



BREAKING THE CHAINS



**RECLAIMING
WEALTH,
POWER, AND
DIGNITY FOR
BLACK MEN**

A REPORT FROM



**Fathers,
Families,
& Healthy
Communities**

BREAKING THE CHAINS: RECLAIMING WEALTH, POWER, AND DIGNITY FOR BLACK MEN REPORT AUTHORS

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Since its founding in 2012, the Alliance has served as a major convener in workforce development, social justice, education, and economic opportunity. We also join CWFA in acknowledging the Christopher Family Foundation, the Lloyd A. Fry Foundation, the Polk Bros Foundation and the Field Foundation. Without the thought leadership and additional resources of these foundations, this project would not have come together.

This report is a testament to the power of collaboration, shared knowledge, and the voices that drive meaningful change.



TABLE OF CONTENTS

2	FOREWORD
3	EXECUTIVE SUMMARY
5	BACKGROUND
7	METHODOLOGY
7	Equity and Transformation (EAT)
8	Fathers, Families & Healthy Communities (FFHC)
10	HISTORICAL CONTEXT & CONTINUITY: A LEGACY OF EXCLUSION AND RESILIENCE
10	From Enslavement to Reconstruction: Black Men’s Fight for Economic Autonomy
11	Economic Exclusion and Black Men’s Resilience from Jim Crow Segregation to Civil Rights
14	From Civil Rights to Carceral Control: Mass Incarceration’s Economic Grip on Black Men
17	FINDINGS
17	Systemic Roadblocks to Economic Opportunity
20	Structural Inequities in the Workforce
21	The Hidden Costs of Economic Marginalization
23	Forging New Economic Pathways
26	CONCLUSION: A CALL FOR BOLD AND TRANSFORMATIVE ACTION
27	ACTIONABLE INSIGHTS & POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS
27	Wealth Redistribution Policies for Black Men
28	Redesigning Public Budgets to Support Black Men and Drive Equity
29	Invest in Fatherhood Programs to Empower and Strengthen Families
30	Workforce Development and Career Advancement for Black Men
31	Education and Skill-Building Opportunities for Black Men
32	Entrepreneurship and Business Ownership
32	Incentivize Businesses to Hire Formerly Incarcerated Black Men
33	Establishing a Statewide Data Set on Black Men’s Health and Well-Being
34	REFERENCES

FOREWORD

The economic exclusion of Black men and fathers in Chicago is not a new phenomenon. It represents a continuation of deeply rooted historical patterns that have devalued the contributions of Black men for generations. The research before you — thoughtfully compiled by the dedicated teams at Equity and Transformation (EAT) and Fathers, Families, & Healthy Communities (FFHC) — lays bare the stark realities of this exclusion. However, the report also offers hope in charting a path forward with policy recommendations that demand our attention and action.

It was not easy for me to read this report. As the son of a rust-belt Midwestern town, this text triggers painful memories of growing up in a community where Black male unemployment was consistently two to three times higher than the overall rate. It takes me back to that moment when I decided to major in economics, determined to learn why the Black men in my community couldn't find work, and committed to creating change.

I spent much of my early career studying the economic plight of Black men and boys, with my first professional job focused on examining Black fathers and their relationships with family and social policy. What struck me then — and what continues to trouble me today — is how rarely public discourse and policy discussions center the needs of Black men. And, when we do discuss Black men, it's often narrowly framed in the context of public safety, violence prevention, or community reentry from prison rather than acknowledging their full humanity and the structural barriers they face.

The research in this report is rooted in community. It is not theoretical or abstract. It represents the lived experiences of Black men from Chicago's South and West sides. Their voices, struggles, and resilience inform every recommendation. The report highlights actionable solutions that go upstream — addressing root causes rather than symptoms — and focuses on what we are not doing in this region to support Black men. This report reflects a stark reality. If we do not comprehensively address the needs of Black men and fathers, we will undermine all other efforts to transform communities and improve lives.

The economic disenfranchisement of Black men is not just a problem for Black communities. It represents a moral failure and an economic hindrance for our entire city and region. As the authors make clear in this report, we must collectively reimagine systems that undo and prevent future harm and offer the opportunity for Black men to emotionally and financially support their households.

I urge you to approach this report as a call to action, requiring your personal engagement and commitment. The authors have provided a precise diagnosis and a prescription for change. It is up to all of us — policymakers, philanthropists, business leaders, and community members — to implement these recommendations with the urgency and scale that Black men and fathers deserve.

