Black Thinkers

NICJR
National Institute for Criminal Justice Reform

Outcome Disparities and Gains in the Black Community

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Economic Disparities and Gains

The Black poverty rate remains roughly double the national rate. In 2024, 18.4% of Black Americans lived in poverty versus 10.6% nationally – about 2.4 times the rate for non-Hispanic White Americans (7.7%). Black poverty hit a record low of 17.1% in 2022 before ticking back up in 2023–24. Using the Supplemental Poverty Measure, the Black rate rose further to 20.7% in 2024. (U.S. Census Bureau, Poverty in the United States: 2024)

The racial wealth gap is large and, by most measures, widening even as Black wealth grows. Median Black household wealth rose from about $27,970 (2019) to $44,890 (2022) – a 61% increase – but median White wealth is roughly $285,000, over 6 times higher. The dollar gap between median White and Black wealth grew from about $165,000 in 2019 to over $240,000 in 2022, because White wealth started from a much larger base and grew off it. As of Q2 2025, Black Americans held 3.4% of national wealth ($5.71T) versus 83.5% for White Americans ($139.73T), despite Black Americans being 13.7% of the population. (Federal Reserve Survey of Consumer Finances; Brookings; Federal Reserve Board)

Under the Biden Administration's Child Tax Credit (CTC), the Black child poverty rate was cut in half. Using the Supplemental Poverty Measure, Black child poverty fell from about 17.2% in 2020, to 8.3% in 2021 – a drop of roughly 52%, driven overwhelmingly by the temporary expansion of the CTC in the American Rescue Plan, especially making the credit fully refundable for the lowest-income families. About 716,000 fewer Black children were in poverty in 2021 because of the CTC. The gain was temporary: when the expanded CTC expired at the end of 2021, child poverty (all races) more than doubled by 2022. (Census Bureau SPM data; EPI; PolitiFact fact-check). The CTC expansion is probably the single clearest example of a scalable policy lever that measurably moved Black child poverty – a data point for arguing that targeted, refundable federal benefits move the needle faster than general growth alone.

Historically, Black Americans have had substantially lower upward mobility and substantially higher downward mobility than White Americans at every income level. But new Opportunity Insights/Harvard research (Chetty et al., 2024) found the Black-White mobility gap has narrowed sharply across generations: Black children born in 1978 into the bottom income quintile were 14.7 percentage points more likely to stay in poverty than similarly situated White children; for those born in 1992, that gap fell to just 4.1 points. The earnings gap for those who grew up poor fell 27% between Gen X and Millennials. Mobility is still lower for Black Americans overall, but the trend for younger cohorts is markedly more favorable.

According to Forbes, there are approximately 1.8 million Black millionaires in America, as well as 14 Black billionaires, a significant increase in just the past 10 years.

This brief was written by NICJR with support from Claude AI

Education and Employment

High school completion has improved substantially and the gap has narrowed: the national adjusted cohort graduation rate for Black students was 81% in 2021–22, versus 90% for White students and 87% overall – both up several points over the past decade. The larger gaps remain in college: the college enrollment rate for recent Black high school graduates was 59.2% in 2024, versus 62.2% for White and 94.7% for Asian graduates. Four-year college completion rates are markedly lower for Black students than White or Asian students (National Center for Education Statistics; BLS).

The National Student Clearinghouse counted more than 1.86 million Black undergraduates and roughly 364,000 Black graduate students in Spring 2026, about 2.2 million total. Data from the federal Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) for Fall 2024, puts the figure higher, at about 2.42 million.

According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), in 2022, 36.0% of the 18–24-year-old Black population were enrolled in college. For comparison, about 41% of white and 64% of Asian 18- to 24-year-olds were enrolled in 2020.

The Census Bureau counted 8,675,000 Black Americans over age 25 with at least a bachelor's degree in 2024. That is about 29.6 percent of the Black adult population. By comparison, 38.6 percent of White adults held a bachelor's degree

More information on Black college enrollment and other outcomes can be found in the Black Student in Higher Education Factsheet.

The Black unemployment rate is consistently about double the national/White rate, and the gap widened notably in 2025. In 2025, the average Black unemployment rate was 6.9% versus 4.3% nationally; by December 2025 it had risen to 7.5% for Black workers versus 3.8% for White workers – a roughly 2.2-to-1 ratio, one of the largest in years. Analysts attribute part of the 2025 spike to federal workforce cuts (Black workers are overrepresented in government jobs) and the end of pandemic-era hiring momentum. (Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies; BLS; EPI)

Health

The Black-White life expectancy gap remains one of the starkest disparities in the data, though it has narrowed meaningfully over time. As of 2023, Black life expectancy was about 74 years versus 78.4 nationally and roughly 79.9 for White women/74.9 for White men pre-pandemic – a gap that once stood at 7 years in 1990 and had closed to about 3.6 years by 2018. The pandemic widened it again (Black Americans lost roughly 4.5 years of life expectancy between 2019–2021), but the rebound since has been faster for Black Americans than for White Americans

(CDC/NCHS; KFF; Princeton PNAS study, 2021).

