

# OUR DREAMS WON'T BE DEFERRED: Reclaiming Progress for Black Men and Boys in an Age of Retreat



EDUCATION

## Education should serve as a gateway to opportunity.

Yet for many Black boys, schools remain environments of marginalization rather than empowerment. Despite the landmark We Dream a World (WDAW) report in 2010, which exposed stark disparities in education, discipline, and access to quality learning, little has changed. From early childhood to postsecondary education, Black boys face systemic inequities that stifle their academic potential. Predominantly Black schools are underfunded, employ fewer certified teachers, and offer limited advanced coursework. Racial bias in school discipline continues to disproportionately criminalize Black boys, feeding the school-to-prison pipeline.

Even after **Brown v. Board of Education** aimed to end segregation, **de facto segregation** persists through redlining, school zoning, and inequitable funding models. These policies continue to deprive Black students of well-resourced schools and affirming learning environments. Recent policy shifts have given states more authority over educational accountability. However, the lack of standardized, disaggregated data by both race and gender obscures a full understanding of Black boys' experiences in education.

Meaningful progress requires more than marginal reform—it calls for a systemic overhaul. **Policies and practices that dehumanize Black boys must be replaced with those that affirm their dignity, cultural identity, and right to succeed.** Until then, the promise of education will remain unfulfilled for too many.

## 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.

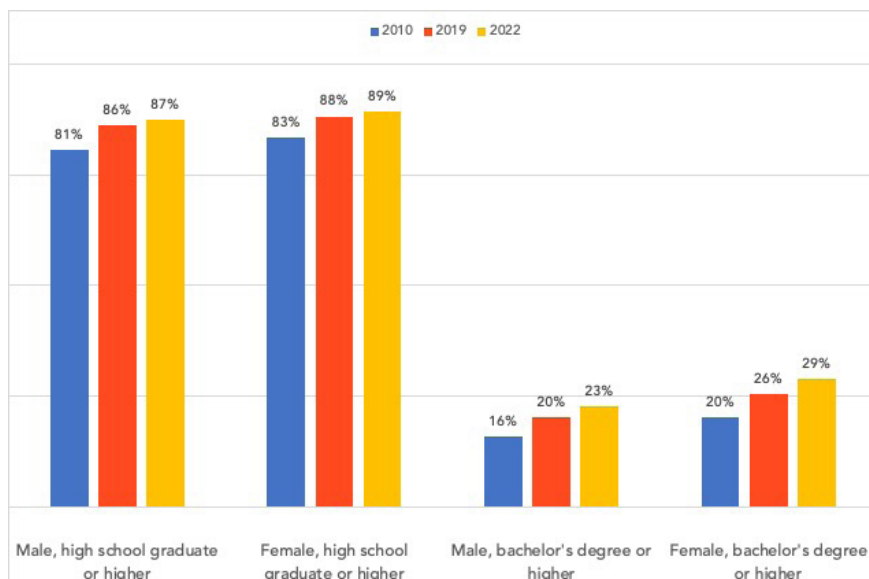
**High school completion:** The graduation rate for Black males has increased significantly. U.S. Census Bureau data show that high school completion among Black males aged 25 and older rose from 82% in 2010 to 88.5% in 2022.

**College degree attainment:** College degree attainment for Black males grew from 16% in 2010 to 22.7% in 2022, according to Census Bureau 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.

## Black male educational attainment has been climbing since 2010.



Rising Education Attainment Among Black Americans (2010–2022)

## 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.

**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.

**Ongoing academic challenges:** 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.

**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.

## A CALL TO ACTION

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.

- **Ensure equitable school funding and resource allocation.**
- **Expand access to high-quality early childhood education.**
- **Support holistic student development.**
- **Invest in culturally responsive teaching and teacher diversity.**
- **Disrupt the school-to-prison pipeline.**
- **Support alternative learning models.**
- **Support family engagement.**
- **Strengthen postsecondary access and completion.**



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## EMPLOYMENT & WEALTH

### 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 and Black Codes to convict leasing and 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 forms of state-sanctioned asset stripping inflicted deep economic wounds — wounds that remain visible in today's labor market and racial wealth gap.



