developed body of research has identified six characteristics that strong families across the world have in common (DeFrain, 1999; Stinnett & DeFrain, 1985). Strong families:

- *Express commitment.* They promote each other's well-being and happiness and value family unity. They are loyal to each other and, when faced with crisis, they rally to work together.
- *Spend time together.* They cultivate practices that make time for each other and create routines centered around time together to provide opportunities for communication, strengthen family ties, and promote a sense of stability and harmony.
- *Show appreciation.* They express love, whether verbally or through physical affection, and accentuate the positive in each member.
- *Communicate.* They develop their communication skills and make time to talk to each other, whether about everyday matters or important issues.

- *Share values and beliefs.* They have a sense of greater good or power in life, a spirituality or set of values and beliefs that gives strength, perspective, purpose, and guidelines for living.
- *Cope with stress.* Members of strong families pull together, communicate and problem-solve, call on necessary resources and the help of others, plan for the future, and work to maintain their mental and physical health even when times are tough.

We utilized the framework and qualities of strong families to assess the status of Hawai'i's families, with a special focus on Native Hawaiian families. It is important to remember that the qualities and measures of strong families discussed here represent a specific framework and only a portion of the family strengths construct. These measures, however, are general and are often represented in various models within the research on family strengths and resiliency (e.g., see McCubbin et al., 1997; Silberberg, 2001).

A representative sample of 1,051 families, including an oversample of 417 Native Hawaiian families throughout the state of Hawai'i, was surveyed by Market Trends Pacific, Inc. for the Hawai'i Family Touchstones project. Families were asked whether and how often they practice certain behaviors or hold certain perceptions related to the six qualities described above. Indicators that speak to the key domains of this framework are discussed below, as well as an index we developed to measure the proportion of "strong families" in Hawai'i.

COMMITMENT AND TIME TOGETHER

For the purposes of this study, these two domains were combined because they are related. Practicing commitment to one's family is perhaps the foundation on which the other behaviors of strong families are built. One of the ways in which families nurture a sense of commitment is by prioritizing family time. Families that make time to be together promote a sense of identity in family members and cohesion among all members. Engaging in enjoyable activities as a family, for example, reduces stress and supports emotional and physical well-being. Shared leisure time

also provides opportunities to learn and develop cultural, artistic, or athletic skills, depending on the activities the family prefers, and can produce better outcomes for children. Eating together on a regular basis also provides opportunities to spend quality time together and a sense of routine that is particularly comforting to children. Nearly 90% of the Native Hawaiian families surveyed indicated that they prioritize family time together and try to do things as a family, compared with nearly 88% of non-Hawaiians. Seventy-eight percent of Native Hawaiian families indicated they regularly spend time together doing fun things like recreational activities, sports, or going to movies or cultural events, compared with 76% of non-Hawaiians. A slightly higher percentage of Native Hawaiian versus non-Hawaiian families reported eating together regularly, 74% versus 70%. Group differences for these three indicators, however, were not statistically significant (see Figure 6).

