OUR DREAMS WON'T BE DEFERRED

RECLAIMING PROGRESS FOR BLACK MEN AND BOYS IN AN AGE OF RETREAT

A REPORT PRESENTED BY

MORIAH GROUP

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Primary Authors and Researchers

Rebecca Rodriguez, Ph.D.

Maya Pilgrim

Rhonda Tsoi-A-Fatt, Ed.D.

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— The Moriah Group

01 Introduction: Our Dreams Won't Be Deferred

Rhonda Tsoi-A-Fatt, Ed.D.
Founder and CEO
The Moriah Group

Black men and boys in the United States continue to live in the shadow of systems that were never designed to ensure their freedom, let alone their flourishing.

It has been 15 years since *We Dream a World* first called on philanthropy, policy, and communities to reimagine a future where Black boys born in 2007 would come of age in a society committed to their wholeness. Some of those boys are now 18. They are graduating from high school, entering the workforce, applying to college, navigating adulthood. And many are doing so while carrying the compounded weight of underinvestment, overpolicing, intergenerational trauma, and systemic exclusion.

The conditions that sparked the 2010 report remain. In some ways, they have intensified. We write this new report at a time when national conversations on equity have been strategically reframed and politicized. Language that once called for justice is being stripped from legislation and banned from classrooms. DEI programs are being dismantled. Efforts to address historic harm are met with calls for "colorblindness" or silence. But while the political discourse has shifted, the urgent needs of Black boys and men have not. If anything, they demand louder, more persistent, more unrelenting attention.

This updated edition of *We Dream a World* is not a restatement of past ideas — it is a reassertion of an enduring truth: the well-being of Black men and boys is a national imperative. It is not optional. It is not a niche concern. It is foundational to the social, economic, and democratic health of this nation. And it is a mirror through which we see whether America has the courage to become what it claims to be.

From Crisis to Continuity: Where We Were, Where We Are

In 2010, we named the crisis facing Black men and boys across five domains: education, employment and wealth, health, fatherhood and families, and justice. The data was stark.

In education, half of Black boys were not graduating from high school on time. In employment, Black men with college degrees earned less than white men with only high school diplomas. In health, life expectancy for Black men lagged more than a decade behind the national average. Injustice defined the justice system, where Black boys were criminalized in classrooms and incarcerated at rates grossly out of step with their white peers.

Since that time, there have been important gains. Graduation rates have risen. Youth incarceration has declined. New models for community investment and school-based support systems have taken root. Public discourse has shifted — briefly — to acknowledge systemic racism as a structural, not personal, failing. Yet progress has not been linear, nor universal. For every area of improvement, a new or resurgent threat emerges. For every child who makes it, too many are still left behind.

The COVID-19 pandemic revealed, with brutal clarity, the racial fault lines that define access to health care, employment, and safety. Black men died at disproportionately high rates. They lost jobs, businesses, and family members. They grieved in isolation and worked on the front lines. And when protests erupted in response to the police murders of George Floyd and countless others, Black boys and men again bore the burden of having to prove their humanity to a nation still reluctant to see it.

Dehumanization Is the Root

The crisis we face is not only statistical — it is moral. It is the result of a country that has for centuries dehumanized Black life and Black masculinity. That dehumanization does not begin at the jailhouse door; it begins in preschool classrooms where Black boys are suspended for behaviors others are coached through. It manifests in emergency rooms where Black men's pain is doubted and untreated. It takes shape in workplaces where potential is questioned and contributions are dismissed. It is reinforced by media narratives that cast Black boys as threats rather than children. And it is codified in policies that criminalize poverty, restrict opportunity, and prioritize punishment over support.

Dehumanization is not abstract. It shows up in school policies, law enforcement practices, housing segregation, and the racial wealth gap. It affects how teachers perceive students, how doctors make diagnoses, how employers read résumés, and how judges issue sentences. To combat this, we must center the humanity of Black men and boys in everything we do. We must build systems not merely to "help" them, but to recognize their dignity, their promise, and their full complexity.

This work demands more than reform. If we are to truly advance justice, our solutions must reach beyond merely stopping harm. They must be designed to cultivate well-being, affirm humanity, and build the conditions where Black boys can thrive. It calls for the radical transformation of systems that inflict harm and the intentional construction of infrastructures that sustain

life. It insists that Black boys and men are not projects to be fixed, but people to be seen, loved, and resourced. It dares to center joy as a metric of justice and declares dignity as non-negotiable. Healing is not the absence of suffering — it is the presence of systems that affirm the worth, promise, and possibility of Black life.

Racial Trauma Is a Public Health Crisis

For too long, the impact of dehumanization and racism, also known as racial trauma, has been under-acknowledged in our public systems. But the science is clear. Chronic exposure to racism has devastating physiological and psychological effects. It contributes to higher rates of hypertension, heart disease, diabetes, and shortened life expectancy. For Black men and boys, the stress of constant surveillance, fear of violence, economic precarity, and social isolation compounds over time — affecting everything from school performance to immune function to sleep quality.

This trauma is passed down, inherited not only biologically but socially. Grandfathers who bore the scars of Jim Crow raise sons who faced mass incarceration, who in turn raise boys navigating new iterations of old harm. This is not just history. It is the present tense of racial injustice. And if we are serious about healing, we must confront the full spectrum of this harm.

Healing is not a metaphor — it is a mandate. It requires culturally grounded, community-rooted practices that are affirming, not pathologizing. It requires shifting from punishment to restoration, from suspicion to support, from erasure to recognition.

Intersectionality Is Not Optional

One of the most critical insights since 2010 has been the growing recognition of the deep importance of intersectionality. If we are to build systems that support Black boys and men fully, we must recognize their intersectional realities. Black boys are not all straight, cisgender, middle-class, or neurotypical. Some are queer, trans, disabled, undocumented, or growing up in foster care. Some are caregivers. Some are navigating mental illness. These identities do not dilute their Blackness — they enrich it, complicate it, and require us to respond with greater specificity and nuance.

Too often, systems treat Black boys as a monolith. But one-size-fits-all solutions fail to meet the unique needs of those living at the margins of the margins. Intersectionality calls us to widen our lens and sharpen our tools. It insists that we center those most impacted, not as afterthoughts, but as leaders in defining what equity requires. **When we talk about racial justice, we must also talk about gender justice, disability justice, and LGBTQIA+ liberation.** We must ask not only what systems do to Black boys, but what they deny them: joy, intimacy, affirmation, safety, and the space to define their own manhood on their own terms.

A Call to Philanthropy, Policy, and Practice

This report is more than a documentation of disparities. It is a call to action. And it is directed to all sectors with the power to shape outcomes:

- **Philanthropy** must fund long-term, Black-led work that is healing-centered and community-defined. It must resist the temptation of short-term metrics and invest in generational change.
- **Policy experts and legislators** must commit to race- and gender-explicit policymaking that recognizes the unique experiences of Black men and boys. Data disaggregation must be the norm, not the exception. Legislative agendas must include Black boys as central stakeholders, not peripheral populations.
- **Nonprofit leaders and practitioners** must build programs that do not just "serve" Black boys but partner with them. Programs must be informed by lived experience, grounded in love, and accountable to outcomes that matter to the communities they claim to serve.

Across all sectors, we must embrace a new standard — one that does not tolerate symbolic gestures in place of systemic change. That does not conflate representation with liberation. That understands accountability not as punishment, but as care in action.

The Dream

The original vision of *We Dream a World* remains alive. It is rooted in the belief that Black boys deserve more than survival. They deserve joy, safety, and opportunity. They deserve teachers who see them, doctors who believe them, and communities that uplift them. They deserve futures that are not defined by fear or scarcity, but by abundance, freedom, and love.

We do not offer this vision as a fantasy, but as a blueprint. We believe in a world where:

Black boys are nurtured in classrooms that affirm their brilliance.

Black men are employed in jobs that respect their labor and pay living wages.

Black families have access to healthcare, housing, and healing.

Black fathers and families are supported to be more cohesive.

Black communities are protected and resourced, not criminalized.

Black lives are honored, not just in hashtags or tragedies, but in policies, practices, and everyday acts of justice.

This is our dream. And it will not be deferred. This is a call to resist the silence that inevitably follows moments of reckoning. It is a call to sustain the work when the cameras leave and the headlines fade. It is a call to not only dream a world — but to build one where Black boys are safe, whole, and free.

To the boys who were three in 2010 and are 18 today — we see you. To the ones coming up behind them — we are not done. The dream lives. And we are still dreaming it forward.

02 Education

Introduction

Education should be a pathway to opportunity. Yet for many Black boys, schools remain sites of dehumanization rather than empowerment — not due to lack of ability, but because they are too often misperceived, undervalued, and criminalized in learning environments meant to nurture them. The 2010 We Dream a World *report highlighted deep disparities in educational attainment, disciplinary policies, and access to quality learning environments. Fifteen years later, despite some progress, these disparities remain deeply entrenched.*

From early childhood through postsecondary education, systemic inequities continue to push Black boys out of learning environments and limit their academic potential. Predominantly Black schools are underfunded, employ more uncertified teachers, and offer fewer advanced learning courses than their white-majority counterparts. Racial bias in disciplinary policies fuels the school-to-prison pipeline as Black boys are still twice as likely to face suspension or expulsion as their white peers.

Despite some progress, these gains remain fragile, as underfunded schools, racialized disciplinary policies, and inequitable access to quality education still hinder success for young Black males. Black-majority schools continue to be underfunded due to historical policies that have long denied Black children an educational system that recognizes their full humanity. Even after *Brown v. Board of Education (Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka*, 1954), de facto segregation persists through redlining, school

zoning, and inequitable funding models, leaving Black students in under-resourced schools with fewer experienced teachers and fewer advanced learning opportunities.

Addressing these disparities requires more than access; it demands systemic change. Policies that dehumanize Black boys must be dismantled and replaced with systems and practices that affirm their dignity, brilliance, and right to learn.

In the years following the original report, shifting educational policies, increased public attention to racial disparities, and new research on trauma, adverse childhood experiences (ACEs), and social determinants of learning have reshaped discussions around Black boys' education. National initiatives such as My Brother's Keeper (2014) and the Executives' Alliance for Boys and Men of Color (2013) focused philanthropic and policy-driven efforts on improving educational and economic outcomes for Black boys and young men.

At the same time, heightened awareness of the school-to-prison pipeline, disproportionate discipline measures, and the impact of systemic trauma led to new conversations about creating more culturally responsive and trauma-informed learning environments. Initiatives began to fill the gap that the original *WDAW* report recommended "to create personalized career and academic counseling and support to support postsecondary access and success for low-income Black men" (Tsoi-A-Fatt, 2010, p. 13); however, the long-term impact of many of these efforts remains undocumented or unpublished.

Federal and state education policies also evolved. The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) (2015) replaced No Child Left Behind and gave states more control over accountability measures, impacting how schools serve historically marginalized students but does not require reporting by gender. This also means that race and gender specific data are challenging to attain due to differences in reporting standards across districts and states. This leaves a tremendous gap in benchmarking national trends for Black male students.

Fifteen years after the original *We Dream a World* report, where do we stand?

Areas of Progress

Over the past 15 years, targeted investments and increased awareness of educational disparities have led to measurable improvements for Black students overall. While a gender gap persists across racial groups, with female students outperforming male students, and data on nonbinary and gender expansive students remains virtually nonexistent, there are encouraging signs of progress. These gains highlight where momentum is building and where further efforts can drive continued improvement.

- **High school completion:** The graduation rate for Black males has increased significantly. Census data show that high school completion among Black males aged 25 and older rose from 82% in 2010 to 88.5% in 2022.
- **College attainment:** College degree attainment for Black males grew from 16% in 2010 to 22.7% in 2022, according to Census data.
- **Early education access:** Enrollment in early education has expanded, with 48% of Black 3- to 4-year-olds enrolled in early education programs.
- **Afterschool program engagement:** Participation in afterschool programs rose from 14% in 2009 to 18% in 2020, reflecting greater engagement in critical early learning and enrichment opportunities.

Areas of Concern

Despite these gains, structural inequities continue to obstruct the academic success of Black boys at every stage of education. Many of the same barriers identified in the original 2010 *We Dream a World* report persist, and in some cases, have deepened, undermining opportunities for sustained progress.

- **Early education equity:** While Black children are the most likely to be enrolled in public preschool, they are the least likely to attend high-quality programs, limiting school readiness and early development.
- **Literacy and numeracy gaps:** By fourth grade, only 11.8% of Black boys achieve reading proficiency. By eighth grade, more than half (53.7%) score Below Basic in reading. Black boys remain underrepresented in gifted and talented programs and overrepresented in special education placements, reflecting systemic bias in how potential and need are assessed.
- **Ongoing academic challenges:** The COVID-19 pandemic disproportionately impacted Black communities, both economically and in terms of health, placing many families under prolonged stress. Black students continue to grapple with post-pandemic learning loss and elevated rates of chronic absenteeism. In 2022, 39% of Black students were chronically absent — 40% higher than white students — exacerbating achievement gaps and complicating long-term recovery.
- **Discipline disparities:** Although there have been some reforms in school discipline, Black boys, who make up only 7.7% of public school enrollment, account for 18% of expulsions. They are still twice as likely as white boys to face suspension or expulsion, perpetuating the school-to-prison pipeline.
- **College enrollment and completion:** Undergraduate enrollment for Black men has dropped by 22% since 2019. Among those who do enroll, 44% leave college without earning a degree — the highest rate of any racial or gender group — raising serious concerns about long-term economic mobility and opportunity.

While the data show areas of progress, persistent racial gaps highlight an urgent need for systemic change. The following sections will examine how these disparities unfold at different stages of education and identify solutions that affirm Black boys' dignity, brilliance, and right to learn.

Early Education and School Readiness Gaps

Investments in early childhood education have been shown to boost school readiness, narrow racial achievement gaps, and improve long-term outcomes such as educational attainment, career opportunities, and lifetime earnings. Yet Black children continue to face unequal access to these vital programs.

Challenges

In 2022, about 48% of Black 3- to 4-year-olds were enrolled in public or private preschool programs. Black children had the highest enrollment in public preschool (37%) but one of the lowest in private preschool (10%). Despite strong participation, Black children still face limited access to **high-quality** early education (National Center for Education Statistics, 2024a).

Although publicly funded early education programs like Head Start have expanded, they do not often reach all eligible Black children. Only 54% of eligible Black children are served by Head Start preschool (Hardy et al., 2020). Many Black and Latinx children live in neighborhoods with too few available slots, making access highly competitive. While the average white Head Start-eligible child lives in a neighborhood with 60 eligible children per center, Black and Latinx children face competition from nearly 90 and 100 peers for these same services (Hardy et al., 2020). This "Head Start Center gap" of 30 or more children significantly restricts access for Black and Latinx families. These challenges are further compounded by the fact that Black households are the least likely to have a Head Start center located within their immediate community, adding logistical barriers to enrollment.

Even when Black children are enrolled in early education, the quality of programs varies significantly by geography. Access to Head Start is highly uneven across states. For example, Mississippi, the District of Columbia, and Kansas serve about two-thirds of eligible Black preschoolers, while states like Arizona, Nevada, and Colorado serve only one-third or fewer (Hardy et al., 2020). Although the number of Head Start slots has remained relatively stable since 2013, these racial and geographical disparities continue to limit access for many Black children across the nation.

During the 2020–2021 school year, 61% of the country's 17,821 public school districts offered public pre-K programs serving 1.2 million children (Office of Civil Rights, 2023). However, Black children remain underrepresented in state-funded pre-K programs and even when enrolled, these children attend schools that fail to meet national quality standards, reinforcing learning disparities. Just 4% of Black children in public Pre-K attend programs that meet 9 of the 10 quality standards developed by the National Institute of Early Education Research (Gillispie, 2019; Iruka et al., 2021). This stark disparity underscores the urgent need for greater investment in high-quality early learning environments that equitably serve Black children.

School Proficiencies in Reading and Math

Early academic proficiency in reading and math is a critical predictor of long-term educational success. Yet Black boys — particularly those in underfunded schools — face systemic barriers that limit their access to quality instruction and support in these foundational subjects.

Long-Term Disparities

The 2010 *We Dream a World* Report highlighted that in 2009, Black boys were three times more likely than their white peers to lack basic skills in math and reading. Over the past decade, these gaps have persisted and, in some cases, have widened.

NAEP data from 2024 shows that Black boys remain disproportionately in the Below Basic category for reading and math, with little progress towards proficiency.

By **fourth grade**, only **11.8%** of Black male students achieved reading proficiency, compared to **26.6%** of white male students (U.S. Department of Education Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics, 2024b) . In math, just **17%** of Black male fourth graders scored at or above Proficient, compared to **41%** of white male students (U.S. Department of Education Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics, 2024a).

By **eighth grade**, these gaps widen further: **53.7%** of Black boys scored Below Basic in reading, compared to **27.8%** of white boys (U.S. Department of Education Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics, 2024a, 2024b).

The following table, where red indicates decreases in proficiency and green indicates gains, illustrates that between 2009 and 2024, there were substantial declines in eighth-grade math performance among Black male students, with many shifting from the Basic and Proficient levels into Below Basic. Proficiency in both math and reading drops significantly between fourth and eighth grade for Black boys, with few advancing to Proficient and even fewer to Advanced.

For Black Males: % Difference from 2009 to 2024*

	Below Basic	At Basic	At Profi ient	At Advanced
4th Grade Math	3.8	-7.8	2.3	1.6
8th Grade Math	11.3	-9.3	-2.4	0.4
8th Grade Reading	2.8	-4.2	0.7	0.7
8th Grade Reading	4.0	-6.6	2.2	0.7

Source: (U.S. Department of Education Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics, 2024a and 2024b)

The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) measures student performance in subjects like math and reading, categorizing achievement into four levels: **Below Basic** (minimal understanding), **Basic** (partial mastery), **Proficient** (solid competency), and **Advanced** (superior performance). These categories help track trends over time and highlight disparities across student groups.

These patterns reveal not just a failure in literacy education but a failure to recognize and incorporate the cultural strengths Black boys bring to learning.

Expanding Definitions of Literacy

National data show that Black boys remain overrepresented in the Below Basic category for reading, but this does not fully reflect their literacy potential. Black literacy traditions that emphasize **oral storytelling, fluency, and verbal expression** are strongly developed among Black children and correlated with future reading success (Stevenson & Ross, 2015).

> **"I have learned that there is healing power in literacy to protect Black boys from harm no matter how often trouble strikes. There is also beauty in texts across the disciplines for Black males."** (Tatum et al., 2021)

Despite these strengths, traditional literacy assessments rarely measure oral fluency or debate-based comprehension, reinforcing deficit perspectives of Black male literacy. Many boys who struggle with traditional writing assessments demonstrate their understanding through oral expression, whether through rap-style narratives, debates, or verbal analysis (Stevenson & Ross, 2015). Yet these literacy forms are routinely excluded from standardized assessments, limiting how Black boys' skills are recognized, valued and nurtured in school environments.

State Literacy Reforms: Progress and Gaps

In response to early literacy disparities, some states have adopted targeted policies aimed at improving reading outcomes. Since 2010, 22 states have passed legislation to support literacy development (Education Commission of the States, 2024). Alabama, for example, now requires individualized reading improvement plans for students identified as needing support (Fischer & Syverson, 2020).

While these reforms represent progress, many fail to address the deeper issue: how literacy itself is defined and taught. When interventions focus narrowly on standardized testing rather than inclusive, culturally responsive literacy instruction, they risk perpetuating existing inequities instead of driving the transformative change our education systems urgently need.

The Role of Afterschool Programming in Supporting Black Boys

Given the persistent gaps in reading and math proficiency, afterschool programs offer a crucial space for Black boys to receive additional academic support. These programs not only reinforce classroom learning but also provide mentorship and culturally affirming experiences that traditional school settings often lack.

Challenges

Since the publication of the 2010 *We Dream a World* report, Black children's participation rates in afterschool programs have grown from 14% in 2009 to 18% in 2020 (Afterschool Alliance, 2021b) while unsupervised rates have dropped from 29% to 13% (Afterschool Alliance, 2021b).

Despite progress, demand remains high: 58% of Black children not currently enrolled would participate if given the opportunity, but cost (55%) and safe transportation (59%) remain major barriers particularly in rural communities of color (Afterschool Alliance, 2021a). Notably, 90% of Black parents with children in afterschool programs report satisfaction, highlighting their effectiveness in meeting the needs of families (Afterschool Alliance, 2021b).

Beyond academics, culturally responsive environments strengthen engagement, build self-efficacy, and promote resilience — counteracting the dehumanizing experiences many Black students face in schools (Stiler & Allen, 2006). These programs create environments where children feel valued, supported, and empowered by affirming cultural identity, fostering mentorship, and celebrating Black excellence.

Expanding afterschool opportunities is not just about educational equity; it is essential for fostering positive youth development, stronger family and community connections, and ensuring Black children have the resources they need to thrive. Recent funding, including federal COVID-19 relief funds expanded access to afterschool and summer programs (Hinchcliffe, 2023). However, with relief funds ending, sustained investment is needed to ensure Black children continue to benefit from these critical resources (Hinchcliffe, 2023).

Policy and Programmatic Solutions

A child's access to a high-quality education should not depend on their zip code. To close school readiness gaps and increase academic proficiencies, we must:

- **Invest in public schools** to strengthen neighborhood education and ensure all students have access to quality resources and opportunities. Avoid diverting critical public funds to voucher programs that weaken public schools and exacerbate inequities.
- **Increase funding for school accountability** and transparency to ensure public dollars support students with the greatest need.
- **Implement statewide school funding formulas** that allocate additional resources to schools serving low-income students, English learners, and students with disabilities.
- **Close racial and economic gaps in per-pupil spending** by ensuring federal and state education funding addresses disparities.
- **Expand community school models** that integrate wraparound services, including health care, afterschool programs, and family engagement initiatives, particularly in underfunded districts.
- **Reduce reliance on local property taxes** to create a more equitable distribution of resources.
- **Promote school integration** through innovative strategies such as magnet schools, open enrollment policies, and revised feeder patterns to promote diversity. Magnet schools, when designed with equity in mind, have proven effective in reducing racial and economic isolation. Organizations like the Southerners Education Foundation and Learning Policy Institute advocate for expanding magnet programs to increase educational equity. Research highlights that well-implemented magnet programs attract diverse student populations through specialized curricula and inclusive enrollment policies. Still, care must be taken not to further segregate traditional public schools in the district. (Pfleger & Orfield, 2024; Kitchens & Brodnax, 2021; Harris, 2022)
- **Use racial and gender disaggregated data and equity impact analysis** to identify where Black children are underrepresented in high-quality early childhood programs, including Head Start and public preschool.
- **Increase funding to communities with lower-rated childcare programs** to provide resources for quality improvements.
- **Ensure quality standards recognize** the strengths and unique challenges of home-based childcare providers.
- **Mandate regular community needs assessments** in childcare programs to document cultural and linguistic needs, as is done in Head Start.

High School Graduation, Dropout Prevention & Recovery

Between 2012 and 2020, Black students made the greatest improvements in graduation rates, cutting the racial gap between Black and white students by half and increasing the national graduation rate by 4% (Schott Foundation, 2024). Despite this progress, disparities remain.

Challenges

Graduation and Dropout Trends

White students graduate at a rate of 89%, while Black students graduate at 79%, leaving a persistent 10 percentage point gap (Reeves & Kalkat, 2023). Similarly, Latinx students have an 81% graduation rate, trailing white students by 8 points. The dropout rate for Black males aged 16–24 has fallen from 11.5% in 2012 to 7% in 2018, where it has remained (National Center for Education Statistics, 2024b). However, sustaining this progress requires continued investment in high school completion programs and postsecondary pathways that provide meaningful career and educational opportunities for Black boys.

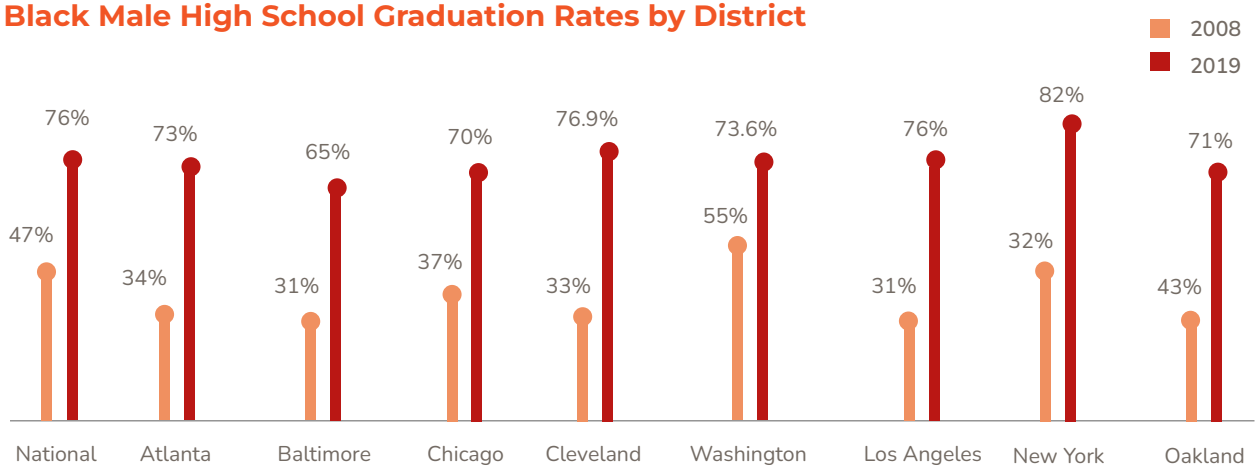
High School Dropout Rates, 2022

Black males 16–24 years: 7%

Black females 16–24 years: 4.4%

Source: National Center for Education Statistics, 2024

Black Male High School Graduation Rates by District



Source: National Center for Education Statistics. (2024). High School Graduation Rates. Condition of Education. U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences. Retrieved March 18, 2025, from https://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/indicator/coi.

Graduation rates for Black male students vary significantly by region. In Southern public school districts in large cities such as Mobile, Miami, and Houston, Black male graduation rates surpassed 80%, though they remained below the national average. Notably, in Mobile and Miami, districts where Black male graduation rates were above 80%, rates for white and Latinx male students also graduated at rates above 80%. However, in cities like Atlanta, Oakland, and Minneapolis, Black boys lagged their white peers by 17–22% (Schott Foundation, 2024).

The Department of Education mandates that states report high school completion rates for the prior academic year to monitor national progress. However, states are not required to disaggregate this data by sex, resulting in a lack of national high school graduation rates specifically for Black boys and girls. This gap in reporting contributes to a distorted picture of educational equity. When graduation rates are reported only by race, the higher rates among Black girls often mask the significantly lower rates among Black boys. Among five states with available data on race and sex, in 2021, approximately 89% of girls graduated on time compared to 83% of boys, indicating a 6 percentage point gap (Reeves & Kalkat, 2023). Examining this data by race and sex revealed an even larger gap between Black boys and Black girls' graduation rates; 85% of girls in 2021 graduated high school compared to 76% of Black boys, a 9 percentage point gender gap within the same racial group (Reeves & Kalkat, 2023).

State-level averages can also mask large disparities between schools, particularly between majority Black schools and those with fewer Black students. Majority Black schools often experience lower funding, fewer experienced teachers, reduced access to advanced coursework, and harsher disciplinary practices than their counterparts serving predominantly white or affluent students, even within the same state (R. T.-A.-F. Bryant, 2015). These disparities underscore the need for school- and district-level data that can reveal where inequities are concentrated and help guide targeted reforms.

To advance equity in education, we urgently need improved data systems that disaggregate high school graduation rates by both race and gender and enable comparisons across schools and districts. Without this level of detail, the unique barriers facing Black boys remain obscured in aggregate data, limiting our ability to design targeted, effective solutions.

Black male educational attainment has been climbing since 2010 while still lagging behind Black females.

Progress in Education: Rising Attainment Among Black Americans (2010–2022)			
Educational Attainment	2010	2019	2022
Male, high school graduate or higher	80.5%	86.1%	87.4%
Female, high school graduate or higher	83.4%	88.2%	89.4%
Male, bachelor's degree or higher	16%	20.1%	22.7%
Female, bachelor's degree or higher	20.1%	25.5%	29%

Source: National Center for Education Statistics. (2024). High School Graduation Rates. Condition of Education. U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences. Retrieved [date], from https://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/indicator/coi.

This progress reinforces a critical truth: When schools provide Black boys with the care, guidance, and resources they need from the start of their educational journey, long-term success follows. To sustain and accelerate these gains, it is essential to address key intervention points — particularly in middle school, a critical tipping point where dropout risk increases.

Middle school is a critical stage for many Black boys, where academic struggles, exclusionary discipline, and identity challenges increase dropout risk (Wint et al., 2022). Schools that prioritize mentorship, culturally relevant curricula, and leadership development achieve higher engagement and retention rates for Black boys. Investing in culturally responsive education, mentorship, and supportive learning environments during middle school is essential to keeping Black boys engaged and on track for high school graduation.

Re-Engagement Strategies: Alternative Pathways to High School Completion

For Black boys who have left school or are at risk of dropping out, alternative education pathways provide flexible learning models, career training, and mentorship to support high school completion and postsecondary success.

In the early 2000s, the term "dropout factories" was coined for schools in communities most impacted by poverty, institutions that produced 73% of Black, 81% of Native American, and 66% of Latinx students who drop out

(Balfanz, 2007). Research on dropout factors reveals that many students leave schools due to toxic home, neighborhood or school environments; caregiving responsibilities; or financial stress that makes earning money more urgent than education (Center for Promise, 2016).

These findings strongly align with concurrent research on adverse childhood experiences (ACE's) and the impact of trauma on educational and health outcomes (Crouch et al., 2019). Additional research highlights that students who don't complete high school in four years often leave due to hardship — not a lack of ability — and that two-thirds eventually return to complete a diploma or equivalency (Center for Promise, 2016).

A number of routes have been developed for young people to re-engage with finishing secondary education. These include district-based programs, community-based programs, re-engagement centers, which match students with available services to meet their education goals, and post-secondary partnerships (Center for Promise, 2016). Examples of these are at right:

The success of these programs depends not on "fixing" participants but on adopting a strengths-based Positive Youth Development approach. This approach includes providing educational experiences that fit students' lives, encouraging supportive relationships with adults and peers, providing consistent support, offering work-readiness strategies, and access to comprehensive support services (Center for Promise, 2016). While outcome data for these programs have not yet been synthesized through meta-analysis, it's worth noting that the Black male dropout rate has **fallen from 11.5% in 2012 to 7% in 2022** (National Center for Education Statistics, 2024b).

Programs like the Leading Men Fellowship in Baltimore train and place young Black and Latino men as early literacy instructors in preschool classrooms. This initiative increases male educators of color while providing mentorship that fosters early engagement and long-term academic success (Center for High Impact Philanthropy, 2023).

100 Black Men of America offers alternative high school completion programs that integrate mentorship and workforce training. In San Antonio, partnerships with local institutions help young Black men reconnect to education and career pathways (Up Partnership, 2023).

Urban school districts have expanded Career and Technical Education (CTE) programs, offering hands-on training and industry certifi ations to boost student engagement. Milwaukee Public Schools' M3 program partners with local technical colleges to offer students career-focused education (Council of the Great City School, 2018).

Among the programs featured by My Brother's Keeper is the Office of African American Male Achievement, out of the Oakland School District. The flagship program, Manhood Development, is evolving into a program called King Care. Utilizing Black male educators, culturally resonant pedagogy, social-emotional learning, and academic support, the program targets reductions in Black male students' disproportionately high dropout rates, as recommended in the original report. In schools with access to the AAMA during ninth and 10th grades, the high school graduation rate for Black males increased by at least 3.2 percentage points (Dee & Penner, 2019).

Policy and Programmatic Solutions

Increasing high school graduation rates and re-engaging Black boys at risk of dropping out starts with:

- **Investing in alternative education programs** for youth who have disengaged.
- **Expanding second-chance diploma and GED programs** to provide multiple pathways to high school completion.
- **Increasing access to workforce training** to prepare students for high-demand careers.
- **Expanding youth pre-apprenticeships** and apprenticeships to provide technical skills, a high school diploma or equivalent, a postsecondary credential, and paid work experience.

Post-Secondary Education & Career Pathways

Challenges

College Enrollment and Completion

Between 2010 and 2022, Black men's bachelor's degree attainment rose from 12% to 16.3%, while associate's degree attainment increased from 7.8% to 9.7%. Meanwhile, the share of Black men who attended college but did not complete a degree dropped from 19% to 17% (data not shown in table), signaling improved retention.

Postsecondary Degree Attainment for Black Men (Ages 25 and Older) (2010–2022)

Attainment	2010	2019	2022
Associate's degree	7.8%	9.5%	9.7%
Bachelor's degree	12.0%	16.7%	16.3%
Master's degree	4.5%	5.8%	6.2%
Professional degree	0.7%	0.5%	1.0%
Doctoral degree	0.6%	1.0%	1.1%

Source: https://www.census.gov/data/tables/2022/demo/educational-attainment/cps-detailed-tables.html

Postsecondary Degree Attainment for Black Adults (Ages 25 and Older) by Gender, 2022[4]

Attainment	Black Male (%)	Black Female (%)
Associate's degree	9.7	12.1
Bachelor's degree	16.3	18
Master's degree	6.2	9.7
Professional degree	1.0	1
Doctoral degree	1.1	1.8

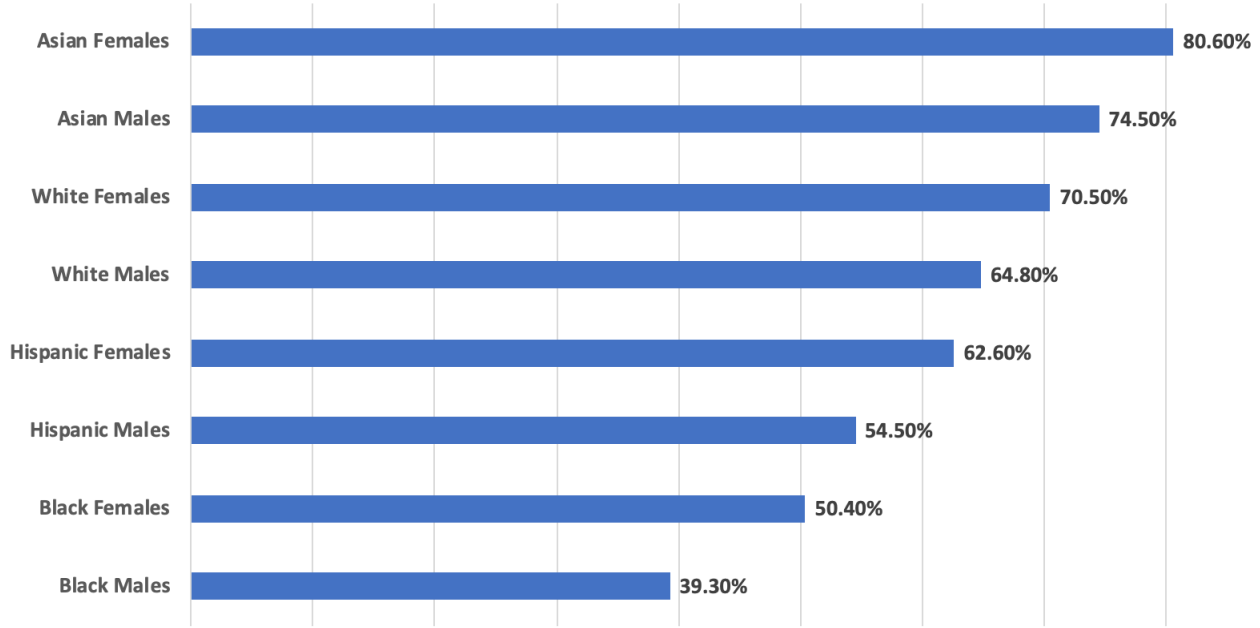
Source: (Kim et al., 2024)

Undergraduate Enrollment for Black Adults by Gender (1999-2020)[5]

Attainment	Black Male (%)	Black Female (%)
1999-2000	36.7	63.3
2010-2020	63.3	65.8

Source: (Kim et al., 2024)

College Completion Gaps by Race and Gender (within 6 years)



Source: Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) Winter 2021-2022, provisional data, Table 1. (U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2022)

Graduate and professional degree attainment rose from 5% in 2008 to 8.3% in 2022 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2023), but Black men remain underrepresented in higher education limiting leadership and economic mobility.

Despite progress, black men experience the highest stop-out rate (44%) and the lowest college completion rate (39.3%) (Shapiro et al., 2017).

Between 2019 and 2021, Black male undergraduate enrollment declined 23.5% at community colleges (Camardelle et al., 2022)

At HBCUs, overall enrollment declined 11%, while Black men's enrollment dropped by 25% (Windsor & Reeves, 2024). Despite gains in degree attainment, Black men remain less likely than other racial groups to complete college, facing systemic barriers to enrollment, persistence, and graduation.

This decline reflects broader challenges Black men face in higher education, including financial barriers, lack of institutional support, and systemic inequities. After a decade of decline, Black male enrollment at

HBCUs has rebounded since 2020, growing faster than other groups, though still below pre-pandemic levels (Windsor & Reeves, 2024). This resurgence is closely tied to rising racial tensions and overt racism in the United States. Many Black students have sought educational environments where they feel safe, supported, and affirmed, leading to renewed interest in HBCUs. Historically, HBCUs have provided culturally responsive learning spaces that foster personal and academic growth (Inside Higher Ed). Additionally, the Supreme Court's 2023 decision to end race-based affirmative action has further propelled Black students toward HBCUs as institutions that prioritize their success and sense of belonging.

Test-optional policies have placed greater emphasis on GPA, coursework rigor, and extracurriculars, which disadvantages Black boys from underfunded schools who already face disciplinary disparities. The Supreme Court's 2023 ruling striking down affirmative action in college admissions threatens Black male enrollment, particularly at selective institutions, worsening existing educational and economic disparities.