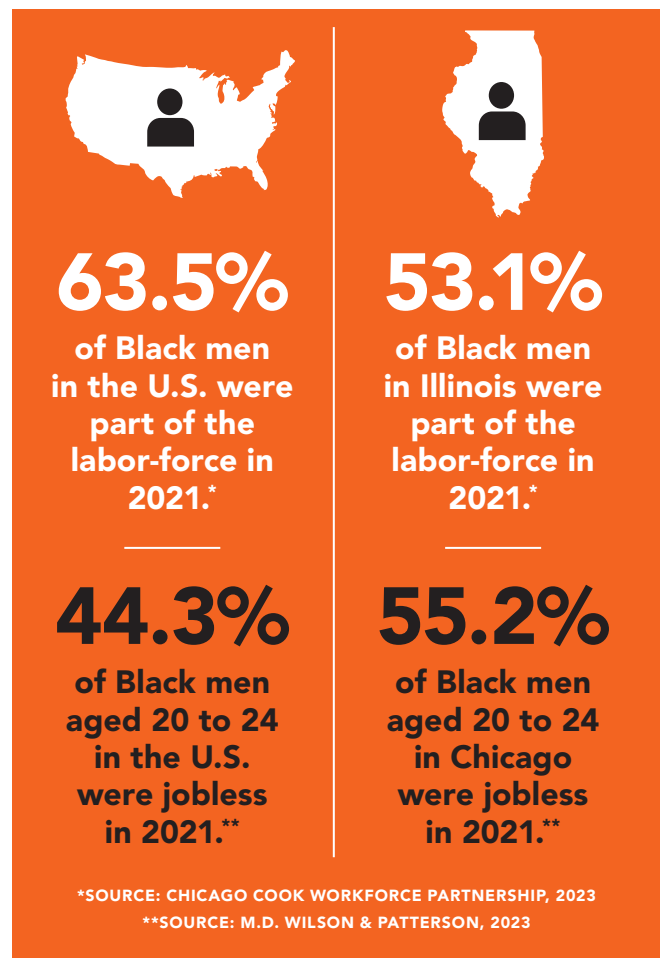
Daniel O. Ash
President
Field Foundation

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Chicago's history is inseparable from the contributions of Black men. Our history, our culture, and our economy are inseparable from their contributions. The city itself was founded by a Black man, Jean Baptiste Point du Sable, a trader of African and French descent who, in the late 18th century, established a settlement at the mouth of the Chicago River, becoming its first permanent non-Indigenous settler (Grossman et al., 2004). Du Sable's legacy is a reminder that we've been here since the beginning — building, shaping, and defining this city. But despite that deep-rooted presence, Black men in Chicago have been systematically locked out of the very economy they helped create. Their labor, their ideas, their potential — all devalued, excluded, and exploited. That is not by accident. It is by design. And it's past time for a fundamental shift.

The economic crisis facing Black men in Chicago didn't happen overnight. It is the result of decades of systemic neglect, structural racism, and deliberate policies that have kept them on the margins of opportunity, resulting in Chicago's Black families having a net worth (or wealth) of \$0 (Bhaskaran et al., 2024). Black men in Illinois had the lowest labor force participation rate among major U.S. cities — just 53.1% in 2021 (Chicago Cook Workforce Partnership, 2023). Not because they aren't willing to work, but because the system has actively denied them access. **This isn't just about jobs. It's about power. It's about who gets to build wealth, who gets to have stability, and who gets to shape the future.** The reality is, unless we shift from economic exclusion to economic empowerment, Black men will continue to be left behind in a city that they helped build.

This report is rooted in the lived experiences of Black men and fathers with low incomes from the West and South sides of Chicago, many of whom are system-impacted.¹ Their stories expose the structural barriers that have made economic stability nearly impossible. Discriminatory hiring practices, chronic underinvestment, mass



1 While this report focuses on a specific segment of Black men, it is important to recognize that the systemic barriers we identify do not exist in isolation. Even affluent Black men navigating corporate spaces and high-income sectors encounter the residual effects of these same exclusionary structures (Wingfield, 2012). The patterns of economic disenfranchisement, racialized hiring practices, and the undervaluation of Black labor are woven into the city's economic fabric, affecting Black men across socioeconomic lines.

incarceration, and predatory economic policies have created a landscape where Black men are pushed into the informal economy just to make ends meet. These barriers don't just impact their ability to work — they impact their families, their communities, and their ability to imagine a different future.

But even in the face of exclusion, **Black men continue to create new economic pathways. They are hustlers, innovators, and entrepreneurs — leveraging informal networks, creating businesses, and finding ways to survive and thrive despite the odds. Their resilience is a testament to their power, but resilience alone isn't enough.** The systems that have kept them locked out must be dismantled. And that requires more than symbolic gestures. It requires bold, targeted, and reparative action.

The solutions in this report are clear, data-driven, and rooted in community expertise. We are calling for a full-scale economic transformation — one that centers Black men as architects of their own futures. That means:

- **Wealth redistribution** through reparations, guaranteed income for system-impacted Black men, baby bonds for Black children, and progressive tax credits that provide financial security and break cycles of generational poverty.
- **Guaranteed access to good jobs** through high-growth industry training, paired with wraparound supports like childcare and transportation assistance.
- **Investment in Black fatherhood programs** that strengthen families and provide economic stability.
- **Mentorship and career pipelines** that connect Black men with established professionals and industries.
- **Funding for Black-owned businesses** through grants, low-interest loans, and cooperative business models.
- **A statewide data initiative** grounded in community data stewardship, tracking the well-being of Black men, particularly fathers, to inform evidence-based policies and practices.

These aren't just policy recommendations. They are demands. Because what's happening to Black men in Chicago is not just an economic issue — it's a moral one. The exclusion of Black men from economic opportunity isn't accidental. It's the product of generations of racist policies that have kept them on the outside looking in.