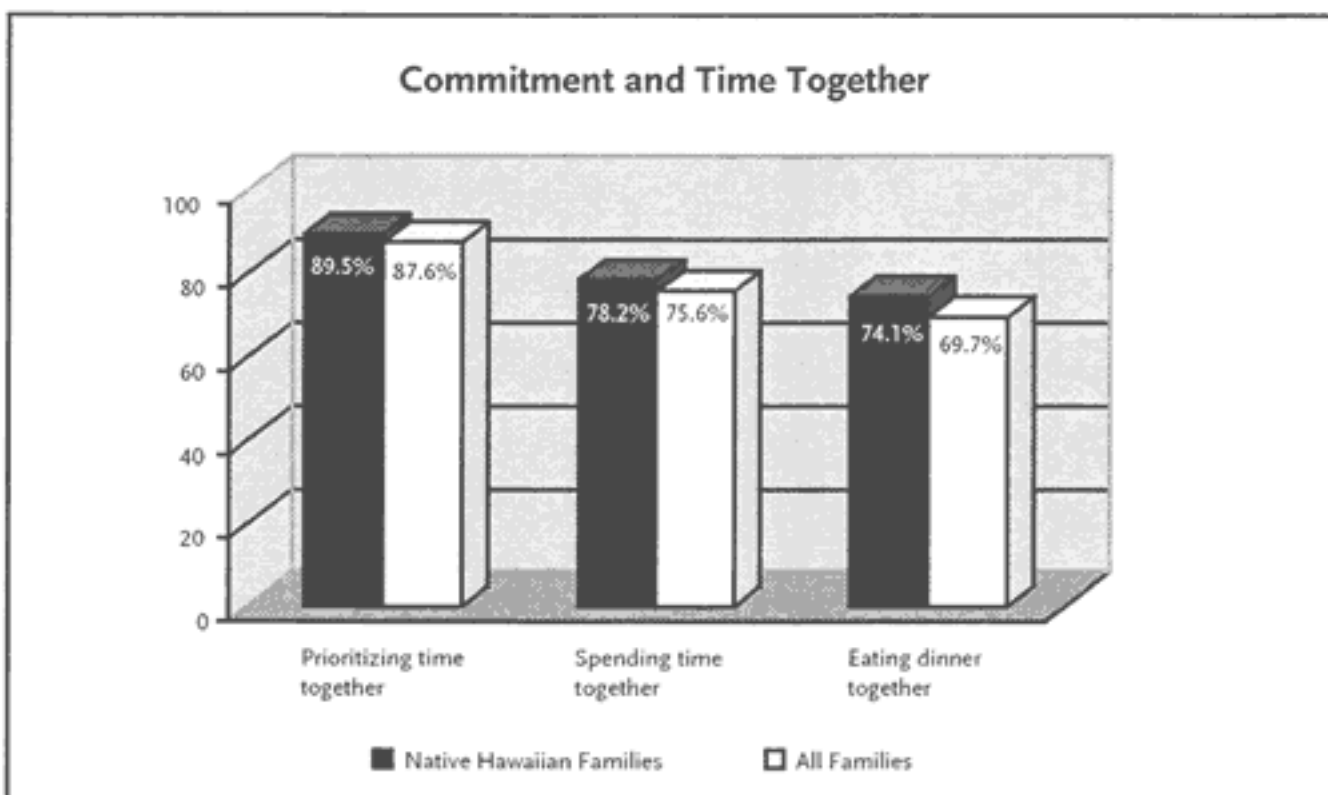


Figure 6. Indicator definitions: Prioritizing Time Together = percentage of families responding to the statement, “Our family makes time for each other and tries to do things as a family” (responses ranged from *strongly agree* to *strongly disagree*); Spending Time Together = percentage of families responding to the question, “How often does your family do fun things together, like recreational activities, sports, go to the movies, or go to cultural events?” (responses are *daily* or *weekly*); Eating Dinner Together = percentage of families responding to the question, “How many nights a week out of seven does your family eat dinner together?” (responses are *five nights per week*, *six nights per week*, or *seven nights per week*).

APPRECIATION

Giving and receiving appreciation helps family members develop confidence and self-esteem. Expressing appreciation helps build positive relationships among family members, which are important to the well-being of all members and are particularly important to the development of children. One of the ways family members show appreciation is by assisting one another. Of the families surveyed, roughly the same percentage of Native Hawaiian (87%) and non-Hawaiian families (86%) agreed or strongly agreed that they show appreciation by doing helpful things for each other (see Figure 7).