### Areas of Progress

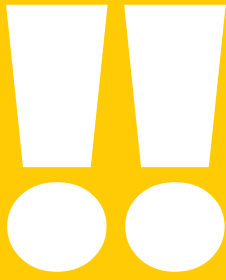
**Declining unemployment rates** across all age groups, including among Black youth and prime-age men (ages 25–54) indicating some post-pandemic market recovery.

**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, Asheville, 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.

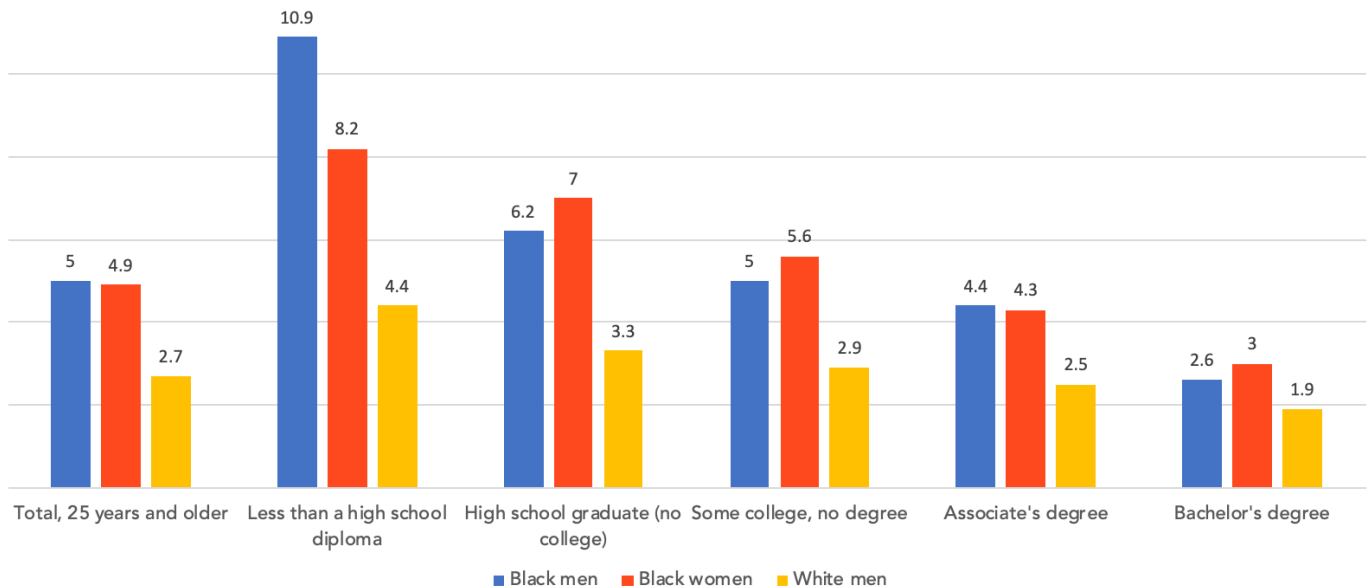
**Occupational segregation and concentration in low-wage, low-mobility jobs**, including disproportionately high exposure to automation risks and weak job protections.

**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.

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

These figures illustrate the enduring penalty of race in the labor market.



Source: US Bureau of Labor Statistics Report 1105, November 2023.

### A CALL TO ACTION

While education may open doors, systemic racism still determines who gets through them. To eradicate barriers to employment and wealth-building 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**
- **Build Equitable Employment Pipelines**
- **Enforce Civil Rights and Labor Protections**
- **Ensure Financial Inclusion and Economic Security**
- **Enact Racially Just Wealth-Building Investments and Policy**

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## FATHERHOOD



### 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.



### Areas of Progress

Black fathers, both co-residential and non-residential, **report high levels of daily caregiving**, including meals, hygiene, and homework support.

In 2020, nearly **half a million Black men were raising children as single fathers**, yet their roles remain largely invisible in public discourse and policy.

Social fathers and extended kin — such as uncles, grandfathers, mentors, and others — **play consistent and emotionally vpresent 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 often 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.

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.

Despite their caregiving contributions, **Black fathers are overrepresented in low-wage, unstable work** and face immense pressure to perform financially, often without institutional support.