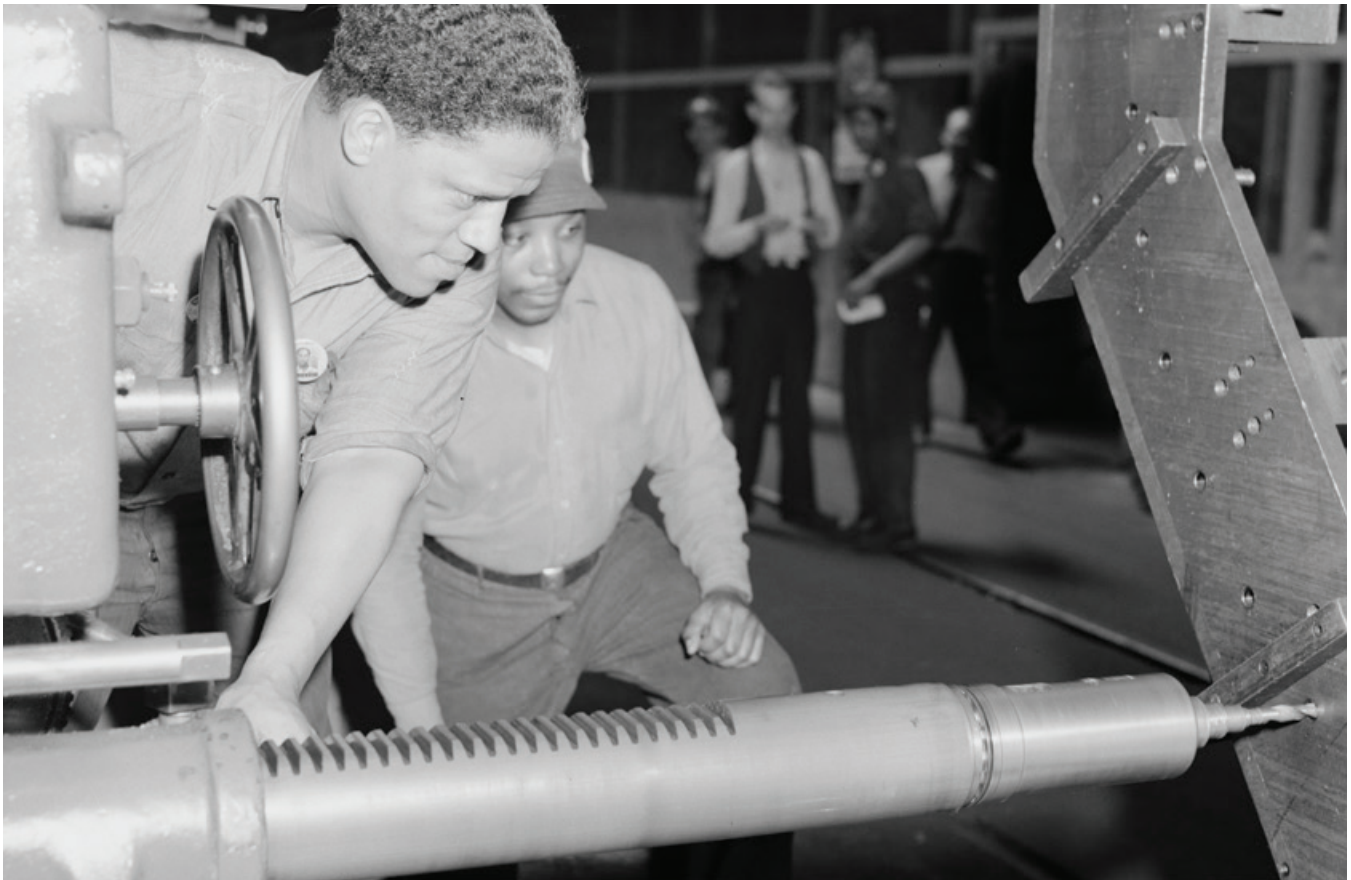
Today, as Black communities — along with other racialized and marginalized groups — confront a renewed wave of racial backlash cloaked in an “America First” policy agenda, the urgency to correct this grievous injustice has never been greater. **The same forces that once sought to deny Black men access to freedom, land, and economic opportunity are now actively unraveling the illusion of hard-won progress. Failing to act is not just an economic misstep; it is a betrayal of justice.**

Chicago must meet this moment with real, transformational change. Black men should no longer have to fight for scraps in a city they helped build. They deserve stability, ownership, and the ability to pass down wealth — just like anyone else. This isn't charity. This is justice. And justice delayed is justice denied.

BACKGROUND

This project was born out of the stark reality that, during the COVID-19 pandemic, Black men in Illinois faced one of the most severe labor force crises in the country. In 2021, the national labor force participation rate for Black men stood at 63.5%, the lowest among all worker classifications in America (Chicago Cook Workforce Partnership, 2023). In Illinois, the situation was even more dire, with only

53.1% of Black men participating in the workforce, the lowest among major U.S. cities (Chicago Cook Workforce Partnership, 2023). The disparity was even greater in Chicago, where Black men, particularly younger workers, faced extreme joblessness.² That same year, 55.2% of Black men aged 20 to 24 in Chicago were jobless, nearly 11 percentage points higher than the national average (M. D. Wilson & Patterson,



Pressed Steel Can Company, Chicago, Illinois. September, 1942. Ann Rosener, Photographer. Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division, FSA/OWI Collection, LC-DIG-fsa-8b07376.