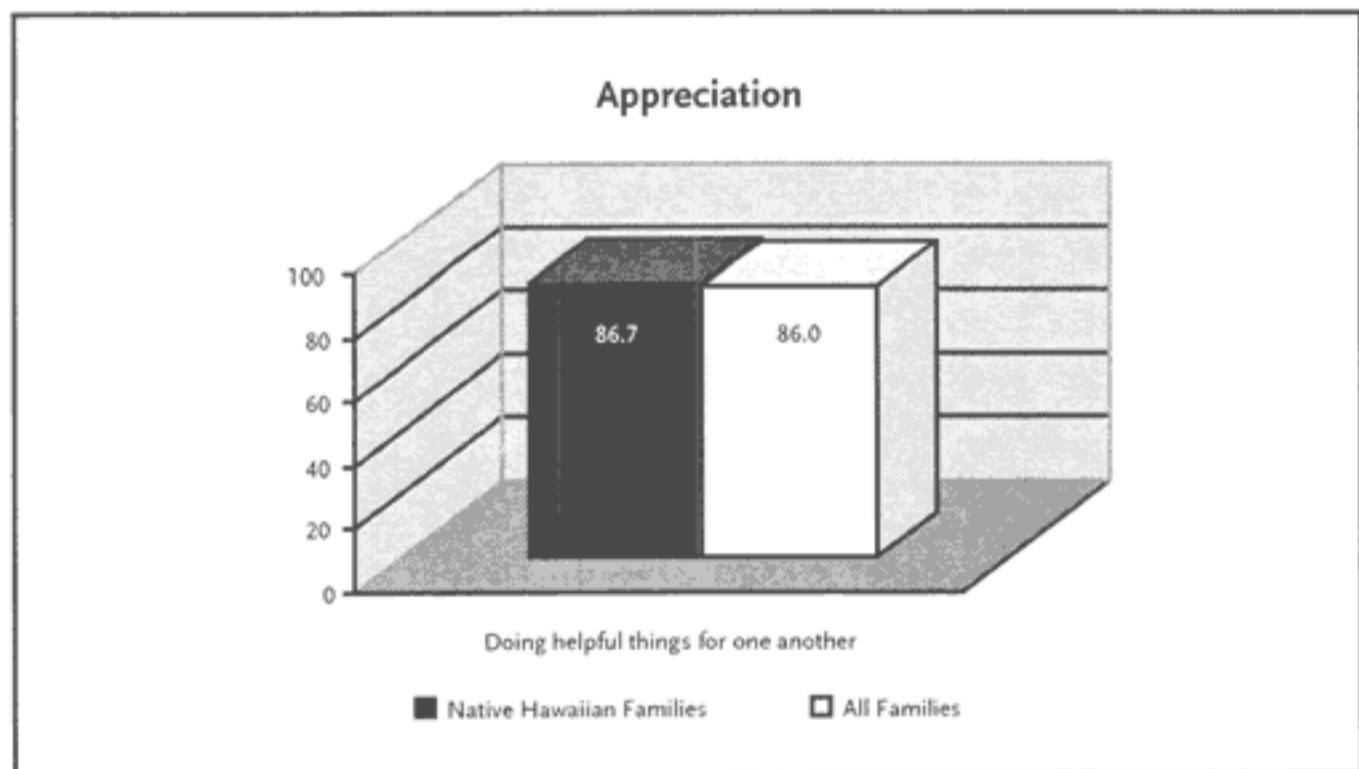


Figure 7. Indicator definition: Doing Helpful Things = percentage of families responding to the statement, "Our family shows appreciation by doing helpful things for one another" (responses ranged from *strongly agree* to *strongly disagree*).

COMMUNICATION

Good communication skills are often at the core of healthy families. While even the strongest of families argue, healthy families tend to attack the problem at hand and not each other, to deal with one issue at a time as problems arise, and to remain open to understanding each other's viewpoint (McCubbin et al., 1997; Stinnett & DeFrain, 1985). Families with communication patterns that convey support and caring often find solutions to meet everyday challenges and prevent or recover from adversity, building their resiliency along the way. By listening carefully and not criticizing each other, family members express respect, increase their understanding of each other, and strengthen their relationships. A lower percentage of Native Hawaiian families indicated that they practice positive communication skills by talking and listening to each other and allowing for expression without criticism than did non-Hawaiian families, 70% versus 81%, a statistically significant difference ($\chi^2 = 13.229, p < .05$) (see Figure 8).