Trade Schools and Technical Programs

Career and Technical Education (CTE) offer Black men cost-effective, high-demand career pathways with strong job security and earning potential. These programs, available in secondary and postsecondary institutions, offer an alternative to traditional four-year college degrees, reducing student debt while equipping students with workforce-ready skills.

In 2016, Black students made up 12% of the US population but represented 15% of students enrolled in a postsecondary CTE program (T. Anderson et al., 2021). While participation is strong, access to high-quality, high-wage career pathways remains unequal.

Black students are most represented in health sciences and hospitality, while white students dominate the trades and STEM careers (T. Anderson et al., 2021; Butrymowicz et al., 2020). These career pathways have significant financial implications.Health technicians earn $57,000 annually, compared to $100,000 for engineers and $92,000 for computer programmers (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2024). These disparities are largely determined by the schools students attend. Schools serving predominantly Black students often offer fewer CTE programs, limiting access to high-wage career pathways (Carruthers et al., 2021).

Additionally, geographic differences shape CTE participation. Black students in urban areas enroll in CTE courses at higher rates than their white peers, while in non-urban areas, participation is lower. Despite these challenges, the right investments in CTE programs can make a difference. In New York City, well-resourced CTE programs have significantly improved outcomes for Black male students. Black and Latino males in these programs graduate at higher rates than their peers in traditional high schools. Specifically, Black males in NYC CTE programs had a graduation rate of 63%, compared to 52% in traditional high schools (Treschan & Mehrotra, 2014). These findings suggest that well-resourced CTE programs can be a critical lever for improving educational attainment and career readiness for Black students, particularly in urban settings where access to high-quality vocational training can provide structured pathways to stable employment.

Limited access to advanced coursework, unequal funding of CTE programs, and biased career counseling restrict Black students' entry into high wage CTE fields (Advance CTE, 2023; Smith, 2019). Underfunded programs and lower-quality training further limit access to lucrative career tracks. Federal efforts to address these gaps have had mixed results. The Strengthening Career and Technical Education for the 21st Century Act (Perkins V) reauthorized federal support for CTE programs, emphasizing equity and workforce alignment. The fiscal year 2025 budget proposal includes a $1.5 billion allocation for CTE State Grants, a $40 million increase over the previous year (U.S. Department of Education, 2025). However, advocates warn that federal budget cuts to education and workforce programs could disrupt access to CTE opportunities for students of color (Advance CTE, 2024).

While CTE participation among Black students has increased, comprehensive data on completion rates, job placement, and long-term earnings by race is limited, making it difficult to assess the full impact on economic mobility.

Expanding Postsecondary Pathways for Black Men

Recent initiatives have expanded alternative postsecondary education pathways designed specifically for **Black men**. These programs address the unique challenges faced by Black male students and support their educational and career advancement.

The **ECMC Foundation's Men of Color Initiative** funds college and university programs that implement data-informed and equity-centered programs that support men of color, including Black men. The initiative has allocated nearly $20 million in grants to remove barriers to postsecondary completion and build the capacity of institutions to support these students. A key initiative,'Takeoff: Institutional Innovations for College Men of Color,' helps community colleges in piloting and scaling innovative efforts to support men of color on campus (ECMC Foundation, 2022).

Project MOST, a **Southwest Tennessee Community College** (STCC) initiative, provides Black male students with stipends, academic support, mentoring, cohort-based services, and leadership training. Participants in Project MOST have significantly higher retention and graduation rates, with some cohorts achieving up to a 91% graduation rate (Tennessee Higher Education Commission, 2021).

These programs create targeted educational pathways that improve Black men's postsecondary success and career readiness. Despite rising postsecondary enrollment, systemic K-12 barriers — including underfunded schools, lack of advanced coursework, and biased disciplinary practices — continue to restrict Black men's college and career opportunities.

Policy and Programmatic Solutions

Increasing access to postsecondary education and career pathways starts with:

- **Increasing investments in technical and trade occupations** to provide stable, well-paying career opportunities.
- **Shifting the narrative around vocational careers**, reducing stigma and highlighting their long-term economic security and growth potential.
- **Expanding college counseling and financial aid literacy programs** to ensure Black students and families can access available scholarships, grants, and debt-free education pathways.

Systemic Barriers to Quality Education

Challenges

Underfunded Schools and Teacher Quality Gaps

Black-Majority Schools Receive Fewer Resources and Have Higher Rates Of Uncertified Teachers

Black students are disproportionately enrolled in chronically underfunded school districts, exacerbating disparities in education resources, teaching quality, and student outcomes. Nationally, 55% of Black students attend schools in chronically underfunded districts, compared to just 15% of white students (Baker et al., 2024), making Black students 3.5 times more likely to experience resource deprivation. This disparity has grown over time. Previous data from the Schott Foundation for Public Education (Schott Foundation for Public Education, 2008) reported that 42% of Black students attended under-resourced, low-performing schools. Meanwhile, only 15% of Black students are enrolled in well-funded schools.

Funding disparities directly affect teacher quality and retention. Schools with fewer resources struggle to offer competitive salaries, professional development, and classroom support, leading to higher turnover rates and reliance on underprepared teachers. The proportion of uncertified teachers in high-minority schools fell from 28% in 2010 to 4.8% in 2016. Recent teacher shortages — exacerbated by COVID-19 — have reversed some gains, forcing many schools to hire unlicensed or emergency-certified teachers (Cardichon et al., 2020).

Teacher quality disparities persist across all geographic settings:

- **Urban Schools:** 6.1% of uncertified teachers in high minority schools vs. 2.2% in low minority schools
- **Suburban Schools:** 2.8% vs. 1.6%
- **Rural Schools:** 4.3% vs. 1%

Beyond certification, teacher experience levels remain unequal. In 2016, 17.2% of teachers in high-minority schools had less than three years of experience compared to 9.1% in low-minority schools (Cardichon et al., 2020). Teacher shortages, particularly in high-poverty areas, exacerbate these inequities. High-minority schools consistently report higher teacher vacancy rates, requiring them to fill classrooms with less-experienced, lower-paid educators, often at the expense of student learning.

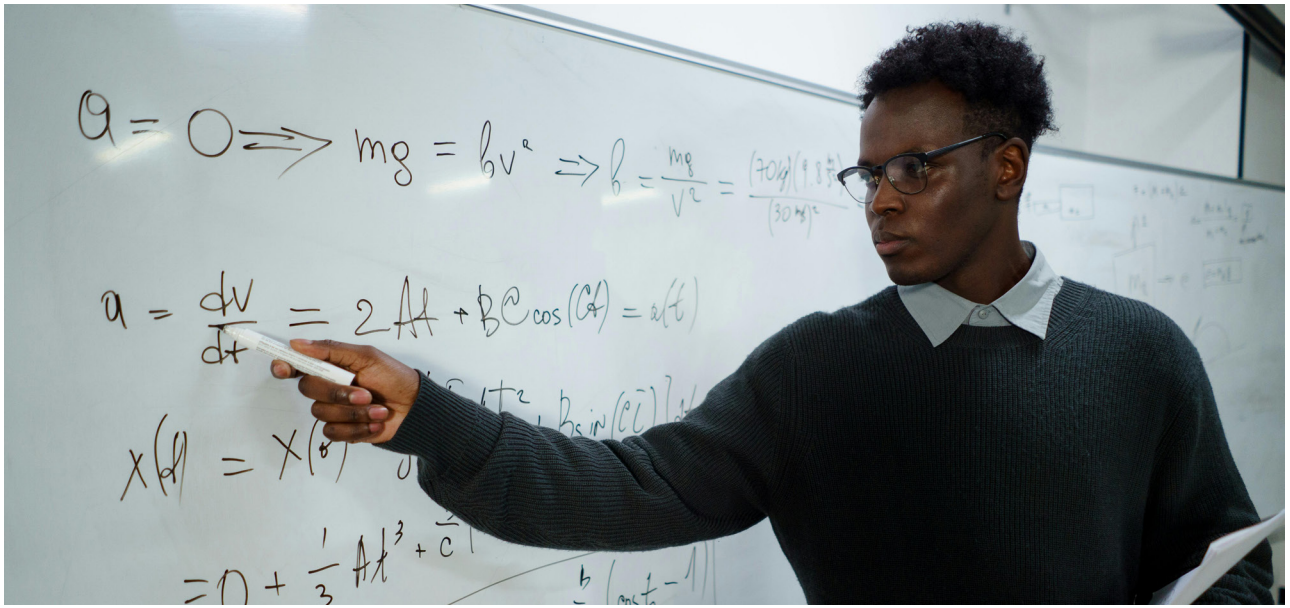
Racial Disparities in Teacher Hiring and Their Impact on Student Outcomes

Beyond funding and certification gaps, the racial and gender representation of teacher diversity plays a crucial role in Black students' educational experiences. In 2021, while Black boys constituted about 8% of the student population, only 1% of their teachers were Black men, a decline from 6.5% in 2018 (*How Many Black Male Teachers Are There in the US?*, 2023).

This lack of representation is important. Studies indicate that Black students perform better academically, have lower suspension rates, and report stronger feelings of belonging when taught by Black educators. Black male teachers act as mentors, role models, and cultural buffers, helping to affirm students' identities and reduce racial bias in school discipline and tracking. However, the pipeline for Black male educators remains critically underdeveloped, facing systemic barriers in teacher recruitment, retention, and professional development.

Progress and Persistent Gaps in Teacher Representation and Quality

Despite federal and state policies to address teacher diversity, progress has been slow, to say the least.



The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) was introduced to improve transparency in teacher quality by requiring states to report how federal, state, and local funds are spent and ensure that students of color and low-income students have access to experienced, effective teachers. However, despite these provisions, accountability measures remain weak, and no state has faced sanctions for failing to meet these equity goals. Consequently, high-minority schools continue to experience lower salaries, higher turnover, and more uncertified educators, perpetuating systemic disadvantages for Black students (Adler-Greene, 2019; Learning Policy Institute, 2024).

At the state level, some targeted initiatives have sought to close the teacher diversity gap. Clemson University's Call Me MiSTER program, in operation for 25 years, partners with HBCUs, community colleges, and universities to provide tuition assistance, academic support, social and cultural support, and job placement for aspiring Black educators. Of its more than 400 graduates, 85% remain classroom teachers, and 14% have advanced into leadership roles as principals, assistant principals, district office administrators, or faculty in teacher education programs (Clemson College of Education, 2024). Other programs, such as the Marathon Teaching Institute (MTI) (North Carolina Central University, 2024), have recruitment and retention of Black male teachers as their focus. While programs like MTI show promise, they remain limited in scope and funding, demonstrating the need for scaled, national solutions that address systemic barriers to teacher diversity.

Efforts to address these disparities are gaining traction, particularly through financial incentives

that have shown a measurable impact. A study at the Brookings Institute (Hansen et al., 2018) found that four key policies significantly increase teacher diversity:

1. **Relocation Assistance** – Reduces financial barriers for teachers willing to work in high-need schools.
2. **Loan Forgiveness Programs** – Helps attract more diverse candidates by reducing debt burdens.
3. **Performance-Based Bonuses** – Rewards effective educators, improving retention.
4. **Incentives for Teaching in High-Need Areas** – Encourages certified teachers to work in historically underserved schools.

These strategies have increased minority teacher representation from 2% to 4%, a critical development in schools where such student representation typically stands at just 16% (Hansen et al., 2018).

Initiatives, ranging from national policies like ESSA to financial incentive programs, as well as regional efforts like Call Me MiSTER and MTI, show a varied track record of progress. These findings highlight the potential of strategic interventions in addressing the underrepresentation of minority teachers in K-12 education, where students of color make up a large portion of the student body but are often taught by a majority of white teachers. Despite growing awareness of teacher equity issues, structural barriers and weak accountability measures persist. Without systemic reform, Black students will continue to face inequities in access to qualified teachers and educational opportunities.

The Role of School Counselors in Supporting Black Boys

School counselors play a critical role in supporting Black students, particularly Black boys, in navigating academic, social, and career pathways. Black students are more likely than their peers to cite school counselors as the primary influence on their postsecondary education (Cholewa et al., 2015). However, systemic

barriers — such as insufficient counselor-to-student ratios, gaps in counselor training, and inconsistent academic expectations — continue to restrict Black students' access to quality counseling, limiting their educational and economic mobility. (R.-L. R. Bryant, 2017). Addressing these issues is critical to ensuring Black students receive the guidance and mentorship necessary for academic and personal growth.

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The American School Counselor Association (ASCA) recommends a student-to-counselor ratio of 250:1. However, the national average remains significantly higher at 376:1 across all schools and between 178:1 to 326:1 for high schools, as of the 2023–24 school year (American School Counselor Association, 2024). Schools with predominantly students of color and low-income schools continue to face even higher ratios, limiting Black students' access to crucial guidance services (Hubbard et al., 2019). In Michigan, for example, schools serving high percentages of students of color have an average student-to-counselor ratio of 711:1, compared to 676:1 in schools with fewer students of color. High-poverty schools in Michigan average 824 students per counselor, while higher-income schools have a ratio of 638:1 (Hubbard et al., 2019).

Research indicates that Black male students are disproportionately impacted, as they are more likely to attend schools with higher counselor-to-student ratios compared to predominantly white schools (American School Counselor Association, 2019). Additionally, federal relief funds used to hire more counselors during the COVID-19 pandemic are set to expire, raising concerns about maintaining current staffing levels.

While some data suggests lower student-to-counselor ratios in certain schools, these figures do not fully reflect the higher levels of student need and increased workload in predominantly Black and low-income schools. Therefore, even with similar or lower ratios, the demand for counseling services in these schools can be significantly greater, exacerbating the challenges faced by both counselors and students.

Despite their critical role in supporting students, school counselors are often excluded from broader educational reform efforts. Their positions are frequently regulated by administrators who may not fully understand their expertise, responsibilities, or the impact they can have on Black male students' academic success (Henfield & Washington, 2016). Consequently, school counselors' potential to implement strong, targeted interventions addressing the racial and gender-specific challenges Black male students face often goes unrealized. Greater policy attention and institutional support are needed to empower counselors to drive meaningful change.

School counselors are essential in identifying students for gifted programs and special education services. However, racial biases result in Black boys being underrepresented in advanced programs and overrepresented in special education classifications.

The Gifted Education and Special Education Paradox

For decades, structural inequities in education have limited Black boys' access to advanced coursework while simultaneously overidentifying them for special education. The 2010 *We Dream a World* report found that in 2008, only 3% of Black male students were enrolled in Gifted and Talented Education (GATE) . Yet, they comprised 20% of students classified with intellectual disabilities despite making up just 9% of the school population (Tsoi-A-Fatt, 2010) .

These disparities persist, shaped by biases in student identification, teacher perceptions, and systemic barriers that determine access to enrichment opportunities versus remedial tracks. New research shows that racial biases in Advanced Placement (AP) , International Baccalaureate (IB), and Dual Enrollment (DE) participation reflect broader structural inequities that shape Black boys' academic trajectories (K. P. Anderson, 2022).

Underrepresentation in Gifted and Advanced Placement Programs

Despite slight increases in representation over the past two decades, Black boys remain significantly underrepresented in gifted and AP programs (Ford et al., 2023):

- **GATE enrollment:** From 1998 to 2018, Black males accounted for only 3.7% despite making up 7.7% of the total student population.
- **AP enrollment:** Although 8.1% of students in schools offering AP courses are Black males, they account for just 3.5% of actual AP enrollments.

Implicit racial bias among educators is a key factor limiting Black students' participation in advanced coursework (K. P. Anderson, 2022). In communities with higher explicit bias, AP participation rates are lower overall, suggesting that racial attitudes shape school policies and limit access to rigorous courses (K. P. Anderson, 2022). Additionally, subjective teacher evaluations, such as personal perceptions of a student's potential, often place Black students in lower academic tracks, whereas objective measures, like standardized test scores, provide a more consistent basis for placement (Grissom & Redding, 2016). Because subjective evaluations are influenced by implicit bias, they can reinforce disparities in access to advanced coursework, limiting opportunities for Black students to reach their full academic potential.

The racial composition of the teaching workforce also plays a role. Black students with Black teachers are three times more likely to be referred for gifted programs (6.2%) compared to Black students with non-Black teachers (2.1%) (Grissom & Redding, 2016). A diverse teaching staff can help disrupt bias in gifted identification, leading to higher student engagement, better academic outcomes, and greater self-expectations (Krasnoff, 2016).

To achieve equity, educational leaders and policymakers must develop multiple pathways to identify gifted students, ensuring that Black boys are not overlooked or excluded from opportunities (Holemon, 2022).

Structural Barriers to Advanced Coursework

Even when Black students meet advanced coursework eligibility requirements, systemic barriers limit access.

Implicit vs. Explicit Bias

Implicit bias refers to unconscious stereotypes that influence decision-making, such as teachers being less likely to refer Black students for gifted programs (Dovidio et al., 2002).

Explicit bias involves conscious prejudices that shape policies, such as limiting Black students' access to AP, IB, or DE programs (K. P. Anderson, 2022).

Both contribute to systemic barriers that limit Black students' access to advanced coursework.

Nationally (The Education Trust, 2020):

- 3 in 10 elementary school students attend schools without a gifted and talented program,
- 1 in 4 high school students do not offer a single AP course.

Without early exposure to accelerated learning opportunities, Black boys are denied the academic preparation necessary for competitive college admissions and career success.

Overrepresentation of Black Boys in Special Education

Black boys have long been overrepresented in special education, not because of higher rates of disability, but due to systemic bias and racialized misinterpretations of behavior. They are disproportionately identified under subjective categories such as intellectual disability and emotional disturbance, which often rely on educator discretion rather than objective assessments. This pattern results in unnecessary separation from general education settings and reduced access to academic opportunities.

Rather than being recognized for divergent learning styles or neurodivergent traits, Black boys are often mislabeled as defiant, disruptive, or emotionally disturbed. These mischaracterizations often lead to punitive interventions over academic support. This process mirrors historical practices of racial control in education, where Black students have been systematically denied equitable learning opportunities.

In the 2022–2023 school year, 17% of Black students received special education services under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) (Office of Special Education Programs, 2023). While gender-disaggregated data was unavailable at the time of writing, earlier data from 2020–2021 show that **17.4% of Black boys** were identified for special education services, nearly three times the rate of Black girls (5.8%) (Office for Civil Rights, n.d.).

Disparities are most pronounced in the categories of intellectual disability and emotional disturbance:

- In **2006**, Black boys accounted for **20%** of students classified as intellectually disabled despite making up only **9%** of the student population (Office for Civil Rights, n.d.-a).
- By the 2022–2023 school year, **8.7%** of Black students (male and female, aged 3-21) were classified with an intellectual disability, compared to **5.8%** of all students (Office of Special Education Programs, 2023).
- Black students accounted for **25%** of all students classified with **emotional disturbance**, despite comprising 16% of the school population (Lambert et al., 2022). Within IDEA classifications, **5.3%** of Black students were identified with **emotional disturbance** compared to **4.3%** of all students. (U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education Programs, 2023).

data and more consistent oversight, it remains unclear whether these shifts represent meaningful progress or simply changes in diagnostic labeling.

One promising factor linked to reduced over-identification is the racial match between students and teachers. A study in North Carolina—where Black students and teachers are more proportionately represented—found that Black students assigned to Black teachers were significantly less likely to be referred for special education, especially Black boys from economically disadvantaged backgrounds (C. M. D. Hart & Lindsay, 2024).

While Rosa's Law (Rosa's Law, 2010) removed stigmatizing terms from federal education and health policies, systemic issues surrounding the misidentification of Black students remain largely unaddressed.

The Shifting Landscape of Autism Diagnosis

For years, Black children were diagnosed with autism later than white children, delaying early interventions critical to long-term outcomes (Tsoi-A-Fatt, 2010). Schools and doctors often misinterpret neurodivergent traits in Black boys as behavioral problems rather than signs of autism, reinforcing harmful stereotypes about their learning ability and self-regulation. These delays restricted access to essential services and contributed to misdiagnoses in other areas, such as emotional disturbance or intellectual disability.

Recent data show a significant shift in autism diagnoses among Black children (Maenner et al., 2023):

- At ages 4 and 8, Black children are now diagnosed with autism at higher rates than white children.
- The autism diagnosis rate is 29.3 per 1,000 Black children compared to 24.3 per 1,000 white children.
- Autism prevalence among Asian, Black, and Latinx children increased by at least 30% between 2018 and 2020, whereas prevalence among white children rose by 14.6%

For the first time, autism prevalence among 8-year-old Asian or Pacific Islander (3.3%), Latinx (3.2%), and Black (2.9%) children has surpassed that of white children (2.4%) — reversing prior trends.

These shifts suggest that improved screening, increased awareness, and better access to diagnostic services have helped reduce racial disparities in autism identification.

However, these numbers alone do not indicate an absence of systemic barriers, particularly delays in diagnoses and misclassification.

Despite increased identification rates, Black children continue to be diagnosed later than their white peers (Constantino et al., 2020):

- On average, Black children receive an autism diagnosis six months later than white children.
- After parents raise concerns, Black children wait an average of three years for a formal diagnosis, with 14% of families consulting six or more providers before receiving one.
- More than 31% of Black families report a lack of available providers as a major barrier to diagnosis, particularly in under-resourced areas.
- Geographic disparities further delay autism diagnoses. While some regions diagnose children as early as 54 months, in others, it can take up to 80 months, disproportionately affecting Black children.

Black children with autism are more than twice as likely as white children to be diagnosed with a co-occurring intellectual disability (44% vs. 22%) (Constantino et al.,

Rosa's Law (2010): A Shift in Language

In October 2010, President Obama signed "Rosa's Law," which removed the terms "mental retardation" and "mentally retarded" from federal health, education, and labor policy and replaced them with "individual with an intellectual disability" and "intellectual disability" to reduce stigma and promote more respectful language.

While this was a step toward more inclusive terminology, it did not address the systemic biases that disproportionately place Black boys in restrictive special education settings. Language shifts are important, but true equity requires systemic change in how Black students are identifi d, supported, and provided with educational opportunities.

2020). This pattern suggests frequent misclassification of autism symptoms, leading to lower expectations and reduced access to autism-specific interventions.

Misdiagnosis remains a significant issue. Black boys are more likely to be labeled with behavioral disorders such as ADHD or emotional disturbance instead of autism, delaying appropriate interventions (Constantino et al., 2020). These patterns reflect longstanding systemic inequities in health care and education, where Black children's behaviors are often viewed through a deficit-based lens, reinforcing racialized stereotypes about behavior and self-discipline.

ADHD and Learning Disabilities: Ongoing Disparities

Despite rising autism diagnoses among Black children, racial bias continues to drive disparities in ADHD identification and treatment (Cénat et al., 2021):

- 14% of all children aged 3-17 have been diagnosed with ADHD or a learning disability.
- 17% of Black children had been diagnosed, compared to 15% of white children.
- Higher-income white families are more likely to receive ADHD treatment, while higher-income Black families still face barriers to proper support.

A 2021 study found that Black students were less likely to be diagnosed with ADHD than white students, suggesting that teachers and clinicians may dismiss or misinterpret symptoms in Black children (Shi et al., 2021).

- Regional differences exist. ADHD diagnoses are most prevalent in the South and Midwest.
- Even when Black students receive an ADHD diagnosis, they are less likely to receive treatment.

The misclassification of Black boys in special education, particularly in behavioral and emotional categories, often sets the stage for harsher disciplinary actions. Without appropriate academic and behavioral support, many Black boys face exclusionary discipline, reinforcing the school-to-prison pipeline.

Policy and Programmatic Solutions

Eliminating systemic barriers to quality education for Black boys starts with investing in culturally responsive teaching and teacher diversity. To do this, we must:

- **Recruit, support, and retain Black educators** through targeted scholarships, loan forgiveness programs, and leadership pipelines.
- **Expand targeted scholarships, loan forgiveness programs, and residency models** to recruit and retain Black male teachers.

- **Strengthen teacher preparation programs** at HBCUs and other Minority-Serving Institutions (MSIs).
- **Require and fund culturally responsive teacher training**
  - Require ongoing professional development on culturally responsive instruction, racial bias, and trauma-informed practices.
  - Ensure that all teacher training programs incorporate strategies for engaging Black boys in affirming and meaningful ways.
  - Expand coaching and support systems for educators to implement culturally responsive practices effectively.
- **Integrate Black histories, cultures, and contributions** across all subjects to create inclusive curricula.
- **Provide professional development and support** for paraprofessionals, school counselors, and social workers to strengthen holistic student support.

School-to-Prison Pipeline: Disciplinary Disparities, Criminalization, and Barriers

Challenges

More than a decade ago, the 2010 *We Dream a World* report underscored the stark racial disparities in school discipline, finding that Black boys were three times more likely than white boys to receive out-of-school suspensions or expulsions. While some progress has been made, they remain twice as likely to face exclusionary discipline. Addressing this persistent injustice demands bold solutions that affirm Black boys' humanity, protect their futures, and invest in their success.

Persistent Disparities in School Discipline and Implicit Bias

Bias should not determine a child's educational trajectory. Yet, research confirms that Black boys are disproportionately disciplined at every stage of their education. Studies show that educators are more likely to anticipate misbehavior from Black boys, leading to harsher discipline, even when behaviors mirror those of white peers (Gilliam et al., 2016; Owens, 2022) .

The U.S. Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights (U.S. Department of Education, 2023) r eports that despite representing just 7.7% of public school enrollment, Black boys account for:

- 15% of in-school suspensions
- 18% of out-of-school suspensions
- 18% of expulsions

While implicit bias training has been introduced in some districts, resistance to and criminalization of racial equity initiatives threaten to slow progress. True change

requires not only recognizing bias but dismantling the policies that enable it.

Over-Policing and the Expanded Use of School Discipline Personnel

Schools should nurture Black boys, not criminalize them. However, rather than increased investments in counselors, social workers, and restorative justice programs, many districts have expanded school policing, disproportionately targeting Black and Latinx students.

Between 2010 and 2023, the presence of law enforcement officers, or School Resource Officers (SROs), has increased, particularly in majority-Black schools. However, disparities in school discipline extend beyond SROs. Black and Latinx students are disproportionately exposed to School Security Officers (SSOs) and other disciplinary personnel, not just law enforcement officers (LEOs) (Munoz et al., 2025).

Recent data highlights the urgency of this issue:

- Black students experience twice the national average exposure to disciplinary personnel in high schools (Munoz et al., 2025).
- 34-37% of schools with high Black or Latinx student populations have full-time SROs, compared with 5-11% of predominantly white schools (Kidane & Rauscher, 2023).
- Black students are 2.3 times more likely than white students to be referred to law enforcement or arrested at school (Gomez, 2021).
- Ten of the nation's largest school districts now operate school police forces, embedding law enforcement directly into school systems (Gomez, 2021).

Even school districts that remove police officers often retain SSOs, ensuring that Black and Latinx students continue to experience heightened disciplinary surveillance (Munoz et al., 2025).

The criminalization of Black students begins with over-policing in the classroom. Minor infractions — such as using a cell phone, being perceived as disrespectful, or failing to comply with teacher instructions — are more likely to result in police intervention for Black students than for their white peers (Gomez, 2021; Kidane & Rauscher, 2023; Skiba et al., 2011).

In schools with SROs and SSOs, student misbehavior is more likely to escalate into law enforcement referrals rather than being handled through school-based interventions (Davis, 2024; Mann et al., 2019). This shift blurs the line between school discipline and the criminal legal system, disproportionately affecting Black youth. Rather than improving school safety, over-policing criminalizes normal childhood behavior and alienates students from the learning environments they need to succeed.

Long-Term Consequences of Exclusionary Discipline

The long-term impact of exclusionary school discipline remains a critical barrier to educational equity and long-term success for Black boys. Suspensions, expulsions, and school-based arrests disrupt the academic progress of Black boys, leading to higher drop-out rates, increased juvenile justice involvement, and long-term

economic and social consequences (Peterson, 2021).

Research highlights the lasting consequences of school pushout (Wolf & Kupchik, 2016):

- Suspended students are more likely to experience a range of adverse events and outcomes in adulthood, including criminal victimization, criminal legal system involvement, and incarceration, compared to peers with similar risk factors who have not been suspended.
- Suspension increases exposure to delinquent peer networks, heightening the risk of future criminal legal system contact.
- Exclusionary discipline disrupts education, limiting employment opportunities and increasing the likelihood of economic instability in adulthood.

When Black boys are pushed out of school, they are denied lifelong opportunities. Schools must ensure that disciplinary practices do not become obstacles to future

success. The long-term consequences of exclusionary discipline — academic disengagement, economic hardship, and increased criminal legal system contact — underscore the urgent need for systemic reform. Community leaders and policymakers have taken steps to address these disparities and create more equitable school environments.

Policy and Community Action to Reform School Discipline

Community efforts and youth-led grassroots organizing, such as the Advancement Project, have long advocated for dismantling the school-to-prison pipeline. In response to growing evidence that suspensions and expulsions do more harm than good, some states have enacted policies to curb the overuse of punitive discipline. At least 16 states and the District of Columbia have passed laws limiting suspensions and expulsions, particularly in early grades (Rafa, 2019). Across the U.S., school districts have implemented restorative justice programs, trauma-informed approaches, and positive behavior interventions to keep students engaged rather than pushing them out of school.

Despite progress, discipline reform remains inconsistent. While states and districts have reduced exclusionary discipline, others have expanded school policing, reinforcing the school-to-prison pipeline. Following the death of George Floyd, the Minneapolis School District terminated its contract with the police department that supplied SROs. Other districts, including Oakland, Denver, Milwaukee, and San Francisco, also removed police officers from schools. Three years later, Denver reinstated SROs, and Texas mandated an armed police officer for each school campus. However, evidence suggests that an increased SRO presence does not improve school safety (Fulks et al., 2020). In Texas, exposure to SROs led to a 2.5% decrease in high school graduation rates and a 4% decline in college enrollment rates (Weisburst, 2018). The table below highlights key policy shifts, demonstrating both progress and ongoing challenges.

State and district policies significantly shape school discipline, but community organizations and policymakers remain instrumental in meaningful reform.

State/District	Policy Change	Impact
Colorado (HB 12-1345, 2012)	Eliminated zero-tolerance discipline policies and required schools to use alternative measures before suspensions, expulsions, or law enforcement referrals.	Poudre School District reduced suspensions from 338 to 20. Law enforcement referrals dropped from 224 to 76 (66% reduction) in two years (Colorado General Assembly, 2012).
California ("Willful Defiance" Suspension Ban, 2020)	Banned suspensions for minor infractions such as talking back or not following directions.	Helped keep thousands of students in school rather than pushing them out for subjective disciplinary actions (Suspensions and Expulsions: Willful Defiance: Interventions and Supports, 2023).
North Carolina (Teacher Diversity Efforts)	Encouraged increasing the number of Black teachers in classrooms.	Black NC students were less likely to be removed from school as punishment when taught by Black teachers (C. A. L. Hart Cassandra M. D., 2017).
Texas (Recent Policy Shift)	Increased funding for school police, despite evidence that SRO presence leads to higher arrest rates for minor infractions.	Black and Latinx students in Texas schools with SROs face disproportionately high arrest rates for non-violent infractions (Méndez, 2022).
Florida ("Stop WOKE Act," 2022)	Restricted racial bias training for educators, limiting schools' ability to implement equity-focused discipline reforms.	Hinders discipline reform efforts, makes addressing racial disparities in school discipline policies more difficu t (Mazzei, 2022).
Minneapolis, MN (removal of SROs from schools)	Terminated contract with the Minneapolis Police Department, removing SROs from schools.	Initial data and interviews suggest that fewer Minneapolis students have contact with law enforcement officers for school- elated behavior (Janzer, 2022).

Community and Legislative Action

Grassroots organizations, families, and national advocates are leading efforts to dismantle punitive discipline policies and implement reforms that uphold the dignity of Black boys. Some key advocacy wins include:

- **Brothers, Sons, Selves Coalition & InnerCity Struggle:** Advocated for California's statewide ban on willful defiance suspensions, keeping thousands of students in school (Zero Suspensions for 'Willful Defiance' at Eastside Schools., n.d.).
- **Oakland Unified School District (2020):** Passed the George Floyd Resolution, eliminating school police and reallocating $2.5 million to hire counselors, social workers, and restorative justice coordinators (Reilly, 2020).
- **LA Unified School District:** Redirected $35 million from school policing to fund the Black Student Achievement Program (Haber, 2021).
- **Federal Legislation:** A proposed bill seeks to limit mandatory law enforcement notification for school personnel, ensuring minor infractions are not escalated to the criminal legal system (Counseling Not Criminalization in Schools Act, 2024).

Black boys are brilliant, resilient, and full of potential, yet systemic barriers continue to hinder their success. The school-to-prison pipeline is not inevitable — it is a policy choice. By eliminating punitive discipline, expanding restorative justice, and removing law enforcement from schools, we can build an education system that affirms Black boys' right to learn, grow, and thrive.

Policy and Programmatic Solutions

Restorative justice practices must replace punitive disciplinary measures to dismantle the school-to-prison pipeline.

Moving forward, schools and policymakers must:

- **Expand non-punitive approaches to discipline**, increase accountability for school policing, and invest in student mental health support.
- **Eliminate punitive discipline policies that disproportionately harm Black students.**
- **Invest in restorative justice, trauma-informed approaches**, and positive behavior interventions as alternatives to exclusionary discipline.
- **Redirect school safety funding toward mental health professionals** and support services to reduce reliance on police in school settings.
- **Hold schools accountable for discipline disparities** by mandating transparent reporting on suspension, expulsion, and school-based arrest data.
- **Expand mentorship programs** that connect Black boys with positive role models, fostering self-confidence, academic success, and aspirations for the future.

COVID-19's Lasting Impact on Black Boys' Education

The COVID-19 pandemic reshaped education in ways that will have lasting consequences for students for years to come. While the crisis disrupted schooling for all children, it exacerbated long-standing racial inequities, deepened educational disparities, and forced families and schools to adapt in unprecedented ways (Goldberg, 2021).

Disruptions to Education and Learning Gaps

Before the pandemic, 32% of Black parents reported concern about their child's education and care. That number rose to 44% during the pandemic, reflecting heightened anxieties about school closures, remote learning, and widening achievement gaps (Iruka et al., 2021).

The abrupt shift to online learning exposed significant disparities in technology access, instructional quality, and family resources. Many students, particularly Black and low-income students, lacked reliable internet, functioning devices, or dedicated learning spaces, making digital learning inaccessible and intensifying existing education inequities. Teachers, students, and parents alike struggled to adapt to virtual instruction, often juggling multiple responsibilities while navigating hunfamiliar platforms.

The academic fallout was significant:

- Between 2019 and 2022, Black, Latinx, and Native American students experienced steeper declines in math achievement than in reading (U.S. Department of Education Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics, 2024a, 2024b).
- Black third graders experienced a 6% decline in median reading achievement, raising concerns about long-term academic challenges (Fahle et al., 2024).

Chronic Absenteeism: A Lingering Crisis

Chronic absenteeism, defined as missing 10% or more of school days in a year (roughly 18 days in the U.S.), remains one of the most persistent post-pandemic challenges. After schools reopened, absenteeism surged, with some schools reporting that 30-40% of students were chronically absent (National Assessment of Educational Progress, 2023).

For Black students, the crisis was even more severe (Malkus, 2024):

The national chronic absenteeism rate rose from 16% (2015-16) to 28% (2022), with Black students experiencing the largest increase.

- By 2022, 39% of Black students were chronically absent, 40% more likely than their white peers to miss three or more weeks of school.
- In high-poverty districts, 41% of Black students were chronically absent, compared to 32% in low-poverty districts.
- In urban schools, absenteeism was highest among Black students: 46% in cities, compared to 38% in suburban and 32% in rural areas.

While barriers like transportation, caregiving responsibilities, and economic instability contributed to school disengagement, many Black students also faced heightened stress, anxiety, and grief following the pandemic, with exacerbated absenteeism. Studies show that students experiencing mental health challenges are at higher risk of disengagement, yet counseling services remain limited, particularly in under-resourced schools (Klassen et al., 2021).

Addressing Chronic Absenteeism

In cities like Detroit, where 77% of public school students were chronically absent, school leaders took urgent action. One high-poverty Northwest Detroit school (Bakuli & Mauriello, 2023) reported 82% absenteeism, prompting an intervention to:

- Pair at-risk students with adult mentors
- Conduct home visits to re-engage families
- Offer incentives for attendance, such as grocery gift cards for parents

While chronic absenteeism more than doubled for all students, Black students saw the highest rates pre- and post-pandemic.

Chronic Absenteeism	2020	2022
All Black Students	19%	39%
All Asian Students	7%	16%
All Hispanic Students	15%	36%
All White Students	11%	24%

Source: (Malkus, 2024)

This effort reduced chronic absenteeism by nearly 20 percentage points in just one year, demonstrating the power of community-driven strategies to re-engage students.

The Digital Divide and the Homework Gap

The pandemic exposed and deepened inequities in technology access, making online learning and homework completion nearly impossible for many Black students (McKinsey & Company, 2023):

- 40% of Black households lacked broadband internet, compared to 28% of white households
- In cities like Chicago and Baltimore, Black households were twice as likely as white households to lack high-speed internet.
- In the rural South, 38% of Black households lacked broadband, compared to 23% of white households.

Without reliable internet, Black students were disproportionately affected by the homework gap, struggling to complete assignments, attend virtual classes, and keep pace with their peers. The pandemic made internet access essential, worsening the educational gap. Students who previously relied on in-person resources such as school libraries or community centers lost access to these supports, further deepening their challenges.

Additionally, many Black students lacked access to devices capable of supporting online learning. During COVID-19 pandemic school closures, many Black students relied on smartphones for schoolwork, as they lacked access to laptops or tablets. These devices, with smaller screens and limited software compatibility, made it difficult to engage with interactive lessons or complete assignments requiring specialized tools.