² Joblessness provides a more accurate measure of economic exclusion, as it captures the percentage of people who are not working, whether or not they are actively seeking employment. Unlike the labor force participation rate, which only accounts for those employed or looking for work, joblessness includes individuals who have disengaged from the workforce due to systemic barriers, discouragement, or other personal circumstances. This makes joblessness a more revealing indicator of long-term economic disconnection, particularly for marginalized groups like Black men, who face persistent structural obstacles to employment.

2023). The economic recovery following the pandemic was not just slow; it was deeply uneven, disproportionately leaving Black men in Illinois, especially in Chicago, behind. This persistent gap is not simply a consequence of the pandemic but a reflection of longstanding systemic barriers that continue to limit economic opportunity, job stability, and wealth-building for Black men (Lorena Roque et al., 2022). Addressing these structural inequities is the driving force behind this project.

Recognizing this crisis, the Chicagoland Workforce Funder Alliance (CWFA) sought to do more than study the problem, it aimed to develop real, community-driven solutions that create lasting pathways to stability. To lead this effort, the Chicago Cook Workforce Funder Alliance turned to Fathers, Families, & Healthy Communities (FFHC) and Equity and Transformation (EAT), two organizations deeply embedded in Black communities, each with a long track record of addressing economic and social inequities through culturally responsive, grassroots approaches.

FFHC and EAT brought distinct but complementary expertise to the initiative. FFHC has long focused on economic empowerment as a pathway to strengthening Black families and fatherhood, ensuring Black men have access to jobs and resources that foster financial security and generational wealth. EAT, founded by and for formerly incarcerated people, has pioneered economic solutions for Black men navigating barriers tied to incarceration, informal labor, and systemic exclusion.

Together, FFHC, EAT, and CWFA designed an action-driven strategy, blending community engagement, research, policy advocacy, and workforce development to address the Black male labor force participation crisis. This

project is not just about analyzing statistics — it is about centering the lived experiences of Black men and fathers, exposing the systemic barriers that block their economic progress, and demonstrating their resilience as one of their greatest assets. It is a call to drive meaningful policy changes and investments that lead to real, lasting economic transformation.

Understanding the historical roots of today's labor force crisis is essential to crafting solutions that go beyond surface-level fixes and instead confront the deep structural forces that have shaped Black men and fathers' economic realities for generations. The next section of this report traces the continuous thread of exclusionary and predatory policies and economic shifts — from the institution of slavery to present-day — to illustrate how systemic barriers have deliberately restricted Black men's access to stable employment and economic security. By reframing the narrative from one of individual shortcomings to one of structural inequities, we strive to challenge misconceptions, hold public and private institutions accountable, and advocate for policies that create real, lasting opportunities for Black men to thrive.



METHODOLOGY

EQUITY AND TRANSFORMATION (EAT)

This study employed a community-centered qualitative research design using focus group discussions to explore the lived experiences of Black formerly incarcerated men. Equity and Transformation (EAT) led this approach to surface authentic narratives and insights from unemployed, formerly incarcerated Black men in Chicago. The qualitative approach allowed for an in-depth understanding of participants' experiences, challenges, and perspectives in their own words, centering their voices and narratives within the research process.

Total EAT Participants 100	Age Range 21-69 (Average Age 41)
Identified as African American/Black 100%	Formerly Incarcerated 100%
Employment Status	
73%	Unemployed, actively seeking job
15%	Self-employed
5%	Unemployed, not actively seeking job
4%	Disabled
3%	Student

Participant Selection and Recruitment

A total of 100 Black formerly incarcerated men participated in this study. Eligibility was determined via a rolling application process — open throughout the entire ten-month study period — that collected information on participants' current employment status and key demographic characteristics. Each month, new applicants who met our inclusion criteria (Black/African American, unemployed, formerly incarcerated, at least 18 years old, and a resident of Chicago) were invited to join one of ten focus groups.

Prospective participants were provided with information about the research objectives, confidentiality measures, and the voluntary nature of participation. Written informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to the focus groups.

Data Collection

Data was collected through ten focus group discussions, with ten participants in each group. Each focus group session lasted approximately two hours and was facilitated by a Black, formerly incarcerated moderator whose shared background fostered trust, cultural understanding, and psychological safety among participants.

The focus groups were conducted in neutral community venues that were accessible, comfortable, and familiar to participants. A semi-structured interview guide was used to facilitate discussions, covering topics including:

- Reentry experiences and challenges
- Employment barriers and workforce experiences
- Housing access and stability
- Family reunification and relationships
- Interactions with systems (legal, healthcare, social services)
- Community engagement and support
- Personal growth and future aspirations

All focus group discussions were audio-recorded with participants' consent and later transcribed verbatim for analysis. Field notes were taken during each session to capture non-verbal cues, group dynamics, and contextual information. Each participant was compensated with \$200 for their time, expertise, and contributions.