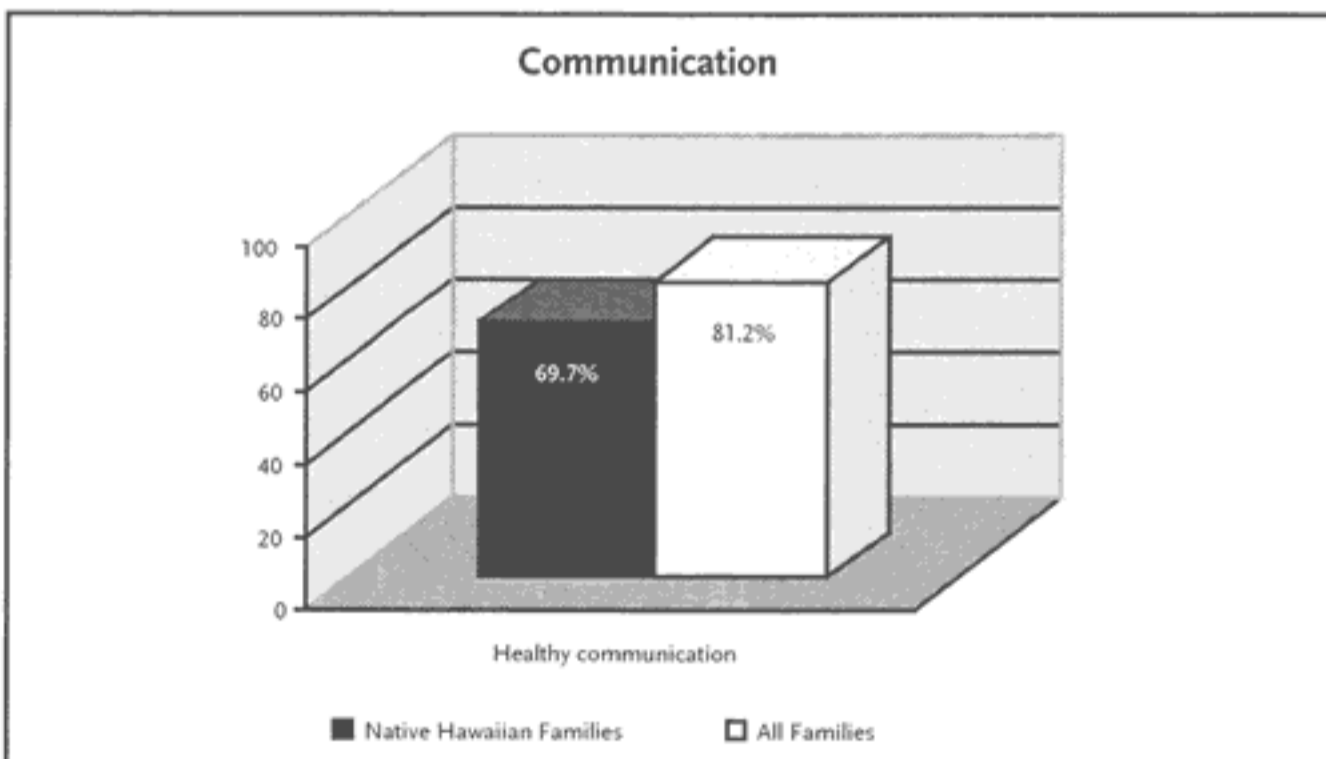


Figure 8. Indicator definition: Healthy Communication = percentage of families responding to the question, "Members of my family talk and listen to each other and allow each person to express themselves without criticizing or putting each other down" (responses ranged from *strongly agree* to *strongly disagree*).

SHARED VALUES AND BELIEFS

Family members express their shared values and beliefs in many ways, for example, by practicing cultural rituals, participating in religious activities, extending themselves to others, and volunteering in their community. A clear and positive cultural identity is an important component of psychological well-being and is associated with healthy self-esteem and resistance to negative stereotypes. Maintaining cultural traditions makes family members aware of their shared history and values. Religious participation similarly provides traditions, values, and a sense of continuity in life. Religious faith helps families cope with, rather than be devastated by, the stresses and crises of life. Religious engagement also expands social networks and, therefore, the resources and assistance available to families