Another challenge was the lack of at-home learning support. Many Black parents, often essential workers, couldn't supervise remote instruction (Iruka et al., 2021). Community leaders continue to push for federal policies, such as the **Emergency Education Connections Act**, which expands internet access for students, and the **Affordable Connectivity Program (ACP)**, which provides subsidies for broadband services (Fahle et al., 2024). In cities like Detroit and Philadelphia, public-private initiatives provide free or low-cost Wi-Fi to low-income households, while nonprofit programs offer tech training for students and families.

Despite these efforts, many Black families remained frustrated by the persistent gaps in access, instructional quality, and support. Consequently, some families have taken education into their own hands. Homeschooling and other alternative learning models have surged, reflecting a broader movement toward culturally responsive and community-driven education.

The Rise of Black Homeschooling and Alternative Learning Models

The pandemic deepened long-standing racial inequities in education, prompting many Black families to seek alternative learning environments. In response to school closures, digital inequities, and unmet academic needs, many Black parents turned to homeschooling and other community-driven education models that prioritize safety, cultural affirmation, and academic excellence.

At the start of the pandemic in 2020, only **3.3% of Black families homeschooled** their children. By the

fall of that year, the rate had **skyrocketed to 16.1%**, the largest increase among any racial group (Eggleston & Fields, 2021). Even after schools reopened, Black homeschooling rates remained significantly higher than pre-pandemic levels, reflecting a growing movement toward educational self-determination and resilience.

However, homeschooling trends among Black families vary. Some families engage in split schooling, choosing to homeschool one child — often a Black son — while leaving other siblings in traditional schools. Many home educators express concern that Black boys, in particular, face lower expectations and harsher disciplinary measures in school, pushing them toward disengagement. Parents report that Black male children often struggle to find a supportive academic niche,

cycling between underperformance and intense efforts to improve their grades (Fields-Smith & Kisura, 2013).

For many families, homeschooling represents a **protective measure** against these institutional barriers. Home educators cite a sense of urgency in removing their Black sons from traditional schools that label them negatively, reinforcing the need for **culturally responsive, affirming learning environments**.

Beyond homeschooling, Black families are increasingly embracing **alternative learning models** that challenge traditional schooling. These include:

- **Freedom Schools:** Inspired by the Civil Rights Movement, these culturally affirming programs center Black history, literacy, and social justice education.
- **Black micro-schools:** Small, independent schools designed to provide personalized, student-centered instruction in safe, culturally responsive settings.
- **Online and hybrid schools:** Virtual and blended learning environments that offer flexibility and access to diverse curricula, particularly for students in under-resourced school districts.
- **Learning co-ops:** Parent- and community-led collaborations where families share resources, instructional responsibilities, and educational decision-making.

Culturally Promotive Curricula in Black Education

As Black families turn to alternative education models, culturally promotive curricula have emerged as a powerful tool for fostering academic success, identity affirmation, and engagement. These curricula counteract anti-Blackness in traditional schooling by centering Black history, racial equity, and self-determination, fostering environments where Black children feel valued, respected, and invested in their learning.

Research has shown that culturally responsive teaching approaches not only improve academic performance but also enhance social-emotional development and resilience, particularly for Black boys and formerly incarcerated students (Lea et al., 2020). In Freedom Schools, micro-schools, and learning co-ops, culturally promotive curricula shift the teacher-student dynamic from authority-driven to student-led learning, encouraging self-direction, critical consciousness, and community engagement. These approaches have been linked to higher retention rates and fewer disciplinary disparities (Fields-Smith & Kisura, 2013).

Schools that incorporate Afrocentric curricula, project-based learning, and culturally affirming pedagogy report increased student motivation, self-confidence, and aspirations for higher education. However, despite their success, these models often face barriers to implementation, including a lack of funding, teacher training, and restrictive state policies that limit flexibility for curriculum flexibility. Addressing these challenges will be crucial to sustaining and scaling culturally promotive education for Black children.

Alternative Learning Models as a Form of Resistance

The resurgence of homeschooling among Black families is not just a response to the COVID-19 pandemic, but a continuation of a long history of educational self-determination. From the post-Reconstruction era, when Black communities established independent schools, to the fight for desegregation and equal education, Black families have historically resisted systems that failed to

serve their children (Fields-Smith, 2020).

Alternative education models provide stronger racial identity affirmation and lower exposure to racialized trauma, both of which contribute to academic persistence and resilience (Fields-Smith & Kisura, 2013).

Today, many Black homeschooling parents and alternative education leaders are not just educating their children but building collective solutions that benefit entire communities. This movement reflects a broader push for educational sovereignty, where families reclaim control over learning environments to ensure that Black children receive an affirming, high-quality, and liberatory education.

Despite the increase of these alternative education models during the pandemic, Black families still face barriers to access, including financial constraints, policy restrictions, and limited resources for curriculum development and teacher training. In many states, homeschooling and micro-schooling regulations can create additional burdens for families seeking flexible learning environments.

As Black homeschooling and alternative learning models continue to shape the educational landscape, it is essential to provide long-term support for these efforts. Investing in these solutions is not just about addressing educational disparities; it is about fostering environments where Black children can thrive academically, culturally, and socially.

Policy and Programmatic Solutions

The lasting impact of the pandemic cannot be overstated. To address the ways it reshaped education, we must:

- **Expand access to wraparound services** —including mental health support, mentoring programs, and community-based interventions — to mitigate the impact of adverse childhood experiences (ACEs).
- **Strengthen partnerships** between schools, social services, and community organizations to provide stable, affirming, and culturally responsive pathways to success.
- **Ensure educational continuity for Black boys in foster care and the juvenile criminal legal system** by addressing systemic barriers that disrupt learning.
- **Recognize homelessness and housing instability** as critical education issues affecting academic success.
- **Ensure equitable access to gifted and talented programs**, special education services, and a positive school climate that fosters inclusion and engagement.
- **Create inclusive parent advisory councils** to ensure family input in education decisions.
- **Host culturally relevant family education workshops** to strengthen engagement and support.
- **Incorporate youth voice in education policy decisions** to center students' needs and lived experiences.

Conclusion

Education is a key pathway to empowerment, yet systemic inequities continue to limit opportunities for Black boys. Addressing these disparities requires sustained investment, policy change, and community-driven solutions. Underfunded education systems impact academic achievement, economic mobility, and long-term well-being. By ensuring equitable resources, support, and opportunities, we can build a just and inclusive educational system that empowers Black boys to succeed. Investing in their education is not only a moral imperative — it is essential for the health and prosperity of society.

The policy efforts described throughout this section address the broader social and economic conditions that contribute to educational under-resourcing, including poverty, housing inequality, and racial discrimination. Ensuring Black boys have the same opportunities as their white peers is not just a matter of fairness — it is an investment in the nation's future.

Ensuring that Black boys thrive in school requires a fundamental shift in priorities. Education policies must center equity, restorative practices, and culturally responsive teaching. We must move away from punitive policing models and toward community-centered solutions that uplift, empower, and equip Black boys with the tools they need to succeed. The time for action is now.

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03 Employment & Wealth

Introduction

Employment and wealth are core to Black men's well-being and sense of belonging. Structural racism has profoundly shaped disparities in both areas, denying Black men equitable access to economic mobility and security.

From slavery, Black Codes, and convict leasing to Jim Crow labor restrictions, Black men have been exploited for their labor while their wealth-building opportunities were systematically stripped away. Generations were excluded from land ownership, union protections, federal benefits, and homeownership programs like Federal Housing Administration (FHA) loans. These state-sanctioned asset-stripping schemes inflicted deep economic wounds — wounds that remain visible in today's labor market and racial wealth gap.

The 2010–2025 period has been characterized by both shocks and shifts:

- an uneven recovery from the Great Recession that left Black men disproportionately unemployed;
- the COVID-19 pandemic, which severely impacted the frontline and service sectors where Black men are overrepresented;
- a national surge in advocacy for racial justice followed by widespread corporate retrenchment in diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI); and
- a political backlash undermining workforce equity and wealth-building initiatives.

Even as awareness of racial inequity has grown, Black men continue to face some of the highest barriers to stable employment, financial inclusion, and generational wealth accumulation.

Areas of Progress

- **Declining unemployment rates** across all age groups, including among Black youth and prime-age men (ages 25–54), indicating some post-pandemic market recovery.
- **Growth in Black entrepreneurship**, with notable gains in revenue and business formation since 2017, driven by both necessity and innovation.
- **Increased public and philanthropic investment** in equity-focused workforce development programs, including youth employment and reentry pathways.
- **Emergence of local reparations programs** and public investments in equity-focused initiatives (e.g., Evanston, Ill., Asheville, N.C., and regional philanthropic efforts)
- **Expansion of cooperative economic models** (e.g., Black-owned banks, Community Development Financial Institutions, mutual aid networks), supporting wealth building in Black communities.

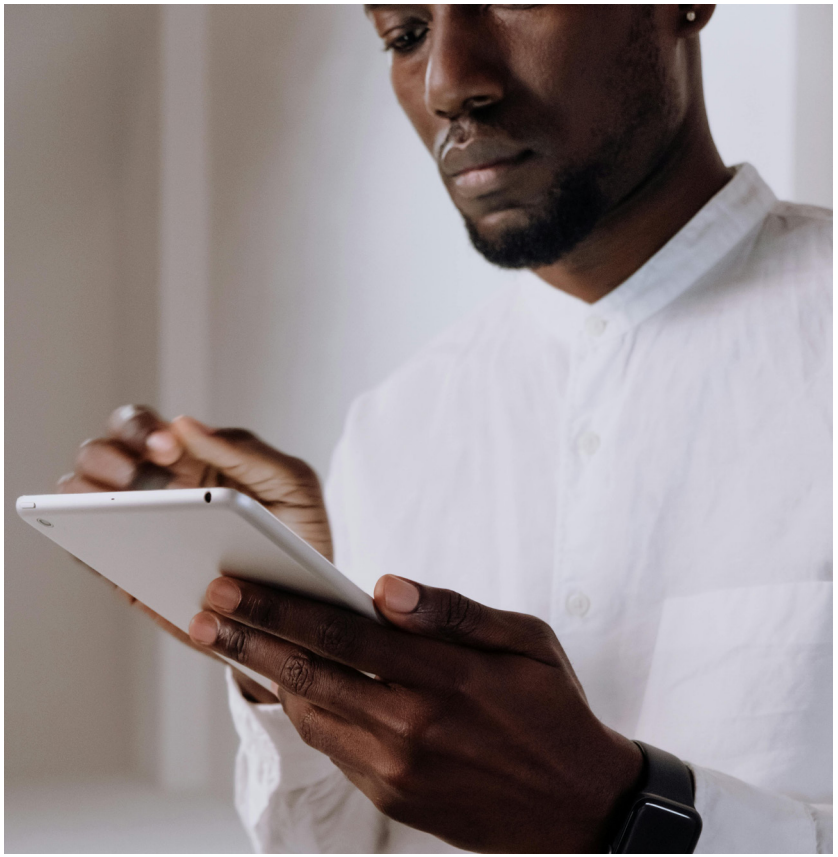
Areas of Concern

- **Stagnant wages and widening income gaps** with Black men earning less than white men at every education level, and facing limited pathways to economic mobility.
- **Occupational segregation and concentration** in low-wage, low-mobility jobs, including disproportionately high exposure to automation risks and weak job protections.
- **Retrenchment of DEI efforts** and the dismantling of employer equity infrastructure, leadership pipelines, and transparency initiatives.
- **Rising tensions between performative and structural responses**, including "equity fatigue" and the rebranding or defunding of racial justice commitments.
- **Automation and credential barriers** which threaten to further marginalize Black men from high-growth sectors without targeted reskilling and inclusive workforce strategies.

Barriers to Employment Equity

"Without feeling like the only thing they're good for is putting food on the table. That's exploitation and commodification at its finest, even as we discuss roles in the household."

— Corey Best, Mining for Gold



Challenges

Black men in America have never had equal access to opportunity in the labor market. From the plantation to the factory floor to the modern workplace, structural racism has dictated who gets hired, who gets promoted, and who gets left behind. Even today, degrees in hand and decades after civil rights victories, Black men remain disproportionately shut out of stable, well-paying jobs.

For many Black men, labor is not a path to fulfillment or power, but survival, often extracted under dangerous and undervalued conditions. Patterns of unemployment have consistently exposed the depth of Black men's exclusion from the labor market across generations.

Structural Exclusion from Stable Work

Black men have faced consistently high unemployment across generations and economic cycles. In 2010, in the wake of the Great Recession, the unemployment rate for Black men stood at 18.4%, nearly double that of white men (9.6%). This 2:1 disparity has persisted for over half a century. By 2023, despite a decade of economic growth and a decade of

targeted workforce programs, Black men still experienced an unemployment rate of 5.7%, compared to 3.4% for white men (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2024).

Despite modest improvements, economic mobility remains elusive for many Black men. **More than half of Black men born into the lowest income quintile remain there as adults,** a rate far higher than Black women or white men. This lack of upward mobility reflects structural barriers beyond employment status, namely occupational segregation, wage stagnation, and exclusion from wealth-building opportunities (Reeves & Rodrigue, 2015).

COVID-Era Job Loss and Unequal Recovery

While the Great Recession exposed deep racial disparities in employment, the COVID-19 pandemic brought new shocks to the labor market, further destabilizing already vulnerable workers. These gaps are not anomalies — they are features of a labor market shaped by structural racism.

Even before the pandemic, Black male youth faced steep barriers to employment. By 2019, when national unemployment had declined, joblessness among Black teen boys (ages 16–19) stood at 22% and 13.8% for young adults (20–24), roughly double the rate of their white peers (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2020).

The pandemic deepened existing labor market inequities. Black men, overrepresented in frontline and service-sector roles, were more likely to lose jobs early and less likely to benefit from the initial stages of economic recovery. Yet the recovery that followed largely excluded them. By 2023, unemployment among Black men had remained high at 5.7%, with youth unemployment still in the double digits — 14.9% for teens and 11.4% for young adults (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2024).

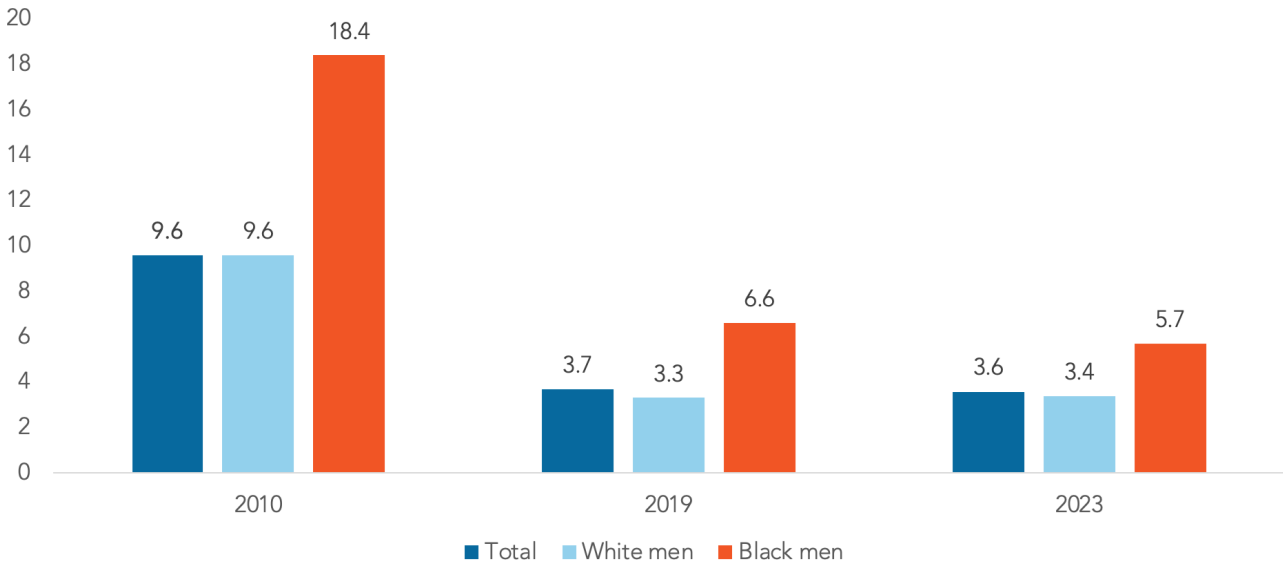
Employment inequities often start early and compound over time. Before Black men can build stable careers, they face disproportionate barriers to entering and staying in the workforce during adolescence and early adulthood.

In 2010, Black men's unemployment was nearly twice that of white men (18.4% vs. 9.6%).

By 2023, that gap narrowed but remained significant (5.7% vs. 3.4%).

Annual Average Unemployment Rates by Race and Gender (2010–2023)

Civilian Noninstitutional Population 16 years and older



Source: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2011, 2020, 2024

Early Disconnection From School to Work

Disconnection from work in adolescence and early adulthood has lasting consequences. For young Black men, it suppresses lifetime earnings, hinders upward mobility, and reinforces intergenerational disadvantage. Even during periods of economic growth, many young Black people remain disconnected, not because they're unwilling to work, but because the labor market continues to shut them out.

These disparities persist well beyond early adulthood. Among prime-age workers (25–54), Black men face unemployment nearly twice that of white men (4.9% vs. 2.9%) (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2024). Older Black men (55+) also face persistent exclusion, often working past retirement age, not by choice but out of economic necessity and limited access to retirement security.

Credentialing and Criminalization as Barriers

Even when Black men pursue postsecondary education or workforce training, many careers remain off-limits. **Occupational licensing laws** disproportionately exclude individuals with criminal records, barring them from more than **800 professions**, including health care, education, and skilled trades. These exclusions fall heavily on Black men due to raciahlly biased policing, over-surveillance, and sentencing disparities.

For returning citizens, the barriers begin well before release. Job readiness programs that include credentialing support must be embedded during incarceration and sustained through reentry. Without a full continuum of support, systemic exclusion simply continues under the guise of regulation.

While 'Ban the Box' policies aim to reduce bias in hiring, they remain inconsistently enforced. Without complementary supports, including legal aid and individualized case management, their impact is limited.

Addressing these disparities requires more than expanding job access. It requires access to the credentials, licenses, and opportunities that make meaningful employment possible.

A Decade of Disconnection: Unemployment (% of labor force) Among Black Men by Age Group (2010–2023)

From the Great Recession to the COVID-19 pandemic recovery, unemployment among Black men has declined, but not equitably. Young Black men continue to face persistently high rates of joblessness, while disparities across every age group remain entrenched.

Age Group	Black Men (2010)	Black Men (2019)	Black Men (2023)	White Men (2023)
All Black men 16+	18.4	6.6	5.7	3.4
16 to 19 years	45.4	22	14.9	11.2
20 to 24 years	29.8	13.8	11.4	6.7
25 to 54 years	16.3	5.4	4.9	2.9
55 to 64 years	12.2	3.4	3.4	2.4
65 years and older	10.4	5	3.8	2.7

Source: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2011, 2020, 2024

Unequal Returns on Education

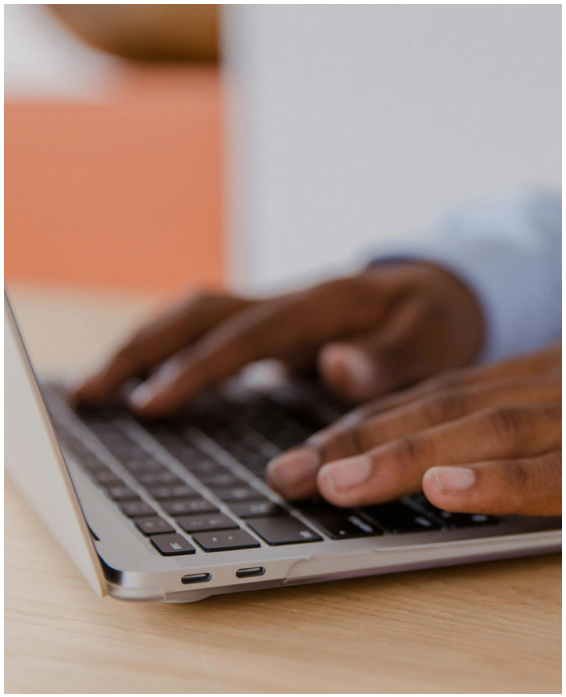
Despite widespread narratives that education levels the playing field, Black men continue to face steep barriers to employment, regardless of credentials. When *We Dream a World* was first published in 2010, it documented that Black men with college degrees often earned no more than white men with only a high school diploma. More than a decade later, that pattern remains unchanged.

Research has consistently demonstrated that systemic bias in hiring penalizes Black applicants even when qualifications are equivalent. A now-classic study found that having a "Black-sounding" name on a resume reduces callbacks by the equivalent of eight years of work experience (Bertrand & Mullainathan, 2004). Additionally, Black men without criminal records were offered interviews at roughly the same rate as white men

with criminal records, revealing just how steep the penalty of race alone can be in the labor market (Pager, 2003).

In 2023, the unemployment rate for Black men with a bachelor's degree was 2.6%, compared to 1.9% for white men with the same credential. Among those without a high school diploma, the gap was even more stark: 10.9% for Black men vs. 4.4% for white men (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2024).

Credentials alone cannot overcome the effects of racial discrimination. From resume screening to hiring decisions, systemic bias continues to shape who gets access to jobs.



Pathways and Pitfalls: Postsecondary Choices and Economic Outcomes

Pitfalls:

33% of Black workers are concentrated in occupations at risk of automation, such as food service, office support, and production roles. Yet the few sectors projected to grow, like home health care, remain low-wage and unstable (Hancock et al., 2021).

For-profit trade schools disproportionately enroll Black and low-income students but have low completion rates, inflated job placement claims, and high loan default rates (Huelsman, 2015).

Pathways:

Career academies, like the California Partnership Academies (CPAs), offer a more equitable route to economic security by integrating:

- College-prep academics and technical training
- Real-world experience through employer partnerships
- Small, supportive learning environments

Results:

95% graduation rate (vs. 85% statewide), higher postsecondary enrollment, and **up to $30,000 more in earnings** over eight years (Kemple, 2008).

Bottom Line:

Not all pathways are equal. Black students navigating the education-to-employment pipeline require access to credible, supported, and career-connected models, rather than debt traps disguised as opportunities.

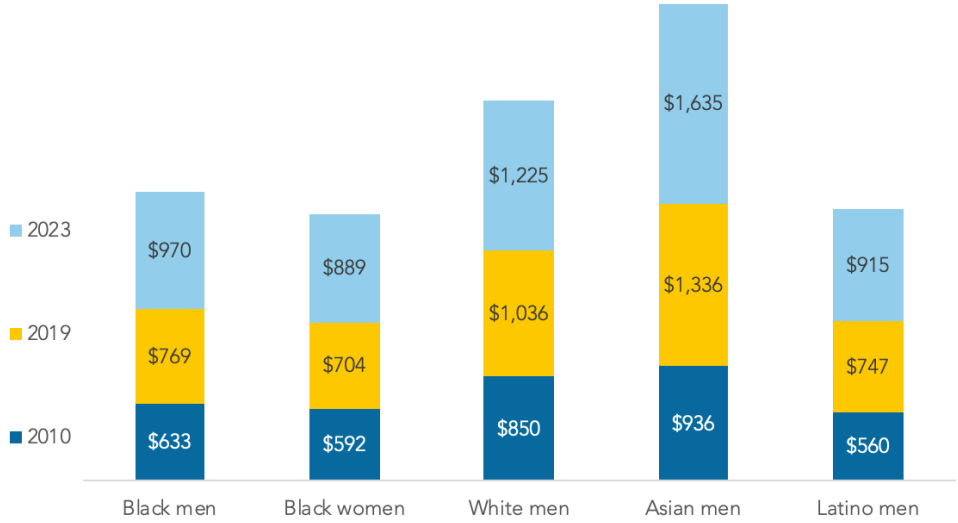
Unemployment Rates (%) by Level of Schooling (Year 2022)

These figures illustrate the enduring penalty of race in the labor market. While education may open doors, systemic racism still determines who gets through them.

Educational Attainment	Black Men	Black Women	White Men
Total, 25 years and older	5	4.9	2.7
Less than a high school diploma	10.9	8.2	4.4
High school graduate (no college)	6.2	7	3.3
Some college, no degree	5	5.6	2.9
Associate degree	4.4	4.3	2.5
Bachelor's degree	2.6	3	1.9

Source: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2023

Median Weekly Earnings by Race and Gender (2010–2023)



Source: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2023

Occupational Segregation and Suppressed Wages

Securing employment is not the same as achieving equity. For many Black men, entering the workforce brings a new set of challenges — jobs that offer limited mobility, unstable wages, and few pathways to leadership.

In 2023, roughly 30% of Black men held management or professional roles, compared to 40% of white men and 60% of Asian men. Meanwhile, 27% of Black men worked in production, transportation, and material moving occupations, nearly 10 percentage points higher than white men. They were also nearly twice as likely as white men to work in transportation and utilities (15% vs. 8%) and significantly overrepresented in service-sector roles (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2024).

These roles tend to offer lower wages, unstable schedules, fewer benefits, and higher risks to health and safety. Demanding conditions, long hours, and minimal job protections contribute to chronic stress, occupational injury, and shortened life expectancy. Black men working in these positions frequently experience job-related injuries and even deaths. Despite these systemic conditions, the burden of this instability is often internalized as a personal failure, rather than being recognized as a product of structural exclusion (Mullany et al., 2021).

Racial Wage Gaps

Between 2010 and 2023, median weekly earnings increased across all racial and gender groups, but not equally. Black men's weekly earnings grew from $633 to $970, a 53% increase over 13 years. Yet they remain near the bottom of the earnings ladder. In 2023, Black men earned $255 less per week than white men and $665 less than Asian men, who had the highest weekly median earnings at $1,635 (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2024).

The wage gap has widened over time. In 2010, Black men earned about 74% of what white men earned. By 2023, that share had increased slightly to 79%, but the dollar gap remained substantial. Latinx men also remain

behind, although they have nearly closed the gap with Black men, earning $915 per week in 2023 (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2024).

Without intentional policies to raise job quality, strengthen wage protections, and eliminate systemic discrimination, these inequalities will persist. Simply entering the workforce does not shield Black men from exclusions — it often ushers in new forms of marginalization.

Automation and the Future of Black Labor

The accelerating pace of automation and artificial intelligence is poised to transform the labor market, and Black workers are disproportionately at risk of being left behind. **One-third of Black workers are concentrated in jobs highly susceptible to automation**, including food service, production, and office support roles (Hancock et al., 2021). These are sectors where automation is not only advancing quickly but also often displacing workers with few viable pathways to reskilling or advancement.

A Brookings Institution analysis found that Black and Latinx workers are more likely than white workers to hold routine or manual jobs with a **high risk of being automated**, and less likely to work in jobs that require creative, interpersonal, or analytical skills — roles projected to grow in the future economy (K. E. Broady et al., 2021). Even as new jobs emerge, they are increasingly clustered in industries that demand digital skills, postsecondary credentials, and access to professional networks — advantages that many Black workers have been structurally denied.

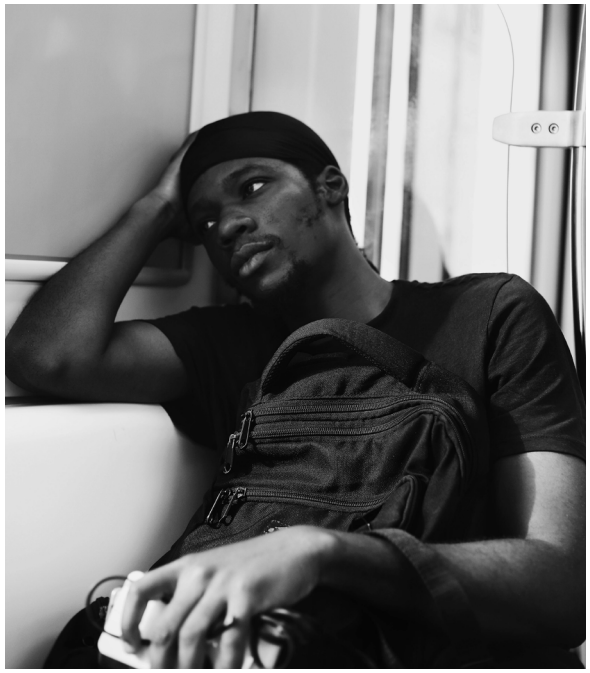
Between 2016 and 2021, employment declined significantly in office support, retail, and food service sectors, where Black workers are overrepresented and especially vulnerable to displacement. Meanwhile, employment in high-growth, tech-driven roles like software development and data analysis rose sharply, yet these positions overwhelmingly went to white and Asian men (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2023).

Without urgent investment in reskilling, digital access, and career navigation supports, Black workers risk being locked out of the fastest-growing industries — such as tech, clean energy, advanced manufacturing, and health care technology — before they can even gain a foothold. Delay now will lead to decades of widened racial gaps in income, wealth, and employment security.

Geographic and Digital Exclusion from Employment

Where Black men live — and how they move — profoundly shapes their access to economic opportunity. In cities, a combination of job sprawl, transit deserts, and rising housing costs pushes Black workers farther from stable employment. In 2023, Black workers spent an average of 22.4 more minutes commuting per week than white workers, nearly 20 additional hours per year lost in transit (Bunten et al., 2022). Nearly half of all metropolitan jobs are now located more than 10 miles outside of downtowns, while only one in five remains near the urban core (Tomer et al., 2011). As job centers decentralize and shift into low-density, suburban areas, Black workers, who are more likely to rely on public transit and more likely to live in cities with the longest average commute times, face increasing structural barriers to employment (Bunten et al., 2022).

These long, costly commutes wear down time, energy, and well-being. In many highly segregated metro areas, job centers have moved to the suburbs, leaving behind underinvested neighborhoods with limited transportation options. But they're also the product of **transit systems shaped by racial exclusion.** In many highly segregated metro areas, public transportation fails to reach suburban job hubs, either by design or disinvestment, effectively severing Black communities from economic opportunity. Local decisions to **block regional transit expansion**, like in Cobb and Gwinnett Counties in metro Atlanta, have created **racialized access gaps** that reflect and reinforce historic patterns of economic segregation.



Spatial Mismatch and Transit Exclusion in Atlanta

In metro Atlanta, job growth has concentrated in majority-white suburban counties like Cobb and Gwinnett. However, both counties have rejected joining MARTA, the region's main transit system, for decades. This policy choice has severed access to employment for many Black residents in Atlanta's southern and western neighborhoods, reinforcing long-standing racial and geographic divides (Partnership for Southern Equity, 2017).

This local transit gap reflects a broader national trend:

- **Nearly half** of all metropolitan jobs are now located more than 10 miles from downtowns
- Only **1 in 5 jobs** remain near urban cores (Raphael & Stoll, 2010). This divide is worsened by broader trends in the suburbanization of jobs.

In metro Atlanta, the impact is especially stark. As jobs sprawl outward, **affordable housing and public transit have not kept pace**. Without a car, commutes to these suburban job centers can take **2 to 3 times longer** than trips within the city (Raphael & Stoll, 2010).

The result is a transit system that quietly enforces economic exclusion by design.

In rural areas, the barriers shift but remain punishing. Job opportunities are often sparse and spread across long distances. Without robust public transit, car ownership becomes essential. However, rural Black and Native households are three times more likely than white households to lack a vehicle (Wang et al., 2023). **Nationally, nearly 17% of Black households do not own a car, compared to just 6% of white households** (National Equity Atlas, n.d.). Even for those who do, the cost of mobility is unequal: Black drivers pay nearly twice as much for auto insurance as white drivers ($1,317 vs. $658) (Consumer Federation of America, 2017). These costs strip away at already thin margins, turning transportation into yet another mechanism of economic exclusion.

Some cities and states are beginning to recognize and respond to these disparities.

- In Los Angeles and Oakland, Universal Basic Mobility programs offer low-income residents transportation credits that can be used on buses, ride shares, e-bikes, and more.
- At the state level, California's Sustainable Transportation Equity Project (STEP) aims to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and increase mobility for historically marginalized communities through targeted investments in clean transit and land use (Sustainable Transportation Equity Project: Projects in Action | California Air Resources Board, n.d.), connecting environmental justice to economic mobility.

These models demonstrate that transportation justice can also be climate justice and racial equity in practice.

But barriers don't end at the curb. **Gentrification and displacement** intensify spatial exclusion. As neighborhoods redevelop, Black renters are pushed farther from job centers, public transit, and community networks. In 2023, more than half of Black renter households were rent-burdened — spending over 30% of their income on housing — compared to 43% of white renter households (Harvard Joint Center for Housing Studies, 2023). Without tenant protections, inclusionary zoning, or community land trusts, redevelopment becomes a force of expulsion, not opportunity.

Digital infrastructure compounds the problem. In a labor market increasingly reliant on digital tools, Black workers are being left behind. Only half of Black workers are proficient in digital tools, compared to 77% of white workers (Darko et al., 2023). More broadly, Black adults are also twice as likely to lack basic digital literacy (22% vs. 11%) (Mamedova et al., 2018).

These disparities reflect longstanding racial and geographic inequities in digital access. During the COVID-19 pandemic, nearly 40% of Black households lacked broadband, compared to 28% of white households. In cities like Chicago and Baltimore, Black households were twice as likely to be without high-speed internet. In the rural South, 38% of Black households lacked broadband, while 23% of white households did, highlighting a sharp regional divide (Darko et al., 2023). Without investment in digital equity, three out of four Black Americans could be unqualified for 86% of jobs by 2045 (Walia & Ravindran, 2020).

Place shouldn't decide destiny. But for too many Black men, it still does. Addressing spatialized exclusion requires bold investments in transit access, affordable housing, and digital infrastructure, so that access to opportunity isn't dictated by ZIP code, commute time, or bandwidth.

Racialized Workplace Discrimination and Mental Health

Discrimination in the workplace extends far beyond hiring or pay. It appears at every stage of employment — from resume screening and interviews to promotions, performance evaluations, and terminations (Whitaker, 2019). Black men face pre-employment bias so pervasive that their résumés often receive significantly fewer callbacks than those of white applicants, a disparity shaped in part by systemic barriers to education and opportunity (Chen, 2024). Once hired, they are more likely to be denied mentorship, excluded from informal networks, and judged by inconsistent standards (Hancock et al., 2021).

Legal protections exist to guard against racial discrimination in the workplace, but enforcement is often limited to egregious cases. More subtle and pervasive forms, including coded feedback, assumptions about attitude or fit, and lack of access to high-visibility assignments, continue to shape career trajectories in ways that are difficult to prove but deeply felt. Even when hired, Black men are often offered lower starting salaries than white men with comparable qualifications. Research shows that Black men earn **14–19% less than white men** in similar roles, even after controlling for education, experience, and job type — an early wage gap that compounds over time (Wilson & Rodgers III, 2016).

The cumulative toll of these dynamics is profound. Many Black men begin to suppress their ambitions, second-guess their worth, or withdraw from opportunities out of fear of being misunderstood, undermined, or penalized. This internalization

contributes to emotional exhaustion, distrust of employers, and broader mental health disparities (Burrell, 2022; Whitaker, 2019).

These burdens are not the result of individual fragility. They are the consequences of chronically unsafe and abusive work environments. In a 2023 analysis cited by HR Dive, **only 33% of Black men reported feeling safe voicing dissenting opinions at work**, compared to 87% of white men, highlighting stark disparities in psychological safety (Colvin, 2023). This lack of psychological safety stems from a constant need to code-switch, downplay challenges, and overperform to prove competence — all while receiving less support, fewer opportunities, and greater scrutiny than their peers.

These harms extend beyond the workplace. Racialized work environments contribute to elevated rates of hypertension, anxiety, and burnout among Black men. One study found that **Black men lose an average of 2.77 years of life expectancy due to work-related stress**, more than a full year greater than white men (Goh et al., 2015). For those in physically demanding jobs, the absence of rest and recovery only deepens the toll.

> **"My dad works a graveyard shift right now, and he's talking about getting another job, and the result of that is that he's more stressed. His body is breaking down quicker. He has less time to spend with family, friends, you know, or do the things that he's passionate about, and that's like, that's the experience of a lot of Black boys and men in this moment, you know. So how can we talk about fighting for a better future for our Black boys, if their time is going to be spent just trying to survive their basic necessities?"**
>
> — Eric Morrison-Smith,
> Alliance for Boys and Men of Color
> abmoc.org

Even basic expressions of self can become fraught. Black men often alter their dress and behavior to avoid being perceived as threatening or unprofessional (Burrell, 2022). Interactions with security staff, managers, and colleagues can be tinged with bias and surveillance, eroding trust and

Cara Collective: Holistic Employment Pathways

Cara Collective offers inclusive workforce development for job seekers facing barriers to employment. Their model combines job placements with wraparound support services, including housing, mental health care, and financial coaching. By recognizing that economic mobility requires more than a paycheck, Cara demonstrates what it means to meet workers with dignity and holistic support.

caracollective.org

engagement. Many report a dual burden: doing their job while constantly having to prove they are competent, safe, and deserving to be there (Burrell, 2022).

Despite growing attention to workplace wellness, many interventions focus narrowly on individual resilience, offering stress management tools without addressing the deeper causes of harm (Mullany et al., 2021). Standard wellness programs often feel irrelevant or performative, particularly in environments with low Black representation in human resources (HR) departments, mental health services, and leadership.

To close these gaps, organizations must go beyond statements and surface-level commitments. They must invest in culturally responsive mental health supports, ensure access to Black therapists and support groups, and build systems for accountability and repair. Psychological safety should not be conditional; it must be integral to how organizations recruit, retain, and support their people, especially those historically excluded from belonging.

Creating psychologically safe work environments requires more than passive inclusion; it demands active listening, representative leadership, and equity-focused policy change (Burrell, 2022).