Ethical Considerations

This research was conducted following rigorous

ethical standards. Key ethical considerations included:

- Obtaining informed consent from all participants
- Ensuring confidentiality using pseudonyms and removal of identifying information
- Acknowledging the sensitive nature of discussions and potential for emotional distress
- Providing resources for support services when needed
- Compensating participants with \$200 Visa gift cards for their time and expertise
- Emphasizing the voluntary nature of participation and the right to withdraw at any time

Data Analysis

The transcribed data was analyzed using thematic analysis, following these steps:

1. **Familiarization with the data:** The research team thoroughly reviewed all transcripts and field notes.
2. **Initial coding:** Transcripts were systematically coded using both inductive (emerging from the data) and deductive (guided by research questions) approaches. Coding was guided by the participants’ own language and experiences.
3. **Theme development:** Codes were grouped into potential themes and subthemes that captured important patterns in the data.
4. **Theme review and refinement:** Themes were reviewed for internal coherence and distinctiveness, with attention to potential connections between themes.
5. **Theme definition and naming:** Clear definitions and names were developed for each theme to capture its essence.
6. **Report production:** The final analysis was integrated into a comprehensive report, incorporating illustrative quotes from participants.

To enhance trustworthiness and rigor, several strategies were employed:

- **Multiple analysts:** EAT employed multiple analysts to review and code the data, allowing for diverse perspectives and interpretations.
- **Peer debriefing:** Regular team meetings were held to discuss emerging interpretations and address potential biases.
- **Audit trail:** Detailed documentation of all methodological decisions and analytical processes was maintained.

FATHERS, FAMILIES & HEALTHY COMMUNITIES (FFHC)

Total FFHC Participants	72
Age Range	17-58 (Average Age 33)
High School Graduate or GED	60%
Single Marital Status	>50%
Identified as African American/ Black	100%
Average Number of Children Per Father	2
Have Felony Conviction	72%

FFHC employed a restorative, community-centered approach to explore the labor market barriers, economic experiences, and aspirations of Black men and fathers living primarily on Chicago’s South and West sides. Between April and July 2024, FFHC facilitated a series of structured *Restorative Conversations* with approximately 72 Black men and fathers from diverse walks of life. Each participant engaged in two consecutive conversations within their assigned group, fostering deeper

dialogue, trust, and relationship-building. Following each session, the facilitation team conducted immediate debriefs to capture and synthesize emerging insights.



FFHC intentionally engaged a broad range of Black men, each offering valuable lived experience and unique perspectives shaped by their life journeys. Participants included young men (ages 18–30), fathers navigating the child-support system, men living with physical health conditions, military veterans, individuals with lived experience of housing insecurity, and those impacted by the criminal legal system.

Grounded in Restorative Justice principles, each circle was thoughtfully designed to cultivate a sacred, culturally affirming space. Sessions were led by trained Circle Keepers and began with grounding ceremonies that promoted collective healing and honored the dignity and presence of every participant. A traditional talking piece ensured that each individual had the opportunity to speak authentically and without interruption. Core values — such as speaking and listening with integrity, respecting each person’s truth, and upholding confidentiality — were clearly established at the outset of each gathering.

Dialogues were guided by carefully developed *North-Star* questions that invited participants to reflect on their employment experiences, economic aspirations, and personal definitions of success. Conversations surfaced critical

themes including systemic workforce barriers, participation in informal economies, shifting concepts of manhood, and the impact of financial instability on family life. Additional rounds highlighted participants’ talents, entrepreneurial visions, and practical strategies for achieving economic empowerment and generational change.

Emotional safety and mutual respect were central throughout the process. FFHC employed trauma-informed facilitation practices and built in time for real-time reflection through structured post-session debriefs. Each circle concluded with a check-out round and a culturally meaningful closing ceremony featuring inspirational readings and collective reflection.

In recognition of participants’ time, vulnerability, and contributions, FFHC provided each man with a total of \$210 in Visa gift cards (\$105 per session). Participants were also served healthy, nutrient-dense meals designed to address potential food insecurity and support overall well-being. In addition, they received thoughtfully curated gift boxes valued at \$150, which included hygiene kits (featuring lotion, body wash, and deodorant) and culturally relevant books focused on mental health and entrepreneurship — resources chosen to affirm their dignity, nurture their aspirations, and offer continued support beyond the conversations themselves.

Qualitative data were gathered through detailed note-taking by a designated scribe during each session. Facilitators completed standardized debrief forms within 24 hours to support timely thematic analysis. To further honor the spirit of care and connection, FFHC remained in touch with participants after the circles concluded — reinforcing its commitment to building trust and sustaining relationships beyond the bounds of research alone.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT & CONTINUITY: A LEGACY OF EXCLUSION AND RESILIENCE

The economic challenges Black men face today are not the result of a lack of work ethic or ambition, but rather the continuation of a long history of systemic exclusion and racialized economic policies (Hicks et al., 2021). From enslavement to present-day labor force disparities, Black men have consistently fought for economic opportunity and financial security, only to be met with policies and practices designed to limit their mobility. Despite these barriers, Black men and fathers have repeatedly demonstrated resilience, ingenuity, and a relentless commitment to securing a better future for themselves and their families. Their pursuit of economic opportunity has been met with obstruction, yet at every turn, they have built, rebuilt, and reimagined new ways to thrive.