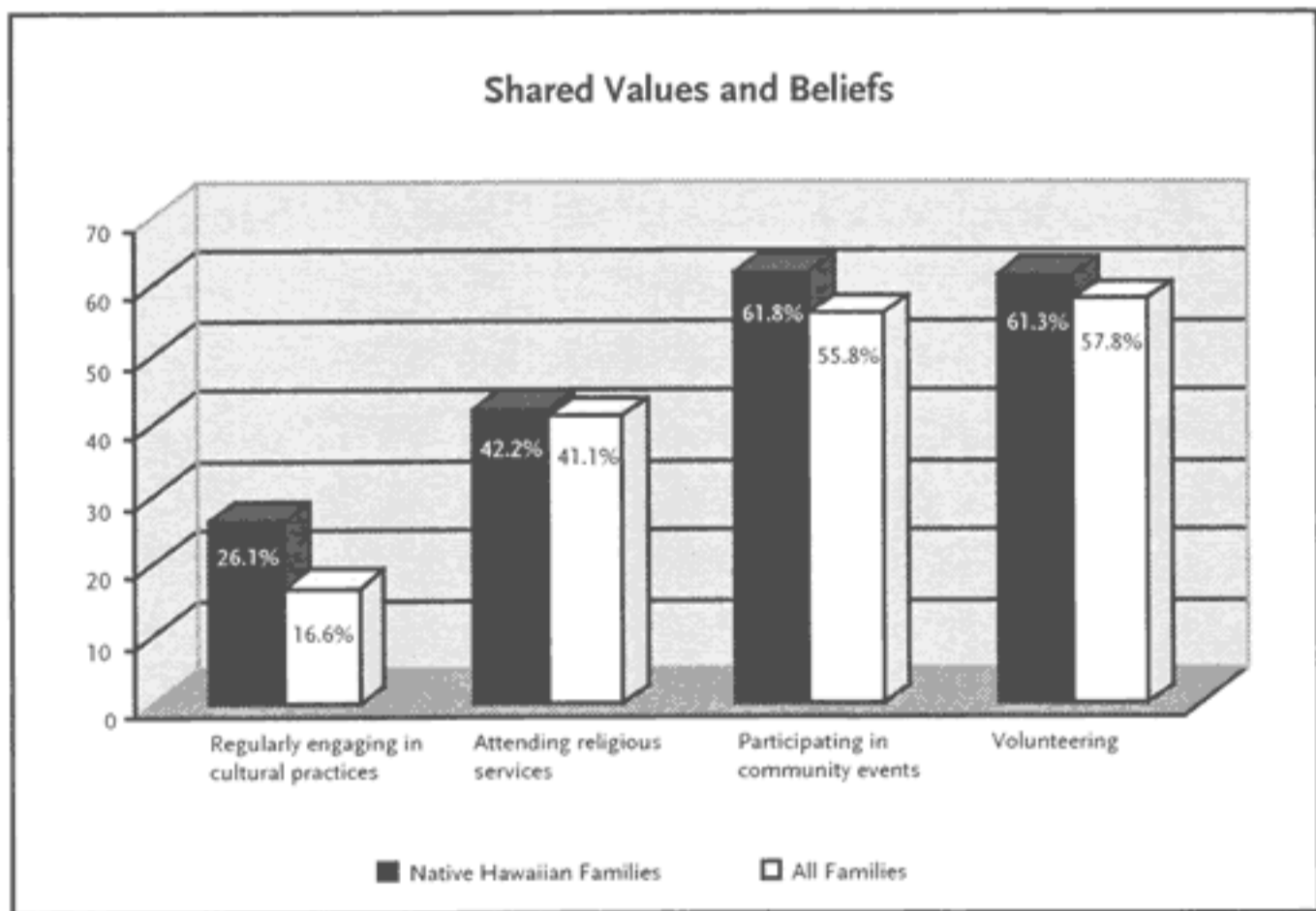


Figure 9. Indicator definitions: Regularly Engaging in Cultural Practices = percentage of families responding “daily” or “weekly” to the question, “How often does your family engage in cultural practices or activities of your family’s heritage?”; Attending Religious Services = percentage of families responding “weekly” to the question, “On the average, how often do you attend religious services?”; Participating in Community Events = percentage of families responding “yes” to the question, “Do you attend neighborhood celebrations, like block parties, and cultural events in your community?”; Volunteering = percentage of adults responding “yes” to the question, “In the last year or so, have you done any volunteer work for any church, charity, or community group?”

when in need (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2000). Similarly, when families spend their leisure time participating in community activities and cultural events, they engage in civic life, build social networks, and contribute to the vitality of their community. Participating in community celebrations and cultural events generates commitment and care for the communities in which the families live. When civic engagement extends to volunteerism, the inclusion of all family members in volunteer activities provides additional opportunities for shared quality time and family bonding and further perpetuates shared values and beliefs.

A higher percentage of Native Hawaiian families reported regularly engaging in cultural practices than non-Hawaiian families, 26% versus 17%, a statistically significant difference ($\chi^2 = 9.684, p < .05$). More Native Hawaiian families also reported engaging in neighborhood celebrations and cultural events (62%) and volunteering (61%) compared with non-Hawaiians (56% and 58%, respectively). However, these group differences were not statistically significant. A similar proportion of Native Hawaiian (42%) and non-Hawaiian families (41%) reported attending religious services at least weekly (see Figure 9).

COPING WITH STRESS

Coping well often requires family members to unite in the face of a challenge or crisis. Families that pull together and rally their group strength tend to maintain a sense of integrity and purpose, to reframe and redefine hardships as “challenges” rather than insurmountable problems, and to gain a sense of control and influence over their outcomes (McCubbin et al., 1997). Although immediate family members can provide much of the help needed to get through a crisis, families do not have to do it alone. Extended family networks can also pull together and serve as a resource both during a crisis and in daily events to prevent crisis (e.g., by providing child-care assistance).