DEI Retrenchment and the Role of Employee Resource Groups

In the wake of the 2020 racial justice uprisings, institutions across sectors scrambled to issue statements, establish DEI offices, and make new commitments to racial justice. For a brief moment, it seemed a genuine reckoning might be underway.

But within just three years, the momentum faded. Amidst political backlash, legal threats, and shifting public sentiment, many of these same institutions quietly reversed course. DEI budgets were slashed. Chief Diversity Officers departed and were not replaced. Employee Resource Groups (ERGs) were deprioritized or disbanded. **What began as a promise of transformation devolved into a systematic defense of capital, control, and the status quo.**

This retreat is not just a failure of courage or a reenactment of bias. It reflects a deeper resistance to sharing power. For Black men and other people of color, these reversals feel deeply personal. They reinforce a familiar pattern: public promises followed by private retreat; inclusion granted only under pressure; and belonging treated as conditional, not guaranteed.

What is often framed as a backlash against "wokeness" is, in truth, a reassertion of business as usual. When DEI is executed with sincerity, it does not merely challenge interpersonal bias — it disrupts systems that concentrate leadership, capital, and decision-making power. It threatens the structures that perpetuate racialized wealth inequality and protects monopolized access to opportunity.

As one analyst put it:

"These folks often say that they are concerned that DEI threatens merit. The real horror they confront is that DEI threatens monopoly." (Jefferson, 2025)

The economic impact of this retrenchment is substantial. As DEI infrastructure dissolves, so do the pipelines that connect Black men to leadership roles, high-growth sectors, and professional networks. The rollback of pay equity audits, salary transparency efforts, and supplier diversity initiatives stalls progress on wage parity and wealth-building.

Among organizations still engaged in equity work, several practices have emerged as especially promising:

- **Well-supported ERGs** that are not only visible and resourced but meaningfully connected to leadership and decision-making processes, not relegated to planning events or symbolic gestures.
- **Leadership accountability structures** where equity-related goals are integrated into performance evaluations, compensation discussions, and advancement criteria, not treated as optional or secondary.
- **Investments in supplier diversity and community engagement,** particularly those that expand access to contracts, funding, and ecosystem support for Black-owned businesses, creators, and contractors.
- **Ongoing evaluation of equity efforts**, including the use of benchmarks, progress tracking, and employee feedback to assess what's working, identify gaps, and sustain long-term commitment.

True structural interventions require consistency, adequate resources, and courage. It cannot be delegated to a single office or leader. Organizations that are serious about equity must be willing to name harm, repair it, and stay in the work even when it's uncomfortable or contested.

The difference between performative equity and transformative equity lies not in what's said, but in who is empowered, compensated, and protected when power is at stake.

Ultimately, the erosion of DEI infrastructure does more than shrink inclusion. It narrows paths to opportunity. For Black men in the workplace, it reinforces a painful truth: that access to advancement remains conditional, precarious, and withheld by design.

Policy and Programmatic Solutions

To eradicate barriers to employment for Black men, we must start with an approach that engages Black youth and provides real pathways to success. We must:

Invest in Youth Employment Pathways

- **Start career exposure early.** Schools and community programs should begin introducing youth to career pathways as early as middle school. Early exposure to real-world work opportunities helps young people connect academic learning to future employment, develop aspirations, and build the foundation for long-term success.
- **Integrate skill-building with paid experience.** Youth development programs should help young people build foundational work and life skills, including communication, self-regulation, problem-solving, and confidence, while participating in paid job experiences.
- **Expand access to paid work.** Local workforce systems should partner with employers, education providers, and youth programs to offer various options, including summer youth employment, internships, year-round subsidized jobs, youth corps, career academies, and pre-apprenticeships.
- **Support disconnected youth with wraparound services.** Young people who are not in school and not working often face multiple challenges, including housing insecurity, parenting, or criminal legal system involvement. Case management and targeted support are essential to help them stay engaged and succeed.
- **Strengthen Career Academies, union-affiliated training, and sector-based partnerships.** When properly supported, these programs can connect Black men to high-growth, high-quality jobs.
- **Ensure stable housing for employability.** For unhoused individuals, achieving employment success depends on access to safe and stable shelter. Housing is employment infrastructure.
- **Support reentry through early intervention.** Begin employment support while people are still incarcerated, including skill-building, job placement, and community reintegration planning.
- **End categorical occupational bans.** More than 800 occupations bar individuals with criminal records, many without a clear safety rationale. Reform these bans and leverage employer partnerships. Broker public-private collaborations to build pipelines into the private sector, with employer commitments to hire, train, and retain Black men to expand access to meaningful work.
- **Enforce 'Ban the Box' laws.** Remove criminal history checkboxes from job applications and ensure employers comply, helping reduce stigma and expand access for returning citizens.

Build Equitable Employment Pipelines

- **Implement a federal job guarantee.** As an employer of last resort, the federal government can offer meaningful, living-wage jobs to all who want them, especially Black men, who face chronic underemployment.
- **Design career pathways tailored to Black men.** Ensure workforce systems offer culturally responsive, coordinated services — beginning in high school and continuing into adulthood — to help Black men explore career options early, gain relevant skills, and advance in high-quality careers.
- **Broker employer partnerships.** Local governments should incentivize private sector involvement and ensure that Black men are adequately trained and prepared for stable, upwardly mobile employment.
- **Integrate Black workers into local development.** Local governments should create hiring agreements and collaborate with community organizations to ensure Black men are prioritized in regional development and infrastructure projects.
- **Establish Community Benefits Agreements (CBAs).** CBAs allow communities to negotiate with developers for tangible benefits like local hiring, living wages, child care, and affordable housing, ensuring that economic growth serves long-term residents.

Wealth Disparities and Opportunities

Challenges

Employment is intended to be the engine of wealth-building. Yet for Black men, that engine has long been stalled by wage suppression, occupational segregation, and exclusion from pathways to advancement. The result is not just lower earnings in the present, but limited opportunities to save, invest, and pass on assets, perpetuating economic instability across generations.

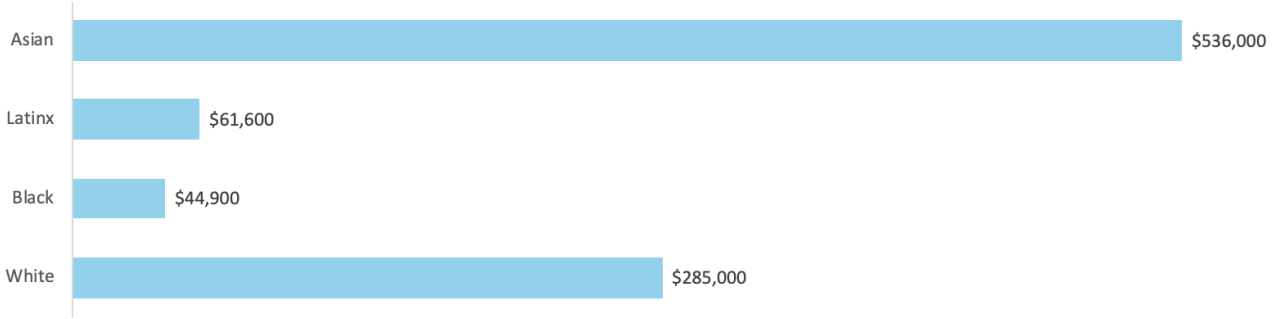
Wealth is not merely a function of income or savings; it is the cumulative product of policy decisions, historical dispossession, and structural power. From land theft and redlining to exclusion from the GI Bill and federally backed homeownership programs, Black men have been systematically denied access to the foundational tools of wealth accumulation. Repairing this legacy requires more than individual effort — it demands structural redress.

Persistent and Intergenerational Wealth Gaps

Over the past four decades, from 1984 to 2023, the racial wealth gap has widened dramatically. When *We Dream a World* was first published in 2010, it noted that the gap between Black and white household wealth had grown from $20,000 in 1984 to $95,000 in 2007. At the time, white families held a median of $100,000 in financial assets (excluding home equity), compared to just $5,000 for Black families.

These disparities have only deepened. Between 2019 and 2022, U.S. median household wealth increased by $51,800 — but the racial wealth gap widened by nearly $50,000. **As of 2022, the median white household held $240,000 more in wealth than the median Black household** (K. Broady et al., 2024).

Median Household Wealth (Net Worth), by Race (2022)



Source: (K. Broady et al., 2024)

The 2022 figures reflect more than income inequality — they point to stubbornly entrenched systems that restrict wealth accumulation for people of color. **In 99% of U.S. neighborhoods, Black boys raised in families with comparable income to white boys grow up to earn significantly less.** By contrast, the outcomes for Black girls more closely track those of their white counterparts (Chetty et al., 2018). These disparities in earnings translate into long-term consequences: lower savings, reduced asset ownership, and fewer opportunities to build wealth.

Wealth disparities also vary by age and household structure. In 2019, single white men under age 35 held a median wealth of $22,640 — nearly 15 times greater than the $1,550 held by single Black men. Among those aged 55 and older, white men held over eight times the wealth of their Black counterparts. The Great Recession only worsened these inequities: from 2010 to 2013, white families gained an average of 1% in wealth, while **Black families lost 23%** (Moss et al., 2020).

Inheritance is another key driver of the divide. In 2019, just 10% of Black households reported receiving any inheritance, compared to 30% of white households. Even among those who did inherit, white families received nearly twice the average amount. While inheritances explain only 10%–20% of the racial wealth gap, broader structural factors — such as disparities in lifetime earnings, education access, retirement accounts, and housing stability — account for as much as 80% (Sabelhaus & Thompson, 2023).

Disparities in marketable assets also reveal the depth of racial wealth inequality. As of 2023, the average white family held **6.8 times** the market wealth of the average Black family, including stocks, businesses, and savings. Even when pensions are included, white households still hold **4.4 times** more total wealth than Black and Latinx households (Sabelhaus & Thompson, 2023).

The racial wealth gap is not the result of personal failure or poor financial literacy. It is the cumulative outcome of unequal access to earning, saving, investing, and intergenerational transfer. Without bold, structural interventions to address both historic and contemporary exclusion, the gap will continue to grow.

The Promise and Precarity of Entrepreneurship

For many Black men, entrepreneurship has become less a pathway to prosperity and more a strategy for survival. Shut out of stable employment, denied equitable access to capital, and navigating systemic racial bias, Black men often turn to business ownership as a form of self-determination (Baboolall et al., 2018; Bruton et al., 2023). But while entrepreneurship holds promise, the systems meant to support it — financing, mentorship, procurement, and policy — remain deeply inequitable (Bruton et al., 2023).

Traditional lenders often deny loans or offer unfavorable terms, even when Black applicants have comparable credit profiles to white entrepreneurs (Bruton et al., 2023). Credit scoring systems and collateral requirements, rooted in generations of discriminatory housing and lending policy, continue to penalize those without inherited wealth. Beyond financing, many Black men lack access to professional networks and mentorship critical to sustaining business growth. Consequently, they are overrepresented in low-margin, high-competition sectors with limited scalability (Bruton et al., 2023).

Still, Black entrepreneurship is on the rise. **In 2021, the number of Black-owned businesses rose by 14.3%**, continuing a trend of steady expansion since 2017 (Perry et al., 2024). Revenues also surged, increasing by 30% and outpacing every other racial or ethnic group. This growth was driven in part by the COVID-19 pandemic

and racial justice movements that mobilized consumer and institutional support.

Yet stark disparities remain. Black Americans account for **14.4% of the country's total population**, but own just **2.7% of employer businesses**. White Americans, by contrast, comprise 72.5% of the total population but own 82% of such businesses (Perry et al., 2024). For many Black men, entrepreneurship is less a launchpad for wealth and more a response to exclusion from traditional employment pipelines (Bruton et al., 2023).

Chicago Community Trust

In philanthropy, organizations like the Chicago Community Trust have prioritized closing the racial wealth gap through targeted investments in housing, entrepreneurship, and income equity, proving that regional foundations can play catalytic roles in systems-level change.

www.cct.org

Digital platforms and social media have opened new avenues for visibility and sales, but barriers remain. Algorithmic bias, digital redlining, and unequal broadband access continue to limit growth and sustainability.

In response, alternative models rooted in solidarity and shared ownership are gaining traction. Worker cooperatives, community equity funds, and real estate collectives offer entry points for those without startup capital. These models challenge the hyper-individualism of mainstream entrepreneurship by redistributing both risk and reward (Bruton et al., 2023).

Black-led entrepreneurship ecosystems — including culturally responsive incubators, **Community Development Financial Institutions (CDFIs)**, and peer lending circles — are also expanding access to capital and technical support. These institutions offer more than just funding: they provide trust, flexibility, and a sense of rootedness in the lived experiences of Black men navigating systemic exclusion (Bruton et al., 2023).

Building wealth takes more than hustle. It requires dismantling the barriers that have long pushed Black men to the margins of ownership and investment — and replacing them with systems rooted in equity, community, and shared prosperity.

Rebuilding Trust in Financial Institutions

Building wealth is nearly impossible without access to reliable financial institutions. Yet for many Black men, traditional systems have been more associated with surveillance, denial, and harm than opportunity. The very institutions meant to support financial security, banks, credit bureaus, and loan agencies, have long reinforced racial hierarchies rather than dismantled them.

Black men are disproportionately unbanked or underbanked, meaning they don't have checking or savings accounts with traditional banks or credit unions. Additionally, they are more likely to be denied credit, and even when approved, face higher interest rates than their white peers with similar credit profiles (Bruton et al., 2023). Labeled as "risky borrowers," they are penalized for lacking the very advantages — generational wealth, stable homeownership, and long credit histories — that were systematically denied to Black families for decades.

Credit scoring systems are often viewed as neutral, but they are anything but. These systems reward wealth-building behaviors that have been historically inaccessible to Black communities, including early access to home loans, inherited property, or multigenerational banking relationships. For many, even basic services like electricity or water require credit histories that remain out of reach.

Survival in financially excluded communities often demands alternative strategies — some informal, some creative, all rooted in necessity. Even well-intentioned initiatives like community reinvestment programs or supplier diversity efforts often fall short. Many are critiqued for prioritizing compliance over community impact, and for engaging communities in name more than practice (K. Broady et al., 2021).

What's often missing is not just capital, but trust. Black men frequently report experiencing subtle but persistent discouragement in financial institutions: lack of engagement, excessive scrutiny, or dismissive treatment — forms of exclusion that rarely show up in denial statistics but have real impacts. These "soft rejections" increase search costs, reduce confidence, and make future engagement less likely.

In response to this exclusion, Black communities have long built alternative financial ecosystems. Black-owned banks and credit unions play a critical role in offering fair, culturally grounded services. Many of these institutions provide flexible underwriting, financial coaching, and investment

strategies centered on long-term community well-being, not profit maximization.

Community land trusts represent another transformative approach, taking land and housing out of speculative markets and placing them under community control. **A community land trust (CLT)** is a nonprofit organization that acquires and stewards land to ensure permanent affordability, often through long-term ground leases with homeowners. This model helps protect Black residents — especially returning citizens and first-time buyers — from displacement and predatory lending, offering stable, long-term ownership pathways.

Fintech innovation is also expanding access. Peer-to-peer lending platforms and alternative credit-building tools — especially those led by Black entrepreneurs — are beginning to circumvent institutional bias. However, without safeguards, these emerging tools can replicate the very inequities they aim to solve.

Access to financial services is not a luxury — it is a prerequisite for economic security. For Black men, building trust in financial systems — and expanding systems built by and for Black communities — is not only a practical solution, but a necessary act of economic justice.

Atlanta Land Trust

In Atlanta, where rising housing costs have displaced many longtime Black residents, the Atlanta Land Trust (ALT) offers a model of permanently affordable homeownership through the community land trust approach.

Established to counter the effects of gentrification along the Atlanta Beltline, ALT partners with low- to moderate-income families, many of whom are first-time homebuyers or returning citizens. The organization uses long-term ground leases to ensure lasting affordability, allowing families to build equity while protecting future affordability for others. This model creates stable, community-rooted housing and shields Black residents from displacement and predatory lending.

atlantalandtrust.org

Reparations as Structural Redress

The racial wealth gap is not the result of individual choices; it is the product of centuries of policy-driven dispossession. From slavery and Jim Crow to redlining, wage theft, mass incarceration, and exclusion from New Deal-era programs like the GI Bill, Black communities have been systematically denied the opportunity to build and transfer wealth.

For Black men in particular, this history includes the criminalization of labor, targeted economic surveillance, and exclusion from asset-building systems. These structural barriers have suppressed earnings, erased wealth, and destabilized families and communities across generations.

Reparations offer a path to repair. More than financial compensation, reparations represent an acknowledgment of harm, an investment in Black futures, and an opportunity to rebuild trust between governments and the communities they have historically failed. Reparations are especially critical for Black men, who have borne the brunt of policies that erode earnings, confiscate wealth, and sever community ties.

Addressing these harms will require targeted strategies, such as guaranteed income for formerly incarcerated individuals, student debt forgiveness, tax relief, and land return initiatives in historically Black communities. These are not radical proposals. They are necessary interventions to restore what has been systematically extracted.

Reparations in Practice

In Evanston, Illinois, a housing initiative that compensates Black residents for the lasting harms of redlining and housing discrimination.

In Asheville, North Carolina, municipal leaders committed to long-term investment in homeownership, education, and entrepreneurship as part of a broader racial equity strategy.

Nationally, frameworks like the National African American Reparations Commission's (NAARC) 10-Point Plan and H.R. 40 outline comprehensive strategies that include truth-telling, asset-building, debt cancellation, land access, and sustained investment in Black institutions.

While federal momentum remains slow, local models — and the grassroots organizing behind them — are building momentum. These efforts show that reparations are not only possible but already underway.

The racial wealth gap will not close on its own. Structural harm requires structural repair. Reparations offer a necessary and overdue response to generations of economic injustice — and a way forward grounded in truth, trust, and shared prosperity.

Bridging the Wealth Divide

The racial wealth gap is not an accident — it is the result of intentional policy choices that have advantaged some while excluding others. For Black men, the consequences are deeply generational: fewer opportunities to accumulate wealth, greater vulnerability to economic shocks, and limited access to the financial tools that sustain mobility. Yet within communities, institutions, and movements, there are powerful models for repair. From cooperative ownership and community banking to reparations and regional investment strategies, the path forward is clear. Bridging the wealth divide requires not just access, but accountability. Not just programs, but power-sharing. And not just gestures, but sustained structural change.

Policy and Programmatic Solutions

The ability to build wealth and pass on assets to future generations shouldn't be determined by race. To close the racial wealth gap, we must:

Bridging the Wealth Divide

- **Strengthen the EEOC.** Expand capacity for proactive investigations and responsive enforcement to address racial discrimination in employment.
- **Empower local enforcement.** Local anti-discrimination laws are critical: they address cases closer to the community, reduce backlog, and allow culturally competent responses through partnerships with worker centers and legal advocates.
- **Institutionalize racial equity training.** Require regular implicit bias and anti-racism training for employers — not as one-time fixes, but as sustained commitments to culture change.
- **Recognize homelessness and housing instability** as critical education issues affecting academic success.
- **Support unionization and worker power.** Black workers are more likely to benefit from union representation, including wage boosts and workplace protections that help narrow racial income gaps.
- **Invest in Black worker centers.** These grassroots organizations are vital for organizing, advocacy, and connecting low-wage Black workers to employment rights, living wages, and equitable job opportunities.

Ensure Financial Inclusion and Economic Security

- **Expand the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC).** Include childless workers under 25 and over 65 — groups disproportionately represented among Black men who support families or must work into retirement.
- **Raise and index the minimum wage.** The $7.25-per-hour federal minimum wage no longer reflects basic living costs. Raise it to match today's economy and index it to inflation to preserve purchasing power over time.

Enact Racially Just Wealth-Building Investments and Policy

- **Enact reparations.** Reparations are a moral and economic imperative, addressing both the legacy of slavery and the systemic exclusion of Black Americans from wealth-building programs like the GI Bill and federal home loans.
- **Establish baby bonds.** Federally managed, interestaccruing accounts for every child can reduce wealth inequality by building financial assets for education, housing, or entrepreneurship.
- **Expand access to homeownership.** Support first-time and low-income homebuyers through down payment assistance, interest rate subsidies, and homebuyer tax credits.

Conclusion

Repairing the economic harms experienced by Black men demands more than symbolic gestures — it requires structural change. The policy recommendations presented in this section re lect practical approaches to address persistent barriers to employment, wealth-building, and economic security. These are not just policy choices; they represent urgent and actionable strategies to advance employment equity and close the racial wealth gap. More importantly, they are opportunities to invest in the future of equity, belonging, and shared prosperity.

Economic dignity should not be conditional. Black men deserve access not just to jobs, but to careers. Not just to income, but to assets. And not just to symbolic inclusion, but to real power. Closing the employment and wealth gap is not charity — it is justice long deferred, and now urgently due.

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04 Health

Introduction

Black boys and young men in the United States face significant health challenges stemming from systemic inequities, environmental conditions, and limited access to quality health care. Since the release of the We Dream a World *report, 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 (Cutland et al., 2017). As Black children grow, persistent residential segregation and underinvestment in Black communities continue to influence outcomes. A person's zip code remains one of the strongest predictors of life expectancy (Ducharme & Wolfson, 2019). These patterns are reinforced by housing discrimination, limited access to

nutritious food, and unsafe or polluted environments, contributing to poorer health outcomes in adulthood (Schwartz et al., 2022).

Environmental injustice continues to burden Black communities. As of 2012, individuals residing within three miles of a coal-fired power plant were predominantly low-income and people of color (Wilson et al., 2012). Black families bear a 54% greater health burden from proximity to polluting facilities, including elevated rates of cancer, asthma, heart disease, and low birth weight (Mikati et al., 2018).

Beyond environmental risks, broader social and economic stressors increase the likelihood of health-risk behaviors, including substance use, unsafe sexual practices, and exposure to violence. Housing segregation is linked to smoking, alcohol use, and obesity for Black adults (Schwartz et al., 2022). Chronic exposure to racialized stress — compounded by systemic barriers to care — contributes to higher rates of mental health challenges and chronic disease across the life course.

The lived experiences of Black boys and young men must be understood through the lens of dehumanizing policies, intergenerational trauma, and persistent discrimination. Racial trauma is a well-documented risk factor for substance use, depression, obesity, cancer, and chronic illness (Cammett, 2014). When combined with bias and dismissal in health care settings, these experiences further erode trust and deter individuals from seeking help.

Since the COVID-19 pandemic, two interconnected issues have taken center stage: mental health and police violence. Black boys and men face immense psychological burdens, shaped by ancestral trauma, systemic racism, and social pressures to embody emotional restraint. Police violence compounds this harm, instilling fear and contributing to high rates of anxiety, depression, and suicide. At the same time, longstanding taboos around mental health in Black communities are beginning to shift. There is growing recognition of the need for culturally-responsive, affirming mental health care, especially for youth navigating multiple forms of discrimination related to race, gender, and sexual identity.

Together, these intersecting forces underscore the urgent need to build healing-centered systems that affirm the humanity of Black boys and young men. The following sections examine both the areas of progress made since the original report and the persistent areas of concern that require renewed attention.

Additionally, policy recommendations outlined throughout the sections serve as strategic guidance for decision-makers, offering well-researched solutions to pressing issues. The recommendations are grounded in evidence, best practices, and stakeholder input to enhance their feasibility and impact. By implementing these strategies, policymakers, organizations, and communities can work collaboratively to achieve meaningful and lasting change.

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.

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

Social Determinants of Health

Social determinants of health are the societal conditions that profoundly influence an individual's mental and physical well-being. These include the environments where people are born and raised, from the quality of their diet to the safety of their neighborhood. Factors like poverty, lack of grocery stores with healthy food, access to safe housing, and the availability of green spaces all play a role in shaping health outcomes. Whether someone has a safe place to hang out or spends time in run-down, unsafe areas can shape how connected, safe, and supported they feel in their community. Together, these factors underscore the interconnectedness between social conditions and health outcomes.

Source: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Office of Disease Prevention and Health Promotion, n.d.

- 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.
- 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 LGBTQIA+ community.

Mental Health and Violence

- Suicide, homicide (excluding police use of force), and police violence are among the leading causes of death for young Black men. Suicide is now the second leading cause of death for Black males aged 15–24 (Adams & Thorpe, 2023)
- Black boys are three to four times more likely than white boys to die by suicide, and Black men are four times more likely to commit suicide than Black women.
- Within the Black LGBTQ+ community, suicide rates and suicide ideation remain exceptionally high, with 35% of Black LGBTQ+ youth (ages 13–24) seriously considering suicide and 19% reporting a suicide attempt in the past year (Flohr et al., 2024).
- Access to effective mental health care remains limited due to stigma, justified distrust of the health care system, and a shortage of affirming, culturally responsive providers.

HIV and Chronic Disease

- In 2022, Black boys and young men aged 13 to 24 had the highest rates of HIV diagnosis (66.3 per 100,000) than any racial/gender group.
- Chronic conditions such as asthma, hypertension, diabetes, and heart disease remain prevalent and often go untreated.
- Diabetes mortality among Black men rose by 52% between 2006 and 2022, and asthma mortality remains nearly three times higher for Black adults than white adults.
- Hypertension-related diseases were a leading cause of death among Black men in 2019, with a mortality rate of 17.3 per 100,000.

These disparities are not the result of individual choices but the consequences of generations of structural violence and disinvestment. They reflect the relentless social, emotional, and physical dehumanization that Black boys and men continue to experience across their lives.

Police Use of Force vs. Police Violence

Police use of force is a broad term encompassing the various methods officers employ to compel compliance, ranging from verbal commands to lethal force. Police violence, on the other hand, is specifically defined as the unlawful, unnecessary, or disproportionate use of force by police. In essence, police violence is a subset of police use of force where the force used is illegal, excessive, or unjustified.

Police Use of Force: The amount of effort required by law enforcement to compel compliance from an unwilling subject, according to the International Association of Chiefs of Police.

Police Violence (Excessive Force): The unlawful, unnecessary, or disproportionate use of force by law enforcement, according to the Brady Campaign.

Health Disparities Are Driven by Social and Economic Inequities.

Source: https://www.kff.org/racial-equity-and-health-policy/issue-brief/racial-disparities-in-maternal-and-infant-health-current-status-and-efforts-to-address-them

The State of Black Male Health: Life Expectancy

When the original We Dream a World *report was published, Black males had one of the lowest life expectancies in the United States (Tsoi-A-Fatt, 2010. This stark disparity remains unchanged today, with Black men experiencing higher rates of death and disease than white men across virtually every major health category — including heart disease, stroke, cancer, asthma, influenza, diabetes, HIV/AIDS, and homicide.*

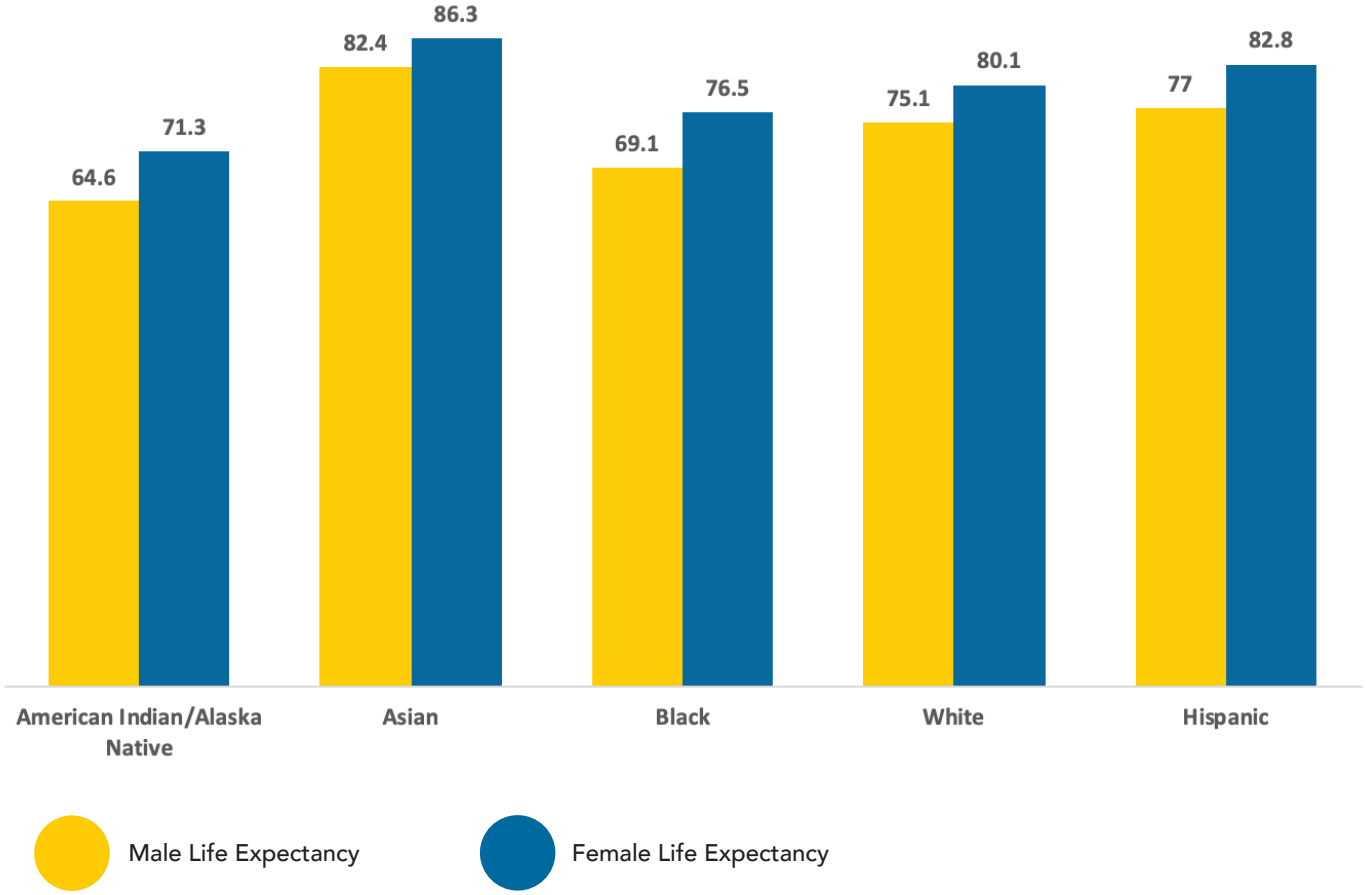
The effects of systemic inequities are evident from the very start of life. Congenital conditions are the third leading cause of death for Black boys under age 4. Black birthing parents often lack access to timely, high-quality prenatal care and face compounded barriers, including residential segregation, poverty, and environmental hazards, creating challenging conditions for a healthy pregnancy and childbirth (Burris & Hacker, 2017).

Teen birth rates have steadily declined overall, yet racial disparities persist. In 2022, Black youth aged 15–19 had a birth rate of 20.3 per 1,000, more than double the rate for white youth (9.8). Rates were similarly high for Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander (20.5), Latinx (21.3), and Native American youth (22.5) (Mickler & Tollestrup, 2024). Pregnancies among individuals under age 20 carry higher risks: infant mortality is twice as high among mothers aged 15–19, and three times higher among those under 15, compared to birthing parents aged 25–39 (Arias, 2016).

Black families continue to experience disproportionate birth risks and infant mortality due to limited health care and broader social inequities. Low birth weight remains the **leading cause of death for Black infants**. While the infant mortality rate among Black mothers was 11.6 per 1,000 live births in 2010 (MacDorman & Mathews, 2014), it had only declined to 10.9 by 2022 (Infant Health and Mortality and Black/African Americans, 2025). Young Black mothers under age 19 face even higher rates, reaching 13.9 per 1,000. In 2022, **Black mothers had the highest rates of both preterm births and low birth weight.**

The **chronic stress of living in an anti-Black society** takes a measurable toll on Black maternal and infant health. Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander and Native American /Alaska Native mothers, despite higher rates of late to no prenatal care, experience better birth outcomes than Black mothers. This paradox highlights the disproportionate burden of racialized stress and systemic inequities on Black communities.

Unequal Lifespans: Racial Disparities in Life Expectancy at Birth (2022)

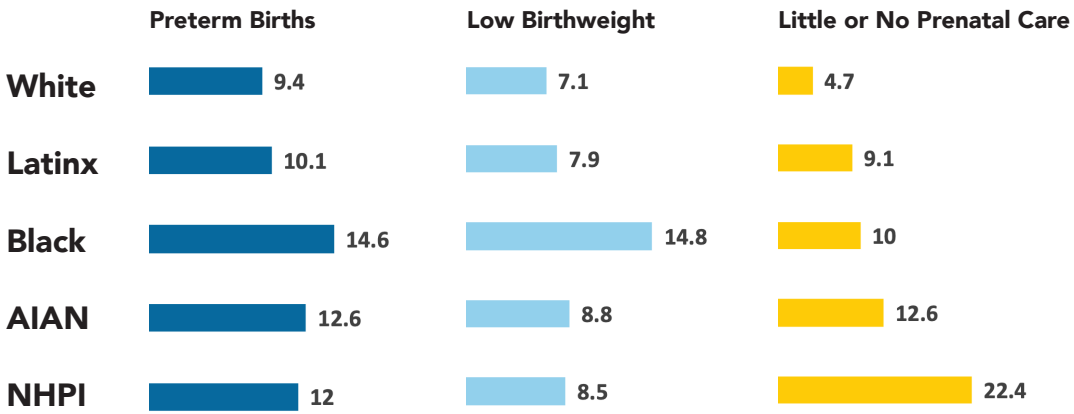


Source: CDC / National Center for Health Statistics (Arias et al., 2023)

Life Expectancy Trends for Non-Hispanic Black Americans (2006-2021)

Year	Black Male Life Expectancy (in years)	Black Female Life Expectancy (in years)	Source
2006	64.6	76.5	Heron et al., 2009
2010	82.4	77.7	Murphy et al., 2013
2019	69.1	78.1	Xu et al., 2021
2021	75.1	75	Murphy et al., 2024

Birth Risks by Race and Ethnicity (2022)



Note: Persons of Hispanic origin may be of any race but are categorized as Latinx for this analysis; other groups are non-Hispanic. AIAN refers to American Indian or Alaska Native NHPI refers to Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander. Source: Osterman MJK, Hamilton BE, Martin JA, Driscoll AK, Valenzuela CP. Births: Final data for 2022. National Vital Statistics Reports; vol 73, no 2. Hyattsville, MD: National Center for Health Statistics. 2024

COVID-19

Before the pandemic, the life expectancy of Black men had steadily improved, increasing by 3.9 years between 2000 and 2019, compared to a 2.3-year increase for the overall population. Despite these gains, Black men still had the second-lowest life expectancy (75.3 years) in 2019, following Native American/Alaska Native men (73.1 years) (Dwyer-Lindgren et al., 2022). Most of these improvements occurred between 2000 and 2010, with slower progress in the following decade. Life expectancy trends also varied by county — while some areas saw progress, others experienced persistent disparities. These factors highlight the continued impact of systemic inequities on Black men's health and the fragility of these gains, particularly in the face of events like the COVID-19 pandemic.

The COVID-19 pandemic disproportionately affected Black, Native, and Latinx communities, worsening long-standing health disparities (L. Hill & Artiga, 2022). By mid-2022, Black Americans were 1.5 times more likely to contract COVID-19 and twice as likely to die from it compared to white Americans (L. Hill & Artiga, 2022). This devastating toll contributed to a sharp, temporary decline in Black male life expectancy, dropping to 69.1 years in 2022, a loss of over six years from 2019 levels. This marked one of the steepest declines among any racial group (Arias et al., 2023). Although life expectancy has begun to stabilize, the pandemic laid bare the structural injustices that make Black communities more vulnerable in times of crisis.

Leading Causes of Death

The leading causes of death for Black males change across their lifespan, reflecting health risks that differ from those faced by Black women and men of other racial and ethnic groups. Among children, unintentional injuries – including motor vehicle accidents, falls, drownings, burns, firearms, poisonings, and suffocations – are a significant concern. Black children are significantly more likely than white children to be hospitalized for nearly all types of injuries, with the highest relative risk occurring in firearm-related cases (Jeffries et al., 2022).

These patterns are shaped by the intersectional influences of race, gender, and social determinants of health, as well as childhood experiences. Understanding these disparities requires an intersectional lens — one that examines how systemic forces such as medical bias, barriers to health care, economic instability, and community disinvestment contribute to the disproportionate burden of violence and lower life expectancy among young Black men.

Top 3 Leading Causes of Death for Black Males by Age (2022)

Age	1st	2nd	3rd
1–4 years	Accidents	Homicide	Congenital
5–9 years	Accidents	Homicide	Cancer
10–14 years	Homicide	Accidents	Suicide
15–19 years	Homicide	Accidents	Suicide
20–24 years	Homicide	Accidents	Suicide
25–34 years	Accidents	Homicide	Suicide
35–44 years	Accidents	Heart disease	Homicide
45–54 years	Heart disease	Accidents	Cancer
55–64 years	Heart disease	Cancer	Accidents
65+	Heart disease	Cancer	COVID-19

Source: (Curtin et al., 2024)

The State of Black Male Health: Chronic Disease Disparities

Challenges

The chronic disease burden among Black boys and men reflects the compounding effects of systemic inequities, resulting in earlier onset, greater severity, and poorer health outcomes. Racial discrimination, financial insecurity, environmental racism, and adverse childhood experiences — many of which co-occur — are linked to serious chronic diseases that cut short Black lives (Alhowaymel et al., 2023; Duru et al., 2012; Mikati et al., 2018; Miller et al., 2021). Recognizing the widespread harm of systemic racism, the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) declared racism a public health threat (Hall & Boulware, 2023). This section highlights the major chronic illnesses disproportionately affecting Black males and their impact on mortality and quality of life.