FROM ENSLAVEMENT TO RECONSTRUCTION: BLACK MEN'S FIGHT FOR ECONOMIC AUTONOMY

The economic exploitation of Black men in America began with the institution of slavery, where they were forced into grueling labor that built America's wealth while being denied any opportunity to claim it for themselves (Equal Justice Initiative, 2023). Their status as property — not people — ensured that their labor enriched white landowners while keeping them in a state of enforced poverty. To reinforce this point,

even during the institution of slavery, the Three-Fifths Compromise³ remained a stark reminder that Black men were counted when politically convenient but denied the full rights of citizenship.

For Black fathers, this system was especially cruel, as they were stripped of their ability to protect, provide for, or even remain with their families (Hamer, 2001; Hilde, 2020; Perry & Johnson, Jr., 2017). Enslaved men were frequently separated from their children and partners through sales, punishments, or forced breeding practices, preventing them from forming stable family units (Hamer, 2001; Hilde, 2020).⁴ Those who remained with their families lived under the constant threat of being torn apart, yet many found ways to resist. They secretly taught their children survival skills, passed down cultural traditions, and fought, both physically and spiritually, to maintain their dignity despite the inhuman conditions imposed upon them (Hamer, 2001; Hilde, 2020).

With the end of the Civil War, the Reconstruction era (1865–1877) brought a brief period of hope, progress, and economic advancement for Black Americans (Du Bois, 1935; Foner, 2014, 2019). Black men, newly freed, seized the opportunity to build businesses, acquire land, and establish

3 The Three-Fifths Compromise was a provision in the U.S. Constitution (1787) that counted enslaved Black people as three-fifths of a person for congressional representation and taxation. This agreement gave slaveholding states more political power while denying enslaved Black people any rights or citizenship. It reinforced the dehumanization of enslaved Black people, reducing them to fractions of a person for political gain, ensuring that their labor fueled the economy without granting them participation in the nation they helped build. The compromise remained in effect until slavery was abolished by the 13th Amendment in 1865.

4 Partus sequitur ventrem, a colonial-era law, ensured that children of enslaved women were born into slavery, stripping enslaved Black fathers of any legal claim over their children. This doctrine erased Black fatherhood by denying them the ability to protect, provide for, or secure their children's freedom. Though slavery was abolished in 1865, the ideological remnants of this law persist in modern systems that disproportionately separate Black fathers from their children.



Picket line at Mid-City Realty Company, South Chicago, Illinois. July, 1941. John Vachon, Photographer. Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division, FSA/OWI Collection, LC-DIG-8b07376.

independent communities. Many Black fathers were able to provide stability for their families for the first time, securing property to pass down to future generations (Hamer, 2001). Black political leaders emerged, advocating for economic justice and securing legal rights that allowed Black men to enter new trades and professions.

However, this progress was met with swift and violent backlash (Equal Justice Initiative, 2020). White supremacist policies and terrorist organizations such as the Ku Klux Klan, White League, and Red Shirts sought to strip Black men of their newfound economic gains through voter suppression, intimidation, and racial violence (Keith, 2009; Madigan, 2021; Zucchini, 2021). The promise of land through policies like “40 acres and a mule” was revoked, and instead of being given the tools for self-sufficiency, Black men were pushed into sharecropping, a system designed to keep them in perpetual debt and economic dependence (Davis, 2023).

ECONOMIC EXCLUSION AND BLACK MEN'S RESILIENCE FROM JIM CROW SEGREGATION TO CIVIL RIGHTS

Segregation laws in the South and discriminatory hiring practices in the North ensured that Black men were overwhelmingly pushed into low-wage, unstable employment. Despite these systemic barriers, Black men — supported by the resilience and contributions of Black women (Greene, 2005)⁵ — fought back by building and sustaining their own economic institutions. Thriving Black business districts, such as the Greenwood community in Tulsa, Oklahoma, and the Hayti District in Durham, North Carolina — both known as “Black Wall Street” — stood as testaments to Black enterprise and economic ingenuity. These were just two of many Black enclaves that flourished during the Jim Crow era, where Black men established banks, hospitals, grocery stores,

⁵ The contributions of Black women to the economic and social progress of Black communities are profound, yet they have often been overlooked or erased from mainstream narratives. As business leaders, activists, and key figures in sustaining Black economic life, Black women worked alongside Black men, often taking on the dual burdens of racial and gender oppression while remaining the backbone of families and communities. We acknowledge this history and the valid concern that centering Black men in this report could be seen as perpetuating this historical oversight. However, the purpose of this report is to examine the specific systemic barriers Black men face in the labor market, and doing so requires a focused analysis. This does not diminish the role of Black women, nor does it ignore the ways in which their struggles and successes have been intertwined with those of Black men. Rather, it reflects the need for nuanced discussions that allow for deeper engagement with the unique challenges facing different segments of the Black community.

insurance companies, and transportation services. These businesses provided not only financial stability but also a foundation for collective advancement and self-sufficiency.