A similar proportion of Native Hawaiians (96.7%) and non-Hawaiians (96.6%) reported they could rely on other family members as well as others in the community (84% and 85%, respectively) in time of need. Native Hawaiians, however, are more embedded within the extended family network. They indicated more frequent contact with other family members—seeing and talking more

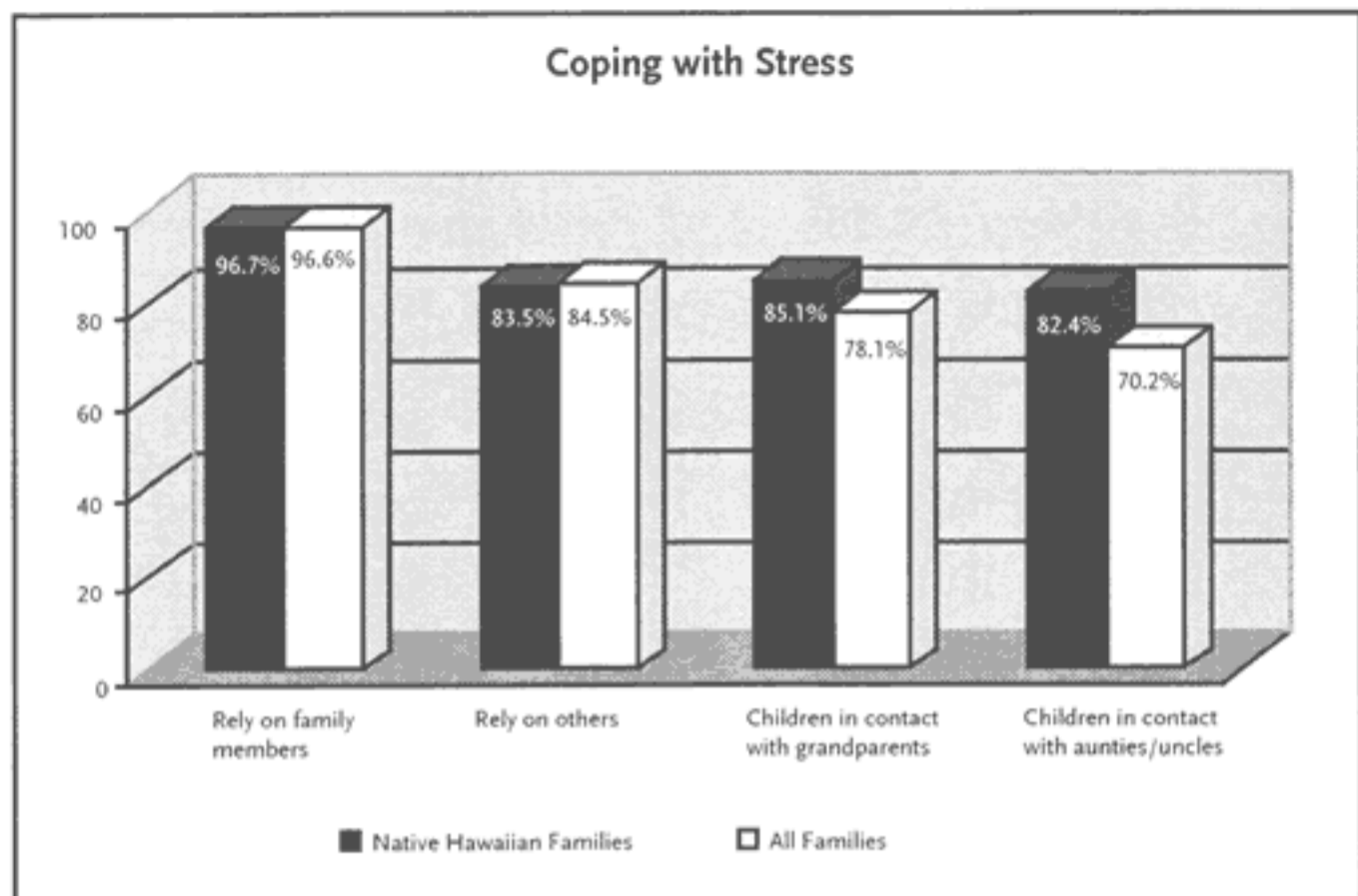


Figure 10. Indicator definitions: Rely on Family Members = percentage of families responding to the statement, "In our family, while we don't always agree, we can count on each other to stand by us in time of need" (responses ranged from *strongly agree* to *strongly disagree*); Rely on Others = percentage of families responding "yes" to the question, "Is there someone in your community, outside of your family, that you feel you can rely on in time of need?"; Children in Contact with Grandparents, with Aunties/Uncles = percentage of families responding to the question, "How many times per week do your children see or talk to their (family member)?" (responses ranged from one to seven).

times per week with grandparents (85% vs. 78%) and aunts and uncles (82% vs. 70%) than did non-Hawaiians; these differences were statistically significant ($\chi^2 = 4.719$ and $\chi^2 = 11.722$, respectively, $p < .05$). This is not surprising given the higher proportion of Hawaiian households that include grandparents, as well as the observance of the Hawaiian concept of 'ohana, which includes the extended family (see Figure 10).