Asthma

Large populations of Black children live in densely populated or lower-income areas, which puts them at a higher risk for chronic respiratory diseases due to exposure to contaminants, air-borne particles, dust, and chemicals present in living areas. Black children are eight times more likely to die from asthma than white children (National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute, 2023). Non-Latinx Black or African American adults were 2.5 times more likely to die from asthma-related causes than non-Latinx white adults (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2022).

Asthma remains a severe health crisis in Black communities. Black children are twice as likely as white children to have asthma and are 7.7 times more likely to die from it (National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute, 2023). While overall asthma prevalence has declined and emergency room visits have decreased, the racial gap has widened. Most troubling, asthma-related death rates for Black children have worsened over time, reinforcing the need for improved treatment access and preventive care.

Among adults, the trend persists. Black men continue to have higher asthma rates than white men, and while emergency room visits have also declined, they remain nearly twice as likely to seek emergency care. Asthma mortality rates among Black adults, though slightly improved, remain nearly three times higher than for white adults. These disparities reflect structural inequities in health care access, environmental exposure, and treatment outcomes that continue to put Black communities at risk.

CHILDREN 0–17 Years of Age: Asthma Prevalence, Emergency Room Visits, and Mortality by Race

ASTHMA	Black Children	White Children	Black/White Ratio
2003–2005	14.6%	9.2%	1.6
2020-2022	10.8%	5.5%	2.0

Source: Akinbami, 2006; National Center for Health Statistics, 2023: Current Asthma Prevalence by Race and Ethnicity Among Children and Adults (2020–2022)

EMERGENCY DEPARTMENT VISITS	Black Children	White Children	Black/White Ratio
2003–2005	254 per 10,000	66 per 10,000	3.8
2020-2022	89.5 per 10,000	14.4 per 10,000	6.2

Source: Akinbami, 2006; https://www.cdc.gov/asthma/health-care-use/2020/table_a.html

MORTALITY RATE	Black Children	White Children	Black/White Ratio
2003–2005	9.2 per million	1.3 per million	7.1
2020-2022	7.7 per million	1 per million	7.7

Source: Akinbami, 2006; National Center for Health Statistics, 2023: Asthma Mortality by Select Socio-demographic Characteristics (2021)

ADULTS: Asthma Prevalence, Emergency Room Visits, and Mortality by Race

ASTHMA	Black Adults	White Adults	Black/White Ratio
2003–2005	10.3%	7.8%	1.3
2020-2022	10.6%	8.4%	1.2

Source: Akinbami, 2006; National Center for Health Statistics, 2023: Current Asthma Prevalence by Race and Ethnicity Among Children and Adults (2020–2022)

EMERGENCY DEPARTMENT VISITS	Black Adults	White Adults	Black/White Ratio
2003–2005	195 per 10,000	43.6 per 10,000	4.5
2020-2022	80.6 per 10,000	13.7 per 10,000	5.9

Source: Akinbami, 2006; https://www.cdc.gov/asthma/health-care-use/2020/table_a.html

MORTALITY RATE	Black Adults	White Adults	Black/White Ratio
2003–2005	2.8 per million	0.9 per million	3.1
2020-2022	29.7 per million	11.8 per million	2.5

Source: Akinbami, 2006; National Center for Health Statistics, 2023: Current Asthma Prevalence by Race and Ethnicity Among Children and Adults (2020–2022)

Diabetes

Diabetes and obesity are among the most pressing chronic health issues facing Black boys and men, driven by systemic barriers to health care, food insecurity, environmental factors, and economic inequality. Black men experience higher rates of diabetes-related mortality and obesity than their white counterparts, leading to increased risks of cardiovascular disease, kidney failure, and amputations.

The diabetes death rate has increased significantly: from 30.6 per 100,000 in 2006 (Heron, 2010) to 46.3 per 100,000 in 2022 (Curtin et al., 2024), a 52% increase. The most significant rise occurred between 2014 and 2022, highlighting a worsening trend. In 2014 (Heron, 2016), Black men were 15% more likely to die from diabetes than white men, and by 2022 (Curtin et al., 2024), the disparity widened to 19%. Among Black men, diabetes is now the fourth leading cause of death after age 45.

Food Insecurity

Food insecurity refers to limited or uncertain access to sufficient, nutritious food, often due to economic hardship, systemic barriers, or gaps in local food systems. It is a key social determinant of health linked to long-term health disparities.

2003–2022 Trends in Diabetes Mortality Rates Among Males by Race

(All ages; Rate per 100,000 persons; *non-Hispanic)

Year	Black*	White*	Hispanic	All Races
2006	30.6	24.2	13.7	24.4
2010	29.2	25.5	13.2	23.4
2019	40	34.3	18.4	30.6
2022	46.3	38.8	21.8	34.8

Source: 2006: Heron, 2010; 2010: Heron, 2013; 2019: Heron, 2021; 2022: Curtin et al., 2024.

Cancer

Over the past three decades, Black men have experienced the most significant relative decline in cancer mortality, with a 49% decrease from 1991 to 2022 (Saka et al., 2025). The most important improvements occurred among those aged 40–59, where mortality rates dropped by over 65%. This progress is primarily attributed to historical declines in smoking rates among Black teens, advancements in treatment options, and improvements in early detection.

Despite these gains, Black men experience disproportionately high cancer mortality rates. Black men had a 16% higher mortality rate than white men over the past five years, despite only a 4% higher incidence rate. This gap underscores systemic inequities in access to quality care, early detection, and treatment outcomes. Specific disparities include (American Cancer Society, 2019):

Lung cancer: 18% higher mortality rate than white men (63.9 vs. 54.1 per 100,000; Ratio: 1.18).

Colorectal cancer: Nearly 50% higher than for white men (24.5 vs. 16.6 per 100,000; Ratio: 1.47).

Prostate cancer: More than twice the mortality rate than white men (39.8 vs. 18.1 per 100,000; Ratio: 2.20).

Stomach cancer: Double the mortality rate of white men (8.4 vs. 3.3 per 100,000; Ratio: 2.55)

Pancreatic cancer: 20% higher mortality rate than white men (15.2 vs. 12.9 per 100,000; Ratio: 1.18).

HIV/AIDS

Black men, particularly young Black men, continue to be disproportionately affected by HIV/AIDS. In 2022, Black boys and young men (aged 13–24), had the highest HIV diagnosis rate of any racial or gender group, with 83.1 per 100,000, a rate nearly three times higher than Latinx men (29.2 per 100,000) and over three times higher than Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander men (23.8 per 100,000) (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, n.d.-b).

Disparities persist across race and gender, with Black Americans diagnosed at more than seven times the rate of white Americans in 2022. **Black men specifically** were diagnosed with HIV at a rate **7.6 times higher than white men** (66.3 vs. 8.7 per 100,000) and three times higher than Black women (HIV/AIDS and Black/African Americans | Office of Minority Health, 2025). Despite medical advancements, HIV-related deaths remain disproportionately high.

Between 2010 and 2022, mortality rates among Black men showed mixed trends (see top right; Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, n.d.-a).

Between 2010 and 2019, AIDS-related deaths among Black men declined by 37.3%, dropping from 30.3 to 23 per 100,000. However, this progress stalled between 2019 and 2022, with fatalities rising 8.7% to 25 per 100,000 Black men. Similar increases were observed among Latinx and white men during this period. This reversal may reflect disruptions in access to treatment, prevention, or health care services.

AIDS Mortality

Black men: AIDS-related deaths declined 17.5% in 2022

Latinx men: Declined 12%

White men: Declined 7.3%

In 2022, AIDS-related deaths among Black men were **nearly three times higher** than those among Latinx men and **over 5.5 times higher** than those among white men.

HIV Mortality

Black men: HIV-related deaths declined 9.3% from 2010 to 2022

Latinx men: Declined 2.8%

White men: Increased 17.6%

In 2022, Black men's HIV mortality rate was **over three times higher** than Latinx men and **5.5 times higher** than white men.

Males Aged 13 and Older HIV/AIDS Mortality Rates (per 100,000)

Year	Category	Black	Latinx	White
2010	AIDS deaths	30.3	9.2	4.1
2010	HIV deaths	36.7	10.6	5.1
2019	AIDS deaths	23	7.5	3.9
2019	HIV deaths	29.9	9.3	5.3
2022	AIDS deaths	25	8.1	4.4
2022	HIV deaths	33.2	10.3	6

Source: (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, n.d.-a)AIDS deaths | HIV deaths | 2010 | 2019 | 2022 | United States | Black/African American | Hispanic/Latino | White | Male | Ages 13 years and older | All transmission categories

Hypertension and Heart Disease

Hypertension and related diseases are a leading cause of death in Black males. In 2019, 17.3 Black people per 100,000 died as a result. Black men have historically had a higher prevalence of hypertension than white males. According to the Mayo Clinic, hypertension affects approximately 85 million Americans (one in three adults).

Still, Black males are more likely to experience complications of high blood pressure, which include stroke, myocardial infarction, and death (Sulaica et al., 2020). Although these figures apply to adults, children are also affected by pediatric hypertension, with Black adolescents following their Latinx peers, primarily due to childhood obesity (Cheung et al., 2017). Perceived racial discrimination and exposure to multiple adverse childhood experiences are linked to hypertension (Dolezsar et al., 2014).

Policy and Programmatic Solutions

To reduce chronic disease disparities and increase Black male life expectancy, we must:

- **Enhance Prenatal and Early Childhood Health Services:** Expand access to prenatal care, doulas, and maternal health programs to reduce infant mortality.
- **Develop Targeted Public Health Campaigns**: Raise awareness about leading causes of death, including heart disease, homicide, and suicide, with culturally- relevant outreach. Collaboration among public health departments, educational institutions, and employers to create sustained health campaigns, programs, and welcoming and affirming services will improve health outcomes for Black men.
- **Increase Preventive Health Care Access**: Strengthen efforts to connect Black men to primary care providers for early intervention and disease management. Provide more community-based screening services and outreach programs to provide preventive services for prevalent illnesses in Black men, such as asthma, heart disease, diabetes, and HIV/AIDS. Utilize advanced technologies that reduce wait time for screening results and allow for quicker follow-up with patients. Partnerships with community institutions, including faith-based organizations, barber shops, and community centers, will provide access to health education, screenings, and referral services in places that Black boys and men trust and frequent.
- **Increase Access to Holistic Healing Practices:** Fund and support holistic healing practices developed by and for the Black community for prevention and treatment.

Impact of Adverse Childhood Experiences

Challenges

Navigating negative social determinants of health, such as racial discrimination, housing and food insecurity, enforced poverty, and a lack of quality education and health care, creates a pressure cooker environment in people's lives. Over the last decade, **Adverse Childhood Experiences** (ACEs) have gained significant attention as a framework for tracking childhood trauma and underscoring the urgent need to protect and nurture Black boys from an early age. More recently, a culturally-specific ACE framework was developed to recognize **racism as a distinct ACE exposure risk factor, an independent category, and a determinant of post-ACE mental health outcomes among Black youth** (Bernard et al., 2022).

ACEs are strongly linked to **coronary heart disease, poor physical health, persistent mental distress, heavy drinking, and smoking** (Sheats et al., 2018). Nationally, Black non-Latinx youth experience the highest prevalence of ACEs (Sacks & Murphey, 2018). The disproportionate exposure to ACEs likely contributes to both physical deterioration and long-term mental and physical health challenges, underscoring the need for systemic interventions to address these disparities (Sheats et al., 2018).

ACEs offer a crucial lens into how negative social determinants of health impact Black communities, particularly Black boys and young men. Youth who experience racial discrimination are significantly more likely to report all other ACEs, multiple exposures to adverse experiences, and internalizing mental health diagnoses compared to youth who have not experienced racial discrimination (Bernard et al., 2021). **Black men report higher rates of expanded ACEs relating to violent crime** (Giovanelli & Reynolds, 2021). One study found that boys who experienced multiple adverse experiences faced a tenfold increase in suicide risk and were 2.7 times more likely to engage in violent behavior (Duke et al., 2010).

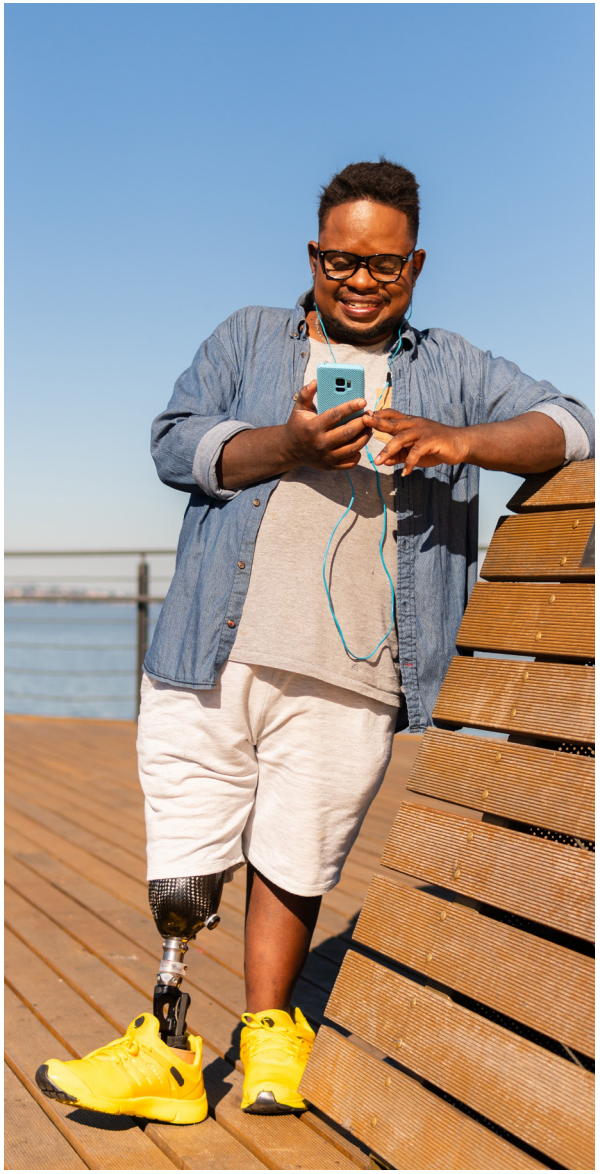
While ACE exposure remains high, some progress has been made. In response to the long history of Black families being disproportionately targeted by the child welfare

system, recent policy changes have aimed to reduce racial disparities. Consequently, the proportion of Black children in foster care has decreased from **38% in 2000 to 20% in 2021,** though they remain **1.8 times more likely** to be in foster care than the general population (Harp & Bunting, 2020).

Policy and Programmatic Solutions

Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) are the direct result of not addressing negative social determinants of health. To rectify this, we must:

- **Invest in Economic Stability:** Expand workforce development programs and provide financial assistance for Black families to reduce poverty-related health disparities.
- **Improve Neighborhood and Housing Conditions:** Increase funding for affordable housing and enforce policies that address environmental hazards in Black communities.
- **Expand Access to Healthy Foods**: Support urban farming, community gardens, and initiatives to eliminate food deserts.
- **Champion Community Organizing:** Support Black communities working to demand material change in their living conditions and in the policies and laws that enforce poverty, violence, and illness.
- **Support Culturally-Affirming Programming:** Develop creative and innovative systems that are designed by and for Black communities to strengthen stability, security, and well-being.
- **Recognize the Role of Trauma:** Develop appropriate programs and projects that focus on the collective healing and well-being of Black boys and men.
- **Address Environmental Racism:** Develop action plans to reduce environmental hazards located near low-income neighborhoods as part of state- or community-level strategies to reduce health disparities.



Mental Health

Black youth and men face sharply higher suicide risks — three to four times higher for boys compared to their white peers, and four times higher for men than for Black women.

Challenges

Suicide Crisis

The mental health crisis among Black boys and men has reached alarming levels, with suicide now the second leading cause of death for Black males aged 15–24 (Adams & Thorpe, 2023). Over the past two decades, suicide-related injuries among Black adolescent boys have risen by 122%, and suicide deaths among Black men have increased by 25.3%. 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. Within the broader Black population, 81% of suicides are among men, reflecting both the gendered nature of the crisis and the deep barriers to mental health care that persist.

This crisis marks a significant departure from historical trends. Historically, suicide rates for Native American/Alaska Native (NA/AN) youth and white youth were higher than those of Black youth (Ramchand et al., 2021). However, from 2007 to 2020, the suicide rate among Black youth aged 10–17 rose by 144% (Cubbage & Adams, 2023). Firearm suicides for Black teens ages 15–19 saw a 24% rise, surpassing rates among white peers for the first time (Villareal et al., 2024). This reversal signals an urgent and evolving public health emergency, pointing to the cumulative effects of systemic racism, discrimination, economic instability, and limited access to culturally-responsive mental health care. These alarming trends call for a deeper and more comprehensive understanding of the cumulative challenges Black males face across their lifetimes.

Masculinity

While Black masculinities are rich and diverse, Black boys and young men face societal pressure to conform to particular, rigid masculine norms such as not showing weakness, holding power over women, and the pressure to be promiscuous. Conformity to these norms can bring social and economic rewards, but it can also lead to emotional distancing and interpersonal dominance in relationships (Watkins, 2019). These norms have been consistently and robustly associated with adverse mental health outcomes (Wong et al., 2017).

Navigating masculinity adds another layer of complexity in institutional settings. A tragic example is Gabriel Taye, an 8-year-old Black boy in Ohio, who took his own life in 2017 due to relentless bullying by his classmates. Nathaniel Bryan (2020) highlights how dominant white gender norms are projected onto school environments, where Black boys' behavior is misread, criminalized, or feared. What results is the dehumanization and criminalization of Black boys, which leaves one in five Black men born in 2001 likely to be imprisoned at some point in their lifetime (Roehrkasse & Wildeman, 2022).

Black LGBTQIA+ Youth at Heightened Risk

More than half (57%) of Black LGBTQ+ youth experienced depressive symptoms, and 66% experienced anxiety (The Trevor Project, 2022) compared to all youth at 21% (Wang et al., 2024). In a national survey of Black LGBTQ+ youth aged 13–24, 35% seriously considered suicide, and 19%

reported a suicide attempt in the past 12 months (Flohr et al., 2024). Among Black trans, nonbinary, or questioning youth, 21% reported a suicide attempt in the past year (The Trevor Project, 2024).

These outcomes reflect the compounding stress of racial and gender/sexual identity-based discrimination. Black LGBTQ+ youth are more likely to experience family rejection, homelessness, and social isolation, all of which heighten mental health risks (Cray et al., 2013). A lack of affirming mental health providers who understand and respect the lived experiences of Black boys and men contributes to low engagement in care and higher rates of untreated depression.

The consequences of systemic racism are actualized in Black boys taking their own lives and signal the dire need for access to culturally-affirming healing practices.

Mental Health and Police Violence

Mental health issues, including depression and complex trauma, frequently go undiagnosed or untreated due to stigma and a lack of culturally-affirming care. Violence impacts Black boys and young men in particular ways, and while homicide and suicide top the list, death at the hands of police is also a leading cause for young Black men (Edwards et al., 2019). This intersection of mental health, racial marginalization, and police violence poses a deadly threat. An estimated 76% of individuals killed in police encounters have had previous mental health treatment, and Black people are 2.8 times more likely than white people to die in those encounters, despite being less likely to be armed (Shadravan et al., 2021).

"I've seen alarming mental health data for Black boys in high school, especially tied to social media. Their suicide attempts tend to be more extreme than their peers. A lot of this starts early — family dynamics, poverty, body image. I grew up hearing I was too dark, too fat. I carried that. I wonder what that looks like now, because it seems like it's getting worse. Is it connected to poverty? Literacy? We have to listen differently when we talk about holistic health."

— Dustin, *We Dream a World* Advisory Committee Member

Culturally-Affirming Interventions

Stigma and negative perceptions surrounding mental illness and treatment services significantly impact help-seeking behaviors among Black adolescents. These perceptions often include beliefs that mental illness signifies weakness or that healing should rely solely on faith and family (Pederson, 2023). Consequently, families of Black boys and young men may hesitate to seek help for fear of ridicule or social isolation.

Despite heightened risks, Black youth remain significantly less likely to receive adequate mental health care, and when they do, they are more likely to receive poor-quality treatment (Alegría et al., 2015). A 2017 review found no published, evidence-based suicide prevention programs tailored to Black youth (Bluehen-Unger et al., 2017), underscoring the failure of existing mental health systems to address their needs.

What is needed are new models of care — not just adapted from mainstream systems, but culturally-grounded, community-designed, and inclusive of peers, families, and the youth themselves. For Black and Native youth, mental health solutions must be embedded in culture, tradition, and belonging (Bluehen-Unger et al., 2017).

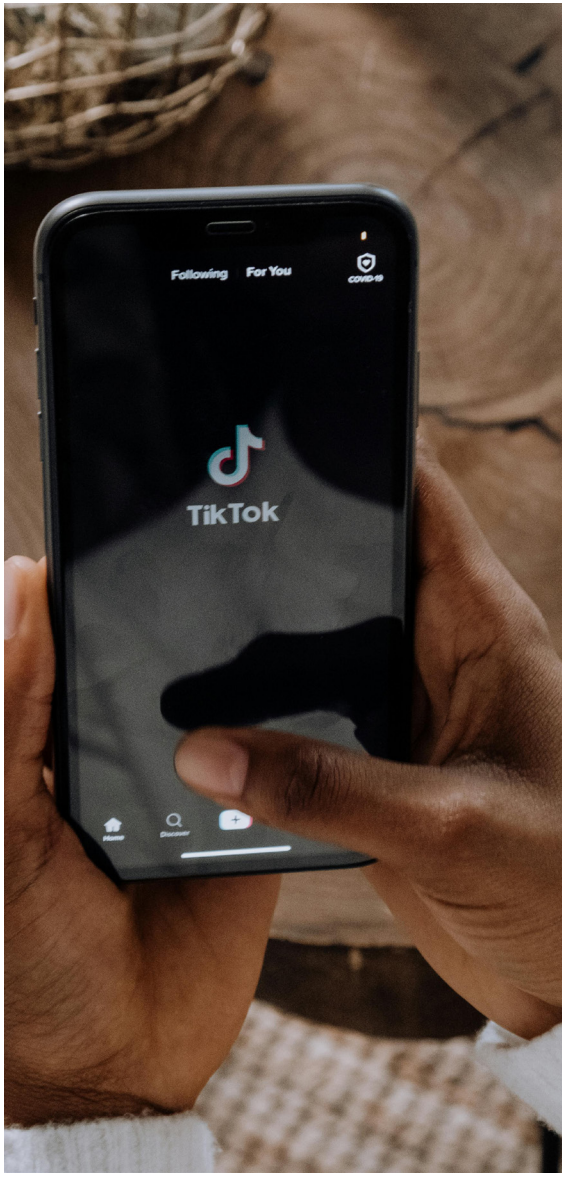
Even when Black adolescents access care, early termination of treatment is common. The reality is that the mental health crisis affecting Black boys in urban communities cannot be addressed through mental health access alone. Instead, it calls for urgent attention and transformative action to dismantle oppressive structures and affirm the humanity of Black boys. As Bryan (2022) posits, Black boys are ensnared in a perpetual state of mental and existential crisis, which is not only disregarded and unaddressed by society but also used to reinforce harmful stereotypes of Black boyhood and masculinity.

Social Media

Since the original report, the topic of social media use among teenagers has gained significant attention as it presents both risks and protective aspects. Social media can expose youth to harmful content, including online racism, which has been linked to higher rates of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and suicidal ideation among Black girls and boys (ages 10–19), who on average view five racially discriminatory posts per day (Tynes et al., 2024). Additionally, regular use of digital platforms has been associated with higher rates of anxiety and depression, sleep disruptions that impair cognitive function, and increased exposure to misinformation and toxic discourse, all of which can worsen mental health outcomes.

At the same time, research is showing that social media use can have a protective effect when used

> Early adulthood is a critical period for Black men, marked by an increasing awareness of how systemic inequalities restrict their educational, economic, and social opportunities along lines of race and gender. During this time, many young Black men encounter structural barriers such as limited access to quality education, unemployment and underemployment, poverty, and homelessness. These challenges are closely associated with an elevated risk of adverse mental health outcomes, further compounding the impact of systemic marginalization.
>
> *Source: Watkins, 2019*



to maintain offline relationships, explore new content and connections, and try different modes of self-representation. In this way, it can impact the cognitive processes that support positive identity development (LeBlanc & Loyd, 2022). Exploratory research with Black boys in a Michigan high school also found that while they mistrust health information on social media, they still use it, relying on social media, websites, and entertainment media to educate themselves about mental health concepts and to decide where to go for help (Ribeiro Brown et al., 2022). Social media provides the opportunity to seek out and create culturally-affirming spaces. Black Americans use social media more than any other racial group and are also more likely to engage in online activism (Stamps, 2022). "The existence of social media has allowed Black individuals to share their grievances, celebrate their successes, call attention to injustice, and build awareness around cultural issues" (Mastantuono, 2023).

Policy and Programmatic Solutions

To strengthen the mental health support system for Black men and boys, we must:

- **Normalize Mental Health Care in Black Communities:** Fund community-based mental health initiatives, counseling centers, and peer support networks. Ensure that programs are culturally-affirming and tailored to meet the unique needs of Black boys and young men.
- **Increase Access to Black Therapists and Counselors:** Provide incentives for Black mental health professionals to serve in underserved areas.
- **Create Suicide Prevention Programs for Black Youth:** Develop school and community-based interventions tailored to the unique mental health challenges of Black boys.
- **Increase Access to Substance Abuse Services:** Provide more treatment opportunities within low-income communities for Black community members struggling with substance abuse and comprehensive wraparound services.

In a hip-hop-based education program in Chicago, Black youth developed creative strategies to resist algorithm bias, increase the visibility of their creative work, and build online communities. Tactics including collective posting, strategic hashtag use, and shared-interest groups helped support their racial identity and sense of efficacy. This example illustrates how the intentional and culturally- informed use of social media can foster connection and a sense of belonging.

LeBlanc & Loyd, 2022

Violence Exposure

Violence against Black communities is not random; it is the product of decades of policy-driven neglect and structural disinvestment. For Black males aged 10–34, homicide remains the leading cause of death, a stark contrast to other racial groups, where chronic illnesses are the primary drivers of mortality. This persistent crisis is not just a public safety concern; it is a failure of systems that were never designed to protect or invest in Black lives.

Challenges

Exposure to violence — whether direct or indirect — disrupts entire life trajectories. Research on Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) confirms that violence exposure increases risks of long-term health complications, economic instability, and intergenerational trauma. However, violence does not emerge in isolation; it is rooted in structural inequities that have concentrated poverty and hardship in Black communities. Economic disinvestment, discriminatory policies, and systemic underfunding of education and social services create conditions where violence thrives. The conditions that sustain violence — disinvestment, over-policing, and lack of resources — are policy choices, not inevitabilities.

Homicide Trends

Between 2006 and 2022, homicide mortality rates among Black boys and men initially declined but surged later, reflecting a worsening crisis. The overall homicide rate dropped from 40.6 per 100,000 in 2006 to 35 in 2010, before rising sharply to 56.1 in 2022. Young Black males faced the highest risks — homicide rates nearly doubled for those aged 15–19 (54 to 105 per 100,000) and 20–24 (99 to 125 per 100,000) between 2010 and 2022. Among Black men aged 25–34 and 35–44, rates rose from 81.1 to 107.8 and from 35.8 to 77.2, respectively. Even Black boys aged 10–14 saw their homicide rate triple. These trends underscore the growing racial disparities in violent deaths.

Firearms play a dominant role in this crisis. In 2022, firearm homicides among Black youth increased by 5.6% from 2021 (Villareal et al., 2024), continuing a troubling trend of increasing violence. Black people were nearly 14 times more likely than white people to die by gun homicide, and young Black males aged 15–34 were the most vulnerable.

Violence Beyond Homicide

While homicide is the most visible form of violence affecting Black boys and men, it represents only one part of a broader crisis. Black adolescents and young adults also experience disproportionately high rates of aggravated assaults, physical fights, and bullying victimization compared to their white peers (Sheats et al., 2018).

Between 2010 and 2015, Black individuals aged 10–34 were significantly more likely than white individuals to suffer serious physical injuries from

Homicide Mortality Rates for Black Boys and Men by Age Group (per 100,000)

	2006	2010	2019	2022
All Black Males	40.6	35	43.8	56.1
1-4 years	6.3	7.2	6	8.6
5-9 years	2.1	1.4	2.8	3.3
10-14 years	4.1	2.9	4.4	9.4
15-19 years	66.3	54	70.9	105
20-24 years	112.2	99	106.3	125
25-34 years	86.2	81.1	89.6	107.8
35-44 years	39.8	35.8	58.7	77.2
45-54 years	27.1	21	29.1	41.1

Source: 2006: Heron, 2010; 2010: Heron, 2013; 2019: Heron, 2021; 2022: Curtin et al., 2024.

violence, including attacks with weapons and fights requiring medical treatment. Additionally, Black students were more likely to report missing school due to safety concerns, highlighting the persistent threat of violence in their daily environments (Sheats et al., 2018).

Too often left out of conversations on violence, adult sexual abuse of Black boys is a hidden crisis with devastating mental health consequences and little institutional response (Curry & Utley, 2018). The silence around this issue only deepens the harm and further highlights the need for comprehensive approaches to understanding and addressing the many forms of violence Black boys and men face in urban communities.

"One thing that's still taboo — but really important — is how many Black boys and men have experienced sexual violence. I've asked almost every Black man I know, and most have shared they went through something inappropriate with an older person when they were young. But they don't always recognize it as abuse because of cultural norms. If we're serious about ending violence, we have to acknowledge the kinds of violence our boys have experienced and still carry."

— Advisory Member, EMS

The presence of violence in communities is not just a safety issue — it is a symptom that then reinforces cycles of poverty, disinvestment, and instability that make it harder for Black boys and men to thrive.

State-Sanctioned Violence and Police Brutality

Though often treated separately from community violence, state-sanctioned violence is deeply interconnected. Policing practices in Black communities frequently exacerbate the conditions that contribute to violence, while also inflicting direct harm. The 2020 national reckoning for racial justice brought renewed focus to police violence, but sustained policy change has not followed. Black boys and men continue to be disproportionately targeted by aggressive policing, excessive force, and criminalization.

The deaths of Black boys and men, including Philando Castile, Eric Garner, George Floyd, Tamir Rice, and Daunte Wright at the hands of police officers, exemplify a form of systemic violence that extends beyond individual incidents. These cases highlight how police brutality serves as both a direct threat to Black lives and a psychological burden compounding within communities already grappling with violence.

Media narratives often depict Black males as perpetrators of violence while neglecting institutional policies that fuel these conditions (Curry, 2017). Over-policing, discriminatory sentencing, and chronic underinvestment in education and economic opportunity reinforce cycles of community and state violence (Curry, 2017; K. K. Hill, 2016).

The mental health impacts of police violence are profound, yet research in this area remains critically underdeveloped, failing to capture the full scope of harm inflicted by state institutions. Constant exposure to surveillance, harassment, and trauma leads to toxic stress, which accumulates and manifests in elevated risks of hypertension, heart disease, depression, and early death (Geronimus et al., 2020, Sheats et al., 2018).

These chronic health disparities are not just personal struggles; they are the direct result of structural inequities that shape who gets to live a long, healthy life and who doesn't. Violence, in all its forms, is both a cause and consequence of these inequities, compounding the physical, emotional, and psychological toll on Black boys and men.

Without systemic change, Black boys and men will continue to face disproportionate exposure to violence and its far-reaching health and social consequences. Addressing these disparities requires more than law enforcement — it demands comprehensive, community-driven solutions that prioritize healing, safety, and equity as public health priorities.

Policy and Programmatic Solutions

To reduce violence and its health impacts:

- **Fund Violence Prevention and Intervention Programs:** Expand community-centered, evidence-based initiatives to address violence. Addressing violence requires a multipronged approach. Cities United has 15 solutions to reduce violence and re-imagine public safety — from hospital intervention programs to street outreach to bolstering family support. Mentorship programs, safe school initiatives, and trauma-informed interventions help mitigate the long-term effects of violence. Support promising programs such as:

Beats, Rhymes, and Life in Oakland, Calif., aims to provide culturally- congruent services through therapeutic activity groups and hip-hop that inspires youth to recognize their capacity for healing.

Healing Hurt People from Drexel University's Center for Nonviolence and Social Justice promotes healing, reduces re-injury, and stems retaliation among youth who are survivors of violence through trauma-informed practices.

Community Healing through Activism and Strategic Mobilization (CHASM) utilizes the Community Health Worker model and the CDC's STRYVE model in counties like Buncombe County, N.C., and Multnomah County, Ore., to integrate outreach, mentoring, and support for young people, forging genuine relationships and building cohesion within communities.

- **Implement Economic Stability Policies:** Violence is a symptom of poverty and oppressive conditions. Implement proven projects, such as direct cash assistance and guaranteed income, which reduce stress and help maintain stable employment.

Health Care Disparities and Medical Racism

Challenges

Health Insurance Coverage and Underinsurance

Given the significant disparities in social determinants of health and the burden of chronic conditions among marginalized communities, health insurance is essential for ensuring access to medical care, preventive services, and treatments that can improve health outcomes. Black boys are disproportionately affected by chronic illnesses, mental health challenges, and violence-related injuries, making accessible, quality, and holistic health care vital. Without insurance, families often face financial barriers to accessing necessary services, leading to delayed diagnoses and untreated conditions that can worsen over time. Health insurance also connects Black boys to preventive care, including vaccinations, routine check-ups, and screenings, which are critical for identifying and addressing health issues early. By reducing the economic burden of medical costs, insurance can play a crucial role in bridging health equity gaps and promoting better long-term health outcomes for Black boys and their communities.

The expansion of health insurance coverage has helped reduce disparities in health outcomes for Black Americans. In 2010, nearly 20% of Black Americans lacked insurance coverage, according to the U.S. Census Bureau's American Community Survey. By 2023, only 9.7% were without coverage, although many remain underinsured. High unemployment and underemployment rates of Black males were a driving factor for the uninsured (L. Hill et al., 2025).

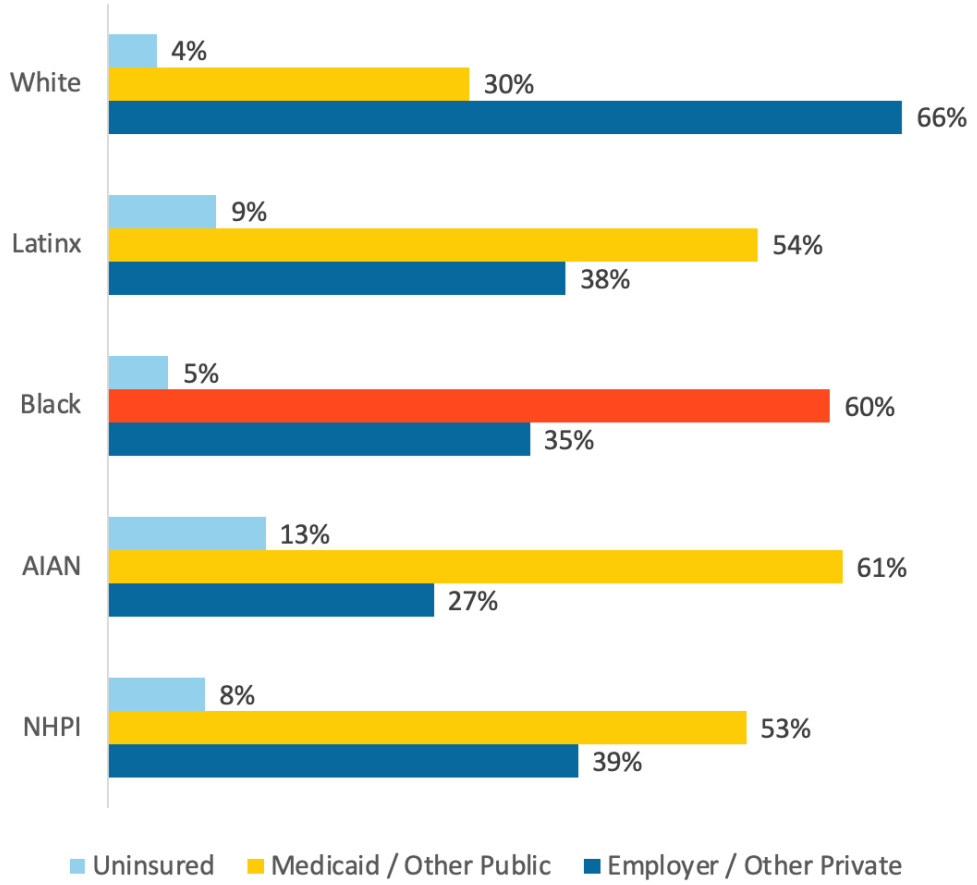
The increase in insurance coverage is a direct result of the Affordable Care Act, enacted in 2010. This comprehensive health care reform law makes affordable health care insurance available to more people, expands Medicaid to cover people below the poverty level, and supports innovative medical care that lowers the costs of health care. In 2023, the uninsured rate for Black Americans was 8.6%, compared to 5.8% for white Americans, which means that Black Americans are now 1.5 times more likely to

be uninsured than whites (Vankar, 2024). In 2023, Black children were insured mainly by Medicaid or another public insurance program (60%), with only 35% covered through employer or other private insurance, and 5% uninsured entirely. Black communities in states with Medicaid expansion experienced a 5% reduction in the number of uninsured individuals (L. Hill et al., 2025).

While the drop in uninsured Black families is promising, there are existing challenges and stigmas associated with using Medicaid, CHIP, and other public insurance programs. A 2013 report found that while Medicaid is effective in providing coverage for primary care, children on Medicaid were less likely to receive specialist care for various conditions, with specialists more likely to deny appointments to Medicaid and CHIP children than privately insured children. Parents and caregivers also experienced longer wait times for appointments for publicly insured children (Paradise & Garfield, 2013). In 2023, a higher proportion of families insured through Medicaid (23%) were unable to access recommended medical treatment than those insured through employer-sponsored insurance (15%) (Diana et al., 2023).