However, white supremacist backlash was swift and devastating. The 1921 Tulsa Massacre and similar attacks on prosperous Black communities were not just acts of racial terror but economic warfare, calculated efforts to erase Black prosperity and force Black men back into economic precarity (Bentley-Edwards et al., 2018).⁶ These violent assaults, often carried out with government complicity,⁷ destroyed generations of Black wealth and reinforced the systemic barriers that continue to shape economic disparities today (Darity and Mullen, 2020). These ongoing threats, coupled with racial violence and oppression, limited economic opportunities, political disenfranchisement, and natural disasters and economic hardship, pushed millions of Black families to leave the South in what became known as the *Great Migration* (Wilkerson, 2011).

The Great Migration forced millions of Black families to seek refuge in northern cities. During the Great Migration, between 1910 and 1970,

over six million Black Americans migrated north, with Chicago emerging as a major hub for industrial employment. By the late 19th century, Chicago's Black population was small but growing, as early migrants sought better opportunities. Economic pressures accelerated migration in the early 20th century, with the boll weevil infestation devastating Southern agriculture and World War I creating a labor shortage in the North. Chicago, with its booming industrial sector, became a prime destination, especially for Black southerners from Mississippi and Alabama. The Illinois Central Railroad provided a direct route, while *The Chicago Defender* spread stories of economic promise, describing Chicago as the "Promised Land" (Lemann, 1992; Michaeli, 2016).

Black men migrating to Chicago in search of economic opportunity faced deeply entrenched racial discrimination that shaped their employment prospects and financial stability. While the North lacked the formal Jim Crow laws of the South, segregation, redlining, and hiring discrimination created significant barriers to economic mobility. Although industrial jobs offered higher wages than agricultural labor in the South, Black men were often relegated to the

6 More than 100 white terror campaigns took place from the end of the Civil War to the 1940s, far surpassing the well-known Tulsa Race Massacre of 1921. These violent, white-initiated riots led to an enormous loss of Black life and the widespread destruction of Black-owned homes, businesses, and entire communities. Black property was often looted, seized, or forcibly devalued, with white perpetrators and local governments profiting from the displacement of Black residents. In many cases, Black landowners were illegally stripped of their property through fraudulent legal tactics, intimidation, and violence. These campaigns systematically robbed Black communities of generational wealth and economic independence while also stripping them of fundamental constitutional rights, including voting rights, due process, equal protection under the law, free speech, the right to assemble, freedom of the press, and the right to bear arms. Despite their far-reaching consequences, these events remain largely obscured in mainstream historical narratives, perpetuating the erasure of Black resilience and resistance.

7 All levels of government — local, state, and federal — have contributed to the racial wealth gap, but the federal government bears the greatest responsibility due to its broad authority and policymaking power. Through both direct actions and deliberate inaction, the federal government has systematically obstructed Black wealth-building. From failing to deliver land to formerly enslaved people after the Civil War to enacting exclusionary policies such as redlining and urban renewal, federal policies have actively dismantled Black economic progress. In many cases, the federal government either directly participated in racial terror or turned a blind eye, allowing white mobs to destroy generations of Black wealth without consequence. This long history of government complicity has entrenched economic disparities that persist today, underscoring that the racial wealth gap is not the result of individual shortcomings but of deeply rooted systemic injustices.

lowest-paying, most dangerous positions in steel mills, slaughterhouses, and rail yards, with little opportunity for advancement. Many were hired as strikebreakers, only to be discarded when white workers returned, reinforcing the cycle of economic instability.

For much of the 20th century, unions provided one of the few pathways to economic mobility for Black men in Chicago. In early manufacturing — from steel production and sleeper car assembly to candy and toy production — these jobs, although often more hazardous and lower-paying than those held by white workers, enabled many Black men to support their families and build modest financial security. However, deindustrialization hit Black neighborhoods the hardest, causing unionized jobs to vanish and pushing Black men further to the economic margins. Yet, just as Black workers were beginning to secure footholds in the industrial economy through hard-won union gains, a new wave of economic restructuring dismantled these opportunities, exacerbating the very inequalities that unions had begun to address.

Across the nation, systemic barriers had long restricted Black economic opportunities. Black workers were deliberately excluded from many labor unions, preventing access to the collective bargaining power that secured better wages and job security for white workers. The Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) in the 1940s, which sought to unionize workers regardless of race, marked a turning point, leading to increased unionization rates among Black workers (Bivens et al., 2023). However, these gains were limited, as broader discriminatory policies continued to undermine Black economic stability. Even in the North, economic advancement remained precarious for Black men, who were often the first to be laid off during economic downturns and denied access to stable jobs, homeownership,

and wealth-building opportunities. These systemic exclusions perpetuated cycles of economic insecurity that continue to shape the financial realities of Black men today.