These six survey items form the basis for the Strong Families Index. We assessed the percentage of families that gave positive responses to these survey items to obtain the proportion of families practicing behaviors that are associated with the qualities of strong, healthy families. We recognize that data from self-reports may or may not correspond to actual behaviors, that a high index score does not

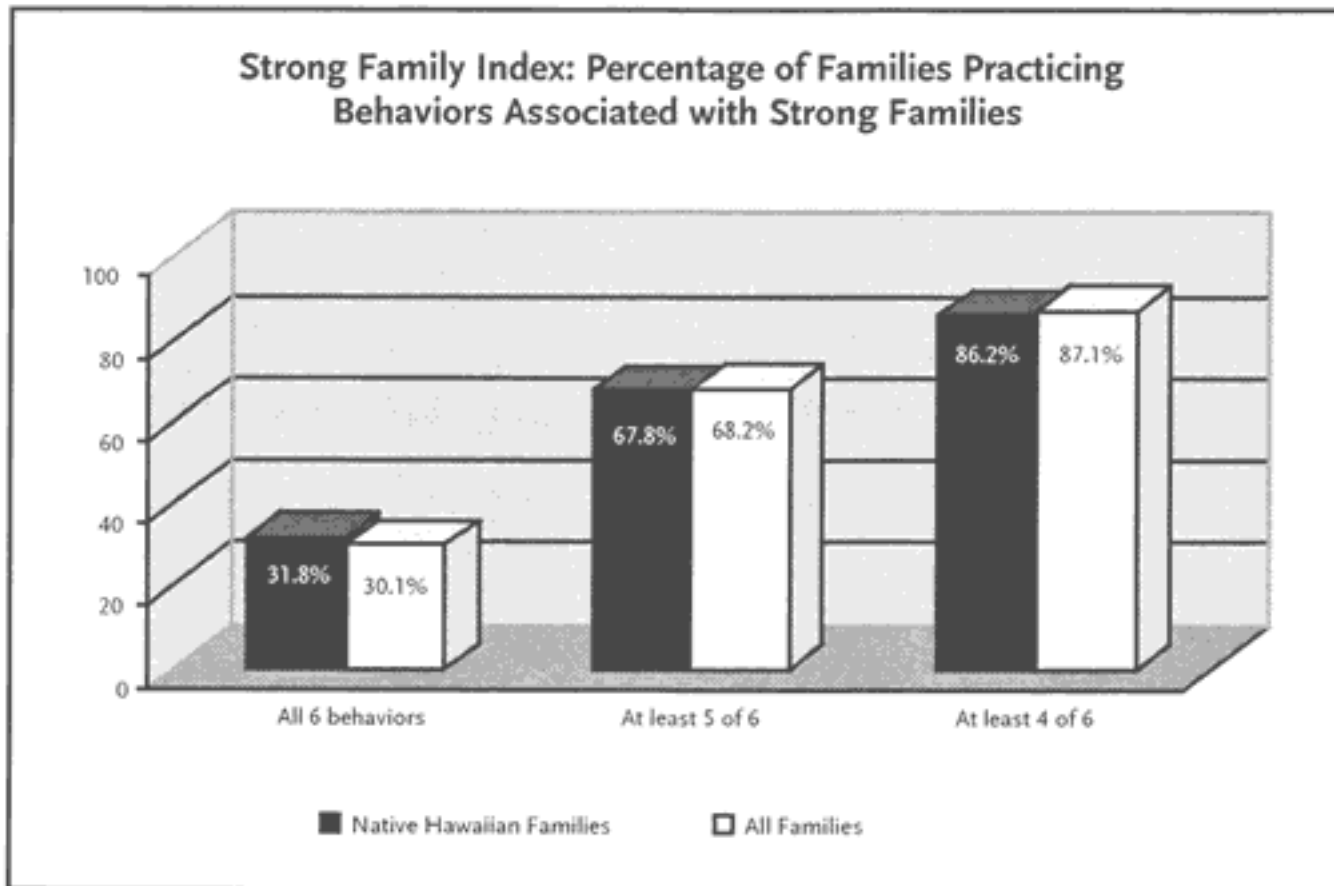


Figure 11. For the index, families responded to the following survey items: “Our family makes time for each other and tries to do things as a family” (*strongly agree to strong disagree*); “Our family shows appreciation by doing helpful things for one another” (*strongly agree to strong disagree*); “Members of my family talk and listen to each other and allow each person to express themselves without criticizing or putting each other down” (*strongly agree to strongly disagree*); “How many nights a week out of seven does your family eat dinner together?”; “In the last year or so, have you done any volunteer work for any church, charity, or community group?”; and “In our family, while we don’t always agree, we can count on each other to stand by us in time of need” (*strongly agree to strongly disagree*).