The U.S. health system favors those with employer-sponsored insurance. Given the unwavering discrimination experienced by Black families in hiring, unmoved for decades, this limits access to Black families who tend to rely on public insurance systems. This results in limited access to medical treatment for issues that require more specialized attention than primary care.

Health Coverage of Children by Race and Ethnicity, 2023



Note: Includes children ages 0 to 18. Persons of Hispanic origin may be of any race but are categorized as Latinx for this analysis; other groups are non-Hispanic. AIAN refers to American Indian or Alaska Native NHPI refers to Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander. Source: KFF analysis of 2023 American Community Survey, 1-Year Estimates.

Health Care Provider Racial Bias

While access to medical providers and treatment is growing, recent efforts have increasingly focused on enhancing cultural competence among health care providers to address chronic disparities in the U.S. health care system. Health care providers, along with their administrative and clerical staff, can significantly impact the quality of experience and care that Black families receive when seeking care. **The availability of Black doctors to serve their community remains virtually unchanged since 1900**, over 120 years, with only 5.4% of physicians in the U.S. being Black, 2.6% of them Black men (Ly, 2022). The situation is more dire with regards to mental health, where only 2% of psychiatrists and 4% of psychologists are Black (Lin et al., 2018).

This leaves medical care for Black communities mainly provided by health care professionals who do not share the lived experience of a Black person in society. Experiences of discrimination and bias stemming from historical, structural, and systemic racism, credible mistrust of the health care system, and negative encounters with care professionals deter Black families from receiving quality care (Smedley et al., 2003). A review of a decade of research on implicit racial bias revealed preference favoring white patients over Black patients across multiple levels of training and disciplines of health care professionals (Maina et al., 2018). Studies suggest that Black men experience and express mental health issues in distinct ways from Black women or white men, where, rather than reporting sadness, they report anger, frustration, and agitation (Watkins, 2019). This means providers would need to be able to recognize how mental health challenges present uniquely for Black boys and young men to be effective.

Since 2010, there has been a shift from the idea of cultural competency, often addressed with a short and superficial training on specific populations, to cultural humility. This approach, rather than focusing on training that might cement monolithic stereotypes of Black patients seeking care, is based on self-reflexivity, appreciation of patients' lay expertise, openness to sharing power with patients, and continuous learning from one's patients (Lekas et al., 2020). More recently, the concept of culturally affirming care has been introduced to the health care field, which actively honors and celebrates identity while at the same time validating the oppression felt by individuals seeking services (Mendoza et al., 2020).

Black men have long reported negative experiences within the U.S. health care system, including feeling unheard and having their concerns dismissed. These experiences have led many individuals to avoid medical settings or feel hesitant about seeking care (Hammond et al., 2010; Stevens-Watkins & Lloyd, 2010). This mistrust often extends to younger generations, with many Black youth discouraged from pursuing the care they need (Lindsey et al., 2024). While racism and bias in the health care system are systemic issues, individual decisions still matter. Actions such as increasing awareness of implicit bias, reflecting on assumptions about Black masculinity, and using patient-centered communication can make a meaningful difference in the care that Black boys and young men receive (Stevens-Watkins & Lloyd, 2010).

In 2021 and 2022, the Black-owned research firm EVITARUS conducted the Listening to Black Californians study for the California Health Care Foundation (CHCF). Key Findings and Recommendations:

1. Involve Black men in initial and ongoing training for health care providers and frontline staff. "Training should include normalizing the idea of Black men needing care and safe environments as well as the idea of Black male caregivers accompanying family members to appointments."

2. Black men in California "are invested in their health and actively advocate for their well-being and for the health of loved ones."

3. "Health care providers should partner with Black men to pursue positive health outcomes through community forums and provider training."

Source: California Health Care Foundation, 2024

Policy and Programmatic Solutions

Eliminating health care disparities and medical racism starts with:

- **Expanding Health Insurance Access:** Ensure Black boys and men are enrolled in private insurance, Medicaid, or Affordable Care Act plans, with a focus on underinsured populations. Protect these programs and resist privatization, which has historically redlined Black communities out of stability and well-being.
- **Expanding Provider Access:** Open community clinics that specifically focus on men's health issues, staffed with individuals who provide culturally-affirming care and have a superior understanding of Black men's health.
- **Increasing Diversity in the Health Care Workforce:** Provide scholarships and mentorship programs to increase Black representation in medicine, especially in primary care and mental health.
- **Mandating Cultural Competency and Anti-Racism Training:** Require health care providers to receive ongoing training in racial bias awareness and culturally- affirming care.
- **Increasing Diversity in Clinical Trials:** Clinical trials must ensure treatments are effective across populations.
- **Enhancing Provider Education:** Providers must be well-versed in racial disparities in care. This should not be seen as an add-on or optional, but a foundation for provider education.
- **Implementing Financial Incentives and Policy Reforms:** Expand equitable access to preventive screenings, early detection, and high-quality treatment.
- **Protecting Population-Specific Data Collection and Interventions:** Population-specific data tracking provides the ability to set and meet benchmarks for narrowing the inequities of health care for Black boys and young men. Develop and work towards meeting goals and benchmarks for improving the health of Black boys and men.

Conclusion

The health disparities faced by Black boys and men in the U.S. are deeply entrenched in systemic inequities that span generations.

From infancy to adulthood, Black males experience disproportionate rates of chronic disease, mental health challenges, violence, and premature death — all of which are exacerbated by barriers to health care, racial bias, and socioeconomic disparities. The impact of these challenges extends beyond individuals, affecting families, communities, and the broader society.

Despite these challenges, hope persists. Advances in health care coverage, increasing awareness of mental health, and growing efforts to address systemic racism in medicine and policy provide a foundation for meaningful change. The progress made so far underscores the potential for targeted interventions, but much more remains to be done. Achieving health equity for Black men requires unwavering commitment from policymakers, health care providers, community leaders, and advocates. The data is clear, and the urgency is undeniable. The time for action is now. Together, we can reimagine a future where health equity is a reality, not an aspiration.

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05 Fatherhood

Introduction

Black fathers play a powerful and enduring role in the lives of their children and communities. Their care, protection, and guidance serve as anchors of strength and healing, grounding their children in cultural knowledge, pride, and identity in a society that too often places their very presence under scrutiny.

To truly support Black boys and young men meaningfully, institutions must move beyond narrow definitions of fatherhood. Black fathers are not only providers but also nurturers, protectors, and culture-bearers. Their presence strengthens families and shapes generational outcomes, particularly in communities facing the compounded effects of racial injustice, economic exclusion, and systemic surveillance.

Despite this essential role, Black fathers remain structurally marginalized. This erasure, a legacy of U.S. history, continues to be carried through laws and narratives that have consistently undermined Black fatherhood. Under slavery, Black men were denied legal recognition as fathers. In the post-Reconstruction era, vagrancy laws and racialized public assistance policies destabilized Black families by policing male presence in the home.

By 1965, the Moynihan Report codified a now-familiar story, attributing rising rates of Black single motherhood to cultural breakdown while ignoring the impact of over 200 years of legalized enslavement and a century of segregation, economic exclusion, and targeted policy harm. These historical forces laid the groundwork for modern systems,

including child welfare, housing, incarceration, and employment that continue to treat Black fatherhood as a liability rather than a strength.

These narratives continue to shape public perception and policy. Contemporary public discourse still centers the myth of the "absent Black father" while ignoring the structural conditions that drive separation: incarceration, poverty, restrictive housing rules, and premature death (Adams & Johnson, 2021; Alexander, 2010; Pate Jr, 2016). In this context, Black fatherhood is more than a familial role — it is an act of persistence and care, grounded in dignity, cultural legacy, and love.

And still, Black fathers show up. With resilience and creativity, they parent in ways that extend beyond co-residence and economic provision. They nurture, mentor, and advocate across complex systems that were not built to support them, often without recognition. Their fathering is rooted instead in cultural legacy, communal care, and reimagined models of masculinity and connection (Johnson Jr & Briggs, 2021; W. E. Johnson & Briggs, 2025).

Fifteen years after the *We Dream a World* report, public awareness has shifted, yet conditions separating Black fathers from their children persist. Black families and advocates have worked to reclaim visibility and demand policies recognizing fatherhood as a stabilizing force. This moment requires narrative and structural transformation to honor Black fatherhood as the resource it has always been, rather than framing it as a risk.

Areas of Progress

- Black fathers, both co-residential and non-residential, report high levels of daily caregiving, including meals, hygiene, and homework support.
- Social fathers and extended kin — including uncles, grandfathers, mentors, and others — play consistent and emotionally present caregiving roles, grounded in Black cultural traditions.
- Queer, trans, and gender-expansive Black fathers are increasingly visible, expanding public understanding of fatherhood and building affirming family structures despite systemic erasure.

Areas of Concern

- Federal housing policies continue to exclude fathers from subsidized units unless listed on the lease, while Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) rules incentivize maternal gatekeeping and castigate paternal involvement.
- Black fathers are more likely to have child support orders based on imputed, rather than actual income, leading to unpayable debts and legal consequences that strain families.
- Over 13% of Black children have had an incarcerated parent, most often a father. Upon reentry into society, these men face systemic barriers and are frequently criminalized for non-payment of support.
- Black fathers are frequently excluded from child welfare and education systems due to informal caregiving roles, racial bias, and rigid norms of masculinity and parenting.

The Realities of Black Fatherhood

A persistent and damaging myth claims that Black fathers are disengaged or absent from their children's lives, particularly when they do not live in the same household. Popular narratives often depict them as "deadbeat dads" who avoid parental responsibility and abandon their children. These stereotypes not only distort reality but also ignore the deep systemic barriers that many Black fathers navigate daily.

(Mincy et al., 2014; Pate Jr, 2016; Tsuchiya et al., 2020)

Challenges

Misrepresenting Engaged Fathers

Contrary to prevailing stereotypes, Black fathers, whether living with their children or not, demonstrate high levels of daily caregiving and emotional presence. National data from the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (Jones & Mosher, 2013) indicate that Black fathers who live with their children are highly involved in their care. A large majority report eating meals with their children, providing daily care, including bathing or dressing, and regularly helping with homework.

Importantly, this engagement is not limited to co-residential fathers. Among those who do not live with their children, most maintain consistent contact and involvement with them.

Historical Roots of the "Absent Father" Narrative

Antebellum era	No legal recognition of Black fatherhood under slavery
Post-Reconstruction	Rise of vagrancy laws and forced labor for Black men
1935–1960s	Early welfare programs often discouraged male presence in homes
1965	Moynihan Report labels Black families as "patho-logical" due to single motherhood

Sources: Roberts, 1997; Alexander, 2010; Moynihan, 1965

For example, 75% had spoken with their children in the past four weeks about daily events, and a significant share (79%) had played with their young children during that time.

These data reveal a consistent pattern of presence and caregiving that remains largely overlooked in public narratives and policy frameworks.

Undervaluing Father Impact

Fathers, whether they live with their children or not, play a critical role in shaping their children's emotional, academic, and developmental outcomes (Johnson Jr et al., 2020; Lewis et al., 2025; McLeod et al., 2019).

Studies have shown that father involvement can reduce:

- Behavioral challenges and emotional distress
- Risk of early substance use
- Gaps in educational attainment
- Likelihood of juvenile criminal legal system involvement

It also increases:

- School engagement and motivation
- Mental health stability
- Positive identity formation and self-regulation

These outcomes underscore the significance of father involvement, particularly in communities where this presence is often overlooked or undervalued.

The Erasure of Custodial Fathers

An increasing number of Black men serve as primary caregivers; however, their contributions are often rendered invisible. In 2020, nearly **half a million Black father-only households** were recorded, representing **4.5% of all Black families with children** (Hemez & Washington, 2021). Although this share declined from 9% in 2008, mainly due to overall family growth, the total number has remained stable. This underscores the persistence of Black paternal caregiving, even as attention to it has waned.

Between 2008 and 2020, **the number of Black single-parent households increased significantly**, from 3.3 to 5.5 million, now constituting over half of all Black families with children. While the majority remain mother-led, father-only households continue to face challenges within support systems that are predominantly designed for maternal caregivers (W. E. Johnson & Briggs, 2025).

Contrary to pervasive negative stereotypes, the proportion of Black children living exclusively with their fathers (5%) is comparable to that of white children (5%) and slightly higher than Latinx

Black Custodial Fathers In Context

- In 2020, over **490,000 Black households** were headed by single fathers.
- **Father-only households** made up about **4.5%** of all Black families with children.
- About **5% of Black children** lived with their father only, similar to rates for white and Latinx children.
- **8% of Black children** had no parent present in the home. (Hemez & Washington, 2021).

children (4%). Asian children are the least likely (2%) (Hemez & Washington, 2021). These realities contradict dominant narratives that frame Black fatherhood as rare or absent.

However, Black children remain the most likely of all groups to live without either parent present. In 2020, 8% of Black children lived in homes without any parent, compared to 4% of Latinx children, 3% of white children, and 1% of Asian children. Nearly half (46.3%) of Black children lived with their mother only, twice the rate of Latinx children (24%) and substantially higher than white (13%) or Asian children (8%) (Hemez & Washington, 2021). These patterns do not reflect cultural deficit, but the compounded effects of incarceration, poverty, and child welfare removals that disproportionately disrupt Black families (W. E. Johnson & Briggs, 2025).

Overlooking Social Fathers and Kinship Networks

In many Black communities, raising children is a shared effort that goes beyond the traditional two-parent household. Social fathers — including stepfathers, uncles, grandfathers, godfathers, older siblings, family friends, and mentors — often play essential roles in caring for and guiding children (Richardson Jr et al., 2014). These kinship ties are grounded in consistency, emotional presence, and shared responsibility, regardless of biological connection.

Research confirms the profound impact of these relationships. Black social fathers often spend time with children, offer advice, and help shape their development into healthy young people (McDougal, III et al., 2018). Many youth describe their social fathers as the people who made them feel seen and cared for, especially in the absence of their biological fathers. Yet social fathers often lack support, are not taken seriously, or struggle to remain involved due to limited resources or recognition.

These types of relationships reflect a long-standing cultural tradition where caregiving is shared throughout the community, and not limited to biological or legal definitions of fatherhood. In many communities, particularly in rural and underserved settings, youth often build lasting bonds with trusted adults outside their immediate family. Programs like 4-H, for example, sometimes serve as the only available space where children can connect with mentors, elders, and informal father figures. Despite limited resources, these programs can play a crucial role in sustaining intergenerational care and fostering a sense of belonging. As one youth reflected:

"We were making pinwheels out of construction paper while kids in Raleigh were doing pottery and orchestra. Still, that program had heart."

Despite their importance, social fathers remain largely invisible in public systems. Parenting programs, school outreach, and family support services overwhelmingly center on biological parents, excluding the broader caregiving roles that sustain Black children. This invisibility affects both how Black fatherhood is understood and which types of caregiving receive recognition or funding.

We must expand our understanding of family. Social fathers help children navigate not only daily life but also broader systems of injustice. For instance, many Black men, including mentors and fathers, have "The Talk" with their sons or mentees about staying safe in encounters with police. Johnson and colleagues note that many fathers distinguish between neighborhood and law enforcement dangers — an act of

protective love rarely acknowledged in traditional parenting literature.

Despite this profound impact, federal support remains minimal. The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services allocates only $75 million annually to fatherhood programs — a figure that is insufficient to meet national needs (Barker et al., 2023). A few states, such as Ohio, have established commissions to support fatherhood. However, broader policy and funding infrastructure remain lacking. Proposed federal cuts could further jeopardize programs aimed at inclusive parenting.

Affirming social fathers requires meaningful investment in informal care systems, increased visibility in programming, and a shift in the narrative to reflect the strength and structure of Black kinship. Initiatives like Black Men Build, The Dovetail Project, and Fathers, Families and Healthy Communities, with their community circles and civic leadership programs, represent one example of how collective fathering and care can be both mobilized and sustained.

Excluding LGBTQIA+ and Gender-Expansive Black Fathers

Black fatherhood has never been a monolith. Today, queer, trans, and gender-expansive Black fathers continue a long legacy of parenting that transcends rigid norms and embraces care as a collective and inclusive practice. They are raising children, shaping family culture, and expanding the definition of fatherhood itself — often while navigating unique layers of stigma, bias, and invisibility within public systems.

In recent years, an increasing number of Black LGBTQIA+ parents have shared their stories publicly, challenging stereotypes and increasing visibility. Fathers like Terrell and Jarius Joseph (Joseph & Joseph, 2024), along with advocates like Adair Curtis, have utilized social media and other platforms to share their parenting journeys and highlight the richness and diversity of Black family structures. More than 80% of Black LGBTQIA+ youth report being out to at least some members of their immediate family, including parents (Flohr et al., 2024). This shift indicates the increasing role that queer and trans Black parents are playing in creating affirming homes for a new generation.

Still, many LGBTQIA+ Black fathers encounter unique challenges. Public systems often exclude them, and few parenting programs are designed to reflect their lived realities. This includes the absence of inclusive language in legal forms, barriers to adoption or custody, and persistent assumptions that equate fatherhood with traditional masculinity and heterosexuality (W. Johnson & Norwitt, 2022).

Organizations across the country are beginning to respond. Los Angeles's Arming Minorities Against Addiction & Disease (AMAAD) provides community wellness services through housing, behavioral health, reentry, and recovery support. In August 2024, AMAAD, in partnership with the Los Angeles County Department of Mental Health, launched Black Men Rising, an initiative to support Black transmen and transmasculine individuals. The program creates space for connection, peer support, and wellness building, helping Black

transmasculine fathers access affirming community and care. Curricula like Live Respect, developed by A Call to Men, have also evolved to include gender-expansive perspectives, incorporating lessons on race, privilege, and inclusive caregiving.

Supporting all Black fathers means embracing the full spectrum of gender and sexual identity. It also requires challenging the systems and norms that restrict who is seen as capable of parenting. As the definition of family continues to evolve, so too must the frameworks we use to support, affirm, and protect those who are engaged in the daily work of raising the next generation.

Policies and Programmatic Solutions

To protect and sustain Black fatherhood, we must dismantle the structural barriers that limit fathers' ability to care for and remain connected to their children. These recommendations aim to repair harm, recognize caregiving in all its forms, and affirm fathers as essential to the well-being of families and communities. Solutions should be **community-rooted, healing-centered, and inclusive of diverse family structures.**

Recognize and Resource Nontraditional and Kinship Caregivers

- Expand support for social fathers, including stepfathers, uncles, godparents, and mentors, whose caregiving is often overlooked but essential.
- Adapt parenting programs and legal recognition policies to reflect extended kinship networks in Black communities.

Expand Support for LGBTQIA+ Black Fathers

- Fund LGBTQIA+ affirming fatherhood spaces that offer wellness and mental health groups for Black transmasculine and nonbinary parents.
- Provide legal and family navigation support, including assistance with adoption, custody, and gender marker/name changes.
- Create community spaces that foster connection, visibility, and advocacy for queer and trans Black fathers.

Promote Inclusive Father Engagement in Education

- Design father-focused initiatives in schools and early childhood settings, including storytelling sessions, volunteer days, and back-to-school events.
- Provide training for educators and staff to confront bias and affirm Black father presence.
- Support school partnerships with trusted community hubs (e.g., barbershops, churches, sports clubs) to deepen outreach.

Shift Narrative Through Cultural Investment

- Support community-led media, storytelling, and creative projects that celebrate Black fatherhood and challenge deficit-based narratives.
- Fund podcasts, documentaries, and visual campaigns that uplift intergenerational parenting, resistance, and care traditions in Black communities.

Systems That Undermine Black Fatherhood

Despite widespread public messaging about the importance of father involvement, Black fathers continue to face entrenched structural barriers that limit their ability to care for and remain present in their children's lives. These barriers are embedded in systems that devalue informal parenting, criminalize poverty, and treat Black men as peripheral to family life.

(Lemmons & Johnson, 2019; Perry & Johnson, 2017)

Challenges

Poverty Limits Father Stability and Support

Black men are often found in low-wage jobs and face high unemployment rates. Many work in unstable jobs that offer few benefits or protections, leaving them vulnerable to layoffs and limiting their ability to consistently support their children. In major cities, more than 15% of Black men have been jailed for failure to pay child support (Zatz et al., 2016).

More than 60% of single custodial fathers earn less than $50,000 a year, and 17% live below the poverty line (Martinez & Passel, 2025). These financial struggles are made worse by the notion that men should primarily be financial providers rather than also being involved as caregivers. **Many Black fathers find themselves in a tough spot: criticized for their economic struggles while also being judged for how they care for their children, all without much support for either role.**

Income Distribution of Black-Headed Households: 2008 vs. 2023

Year	% Earning <$25,000	% Earning $100,000+
2008	30%	13%
2022	27%	24%

Data from U.S. Census Bureau and Pew Research Center

Despite persistent inequality, there are some signs of economic progress. As of 2023, 25% of Black-headed households earned more than $100,000 annually, nearly doubling from 13% in 2008. The share earning less than $25,000 has declined from 30% to **24%** over the same period. The **median income for Black households now stands at $54,000**, reflecting gradual gains even amid persistent structural barriers (Martinez & Passel, 2025).

Child Support Systems Criminalize Poverty

The child support system often reinforces racial and economic inequities under the guise of neutrality. Designed initially around assumptions of legal marriage and divorce, the system is poorly suited to the realities of many Black families, where informal parenting arrangements are more common and wages are persistently lower.

On average, men of color earn just 65% of what white men earn, yet are ordered to pay 84% of the support white custodial parents are required to pay (Kim et al., 2024). Even after the 2016 federal reforms that limited income imputation, Black fathers remain the most likely of any racial group to receive orders based on imputed, not actual, earnings. Imputed income orders result in unrealistic payment expectations that disproportionately affect Black fathers, especially those navigating reentry, unemployment, or precarious gig work (Mincy et al., 2014).

At the same time, many mothers choose to avoid the formal system altogether:

- 27% cited the inability of the father to pay
- 26% said the father provides informal support
- 28% did not want legal involvement (Kim et al., 2024).

These data points highlight the disconnect between formal enforcement mechanisms and the lived realities of parenting. In many families, informal co-parenting and support arrangements are common but unrecognized by existing policies.

Recent reforms suggest a more equitable course. In 2022, California approved a full child support pass-through policy (AB 207), ensuring **that 100% of payments to families formerly receiving public assistance go directly to the custodial parent**. This change redirects $160 million annually to low-income households, without increasing burdens on non-custodial parents.

Welfare Rules Incentivize Father Absence

The design of cash welfare programs like Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) tends to sideline fathers as well. TANF benefits typically go to single mothers, who must cooperate with child support enforcement against the non-resident father to qualify. Caseworkers often push mothers to identify the father and establish a child support order so the state can recoup some of the TANF benefits.

Imputed Earnings

Courts sometimes assign a hypothetical income to a non-custodial parent when they are unemployed or earn an insufficient amount. This imputed income is used to calculate child support, even if it is not the parent's actual earnings.

For example, a father recently released from prison is doing part-time gig work. The court assumes he earns $2,000 per month and sets support payments based on that, despite having no steady income.

When child support orders are based on imputed — not actual — income, they often exceed what the parent can realistically pay, leading to debt, enforcement actions, and family strain (Pate Jr, 2016).

When a mother receives TANF, any child support the father pays is often intercepted by the state rather than reaching the family. This practice, known as **state cost recovery**, lets states use child support to reimburse welfare expenses.

Black families and children face disproportionate impact, with Black children overrepresented among TANF recipients. In Mississippi, they are six times more likely than white children to get benefits (Rodriguez, 2016). The state withholds over **$1.6 million annually intended for families**, nearly half from parents living in poverty.

This policy creates perverse incentives: fathers receive no credit from their children for payments that never reach the household, and mothers may feel pressured to prioritize financial gain over cooperation. Research and fatherhood advocates note that this dynamic drives a wedge between parents. As Joseph Jones of the Center for Urban Families explains, it is often **"not in the father's natural best interest to be with the mother when she goes to the welfare office,"** because the visit will trigger a child support case against him (Gordy, 2011). This "payments, not parenting" model undermines collaborative co-parenting and can discourage low-income fathers from being present.

Housing Policies that Push Fathers Out

Federal housing regulations and policies have long made it hard for fathers, especially Black fathers, to live with their families. Historically, the welfare rules, such as the "man-in-the-house" policy in the mid-

20th century, barred men from households receiving aid (Floyd et al., 2021). While such explicit rules were eliminated decades ago, today's public housing and voucher programs still mainly serve single-mother families. As of 2023, women head 74% of households receiving U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) rental assistance programs (Gender Equity & Housing, 2024).

This means fathers are frequently not listed on leases, and if they reside informally with their families, they risk violating housing rules. Public Housing Authorities (PHAs) can delay or deny requests to add a father to the lease (Ewert, 2021). These approvals can take months, during which time the father cannot

Income-Based Rent

In public housing, families typically pay 30% of their income toward rent. As income goes up, so does the rent. Adding a father's income can:

- Trigger a rent increase that **can delay or discourage family reunification.**
- **Create a "benefits cliff"** that penalizes work or cohabitation.

lawfully reside in the unit. Bureaucratic hurdles and income-based rent increases actively discourage fathers from co-residing with their families.

Black fathers are especially impacted due to criminal record barriers and economic insecurity.

Landlords and PHAs also sometimes set stricter rules than federal law allows. Even though federal law only bans those with certain offenses (like lifetime sex offenders or major drug convictions) from subsidized housing, local authorities often bar applicants with a criminal record for other crimes (Gordy, 2011). Because Black men are disproportionately likely to have criminal records, these policies often shut Black fathers out of public housing and prevent family reunification.

In short, public housing doesn't outright ban fathers, but its rules and red tape often make it difficult for fathers who are not the official "head of household" to live with their families, thereby limiting their ability to be involved on a day-to-day basis.

The Carceral State Separates Fathers and Children

Incarcerations continue to be one of the most devastating disruptions to Black fatherhood. It not only removes men from their families but also creates lasting barriers that make reentry into family life extraordinarily difficult. The carceral state, rather than just punishing behavior, severs connections and curtails paternal rights.

In 2018, over 5.2 million children in the U.S. had experienced the incarceration of a parent (Ghandnoosh et al., 2021). The racial disparities are stark: **13% of Black children had an incarcerated parent**, compared to **6% of white and Latinx children** (312,000 each), and **over 20% of Native children**, totaling 1.04 million.

Current estimates show that **1 in 15 Black children** has a parent currently incarcerated, compared to **1 in 42 Latinx children** and **1 in 111 white children**. Even as overall incarceration rates decline, the proportion of Black children affected has increased, evidence that racial inequities in the carceral system are deepening.

In cities like Baltimore, **over 15% of Black men aged 18–50 have been jailed at some point for child support non-payment**. This form of economic criminalization disproportionately targets poor and working-class fathers (Zatz et al., 2016). Incarceration can quietly terminate one's role as a parent, leaving fathers isolated and unsupported.

Family Regulation Systems Marginalize Fathers

Child welfare and custody systems continue to reflect deep racial and cultural bias. Black children remain significantly overrepresented in foster care. In 2000, they accounted for **39%** of all youth in foster care. By 2021, that number had dropped to **22%**, a meaningful decline, but still nearly double their share of the general child population (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2023). This shift reflects years of advocacy and policy reform; however, foundational inequities remain intact.

Too often, these disparities mirror systemic failures to engage Black parents — especially fathers — as partners in care. Fathers remain excluded from case planning and are often overlooked as custodial caregivers, lacking recognition as the primary caregivers. Informal parenting roles, legal ambiguity, or racialized and gendered stereotypes routinely lead

child welfare professionals to disregard their presence and capacity. Research has long shown that child welfare caseworkers are far less likely to locate, consult, or include fathers in dependency proceedings. In one national study, **93% of cases lacked supervisory discussion about the father's role** (O'Donnell et al., 2005).

Even when present and willing to parent, Black men face a combination of cultural suspicion and limited standing in decision-making processes. Their caregiving is often invisible to child welfare professionals and unrecognized in the courts.

Federal policy reinforces this erasure. The **Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act** (CAPTA) requires states to define "neglect" to receive child welfare funding, a category that is often applied to families experiencing poverty. Critics argue this incentivizes surveillance and separation over support. In response, lawmakers like Representative Gwen Moore have introduced the Family Poverty is Not Child Neglect Act (H.R. 573), calling for the removal of poverty from CAPTA's neglect framework and a shift toward resource-based, family-affirming interventions.

Schools Exclude and Monitor Black Fathers

Just as child welfare systems often ignore or undermine Black fatherhood, schools and early learning programs engage in similar tactics — monitoring fathers without meaningfully including them.

Public institutions like schools and preschools also play a part in sidelining Black fathers. As research by Posey-Maddox (Posey-Maddox, 2017) found in interviews with Black fathers navigating predominantly white school systems, many described feeling **scrutinized, unwelcome, or treated as a threat** by educators who assumed disengagement. These men were not uninvolved; rather, they engaged in ways the school failed to see or value.

Through an intersectional lens, Posey-Maddox identified six forms of paternal engagement: setting high expectations, reinforcing classroom learning, advising children, asserting visibility in school spaces, monitoring for educator bias, and advocating for both their children and other Black students. These fathers often drew on their own experiences with racism and microaggressions to **prepare their children — especially sons — to navigate bias in schools**.

Similarly, Reynolds and colleagues (2015) documented the emotional toll of **double consciousness** among Black fathers — an acute awareness of how they were viewed by school personnel and how those perceptions shaped every interaction. This internal negotiation re lected a broader pattern: being involved while constantly managing the risk of being misread.

These perceptions are shaped by gendered norms that cast fathers primarily as financial providers. Even when deeply involved, Black fathers often find their caregiving overlooked. They must constantly navigate stereotypes, working to stay engaged in their children's education while being treated as marginal figures.

Institutional structures rarely account for the informal ways Black fathers support their children's learning, helping with homework, offering guidance, and providing emotional support outside formal settings. Without intentional shifts, schools will continue to send the message that Black fatherhood is suspicious, conditional, or invisible.

Black fathers are present. They are parenting under pressure, with power and care, often in systems that refuse to see them. Affirming Black fatherhood requires reimagining policy, investing in care networks, and confronting the structures that treat fathers as disposable.

Policies and Programmatic Solutions

The barriers Black men encounter when they try to build and sustain their families are often deep, systemic, and not of their own making. To support Black fatherhood, we must change and enact policies that support rather than criminalize Black fathers. Reforms are needed in several areas, including but not limited to:

Child Support

- Mandate 100% pass-through in all states, ensuring families receive full child support payments.
- End imputed income practices that result in unpayable orders, especially for unemployed or reentering fathers.
- Ban jail time for non-payment of child support, replacing it with employment programs and debt forgiveness pathways.

Reform Child Support and Welfare Policy

- End the use of incarceration as punishment for non-payment and expand alternatives that emphasize employment and family stability.
- Include fathers in reunification planning and ensure wraparound services — such as housing, employment, and mental health care — are available during reentry.

Housing and Welfare

- Require Public Housing Authorities (PHAs) to streamline processes for adding fathers to leases.
- Adjust Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) rules to support co-parenting and multi-adult households without penalizing maternal recipients.
- Incentivize states to stop intercepting child support as a form of reimbursement for welfare.

Custody and Family Court

- Establish presumptive parenting rights for fathers who are actively involved in informal caregiving.
- Fund legal assistance and father advocacy in dependency court proceedings.
- Train judges and caseworkers on recognizing racial bias, family diversity, and informal caregiving.

Inclusive Education and Child Care Policy

- Require school districts and early learning programs to include fathers in all family engagement plans.
- Provide funding for father-specific engagement coordinators and programming.
- Include social and non-custodial fathers in parent-teacher communication and school decision-making processes.

Strengthen Fatherhood Infrastructure and Reentry Supports

- Fund local and state Fatherhood Resource Hubs that provide workforce development, legal aid, mental health care, and peer-led parenting education.
- Provide comprehensive reentry services for returning fathers, including housing assistance, employment placement, therapy, and parenting reunification planning.
- Ensure incarcerated fathers have access to parenting classes, visitation, and communication tools (e.g., video calls, letter-writing stations).

Reentry and Sentencing

- Expand sentencing alternatives (e.g., community-based parenting programs) for parents, as modeled by WA SSB 6639.
- Ensure all reentry plans include child reunification and parenting goals.
- Restore voting and parental rights upon release as part of the reentry policy.

Additionally, genuine change in how we perceive and support Black fathers can be achieved through new initiatives and amendments to existing laws. For example:

National Commission on Black Fatherhood

Establish a federal advisory body focused on research, policy development, and accountability related to Black fatherhood, including:

- Annual reports on father inclusion in federal family services
- Equity audits of TANF, child support, and child welfare systems
- Community-based listening sessions and policy labs

Redefine "Neglect" in Federal Law

- Reform the Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act (CAPTA) to distinguish poverty from neglect.
- Tie federal funding to nonpunitive family preservation practices.

Conclusion

Black fathers actively engage in parenting despite facing deeply entrenched systemic barriers, demonstrating remarkable strength, intentionality, and profound care. Their involvement in the lives of children, whether as biological fathers, stepfathers, grandfathers, uncles, mentors, or other significant male figures, actively disrupts damaging stereotypes and broadens our societal comprehension of nurturing and safeguarding children. Genuine support for Black families necessitates a fundamental shift within existing systems, moving beyond superficial gestures of inclusivity to a place where the diverse realities of Black fatherhood are fully acknowledged, adequately resourced, and treated with genuine respect.

The necessary progress involves more than simply attempting to fix existing flawed structures; it demands a comprehensive reimagining of family structures, public policy, and the provision of care in ways that both celebrate the rich heritage of Black fatherhood and embrace the limitless possibilities for the future. This reimagining must address historical injustices and contemporary challenges, ensuring equitable access to resources, opportunities, and support networks that empower Black fathers and strengthen Black families and communities.

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06 Justice

Introduction

Perhaps no other system better exemplifies the dehumanization of Black boys and young men than the criminal legal system. Since the publication of the original We Dream A World *(WDAW) report, robust scholarship has entered the national conversation detailing how, from enslavement to sharecropping to incarceration, the very roots of modern-day law enforcement and the criminal legal system,[1] particularly in the South, have functioned to extract labor and suppress autonomy in service of maintaining racial hierarchies and protecting wealth accumulation for white elites.*

What is referred to as the "justice" system has, for Black communities, operated as a mechanism of exclusion and punishment, undermining hard-won rights and perpetuating injustices against them, particularly for Black boys and men.

While incarceration across the United States has declined overall since the publication of the original report, racial disparities remain glaring. From birth through reentry, anti-Black bias continues to shape how Black boys and men are perceived, policed, and punished. However, public awareness and community-led resistance have expanded in the last 15 years, opening up new pathways for justice, healing, and systemic change.

Areas of Progress

- There has been a sweeping shift in public sentiment around police violence and mass incarceration, creating new opportunities to disrupt harmful systems and reimagine community safety.
- Between 2000 and 2022, youth incarceration declined by 75%. Yet racial and ethnic disparities in youth incarceration and sentencing persist even as overall youth offending has decreased.
- Between 2005 and 2022, delinquency cases involving Black youth fell 63%.
- Nationally, arrest rates for Black men have lowered, though some states have seen increases, underscoring regional inconsistencies in reform.
- Although incarceration rates for Black residents remain excessively high and disproportionate, sentencing and corrections reforms over the past two decades have contributed to a 37% decline in their imprisonment rate.
- Specifically, the United States experienced a 24% decline in its total prison population between 2009 (its peak year) and 2022. While all major racial and ethnic groups experienced decarceration, the decline was most significant among Black incarcerated individuals (Ghandnoosh & Barry, 2023).
- Between 2016 and 2022, violent offenses committed by Black youth decreased by about 20%, while property crimes fell by nearly 40% (Lantz & Knapp, 2024).

Areas of Concern

- Public pressure to address police violence and mass incarceration has waned in the last few years and may continue to decline without sustained policy change and structural transformation.
- Despite reductions in incarceration, the U.S. prison population in 2022 remained nearly six times larger than it was 50 years ago.
- While the number of people incarcerated has decreased, deep racial disparities persist. Black Americans remain imprisoned at nearly five times the rate of white Americans, making the racial injustice of mass incarceration undeniable (Ghandnoosh & Barry, 2023).

[1]Throughout this report, we use the term "criminal legal system" rather than "justice system" to more accurately describe the system's function and impact on Black communities. While "justice" suggests fairness and equality, the criminal legal system has historically and presently operated as a mechanism of racial control, surveillance, and punishment, particularly for Black boys and men.

Roots, Resistance, and Contemporary Drivers

Historical Roots of Criminalization

From colonial slave patrols and post-emancipation lynchings to contemporary policing practices, U.S. law enforcement has historically operated as a means of racial control rather than justice for Black communities. In the South, slave patrols in the 1700s used violence to squash resistance and escape; in the North, emerging police forces suppressed immigrant labor and protected elite interests (Muhammad, 2010; Parks & Kirby, 2021).

Emancipation did not end this regime. The Thirteenth Amendment's "except as punishment for crime" clause opened a pipeline from arrest to convict leasing, supplying cheap Black labor to private industry (Alexander, 2010). Sheriffs, judges, and employers colluded to criminalize mundane behaviors — from vagrancy to "insulting gestures" — turning freedom into a new form of bondage. White vigilantes such as the Ku Klux Klan enforced racial caste through lynchings and terror, while courts largely looked away.

Policymakers institutionalized racial criminality narratives in the late 1800s. Statistician Frederick Hoffman claimed high Black arrest rates evidenced inherent criminality, reinforcing stereotypes that justified systemic exclusion from social protections (Muhammad, 2010).