## A CALL TO ACTION

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 strengthen rather than criminalize Black fathers. Reforms are needed in several areas, including but not limited to:

- **Reform Child Support and Welfare Policy** such as mandating 100% pass-through in all states, ensuring families receive full child support payments and ending imputed income practices that result in unpayable orders, especially for unemployed or reentering fathers
- **Reform Housing Policy** to support fathers, co-parenting arrangements, and multi-adult households
- **Custody and Family Court** to fund legal assistance and father advocacy in dependency court proceedings
- **Inclusive Education and Childcare Policy** such as requiring school districts and early learning programs to include fathers in all family engagement plans
- **Reentry and Sentencing** to expand sentencing alternatives for parents (e.g., community-based parenting programs) and ensure all reentry plans include child reunification and parenting goals

### Black Custodial Fathers in Context

#### Black Father-Only Households

2008: 476,181 (9% of Black families with children)

2020: 491,085 (4.5% of Black families with children)

*U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey (ACS)*

#### Total Black Families with Children

2008: 5.28 million

2020: 10.91 million

*U.S. Census Bureau, ACS*

#### Black Single-Parent Families

2008: 3.35 million (63%)

2020: 5.54 million (50.8%)

*U.S. Census Bureau, ACS*

#### Children Living with Father Only (2020)

Black children: ~5%

White, non-Hispanic children: ~5%

Hispanic children: ~4%

Asian children: ~2%

*U.S. Census Bureau, 2021*

#### Children Living with No Parent Present (2020)

Black children: 8%

Hispanic children: 4%

White, non-Hispanic children: 3%

Asian children: 1%

*U.S. Census Bureau, 2021*

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HEALTH

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

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

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

### Areas of Progress

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

#### Foster Care:

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

#### Healthcare Coverage:

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

#### Improved Outcomes:

Expanded health insurance coverage among Black Americans has coincided with improved outcomes. Cancer mortality among Black men declined by 49% between 1991 and 2022, and asthma-related emergency visits dropped by more than half between 2003–2005 and 2020–2022 (CDC, 2023; Saka et al., 2025).

### Areas of Concern

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

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

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

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

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

Examples:

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

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

## Health Disparities Are Driven by Social and Economic Equities.



SOURCE: kff.org

## A CALL TO ACTION

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

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

- **Address social determinants of health**
- **Improve black male life expectancy**
- **Eliminate healthcare disparities and medical racism**
- **Strengthen mental health supports**
- **Reduce violence and its health impacts**
- **Support family engagement**
- **Strengthen postsecondary access and completion**

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JUSTICE, RIGHTS,  
RESPONSIBILITIES, AND OPPORTUNITIES



**Perhaps no other system better exemplifies the dehumanization of Black boys and young men than the criminal legal system.<sup>1</sup>**

Since the publication of the original *We Dream A World* 2015 (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, 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.

*<sup>1</sup>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.*



## Areas of Progress

Between 2000 and 2022, **youth incarceration declined by 75%.**

Between 2005 and 2022, **delinquency cases involving Black youth fell 63%.**

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.**

Between 2016 and 2022, **violent offenses committed by Black youth decreased** by about 20%, while property crimes fell by nearly 40% (Lantz & Knapp, 2024).

Black boys are incarcerated at a rate more than five times the rate of White boys (2021).

Race/Ethnicity	Male Incarceration Rate (per 100,000)
Black	400
Latino	97
White	77

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

## A CALL TO ACTION

We must address the root causes of criminalization and mass incarceration: dehumanization. Racism exacerbates the challenges and dangers Black youth face in the U.S. criminal-legal system. The criminalization of Black boys and men has not only fueled mass incarceration, it has in too many instances robbed Black men of their freedom and ability to function in society on a level playing field. To remedy this, we must start with policies and programs that invest in prevention, early intervention, and re-entry.

- Fully implement the Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Act (JJDP)
- Expand community-based violence prevention
- Scale restorative justice practices
- Reform policing and reduce militarization
- Eliminate discriminatory sentencing practices
- Advance pretrial justice
- Invest in reentry and restoration
- Address cross-system drivers of criminalization
- Ensure financial inclusion and economic security
- Enact racially just wealth-building investments and policy



## 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).



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