guarantee family strength, that a low score does not prove family fragility, and that most families do not practice *all* of the habits of strong families *all* of the time. Still, we believe it is helpful for people to know about the practices that contribute to family strength and to know how Hawaiians are doing collectively on these measures.

Nearly one-third of the families in both the Native Hawaiian and non-Hawaiian groups indicated that they practice the six behaviors of strong families (see Figure 11). Similar proportions of Native Hawaiian and non-Hawaiian families indicated that they practice at least five of the six behaviors (67.8% vs. 68.2%) or at least four of the six behaviors (86% vs. 87%).

DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

At the macro level, Native Hawaiians tend to exhibit greater family-centered characteristics than do non-Hawaiians. They have larger families and live in households with more members compared with Hawai'i's population norms. There are more contacts among extended family members, particularly between grandparents and grandchildren, who are more likely to live together and interact frequently. The value and central role of the 'ohana have not been discarded by contemporary Hawaiians. Like their ancestors, Native Hawaiians today are nurtured and supported by their families. When in need, Hawaiians feel they can rely on a family member or friend for assistance. When they are elderly, more Native Hawaiians will live in three-generational households, where *kōkua* (cooperation) and mutual support flow across generational lines. When children require care, there will be a place for them within the family, as many children who have teen moms or who are *hānai* (adopted or fostered) and raised by grandparents and other relatives have discovered.

The macro portrait of the composition and structure of Native Hawaiian families may also highlight situations that affect the well-being of Hawaiian children. For example, the high proportion of grandparents who have responsibility for the financial, educational, and other support of their grandchildren is a matter of concern, particularly if it signals a growing trend. According to Bryson and Casper (1998), "Increasing drug abuse among parents, teen pregnancy, divorce, the rapid rise of single-parent households, mental and physical illnesses, AIDS, crime, child abuse and neglect, and incarceration are a few of the most common explanations offered" for this trend of greater grandparent responsibility. In grandparent-maintained households, children are more likely to be poor and less likely to have health insurance (U.S. Census Bureau, 1999). While having a grandparent caregiver is generally better than lacking care or receiving foster care, it clearly is not advantageous compared with healthy parental care.

Assuming that the disparity in education applies equally to parents as well as non-parents, the lower educational attainment among Native Hawaiians raises a concern for their children. Higher levels of parent education are strongly associated with positive outcomes for children in many areas, including school readiness and educational achievement, health and health-related behaviors (e.g., smoking and binge drinking), and prosocial activities such as volunteering (Chandler, Nord, Lennon, & Liu, 1999; Child Trends DataBank, 2003; National Center for Education

Statistics, 2000). Research also indicates that children whose families commit to providing learning opportunities and activities are academically motivated and tend to avoid delinquent behavior and emotional problems (Gottfried, Fleming, & Gottfried, 1998; Moore, Chalk, Scarpa, & Vandivere, 2002). Moreover, children of more educated parents are likely to have access to greater material, human, and social resources.

Because Hawaiians of all ages are generally part of families that they value, programs that target this cultural group would achieve greater success if they did not treat the child, parent, or elder independently of the family. Understanding the family constellation and working *with* the family to achieve successful outcomes for each of its members may be a more effective approach. For example, the negative outcomes associated with certain risk behaviors—such as teen pregnancy—may not be apparent to youngsters whose extended families support and greatly love the unmarried young mothers and their babies. Similarly, the models and mentors who encourage educational achievements and the support to advance such goals may be less available for Native Hawaiian children whose parents' aspirations for them may not extend beyond a high school degree. Identifying sources of assistance and support within the extended family may be less isolating for a family member than having to meet these needs outside the family. When asked by the Hawai'i Family Touchstones survey what they wished for their children, Native Hawaiians and non-Hawaiians responded in the same way. They wanted their children to have a "strong and happy family life" and to "contribute to society" (Center on the Family, 2002). Thus, although there are measurable differences among Hawai'i's people, all share common ground on which to work with families in achieving successful outcomes for their most vulnerable members.

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