Despite these conditions, Black communities have remained courageous and vocal. From Reconstruction to the Civil Rights Movement, from Watts to Ferguson, and through contemporary Black Lives Matter protests, they have consistently resisted systemic harm, asserted their humanity, and demanded justice — even when the systems built to serve them refused to listen.

Community Resistance (2010–2025)

In the last 15 years since the original *WDAW* report, organizing against racialized violence has intensified. Widely publicized killings of Black individuals, including Trayvon Martin (2012), Mike Brown (2014), and George Floyd (2020), catalyzed national and global activism. The Black Lives Matter (BLM) and Movement for Black Lives (M4BL) coalitions emerged, advocating for fundamental transformations in policing and the broader criminal legal system.

Alongside these movements, institutional and community initiatives also expanded:

- **Center for Policing Equity** (2008): Addresses racial bias in law enforcement through research, data, and partnerships with police departments. Its 2021 work, as described by founder Dr. Phillip Atiba Goff, emphasized reimagining public safety through equitable and non-punitive alternatives to traditional policing.
- **Cities United** (2011): Unites mayors and supports leaders through community-based solutions to reduce the disproportionately high rates of violence affecting young Black men.
- ***The New Jim Crow*** (2010): Michelle Alexander's landmark book reframed mass incarceration as a form of racial subjugation, sparking widespread public discourse on its enduring impacts.

The 2012 killing of 17-year-old Trayvon Martin and the acquittal of his killer, George Zimmerman, sparked nationwide outrage and gave rise to the **Black Youth Project 100** (BYP100), an organization that centers Black youth-led activism grounded in a Black queer feminist lens. The organization brings a transformative framework to leadership development, direct action organizing, advocacy, and political education.

The 2014 killing of Mike Brown in Ferguson, Mo., by then-police officer Darren Wilson spurred global mobilization through **BLM**. The following year saw the formation of the **Movement for Black Lives** (M4BL), a coalition seeking to center Black-led policymaking and advocacy. That same year, New York City's infamous "stop and frisk" policy was declared unconstitutional, highlighting the growing judicial acknowledgment of racially discriminatory policing, and **The President's Task Force on 21st Century Policing** (2015) released a national report to improve police-community relations. However, only 15 of the 18,000 police departments formally adopted the report's recommendations nationally.

In 2020, amid the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic, the murder of George Floyd by Minneapolis police officers ignited the most significant protest movement in U.S. history. Between 15 and 26 million Americans participated in demonstrations (Buchanan et al., 2020). In response, jurisdictions across the country began reallocating police funding to social services, restricting the excessive use of force, and implementing body-worn camera and citizen oversight policies (Rummler, 2020).

Public opinion also shifted significantly:

- In 2020, 58% of Americans believed significant changes were needed in policing, and 36% supported minor changes (Crabtree, 2020).
- By 2022, support for major reforms remained strong at 50%, though partisan and racial divides had widened (McCarthy, 2022).

Decarceration and Abolition

Decarceration reduces incarceration by promoting community-based responses to poverty, mental health, and substance use. **Abolition** challenges the legitimacy of prisons and policing entirely, instead advocating for transformative, community-driven justice frameworks.

- Public trust in policing continues to fluctuate, revealing substantial differences across race, political lines, and age groups. Some reforms have reduced officer misconduct and improved crisis response outcomes (Cassino & Demir, 2024; Peltz & Bedayn, 2023).

Organizations including BYP100, M4BL, and others within the decarceration and abolition movements continue to pursue bold alternatives to law enforcement and incarceration as paths to justice.

These historical and contemporary forms of racial violence and exclusion underscore the deep structural roots of Black criminalization — roots that must be understood to dismantle harmful policies.

Contemporary Drivers

The criminalization of Black boys and men today is the result of enduring racial bias, structural economic exclusion, and intentional policy design that positions Blackness as threatening and Black communities as disposable. These drivers build upon deep historical roots but operate through contemporary systems, including redlining, school segregation, over-policing, and biased narratives that shape Black lives from birth to adulthood.

Black mothers, particularly those who receive public assistance and have a history of substance use, are disproportionately monitored and punished during pregnancy (Melamed, 2025). Punitive responses to addiction criminalize Black motherhood, discourage access to health care, and heighten the risk of family separation through state intervention (Roberts, 1998, 2002). Hospitals serving low-income Black communities are more likely to involve child protective services after birth, often based on biased assessments rather than evidence of harm. These early interventions contribute to long-term consequences for children's development and increase the likelihood of future systems involvement (Melamed, 2025; Turney & Wakefield, 2019; Wakefield & Wildeman, 2013).

Segregation reinforced by redlining confines Black families to under-resourced neighborhoods, shaping children's educational outcomes and the possibility of future criminal legal system involvement (Chetty et al., 2016; Rothstein, 2017). **By age 10**, Black boys are perceived as older, less innocent, and more dangerous than their white peers, intensifying

disproportionate school discipline and funneling them into the school-to-prison pipeline (Ferguson, 2000; Goff et al., 2014; Morris & Perry, 2016).

In adulthood, perceptions of Black men as threats persist and intensify, influencing policing practices. Increased police presence in Black neighborhoods leads to disproportionately high arrest rates (Chen et al., 2023) and a greater likelihood of police officers shooting unarmed Black men (Correll et al., 2006). Increased police presence accounts for 57% higher arrest rates in Black neighborhoods, regardless of crime rates (Chen et al., 2023).

Labor market exclusion further reinforces criminalization. Black men without criminal records receive fewer job callbacks than white men with records, and access to vocational training remains limited in predominantly Black communities, exacerbating economic instability and system involvement (Pager, 2009; Sampson & Wilson, 1995).

The ongoing "War on Drugs" disproportionately targets Black communities despite comparable drug usage rates across racial groups, perpetuating surveillance and mass incarceration. Black residents are still more likely to be stopped by police in both traffic and street stops (E. Davis et al., 2018). A study of nearly 100 million traffic stops showed Black drivers are 20% more likely to be pulled over than white drivers, and more likely to be searched despite lower rates of contraband discovery (Pierson et al., 2020).

These structural drivers collectively maintain a cycle of criminalization, rooted deeply in historical patterns yet actively sustained through contemporary policies and practices.

Racialized Punishment in the Juvenile Criminal Legal System

While the **Education section** outlines disparities in school discipline, highlighting their academic consequences and systemic biases in educational settings, this section examines how these disciplinary practices extend beyond the school gates, reinforcing racial disparities through juvenile case processing, incarceration, and transfer to adult facilities. It details the persistence of bias at critical juvenile justice decision points and highlights the severe conditions that Black boys disproportionately face when confined or transferred to adult prisons.

Racialized punishment is embedded in every stage of the juvenile criminal legal system, shaping how Black boys are treated from their earliest interactions with schools to their potential incarceration in adult facilities. What should be a system rooted in youth development and rehabilitation instead reproduces exclusion and trauma, mirroring the punitive nature of the adult system.

Challenges

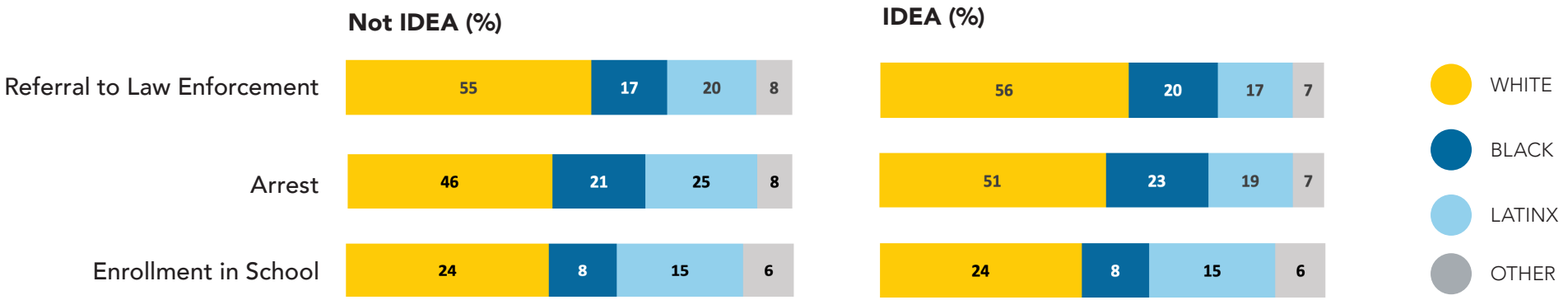
School Discipline as a Gateway to Juvenile System Contact

Early disciplinary interactions at school serve as a critical gateway, marking the initial stage at which Black boys become disproportionately represented in the juvenile criminal legal system. While educational settings are ideally designed for nurturing development, disciplinary practices often initiate a punitive pathway rather than providing supportive intervention. Black boys face significantly higher rates of suspensions, expulsions, and school-based arrests compared to their peers, increasing their risk of early encounters with law enforcement (2020-21 Civil Rights Data Collection, 2023; A. Whitaker et al., 2019). Instead of addressing adolescent misbehavior internally, schools are increasingly referring students to law enforcement, thereby escalating minor infractions into formal criminal matters.

These patterns reflect the adultification of Black boys as more dangerous and less deserving of protection, a bias well-documented across school and juvenile justice contexts (Goff et al., 2014).

During the 2017–2018 school year, Black boys were arrested at more than twice the rate of all students and three times more than white boys (A. Whitaker et al., 2019). In the 2020–2021 school year, while Black boys constituted only 8% of public school enrollment, they accounted for 21% of all school-based arrests among students not receiving services under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and 23% of arrests among students receiving IDEA services (2020-21 Civil Rights Data Collection, 2023). The below graphic shows the detailed breakdown of these disparities by race and disability status.

School-Based Law Enforcement Referrals and Arrests by Race and Disability Status (2020–2021)



Data Source: U.S. Department of Education, Office for Civil Rights, 2020-21 Civil Rights Data Collection, released November 2023, available at https://civilrightsdata.ed.gov
IDEA = Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (special education services).
"Other" includes Asian, Native American, and other racial groups not listed individually.

The presence of law enforcement officers, such as School Resource Officers (SROs) and School Security Officers (SSOs), in majority-Black schools intensifies these disparities (Munoz et al., 2025; Tynan & Warren, 2025). Schools with 75% or higher Black student populations are significantly more likely to have on-site police and security personnel, resulting in increased surveillance, higher arrest rates, and subsequent juvenile justice involvement (Gomez, 2021; Kidane & Rauscher, 2023). This disproportionate exposure not only stigmatizes students but also directly feeds the juvenile criminal legal pipeline by systematically criminalizing behaviors that might otherwise be handled with restorative or behavioral interventions.

Disparities in Juvenile Case Processing

At every turn in this process, Black youth are denied the same opportunities for diversion, rehabilitation, and reduced sentencing that are extended to their white peers. These cumulative disparities reinforce a system designed to punish rather than support, creating lasting inequities that often follow youth into adulthood.

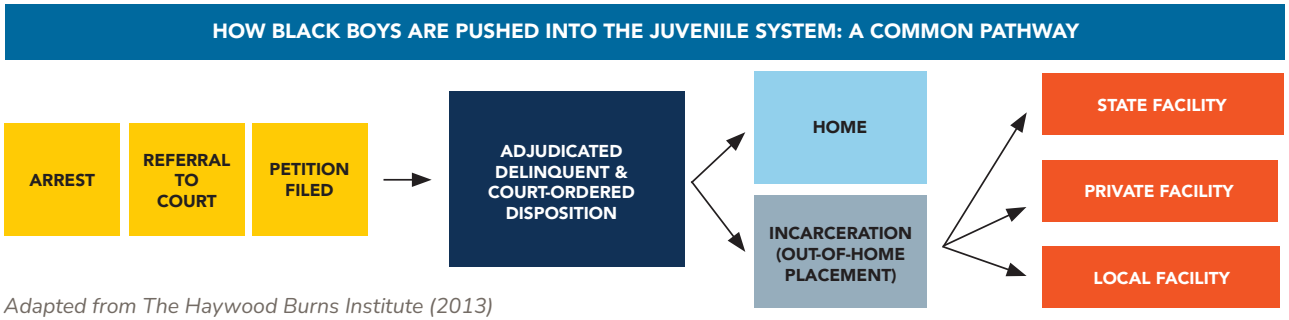
While diversion programs reduce future arrests, violence, and incarceration, and boost high school completion, college enrollment, and adult earnings (Mendel, 2022), Black youth are disproportionately excluded from these rehabilitative paths, deepening cycles of criminalization and disadvantage (Hockenberry & Puzzanchera, 2024).

Key Decision Points that Perpetuate Disparities

Each stage following initial disciplinary referrals presents critical decision points that perpetuate systemic disparities and represent potential sites for targeted interventions:

- **Law Enforcement Referral Decisions:** At this initial point, police officers and school administrators possess considerable discretion. Implicit biases and subjective judgments about perceived threat or defiance often result in law enforcement intervention rather than school-based alternatives. Black boys are disproportionately affected by such discretionary decisions, significantly increasing their likelihood of formal juvenile justice involvement (Skiba et al., 2014; Smolkowski et al., 2016).
- **Intake and Assessment:** Upon referral to juvenile justice authorities, intake personnel decide whether a case warrants formal charges, diversion into rehabilitative programs, or dismissal. Here, systemic racial biases frequently translate into fewer diversion opportunities for Black youth compared to white peers, heightening their exposure to punitive system involvement (Sickmund et al., 2022).
- **Pre-Trial Detention Decisions:** Decisions made at detention hearings — where judges determine whether youth await trial in custody or the community — further reflect racial disparities. Black youth are disproportionately placed in detention pre-adjudication, an outcome linked to an increased likelihood of harsher sentencing and diminished opportunities for rehabilitation (Godfrey Lovett, 2022).

These discretionary decisions are often made by individuals who have not been trained in trauma-informed decision-making or cultural humility, compounding harm and failing to address the unique needs of Black boys. However, each decision point represents an opportunity to interrupt systemic bias and reduce the inequitable funneling of Black boys deeper into the criminal legal system.



Adapted from The Haywood Burns Institute (2013)

National data underscore these inequities:

- **Diversion and Informal Handling**: 52% of cases involving white youth are resolved through diversion or informal handling, compared to only 40% for Black youth (Sickmund et al., 2022).
- **Impact**: Diversion participation significantly reduces recidivism and enhances future success, yet Black youth remain disproportionately excluded from these rehabilitative opportunities (Mendel, 2022).
- **Influence of Bias**: Implicit biases held by intake personnel and probation officers often misjudge Black youth as higher-risk and less suitable for diversion (Skiba et al., 2014; Smolkowski et al., 2016).

Disparities also appear in pre-trial detention decisions:

- **Disproportionate Detention**: Black youth represent 41% of juveniles detained beyond the national average detention period of 40 days (Godfrey Lovett, 2022).
- **Consequences**: Pre-trial detention is linked to harsher sentencing and diminished rehabilitative opportunities, with long-term negative impacts on education and family stability (Godfrey Lovett, 2022).
- **Risk Assessment Bias**: Biases in risk assessment tools disproportionately label Black youth as threats, justifying unnecessary detention (Barnett et al., 2023; Sickmund et al., 2022).

Finally, judicial sentencing decisions further compound racial disparities:

- **Longer Sentences**: Judges assign sentences approximately 7.8% longer to Black youth than white youth charged with comparable offenses (Thomas & Wilson, 2017).
- **Adult Transfers**: Black youth, who make up just 14% of the juvenile population, account for nearly half (47%) of youth transferred to adult criminal courts (Thomas & Wilson, 2017).
- **Judicial Perceptions**: Judges with systemic biases often mischaracterize Black youth as less likely to benefit from juvenile rehabilitation. Consequently, they disproportionately receive adult-oriented sentences that limit access to supportive programs and increase their exposure to harsher incarceration environments (Thomas & Wilson, 2017).

Disparities in Arrest and Drug Enforcement

Drug-related arrests offer a stark example of how racialized punishment operates in the juvenile criminal legal system. National survey data show that Black youth are less likely to use or sell drugs than their white peers, yet they are more likely to be arrested (Kakade et al., 2012).

These disparities have persisted for decades. In 2009, Black youth were more than twice as likely as white youth to be arrested (99.1 vs. 44.5 per 1,000) and nearly twice as likely to be removed from their homes for drug offenses (32.6 vs. 17.7 per 1,000) (Puzzanchera & Adams, 2012, as cited in Davis & Sorensen, 2013). Between 2016 and 2022, arrests for violent and property offenses by Black youth declined by about 20% and 40%, respectively, reflecting substantial progress in community safety and system practices (Lantz & Knapp, 2024). These trends mark significant progress in reducing youth crime and highlight efforts to address structural issues in the juvenile criminal legal system. However, these gains have not eliminated the deep racial disparities in drug enforcement and placement decisions.

Recent data from the Juvenile Court Statistics 2022 report (Hockenberry & Puzzanchera, 2024) underscore the ongoing racial disparities, particularly for Black boys. In 2022, drug offense case rates for Black boys were nearly nine times those of Asian boys and at least 1.4 times those of white, Latinx, and Native American peers. Public order offense case rates were also much higher for Black boys, three to 14 times those of other racial groups. For in-person

offenses, the case rate for Black boys was more than three times that of Latinx and white boys, twice that of Native American boys, and nearly 15 times that of Asian boys.

The states with the lowest and highest rates of Black/white disparity for juvenile placements (rate per 100,000)

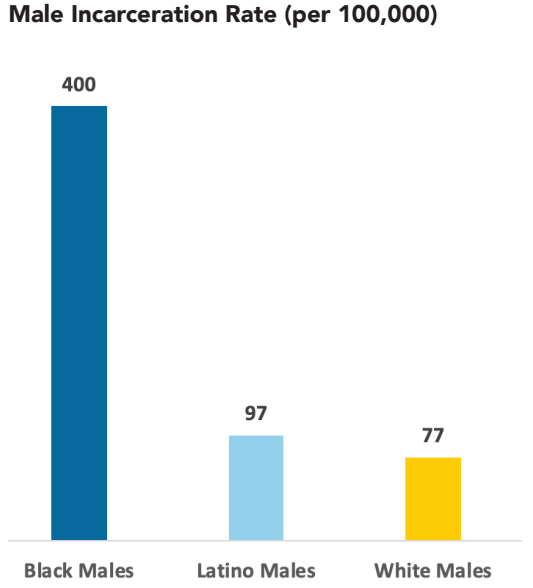
State	Black/White Racial Disparity
District of Columbia	0.9
Alabama	2.4
South Carolina	2.4
Arkansas	2.7
Indiana	3
Illinois	12.7
Massachusetts	13.7
Wisconsin	14.6
New Jersey	28.6
Connecticut	31.3

These disparities extend beyond arrest to patterns in confinement. Between 2011 and 2021, while the national youth incarceration rate fell by 59%, the Black-white incarceration gap widened in 19 states and narrowed in just 23 states and the District of Columbia. By 2021, the states with the highest racial disparities in youth incarceration included Illinois (12.7), Massachusetts (13.7), Wisconsin (14.6), New Jersey (28.6), and Connecticut (31.3) — all far exceeding the national average (Puzzanchera et al., 2025). In contrast, states like Alabama, South Carolina, and the District of Columbia had notably lower disparity ratios, ranging from 0.9 to 2.4.

Even more concerning, recent data reveal a troubling resurgence in racial disparities. In 2023, for the first time since 1997, the total number of youth in residential placement increased, though it remains below pre-pandemic levels (Puzzanchera et al., 2025). Between 2021 and 2023, the number of Black youth in confinement rose by approximately 3,000. Black youth were 5.6 times more likely than white youth to be incarcerated — up from 4.7 in 2021 — marking the highest racial disparity in more than two decades (Puzzanchera et al., 2025). Native American youth also experienced a sharp increase in disparities, with incarceration rates 3.8 times higher than those of white youth — the highest recorded disparity for Native American youth since 1997 (Bishop, 2025).

These patterns reinforce a central truth: the disproportionate criminalization of Black boys is not driven by differences in behavior but by how the system chooses to perceive and punish them. Discretionary decisions — from school referrals and arrests to charging, detention, and sentencing — compound bias at every stage of the process. This systemic overreach is reflected in the most recent disaggregated data available by race and gender: in 2021, Black boys were incarcerated at a rate of 400 per 100,000, more than five times the rate of white boys (77 per 100,000), and over four times that of Latinx boys (97 per 100,000) (Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, 2023).

Black boys are incarcerated at a rate more than 5 times the rate of white males. (2021)



Source: OJJDP Statistical Briefing Book, Juvenile Residential Placement Rates by Race and Ethnicity, 2021.

Solitary Confinement and the Myth of Protection

Black boys, LGBTQIA+ youth, and disabled youth are often placed in solitary confinement either as punishment or under the false guise of protection. In reality, isolation compounds trauma and increases the risk of suicide, especially for those already facing intersecting vulnerabilities. Research indicates that over half of youth suicides in detention occur among those currently or recently held in isolation (Einhorn et al., 2022). These conditions disrupt normal adolescent development and worsen existing mental health challenges, including depression, psychosis, and self-harm (Justice Policy Institute, 2022).

Isolation is not rare. In 2010, the U.S. Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP) found that more than one-third of detained youth had experienced solitary confinement (E. Whitaker et al., 2024). Though national data still remains limited, what we do know reveals devastating patterns. In Florida, for example, incarcerated Black youth were 69% more likely than white youth to be placed in solitary confinement (Ogle, 2019). After two Louisiana teens held in isolation died by suicide, a 2019 audit uncovered that 40% of confinements exceeded the legal time limit, with the standard duration a staggering six days, 14 times the national average. **One child had been held in isolation for three months**. Of the youth subjected to solitary confinement, 94% were Black, far surpassing even the already disproportionate 82% of Black youth in Louisiana's custody (Einhorn et al., 2022).

Conditions in these facilities are bleak. Youth held at Louisiana's now-shuttered Angola site — housed in an adult prison once dubbed the "Alcatraz of the South" — faced prolonged isolation, physical restraints, and frequent use of mace. All but one of the children were Black. When Angola was ordered to close in 2023, those same youth were transferred to Jackson Parish Jail, where civil rights advocates report they are still subjected to near-constant confinement in windowless rooms, denied education and services, and kept within sight and sound of adult detainees (L. Warren et al., personal communication, October 24, 2023).

The intersections of race, sexuality, and disability heighten vulnerability to solitary confinement. Data from the 2012 National Survey of Youth in Custody found that 10.3% of queer youth reported experiencing sexual violence by peers, compared to 1.5% of heterosexual youth (Beck et al., 2013). Rather than ensuring their safety through supportive oversight or peer mediation, many facilities respond by placing queer youth in solitary confinement. The trauma of isolation is thus layered on top of victimization.

Intersectionality is central here. Despite growing recognition of how LGBTQIA+ and disabled youth are disproportionately harmed in custody, national data still fails to disaggregate by both race and sexual orientation. The lived experiences of Black queer boys remain statistically invisible, obscured by data systems that refuse to acknowledge the full complexity of their identities. This omission shields the system from accountability and renders invisible the compounded harm faced by those at the margins of the margins.

Despite federal bans on solitary confinement at juvenile facilities and restrictions in at least 24 states, the practice endures (Einhorn et al., 2022). What continues to be framed as discipline or protection is, in truth, a deeply racialized punishment strategy that exacerbates mental health crises, increases suicide risk, and erodes the possibility of healing. More than half of all youth suicides in detention occur among those who were in isolation at the time or recently held there (Einhorn et al., 2022). The long-term effects include lasting psychological damage, disruptions in emotional regulation, and social detachment — conditions that ripple across a lifetime.

To disrupt this practice, we must move beyond legal compliance toward a vision of justice grounded in

Critical Data Gap

Although national data confirms elevated risk for sexual minority youth in custody, outcomes are rarely disaggregated by both race and sexual orientation. Consequently, we lack national data on the experiences of Black queer boys — a population uniquely vulnerable to the overlapping harms of racism, homophobia, and carceral punishment. This invisibility is not accidental. It reflects a systemic failure to name and protect youth living at the intersection of multiple forms of oppression.

healing and dignity. That means investing in trauma-informed care, peer mentorship models, culturally rooted supports, and small, therapeutic environments — not cages with a different name. It also means demanding data systems that tell the whole truth about who is harmed and how, and holding institutions accountable for the damage they inflict behind closed doors.

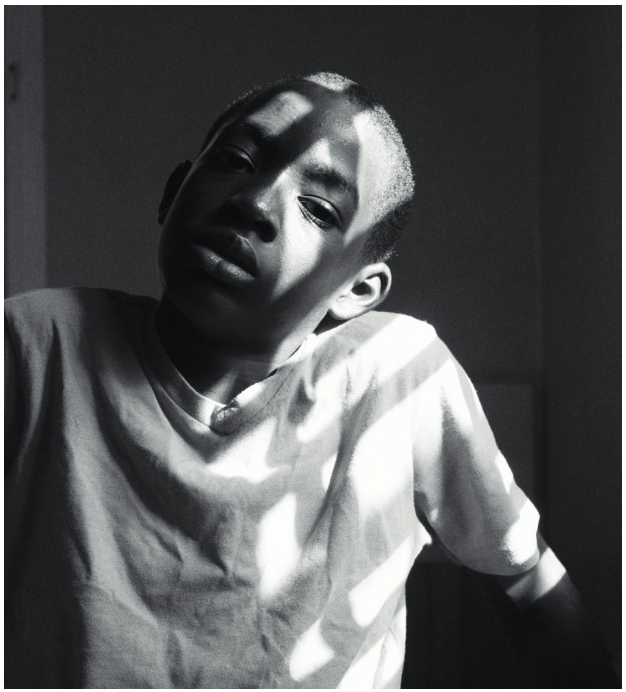
The Transfer of Black Youth to Adult Prisons

Racial disparities in the juvenile criminal legal system extend into the adult system through transfer practices that inordinately impact Black youth. Although the total number of judicial waivers has declined nearly 75% since 1994 (Thomas & Wilson, 2017), racial disproportionality persists. While they comprise just 14% of the youth population, Black youth account for 47% of all youth transferred to adult court by judges who claim they cannot benefit from juvenile court services (Sickmund et al., 2022).

Black boys alone represent 62% of juvenile males transferred to adult court and 65% of male youth serving time in adult prisons (Evans, 2020; Nellis, 2021) Once transferred, they are nine times more likely than white boys to receive adult sentences (Nellis, 2021) and are at heightened risk of sexual assault, physical violence, psychological trauma, and long-term exclusion from educational and economic opportunity (Lambie & Randell, 2013).

A Troubling Reversal

Although youth incarceration declined by 83% by 2021 (Nellis, 2024), recent data shows a troubling reversal.



Between 2021 and 2022, the number of youth held in adult prisons surged by 50%, a stark contrast to the long-term downward trend that began in 2009 (Nellis, 2024). This uptick occurred even as youth incarceration in adult jails continued to decline, suggesting a shifting dynamic in system responses to youth, with a renewed reliance on punitive measures that disproportionately harm Black boys.

As the criminal legal system grapples with bridging the juvenile and adult systems, the resurgence in youth incarceration in adult prisons underscores the need for reforms centered on racial equity, developmental appropriateness, and long-term rehabilitation.

Restorative Justice Across Systems

Restorative justice offers a fundamentally different approach to harm — one that centers healing, accountability, and the restoration of relationships rather than punishment. Restorative justice recognizes that systems built on racialized punishment often compound harm rather than resolve it. In contrast, restorative justice calls for responses that engage both those harmed and those responsible in dialogue, repair, and reintegration. This approach fosters self-determination and collective healing rather than isolation and retribution (F. Davis, 2019). Grounded in values of dignity, mutual respect, and community self-determination, restorative justice affirms the humanity of all involved, especially those who have been historically dehumanized and excluded from decision-making processes.

In the juvenile criminal legal system, restorative justice has created opportunities for young people to take accountability, understand the impact of their actions, and actively work to repair harm (National Conference of State Legislatures, 2022; The Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2022). These programs typically involve facilitated dialogue with those affected, including victims, families, and community members, and prioritize future repair over punitive responses. Restorative practices are especially impactful for adolescents, whose developmental stage makes them more responsive to relational, community-based interventions.

Research shows that youth involved in restorative processes are less likely to re-offend, more likely to remain in school, and more connected to caring adults than those who go through traditional court

processing (Bergseth & Bouffard, 2013; Kimbrell et al., 2023; Mendel, 2023. These outcomes are especially critical for Black youth, who face disproportionately high rates of arrest, detention, and transfer to adult court, often originating from early and racialized system contact, such as school discipline (Morgan, 2021.

Despite its promise, restorative justice faces barriers to full implementation. In many jurisdictions, programs remain underfunded or treated as add-ons rather than true alternatives to punitive systems. Within schools and courts, success depends on consistent application and cultural buy-in. When implemented effectively, restorative justice not only reduces recidivism but also strengthens community bonds and supports more equitable outcomes.

Policy and Programmatic Solutions

The racialized punishment embedded in the juvenile criminal legal system demands urgent reform. To protect the rights and futures of Black youth, systemic disparities must be addressed at every stage, from policing and detention to court processing and community reentry. Solutions must also include investments in community-centered healing and accountability. For example:

Fully Implement the Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Act (JJDPA)

- **Require state and local jurisdictions** to create action plans to address racial disparities within their systems.
- **Remove youth from adult jails** and lock-ups to decrease their exposure to mental, emotional, and physical abuse.
- **Enforce "sight and sound" separation** for youth in rare cases when housed near adults, ensuring age-appropriate safety.
- **Prohibit detention for status offenses**, such as truancy or curfew violations, which are not criminal if committed by adults.
- **Prioritize diversion programs** for youth with nonviolent, first-time, and status offenses to ensure early intervention, access to services, and community-supported accountability instead of court processing.

Expand Community-Based Violence Prevention

- **Support Violence Intervention Programs (VIPs)**, including hospital-based, street outreach, and mentorship models that leverage credible messengers — individuals with lived experience — to mediate conflict and reduce retaliation.
- **Strengthen school-based violence prevention efforts** that provide conflict mediation, violence prevention education, and trauma-responsive support to youth, particularly those at the highest risk of harm.
- **Fund community-led safety initiatives** that address the root causes of violence and invest in trusted neighborhood leaders and organizations.

Scale Restorative Justice Practices

- **Invest in youth-centered restorative justice programs** that offer alternatives to prosecution, with full consent of all parties.
- **Center accountability, healing, and community restoration** by addressing harm without relying on carceral punishment.

Black Men and Systemic Injustice in the Adult Criminal Legal System

The racialized harm that begins in the juvenile criminal legal system only intensifies in adulthood. Black men face expanded criminalization through aggressive policing, discriminatory sentencing, and punitive reentry barriers that reinforce a cycle of exclusion and control.

Challenges

Legal System Biases

Mandatory sentencing laws disproportionately impact Black defendants, resulting in significantly longer federal sentences. A landmark study by the U.S. Sentencing Commission found that Black male offenders received federal sentences that were, on average, 19% longer than those of similarly situated white men, even after controlling for factors like criminal history and the severity of the offense (Schmitt et al., 2017).

Three-strikes laws implemented in many states during the 1990s further entrenched these disparities by imposing lengthy or life sentences on repeat offenders. In California, Black people were incarcerated under the state's three-strikes law at nearly 13 times the rate of whites (Ehlers et al., 2004).

Racial bias operates at multiple decision points throughout the criminal legal process. A 2007 study documented how prosecutorial discretion, pretrial detention decisions, and plea bargaining practices all contribute to racial disparities (A. J. Davis, 2007). More than a decade later, Black defendants are less likely to receive plea offers that reduce charges and more likely to face charges carrying mandatory minimum sentences (Rehavi & Starr, 2014). They also face higher bail rates (Arnold et al., 2018) and

sentences that are 20% longer than those of white men with similar criminal records and convictions (Schmitt et al., 2017).

Racialized Police Contact

U.S. incarceration levels have skyrocketed over the last five decades. Between 1972 and 1991, the prison population quadrupled and doubled again by 2009, even while crime rates were falling. The prison population finally began its modest decline in 2010, entering a nearly decade-long period when both crime and incarceration levels declined in unison.

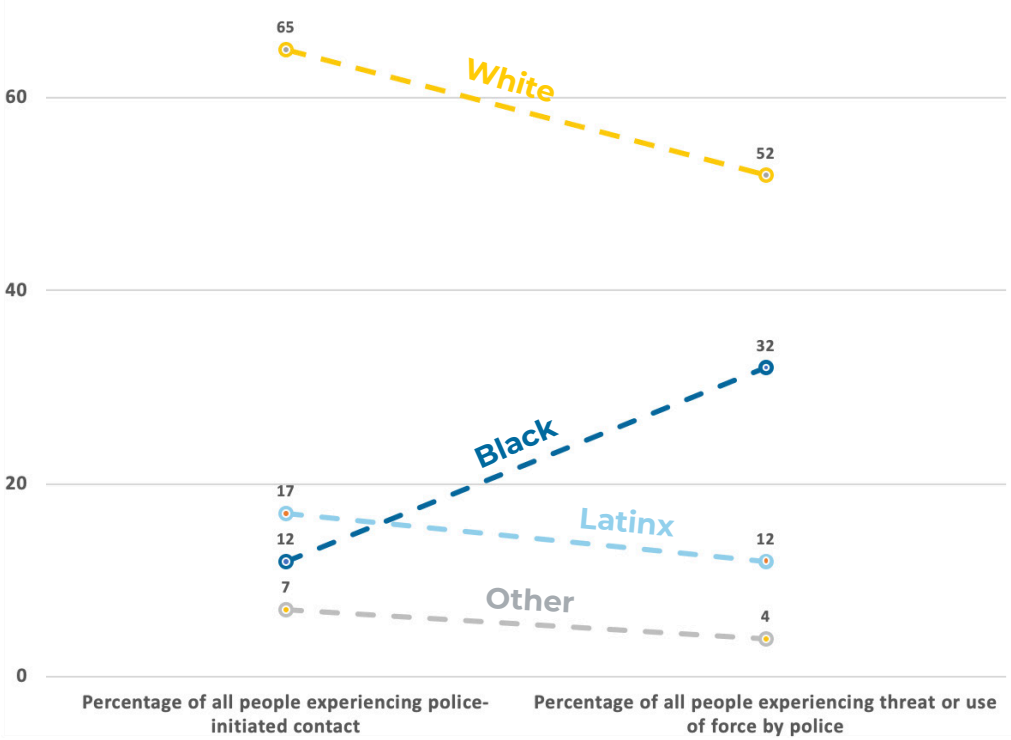
Contact with law enforcement remains deeply racialized. These disparities are not just statistical anomalies — they are manifestations of how Blackness is perceived and policed in America. Rather than reflecting differences in criminal behavior, they expose the systemic surveillance and devaluation of Black lives.

One factor intensifying this pattern is the increasing militarization of police. Federal programs such as the U.S. Department of Defense's 1033 Program have supplied local law enforcement with surplus military equipment — often concentrated in jurisdictions with larger Black and Latinx populations (Ramey & Steidley, 2018). This militarized posture, including armored vehicles, SWAT raids, and combat gear, communicates to Black communities that they are seen as threats, not residents.

Key patterns of racialized contact include (Widra, 2024):

- **Initiation of contact:** Black people are more likely to have police contact initiated against them — including street stops, traffic stops, and arrests — while white people more often initiate contact themselves (e.g., reporting a crime).
- **Traffic stops and use of force:** Black drivers are three times more likely to be searched or arrested during traffic stops. In 2023, 13% of all police killings occurred during these stops.
- **Escalation and verbal abuse:** Black individuals are over three times more likely to experience threats or physical force (such as handcuffing, pushing, or use of weapons) and twice as likely to be shouted or cursed at by police officers.

Black people are nearly twice as likely as white people to experience the threat or use of force during a police encounter, even when contact rates are accounted for.



Adapted from Prison Policy Initiative; Source: (Widra, 2024)

Young adults aged 18–24 are the most likely group to experience police contact and aggressive law enforcement actions (Widra, 2024). For those aged 16–24, 1 in 5 experienced the threat or use of force in their most recent police encounter. For Black boys and young men, these frequent and often violent encounters with police are not isolated incidents — they reflect a broader societal message that their lives are disposable.

Between 2020 and 2025, Black individuals made up 27% of arrests while comprising only 14% of the U.S. population (U.S. Department of Justice, 2025). At the same time, white people only made up 65% of arrestees despite being 71% of the population. The overrepresentation of Black people in arrests mirrors their disproportionate risk of being killed by both the state and civilians.

In 2022, Black people were over eight times more likely to be homicide victims than white men (50.5 per 100,000 compared to 6.2 per 100,000) — with homicide being the leading cause of death for young Black men (Black Homicide Victimization in the US: An Analysis of 2022 Homicide Data, 2022). These deaths are overwhelmingly intra-racial, not because of inherent violence, but because of decades of segregation, economic marginalization, and underinvestment in Black communities (Ghandnoosh & Barry, 2023). Adding to this burden, Black people are also the targets of 30% of all race-based hate crimes (U.S. Department of Justice, 2024).

Racialized harm does not end at arrest. State violence, through aggressive policing and criminalization, sets the tone for these broader forms of harm. The same systems that surveil and punish Black men make them more vulnerable to violence by others. Together, these

overlapping forms of violence reflect a society steeped in anti-Blackness, where Black male life is rendered perpetually at risk.

Harsher Processing and Sentencing

Racialized disparities deepen after arrest. At nearly every stage of the criminal legal process, Black men — especially young Black men — experience harsher treatment than their white counterparts. They are roughly 50% more likely to be detained pretrial than white defendants and often encounter significantly higher bail amounts. A 2019 study showed their median bond was $10,000 higher than that of white defendants, highlighting how economic disadvantage is exacerbated by punitive pretrial practices (Sawyer, 2019).

