

OUR DREAMS WON'T BE DEFERRED:

Reclaiming Progress for Black Men and Boys in an Age of Retreat



HEALTH

Black boys and young men in the United States face significant health challenges

stemming from systemic inequities, environmental conditions, and limited access to quality healthcare. Over the past 15 years, the health sector has increasingly embraced concepts such as social determinants of health and adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) as frameworks for understanding health outcomes. This shift affirms what Black communities have long understood: poverty, community violence, environmental hazards, and limited opportunity are deeply tied to poor health outcomes.

These structural conditions shape health well before birth. Due to the compounding effects of systemic racism and sexism, Black families often face barriers to quality reproductive care, contributing to higher rates of preterm birth and low birth weight—factors that increase the risk of developmental delays and chronic conditions. As Black children grow, persistent residential segregation and underinvestment in Black communities continue to influence outcomes.

Areas of Progress

While full equity in health and well-being for Black boys and men remains out of reach, the past 15 years have seen meaningful progress in several key areas. Notably, exposure to key structural stressors has declined, resulting in improved health outcomes.

Foster Care: In 2010, Black children represented 14% of the child population but 32% of those in foster care. Today, that number has declined to 23%.

Healthcare Coverage: Following the implementation of the Affordable Care Act, the uninsured rate for Black Americans under age 65 fell by 40%, from 20% in 2011 to 12% in 2019.

Improved Outcomes: Expanded health insurance coverage among Black Americans has coincided with improved outcomes:

Cancer mortality among Black men declined by 49% between 1991 and 2022, and asthma-related emergency visits dropped by more than half between 2003–2005 and 2020–2022 (CDC, 2023; Saka et al., 2025).

Areas of Concern

Black boys and men continue to face disproportionate threats to their health and well-being. Mental health challenges and violence remain an urgent and growing concern for Black boys and young men.

Systemic failures continue to fuel dehumanization, contributing to high rates of homicide, suicide, police violence, and HIV, some of which disproportionately affect the Black LGBTQ+ community.

AIDS Mortality: While AIDS-related deaths declined 17.5% in 2022, AIDS-related deaths among Black men were nearly three times higher than those among Latino men and over 5.5 times higher than those among white men.

Suicide Rates: Black boys are now three to four times more likely than white boys to die by suicide, and Black men are four times more likely to die by suicide than Black women.

Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs): Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) as defined by the U.S. Centers of Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) are potentially traumatic events that occur in childhood (0–17 years).

Examples:

- Racial discrimination
- Housing and food insecurity
- Enforced poverty
- Violence, abuse, or neglect
- Witnessing violence in the home or community
- Sexual violence
- Lack of quality education and healthcare

ACEs are strongly linked to coronary heart disease, poor physical health, persistent mental distress, heavy drinking, substance use, and smoking (Sheats et al., 2018).

Health Disparities Are Driven by Social and Economic Equities.



SOURCE: kff.org

A Call to Action:

Effective policy development is essential for addressing complex societal challenges and ensuring sustainable progress. Policy recommendations serve as strategic guidance for decision-makers, offering well-researched solutions to pressing issues.

By implementing these strategies, policymakers, organizations, and communities can work collaboratively to achieve meaningful and lasting change.

Address social determinants of health

Improve black male life expectancy

Eliminate healthcare disparities and medical racism

Strengthen mental health supports

Reduce violence and its health impacts

Support family engagement

Strengthen postsecondary access and completion

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