Black maternal mortality is the sharpest, least-improved disparity in the health data. Black maternal mortality rate was 44.8 deaths per 100,000 live births in 2024 – roughly 3 times the White rate (14.2) – and was the only group whose rate did not show a statistically significant decline over the past two years even as the national rate improved. Black infants die at more than double the rate of White infants (10.98 vs. 4.41 per 1,000 in 2024), a gap that has persisted, and in some measures widened, for over a century. Black women are about 60% more likely to develop preeclampsia and roughly 5 times more likely to die from it than White women – notable because the CDC estimates 84% of pregnancy-related deaths nationally are preventable. (CDC/NCHS, 2024; KFF; U.S. Preventive Services Task Force)

There are also several individual conditions with great disparities. HIV/AIDS is one of the widest disparities. Black Americans make up about 13% of the population in America, but accounted for 38% of new HIV diagnoses in 2023, at a rate more than 8 times that of White Americans (42 vs. 5 new diagnoses per 100,000) (CDC HIV Surveillance Report, 2024; KFF).

Cardiovascular disease remains the leading cause of death for Black Americans, and hypertension-related mortality is markedly higher – the age-adjusted rate for Black Americans (10.95 per 100,000 in 2023) is nearly double the White rate (5.86). One large study found Black adults have a 54% higher cardiovascular mortality rate than White adults after adjusting for age, but that gap essentially disappears when accounting for social factors like unemployment, income, and insurance status – evidence the disparity is driven more by conditions of life than biology (CDC WONDER; Tulane University/Annals of Internal Medicine, 2023).

Cancer is a story of both real disparity and real, faster-than-average progress. Black men have the highest overall cancer death rate of any group – 19% higher than White men, driven largely by prostate cancer, where the Black death rate is more than double any other group. Black women are 40% more likely to die of breast cancer than White women despite similar incidence. But the overall Black-White cancer mortality gap has narrowed sharply – from 33% in 1993 to about 10–13% today – because cancer death rates have fallen faster in Black Americans than White Americans since the 1990s, largely due to steeper declines in youth smoking and improved detection (American Cancer Society, “Cancer Statistics for African American and Black People, 2025”).

Criminal Justice

Black Americans are incarcerated in state prisons at roughly 5 times the rate of White Americans (one in 81 Black adults is in state prison nationally). This is a real disparity, but there's also a real and substantial gain: the Black imprisonment rate has fallen sharply since its 2002 peak – down 48% for Black men and 70% for Black women between 2000 and 2021 – outpacing the decline

for most other groups. The lifetime likelihood of imprisonment for Black men fell from 1-in-3 (born 1981) to 1-in-5 (born 2001). (The Sentencing Project, "One in Five," 2023)

Youth incarceration overall has fallen dramatically – about 75% between 2000 and 2023. But the Black-White disparity has grown even as the numbers shrank: Black youth were about 4x as likely as White youth to be incarcerated in 2001; by 2023 that had risen to 5.6x, described by the Sentencing Project as an all-time high. Researchers attribute this less to differences in offending and more to which kids get diverted, released early, or given "off-ramps" – those options are used more often for White youth. (The Sentencing Project, "Black Disparities in Youth Incarceration"; NPR, 2025)

The number of Black police officers in America is only a slight underrepresentation of the country's population, with 11-12% of full-time local police officers being Black (vs. about 71% White), while Black Americans are about 13-14% of the U.S. population. The National Organization of Black Law Enforcement Executives (NOBLE) has advocated for many years to grow the pipeline of Black command staff, arguing leadership diversity shapes department culture, discipline, and community trust more than officer-level diversity alone. Fewer than 10% of the roughly 3,895 police chiefs nationally are Black, and only about 5% of elected sheriffs are Black (NAACP; Bureau of Justice Statistics).

Over the past two and a half years, the United States experienced the largest sustained crime declines in modern U.S. record-keeping. Violent crime fell 4.5% in 2024 (lowest rate since 1969) and then fell another 9.3% in 2025 – the largest single-year drop since the FBI began estimating trends in 1936. Murder fell 14.9% in 2024 and 18.1% in 2025; the 2025 murder rate (4.1 per 100,000) tied 1955–56 for the lowest ever recorded. And in 2026, all of these crime statistics are trending lower, and this will likely be the safest year in a century in America. This will benefit Black communities which are disproportionately impacted by crime and violence and should continue to reduce the incarceration rate for Black people.

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