In local jails — where over 80% of people are presumed innocent and awaiting trial — Black individuals are incarcerated at four times the rate of white individuals and are held for an average of 12 days longer (Racial Disparities Persist in Many U.S. Jails, 2023). These prolonged pretrial detentions disrupt families, employment, and mental health, especially for young Black men, who are frequently held longer than their older counterparts.

Prosecutorial discretion plays a pivotal role in shaping outcomes. Prosecutors decide which charges to file, what plea deals to offer, and which potential sentences to negotiate — decisions that often favor white defendants. In this way, prosecutors usually hold more influence over sentences than judges do ("Research Finds Evidence of Racial Bias in Plea Deals," 2017). A Wisconsin study found that (Berdejó, 2018):

- White defendants were 25% more likely to have their most serious charge reduced.
- Black defendants were more likely to be convicted of their highest charge.
- White defendants who faced initial felony charges were approximately 15% more likely to be convicted of a misdemeanor than similar Black defendants.
- Among those with no prior convictions, white defendants with misdemeanors were 46% more likely to have all jail-prone charges reduced or dismissed.

These disparities are not just about punishment — they structure access to freedom, housing, education, and employment. For Black men, even minor convictions can lead to lifelong consequences, while their white counterparts are often granted leniency.

Federal sentencing patterns continue to reflect significant racial disparities. As of 2023, Black men received sentences that were, on average, 13.4% longer than those given to white men for similar offenses and were 23.4% less likely to receive probation (2023 Demographic Differences in Federal Sentencing, 2023).

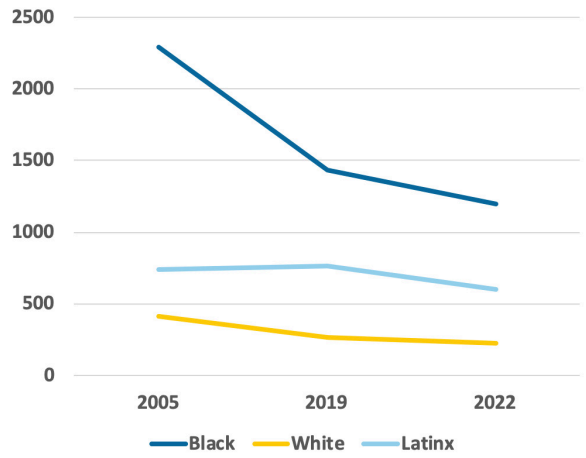
These disparities are not new. Between 2012 and 2016, Black men received federal sentences that were 19.1% longer than those of white men and were 21.2% less likely to receive downward sentence departures (Schmitt et al., 2017). While the sentence length gap has narrowed modestly over the past decade, the persistence of such disparities underscores the enduring role of racial bias in federal sentencing.

These trends suggest that while some policy and judicial reforms may have reduced the most overt inequities, structural patterns of disadvantage remain firmly in place.

Persistent Unequal Incarceration Rates

The cumulative impact of racialized disparities in arrest, prosecution, and sentencing is reflected in incarceration rates that remain starkly unequal across racial groups. Although the national prison population has declined over the past two decades, Black Americans are still imprisoned at more than five times the rate of white Americans (Ghandnoosh & Barry, 2023).

U.S. Incarceration Rates (All Genders), per 100,000



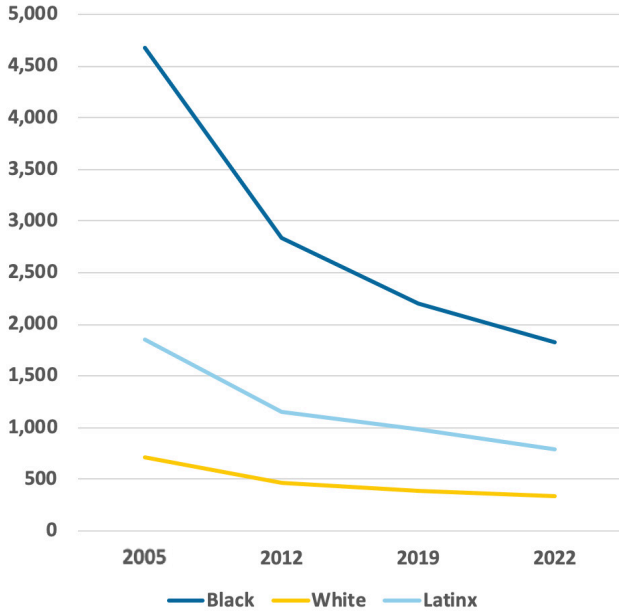
Source: Carson & Kluckow, 2023.

NOTES: "Rates are for December 31 of each year and are based on prisoners with a sentence of more than 1 year." (Carson and Kluckow, 2023, p. 14)

"Includes adult prisoners held in nonsecure community corrections facilities and adults and persons age 17 or younger held in privately operated facilities."

In 2022, the general incarceration rate for Black individuals (male and female) was **1,196 per 100,000**, compared to **229 per 100,000** for white individuals (Carson & Kluckow, 2023). While these figures indicate some progress since 2005, when the rate for Black Americans was **2,290 per 100,000** (Harrison & Beck, 2006), the Black-white incarceration gap has not closed in any meaningful way.

U.S. Incarceration Rates (Males Only), per 100,000



Source: Carson & Kluckow, 2023; Carson & Golinelli, 2013; Carson, 2020.

A closer examination reveals that these disparities are even more severe for Black men. In 2022, Black men were incarcerated at a rate of 1,826 per 100,000, compared to 337 per 100,000 for white men — a ratio of more than 5.4 to 1 (Carson & Kluckow, 2023). While this reflects a significant decline from 2005, when the rate for Black men was 4,682 per 100,000 (Harrison & Beck, 2006), the racial gap has narrowed only modestly, from 6.6 to 1 to 5.4 to 1 over nearly two decades. These trends make clear that while incarceration overall is decreasing, Black men remain uniquely and disproportionately targeted by carceral systems.

Latinx men also face disproportionately high incarceration rates compared to white men, but the disparity is less extreme. In 2022, Latinx men were incarcerated at a rate of 794 per 100,000 — more than twice the rate for white men, but less than half the rate for Black men (1,826 per 100,000) (Carson & Kluckow, 2023).

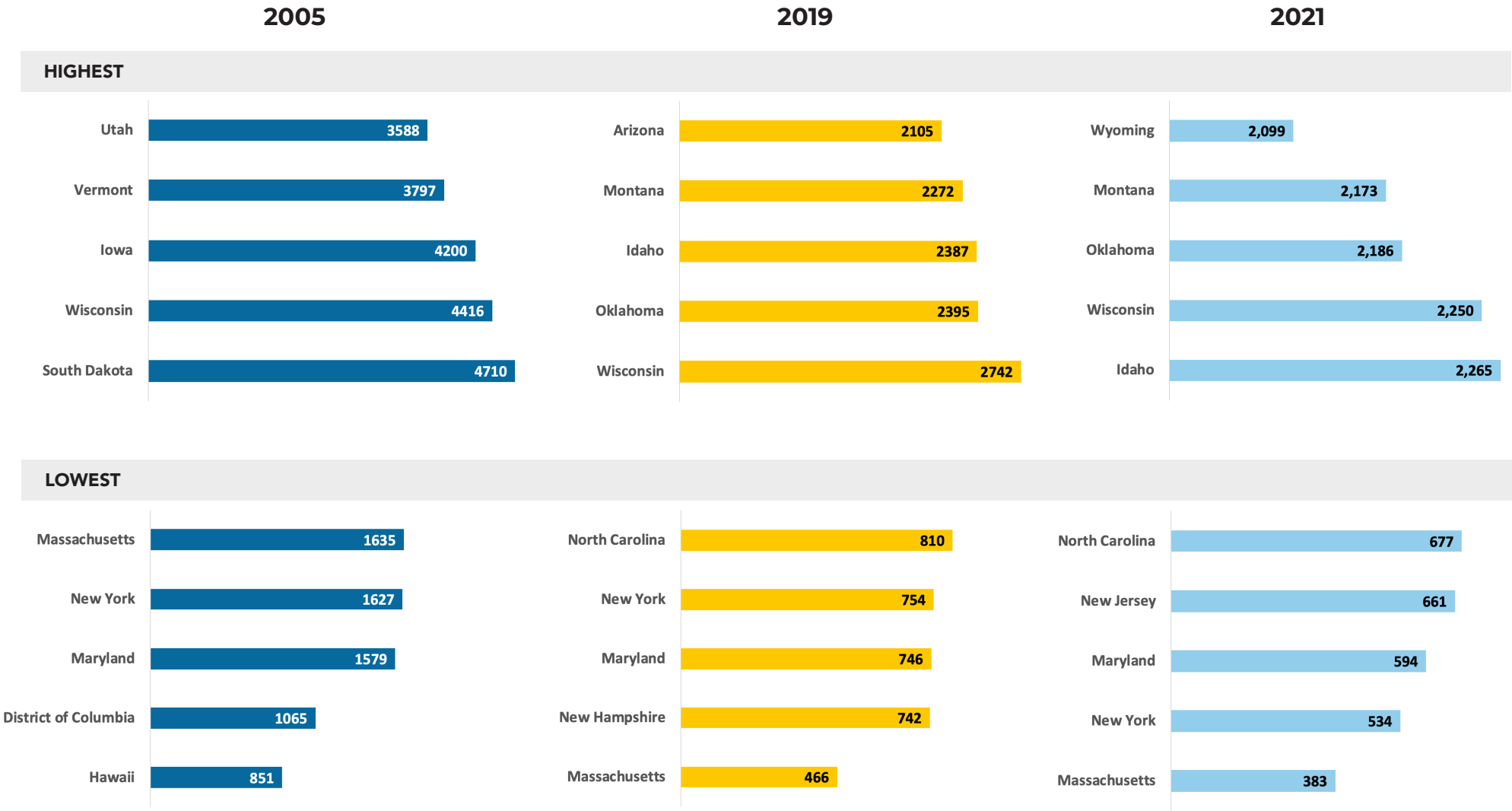
State-Level Disparities

While national incarceration trends offer a broad picture, state-level data reveal even more stark and persistent disparities in the imprisonment of Black Americans. In 2005 — the year of reference for the original *We Dream a World* report — states such as **South Dakota** (4,710 per 100,000), **Wisconsin** (4,416), and **Iowa** (4,200) had among the highest incarceration rates for Black residents in the nation (Mauer & King, 2007).

Fifteen years later, despite an overall decline in the U.S. prison population, these disparities remain entrenched. In 2019, **Wisconsin** (2,742) and **Oklahoma** (2,395) continued to top the list.

States with the Highest and Lowest Rates of Black Incarceration (Number of Prisoners)

In 2021, a Black person in Idaho was more than five times as likely to be incarcerated as a Black person in Massachusetts.



Sources: Sentencing Project, 2007; Carson, 2021; Carson & Kluckow, 2023

By **2021**, **Idaho** (2,265) and **Wisconsin** (2,250) still incarcerated Black individuals at some of the highest rates in the country, more than **four times the national average** for all adults (Nellis, 2021).

This pattern is especially pronounced in states with **small Black populations**, where disproportionate enforcement, racialized sentencing practices, and a lack of accountability often go unchecked.

As one advocate noted,

"The smaller the Black population, the higher the rate of Black incarceration."

- Change Agent Cooper, Operation Gateway, 2024; https://www.operationgateway.org/

At the other end of the spectrum, states like **Massachusetts, New York, and New Jersey** have reported lower Black incarceration rates, often under 700 per 100,000 — a figure still troublingly high, but notably below national averages.

Black Men Face Harsher Conditions in Prison

The systemic racism that disproportionately pushes Black men into the criminal legal system persists beyond sentencing, subjecting them to excessively harsh and dehumanizing conditions within correctional facilities. Solitary confinement, a practice widely criticized for its severe psychological and emotional harm, stands out as one of the most egregious examples.

In 2016, Black men comprised 45% of those held in restricted housing, despite being only 40% of the male prison population across 43 reporting jurisdictions. In 31 of those jurisdictions, the percentage of Black men in solitary confinement exceeded their representation in the overall prison population (Resnik et al., 2016). By 2021, the racial disparity appeared to have narrowed slightly, but researchers caution that this shift may reflect data collection changes rather than meaningful improvements in prison conditions (The Arthur Liman Center for Public Interest Law at Yale Law School, 2021).

The disproportionate use of isolation on Black men is not simply a matter of prison management — it is the byproduct of racialized narratives that cast Black men as inherently dangerous and in need of heightened control. These racialized assumptions have long justified extreme forms of discipline. As early as 1890, in *Medley v. Colorado (Medley v. Colorado, 1890)*, the courts acknowledged the damaging psychological effects of solitary confinement. Yet in practice, this tool has been normalized, especially for managing incarcerated Black men.

These disparities are not incidental. They are a continuation of a broader system of dehumanization, rooted in surveillance, containment, and control. This harm cannot be addressed solely through piecemeal reform. It requires systemic investment in culturally responsive mental health infrastructure, both within prisons and in the communities most impacted by incarceration.

Black-to-White Incarceration Ratio

2005: 6.6 to 1
2019: 5.7 to 1

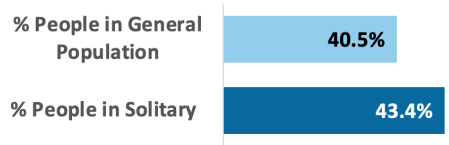
Even after declines, Black men face incarceration at nearly six times the rate of white men.

The Enduring Legacy of the War on Drugs

Racial disparities in drug enforcement begin early and persist across the life course. As shown in the juvenile criminal legal system, Black youth are disproportionately targeted for drug enforcement despite comparable or lower rates of usage. These early patterns of surveillance and criminalization lay the foundation for what becomes a deeply entrenched cycle of punishment in adulthood.

Despite decades of policy reform efforts, the racialized impact of the War on Drugs remains largely intact. Nationally, arrest rates for marijuana possession declined between 2010 and 2018 for both Black and white individuals. However, racial disparities in enforcement not only persisted — they worsened in 31 states (American Civil Liberties Union, 2020). Black people were 3.64 times more likely than white people to be arrested for marijuana possession, with some states reporting racial disparities as high as 6-to-1 or even 10-to-1.

Black Men:



Source: Liman Center, 2021

California's Proposition 47, passed in 2014, serves as an example of reform with measurable impact. The law reclassified several felony drug offenses as misdemeanors, which helped to reduce the racial gap in felony drug arrests. Following implementation, the Black-white gap in monthly felony drug arrests decreased from 81 to 44 per 100,000, with further declines observed over time (Mooney et al., 2018).

Still, many states retain laws and enforcement practices that disproportionately target Black communities. Drug arrests often serve as an entry point to a lifetime of surveillance, incarceration, and exclusion.

Black Men Are More than Half of Those Exonerated

The same patterns of racial bias that drive over-policing and harsh sentencing also shape wrongful convictions, revealing how deeply systemic racism is embedded in the criminal legal system. Innocence has never guaranteed protection for Black individuals; instead, their wrongful convictions reveal the full extent of systemic racism.

Although Black people make up only 14% of the U.S. population, they account for 53% of all known convictions. They are seven times more likely than white Americans to be wrongfully convicted of serious crimes, including murder and sexual assault (Gross et al., 2022).

In drug cases, the disparity is even more stark: 69% of those later exonerated were Black, compared to 16% who were white (Gross et al., 2022). This means that innocent Black individuals are **19 times more likely to be convicted of drug crimes** than their white counterparts, despite similar rates of drug use across racial groups.

The National Registry of Exonerations has documented 17 large-scale "Group Exonerations," including nearly 3,000 individuals who were deliberately framed in fabricated drug cases during corrupt policing scandals (Gross et al., 2022). The overwhelming majority were Black.

These wrongful convictions highlight the systemic nature of racialized punishment: the system not only over-polices and over-sentences Black people, but it also does so even when there is no wrongdoing. **The presumption of guilt linked to Blackness is so intense that it criminalizes even the innocent.**

Barriers to Reentry after Time Served

Reentry after incarceration presents stark and unequal challenges for Black boys and young men. Their experiences are shaped not only by the stigma of a criminal record but also by the compounded effects of structural racism and systemic exclusion. These barriers — across employment, housing, education, civic participation, and access to services — undermine successful reintegration and reinforce cycles of disadvantage.

Employment is among the most significant barriers. Black men face more severe discrimination than white men, even when they possess similar or greater qualifications. Research consistently shows that Black men with records are significantly less likely than similarly situated white men to receive job callbacks (Pager, 2003). Even well-intentioned interventions, such as post-conviction certificates, often fail to yield results for Black men because of persistent biases in hiring (Garretson, 2016).

Citing the 65 million Americans who have a criminal record, Garretson underscores the paradox of mass incarceration: **"A criminal record significantly impairs job opportunities, and a job is a critical component of living a crime-free life."** Additionally, white men are often perceived — accurately or not — to possess construction or mechanical skills from pre-incarceration experiences. These assumptions can ease their access to labor markets post-release, while Black men are less likely to benefit from such bias.

Housing instability further undermines successful reentry. Both public housing authorities and private landlords frequently deny applications based on criminal history, despite the lack of evidence linking stable housing to increased risk. Automated screening tools used in the private market disproportionately flag Black applicants, and public housing authorities retain broad discretion to deny access without clear standards. The result is a heightened likelihood of homelessness or unstable housing for Black men

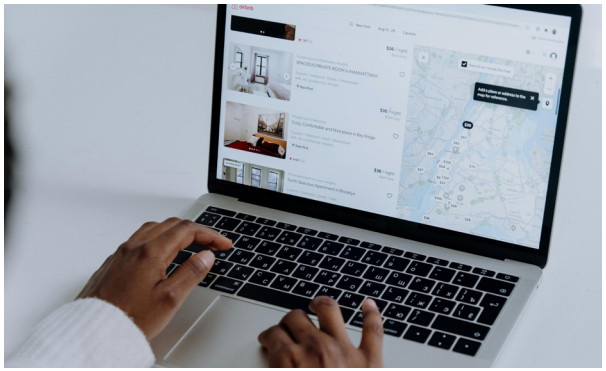
— conditions that correlate strongly with increased recidivism (Middlemass, 2017).

Access to education is also compromised. Individuals with criminal records are often disqualified from receiving financial aid or enrolling in specific academic or vocational programs. Until recently, questions about drug convictions on the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) excluded hundreds of thousands from higher education spaces. Between 1994 and 2020, more than 200,000 students were denied Pell Grants due to drug convictions, with students of color more likely to be impacted due to racial disparities in drug enforcement (Injustice 101, 2002).

Although the FAFSA Simplification Act removed the drug conviction question beginning with the 2023–2024 award year (U.S. Department of Education, Federal Student Aid, 2021), the legacy of this exclusion continues to impact access, completion rates, and trust in the higher education system.

Civic disenfranchisement compounds exclusion. In many states, felony convictions strip individuals of the right to vote, and these laws disproportionately impact Black men. As of 2024, over 4.6 million Americans cannot vote due to felony convictions; Black Americans comprise over a third of that total, despite being only 14% of the population (Uggen et al., 2024). In some states, like Florida, 1 in 5 Black adults is barred from voting. These felony disenfranchisement laws disproportionately strip Black men of their right to vote, weakening their political voice and civic engagement and reinforcing alienation from society.

Access to public benefits and social services is often limited or denied. In many states, individuals with drug-related felony convictions face bans or restrictions from receiving food assistance (SNAP),



housing support, or Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF). These exclusions deepen material hardship and hinder successful reentry. For example, 20 states still enforce food stamp bans for certain convictions, and 24 states restrict access to TANF (Accessing SNAP and TANF Benefits after a Drug Conviction, n.d.).

Taken together, these restrictions contribute to what Middlemass (2017) calls "carceral citizenship," a form of enduring punishment that keeps Black men and boys under state control and surveillance even after their formal sentences end. This layered marginalization reinforces structural racism and hinders meaningful reintegration, making the pathway to stability much more difficult for Black men than for their white counterparts.

Promising Practices

However, there are promising practices and programs aimed at easing reentry for Black men and reducing the systemic barriers they face. Job training programs, such as those launched by the Alliance for Boys and Men of Color, provide skills development and job placement assistance, supporting thousands of individuals returning from incarceration. Additionally, **"Ban the Box"** initiatives, which prohibit employers from asking about criminal history early in the hiring process, are being implemented in many states and cities to reduce discrimination based on prior convictions. **New York's post-conviction certificate programs** have also shown promise by providing individuals with certifications that help mitigate some of the barriers to employment. However, research indicates that such certificates must be better tailored to employer needs for maximum impact (Garretson, 2016). These programs, along with greater access to social services and community reintegration support, offer hope for reducing recidivism and creating opportunities for Black men to rebuild their lives after incarceration.

Incarceration not only disrupts individual lives but fractures the familial roles and relationships that many Black men are expected to resume upon release. Returning home as a father, partner, or son carries weighty expectations tied to traditional notions of masculinity — being a provider, protector, or emotional anchor — yet reentry often begins with limited resources, strained relationships, and unaddressed trauma. The emotional and psychological effects of incarceration are rarely acknowledged or supported, making it difficult for families to rebuild trust and connection. Without intentional efforts to support relational healing and redefine masculinity outside of punishment and provision, reentry systems risk setting Black men up for failure in the very roles they are told to reclaim.

Policy and Programmatic Solutions

To dismantle the systemic harms outlined in this section, policymakers must confront the root causes of criminalization, including structural racism, dehumanization, and overreliance on punitive systems. Solutions must not only reform existing practices but fundamentally reimagine how safety, accountability, and justice are defined and delivered in Black communities. For example:

Reform Policing and Reduce Militarization

- **Restrict the 1033 Program** and other federal-to-local military equipment transfers.
- **Enforce limits on the use of force**, including bans on chokeholds and no-knock warrants.
- **Establish civilian oversight boards** with subpoena power and community representation.
- **Invest in alternative first responders** (e.g., mental health teams, violence interrupters).
- **End racial profiling and surveillance practices**, including algorithmic bias in predictive policing tools.

Eliminate Discriminatory Sentencing Practices

- **Abolish mandatory minimums** and repeal three-strikes laws that disproportionately impact Black men.
- **Institute sentencing review mechanisms** to address excessive sentences and racial disparities.
- **Expand access to diversion and restorative justice programs** as alternatives to prosecution.
- **Require racial impact statements** for new sentencing laws and reforms.

Advance Pretrial Justice

- **End cash bail** and adopt risk-based, non-punitive release practices.
- **Limit pretrial detention for nonviolent charges** and ensure time limits for holding.
- **Ensure access to quality legal representation** from the moment of arrest through plea negotiation.
- **Mandate transparency in prosecutorial decisions** and require data reporting disaggregated by race.

Invest in Reentry and Restoration

- **Fund culturally responsive reentry programs** that include employment, housing, mental health, and family reunification services.
- **Ban the box on employment and housing applications** and provide robust post-conviction certifications with employer education.
- **Restore voting rights** automatically to people returning home from incarceration.
- **End lifetime bans on access to SNAP, TANF, and housing support** for people with drug-related convictions.

Address Cross-System Drivers of Criminalization

- **Fully fund equitable public education** from early childhood through postsecondary, with a focus on trauma-informed supports and alternatives to exclusionary discipline.
- **Ensure universal health coverage**, including community-based mental health care and substance use services.
- **Enforce fair housing and employment laws** to counter systemic discrimination and provide economic stability.
- **Invest in safe, affordable housing and transportation** as foundational components of public safety.

Approaches to Change

From Punishment to Possibility: Shifting the Paradigm

Despite decades of reform efforts, the American criminal legal system continues to function as a site of racialized punishment rather than a guarantor of public safety. For Black boys and men, it consistently fails to protect, serve, or restore. Real safety requires shifting from incremental reforms to community-driven solutions that center care, accountability, and justice.

Abolition and Decarceration

Abolition refers to the movement to dismantle carceral systems — including prisons and police — and replace them with community-based systems of care and accountability. Abolitionists reject the notion that punitive systems can be reformed into justice-bearing institutions; instead, they advocate for investments in housing, education, health care, and economic stability as the foundations of safety (Gilmore, 2022; Gilmore & Kilgore, 2019).

Since 2010, public support for abolition has increased, spurred by high-profile police killings and mass mobilizations in defense of Black life. The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated decarceration through early releases, proving mass incarceration unnecessary for public safety (Benson et al., 2023).

Community-driven wins have made this vision tangible. Justice LA and the Movement for Black Lives successfully stopped a $3.5 billion jail expansion in Los Angeles, redirecting resources toward care-based alternatives. Vermont permanently closed its Woodside Juvenile Rehabilitation Center in 2020 (Benninghoff & Trevellyan, 2022), and Connecticut has pursued community-based juvenile justice reforms (Krupnick, 2022). These shifts reflect an expanding belief that safety cannot be built through cages.

Transformative Justice: Community Accountability Without the State

Transformative justice (TJ) is an abolitionist framework developed by communities historically excluded from legal protection, including Black, Indigenous, trans, queer, disabled, and sex-worker communities. Unlike restorative justice, which is often institutionally embedded, TJ is decentralized and community-based, emphasizing healing, survivor autonomy, and collective accountability without reliance on surveillance or punitive measures (Kim, 2018; Mingus, 2019).

Organizations such as Collective Action for Safe Spaces create alternative accountability processes that reject punitive measures and center survivor autonomy. These processes enable individuals and communities to address harm, heal from violence, and move forward without relying on the carceral system (Kim, 2018; Pelsinger, 2025). Transform Harm serves as a national resource hub for education and tools on transformative justice, community accountability, and ending violence without relying on carceral systems. In New Orleans, Black Men Rising exemplifies TJ through healing circles and peer mentorship, supporting young Black men's leadership and well-being without carceral interventions.

While the informal and decentralized nature of TJ poses challenges regarding scale and funding, it allows these practices to remain adaptable, culturally relevant, and rooted in community self-determination. Advocates continue developing and documenting these approaches, prioritizing marginalized voices and challenging traditional punitive responses to harm (Kim, 2018; Pelsinger, 2025).

These community-led efforts illustrate the necessity and potential of non-carceral approaches, contrasting sharply with traditional police reform strategies.

Limits and Challenges of Police Reform

Efforts to reform policing are often introduced in response to high-profile incidents of brutality, but they rarely reckon with the racialized foundations of American law enforcement. For Black boys and men, contact with police is more likely to result in harm than safety, highlighting that the system functions as designed, with dehumanization deeply embedded.

Most reform efforts fall into six broad categories:

1. **Accountability and oversight,** including civilian review boards and independent investigations (Green et al., 2022; Ray, 2020);
2. **Technology and transparency,** such as body-worn and dashboard cameras (Stening, 2023);
3. **Training and cultural change,** focusing on implicit bias and de-escalation (The Ferguson Commission, 2020);
4. **Policy and legal reform,** including limits on qualified immunity and use-of-force policies (Ray, 2020);
5. **Community engagement and co-response models,** such as embedding mental health professionals in emergency calls (Green et al., 2022);
6. **Organizational reform,** such as diversifying police forces and revising hiring or promotion practices (Green et al., 2022).

Over the past 15 years, various reform frameworks have been advanced. The President's Task Force on 21st Century Policing under President Obama's administration, for example, called for a shift from "warrior" to "guardian" mentalities and championed community policing as a partnership model. Other reforms emphasized "proactive policing," including hot-spot strategies, focused deterrence, and stop-question-frisk tactics (Lum et al., 2020; President's Task Force on 21st Century Policing, 2015). Yet evidence suggests these interventions have ranged in their intended outcomes — from decreasing deadly force to improving community trust, cooperation, or crime reduction — but results have varied from

modest to negligible, and in some cases, have caused harm (Blair et al., 2024; Lum et al., 2020).

Some strategies — such as stop-question-frisk — have been ruled unconstitutional for disproportionately targeting Black and Latinx residents, particularly Black boys and men (Biscontini, 2024). Across reform efforts, one predictor remains consistent: police are more likely to use deadly force in neighborhoods with higher concentrations of Black residents, regardless of crime rates (Koslicki et al., 2021). This correlation underscores the entrenched association of Blackness with criminality — a narrative that training and technology alone cannot undo.

Body-worn cameras (BWCs), in particular, have been widely adopted, aiming to increase transparency and deter misconduct (The Ferguson Commission, 2020). However, BWCs' effectiveness varies significantly by implementation and departmental culture. While BWCs reduced use-of-force incidents in Chicago, they showed no impact in New York City, highlighting that cameras alone cannot transform policing without structural reforms and stringent accountability measures (Chapman, 2019; Ferrazares, 2024; Zamoff et al., 2022). Their impact hinges on clear policies governing when cameras must be activated, how footage is stored, and who has access to recordings (Chapman, 2019; Ray, 2020). Meanwhile, investigative reports have uncovered troubling patterns where departments adopted BWCs without enforcing accountability measures, enabling officers to disable cameras, avoid activation, or block public access to footage (Umansky, 2023). In some cases, BWCs have been repurposed to surveil communities rather than protect them.

The persistent limitations of police reforms underscore the urgency of more fundamental systemic changes.

Demilitarization and Resistance

Police militarization, accelerated by federal programs supplying surplus military equipment to local law enforcement, disproportionately affects Black and Latinx communities. Even after accounting for crime rates, police departments in jurisdictions with larger Black and Latinx populations are significantly more likely to receive military-grade weapons and tactical gear (Ramey & Steidley, 2018). Implicit racial biases drive demand for militarized gear, normalizing aggressive policing tactics and deepening community trauma (Jimenez et al., 2022).

Resistance movements are gaining momentum. In the Bay Area, years of organizing led to the end of **Urban Shield**, a SWAT expo and training program. In Atlanta, resistance to the construction of **"Cop City,"** a $90 million police training facility modeled after urban combat zones, has united environmental justice advocates, abolitionist organizers, and local residents. These efforts have drawn national attention to how militarization displaces communities and defunds care. Despite their efforts, Cop City is now operational, and more than 80 similar projects are planned nationwide (Valenzuela, 2024). These developments underscore the urgent need to not only oppose militarization but to fundamentally reimagine the role of policing.

Community-Based Response Alternatives

Where traditional reform efforts have fallen short, community-based alternatives show greater promise, especially in cases involving mental health crises. National data reveals that 1 in 5 people fatally shot by police were experiencing a mental health emergency at the time of the encounter (Police Shootings Database 2015-2024: Search by Race, Age, Department, 2024). For Black men, whose distress is often misread as aggression, such calls for help can turn lethal. The 2020 killing of Daniel Prude in Rochester, N.Y., illustrated this tragedy. After his brother called for assistance, Prude was restrained by police until he stopped breathing. "I called for help," his brother said, "not for my brother to get lynched"(Shadravan et al., 2021). Models like Crisis Intervention Teams (CITs), which pair officers with mental health professionals, have had mixed success in reducing use-of-force incidents (Baker & Pillinger, 2020; Marcus & Stergiopoulos, 2022).

Civilian-led alternatives, such as **Crisis Assistance Helping Out on the Streets (CAHOOTS**) in Eugene, Ore., have historically demonstrated humane, effective responses without police intervention. Although CAHOOTS closed due to financial constraints in 2025, the model remains influential and has inspired similar initiatives across the country (CAHOOTS | Eugene, OR Website, 2025), showcasing effective alternatives for reducing harm during mental health emergencies (Marcus & Stergiopoulos, 2022; Peltz & Bedayn, 2023).

Conclusion

The criminal legal system in the U.S. continues to produce profound harm, especially for Black men and boys. Even as some reforms offer glimpses of progress, the broader structure remains rooted in punishment and racial inequity. Mass incarceration has not only failed to enhance safety but also deepened poverty and marginalization. True liberation requires investments in community-based solutions that prioritize dignity, care, and equity. True justice and safety demand a reimagining of the systems that perpetuate harm — and an investment in care, equity, and community-based solutions.

Community wisdom underscores the critical importance of this shift. As we strive to repair the damage of systemic violence and trauma inflicted upon individuals, families, and communities, we must reconnect with and elevate the resilience and healing practices that have long sustained marginalized communities. Recognizing the sacred worth of every young person must guide our collective actions, ensuring they have the opportunity to thrive.

As our elders remind us:

"Within the collective Dignity, Respect, Trust and Love of all people exists the wisdom, practices and resources for a healthy and harmonious well-being."

— Jerry Tello, National Compadres Network

"I've never met an evil person. I've never met a bad person. I've met wounded people. I've met people who are in extraordinary pain. I've met broken people, traumatized people, and mentally ill people. But I've never met anybody bad or evil. And it's helped me in my life to have been shown that. Because I don't see anybody who's evil."

—Father Greg Boyle, Homeboy Industries

Healing-centered, community-driven approaches thus offer a transformative path forward, emphasizing restoration and dignity over punishment and exclusion.

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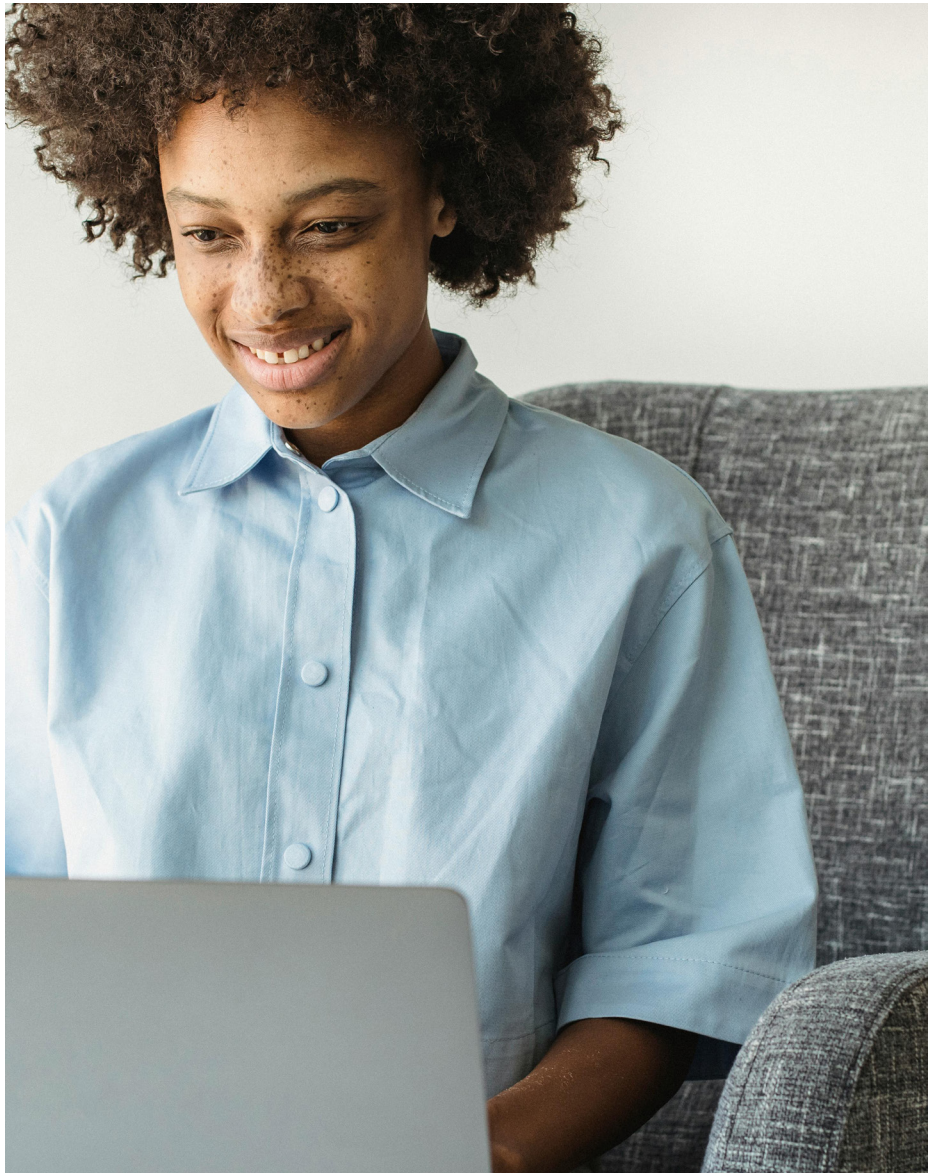

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07 Conclusion: The Dream, Undeterred

What happens to a dream deferred?

Does it dry up
like a raisin in the sun?
Or fester like a sore—
And then run?
Does it stink like rotten meat?
Or crust and sugar over—
like a syrupy sweet?

Maybe it just sags
like a heavy load.

Or does it explode?

— Langston Hughes

Fifteen years after the first *We Dream a World* report, the evidence is both sobering and galvanizing. Across education, employment, health, fatherhood and families, and justice, the throughline is unmistakable: Black boys and men continue to navigate systems that were not built for their success, yet they persist, lead, and thrive in spite of those barriers. The data reveal hard-fought progress — higher graduation rates, declining youth incarceration, growing entrepreneurship, and stronger public awareness — but also enduring inequities that trace back to structural racism, policy neglect, and societal dehumanization.

This moment demands more than acknowledgement; it demands action rooted in love, accountability, and imagination. Policymakers, educators, philanthropists, and community leaders must move beyond performative equity to sustained investment in systems that affirm Black life from early childhood to adulthood, from the classroom to the boardroom, from reentry to generational wealth.

To truly reimagine what is possible, we must:

- **Fund what works** by scaling community-rooted, culturally affirming programs that have proven to improve outcomes.
- **Repair what harms** by dismantling punitive, exclusionary, and racist structures in education, employment, health care, housing, and justice.
- **Redefine success** by centering joy, dignity, and belonging as measures of progress, not just survival metrics.

For too long, America has risked letting its promise of equality "fester like a sore." We stand at a crossroads where the dream deferred can no longer wait. It is time to realize, not retreat from the dream to ensure that it does not dry up, but finally blossoms into the justice and freedom long promised.

The well-being of Black men and boys is not a special interest; it is a national imperative and a moral measure of our collective future. The next 15 years must not repeat the last. The time to act boldly, collaboratively, and without retreat is now.