Housing discrimination confined Black men and their families to the South Side, giving rise to Bronzeville's Black Metropolis, where Black businesses and institutions flourished despite systemic segregation (Drake & Cayton, Jr., 1945). However, the fragility of economic progress became painfully clear during the Red Summer of 1919, when white mobs, threatened by Black advancement, unleashed violent attacks in Chicago and across the country, destroying Black homes and businesses (McWhirter, 2012). Yet, Black Chicagoans demonstrated resilience, rebuilding their communities and continuing their pursuit of economic self-sufficiency despite persistent racial barriers.

Discriminatory housing policies such as redlining entrenched long-term economic disparities. By labeling predominantly Black neighborhoods as high-risk, financial institutions systematically denied home mortgages to Black homebuyers, reinforcing segregation and restricting opportunities for wealth accumulation (Katznelson, 2005). Racial covenants further prohibited Black families from purchasing homes in many areas, forcing Black men to navigate an unjust housing market while also contending with limited employment opportunities (Rothstein, 2017). Urban renewal projects — including highway construction through established Black communities — displaced families, dismantled thriving Black business districts, and further destabilized Black male economic agency. These policies created lasting housing inequities that continue to hinder economic mobility for Black men and their families today (Federal Reserve History, 2023).

Recognizing that economic disenfranchisement was deeply tied to racial injustice, the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s positioned economic justice as a central demand in the fight for civil rights. Leaders like Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and A. Philip Randolph fought for fair wages, employment protections, and equitable access to jobs (King, Jr., 1958, 1964, 1968). Black men and fathers led labor strikes, organized boycotts, and demanded economic self-sufficiency. The passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965 legally prohibited employment discrimination and opened doors to industries previously closed to Black workers.⁸

liberation efforts through organizational sabotage, extrajudicial actions, and mass incarceration (Hoerl, 2015). The subsequent declaration of the War on Crime in 1965 and the War on Drugs in 1971 further intensified policing practices and punitive policies that disproportionately targeted Black Americans (NACDL, 2022). These measures criminalized Black activism and everyday survival, laying the foundation for modern mass incarceration, systematically removing Black men from their families and communities, and deepening economic and social disparities (Alexander, 2012; Miller, 2022; Western, 2018; Western & Wildeman, 2009).

FROM CIVIL RIGHTS TO CARCERAL CONTROL: MASS INCARCERATION'S ECONOMIC GRIP ON BLACK MEN

As legal segregation ended, new economic and social barriers emerged, with racialized policing and mass incarceration further destabilizing Black communities (Alexander, 2012). Black Americans have faced disproportionately high incarceration rates for well over a century. As early as 1880, Black individuals were incarcerated at nearly twice the rate of their white counterparts (Pettit, 2022). The surge of mass incarceration in the 1960s and 1970s exacerbated these disparities; by the late 1960s, Black individuals were approximately seven times more likely to be incarcerated than white individuals (Pettit, 2022).

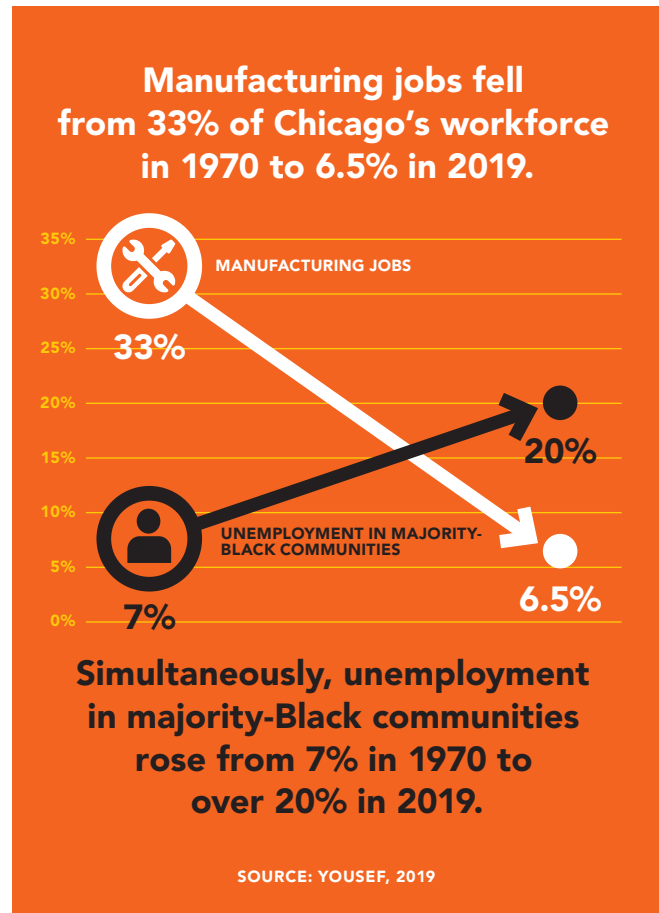
This escalation was not incidental but a direct response to the Civil Rights Movement (Hinton, 2016). Federal initiatives such as COINTELPRO in the late 1950s actively undermined Black



⁸ The Civil Rights Act of 1964 was not the first attempt to establish legal protections for Black Americans; it was the third major Civil Rights Act in U.S. history. The first, the Civil Rights Act of 1866, was passed during Reconstruction to grant citizenship and equal rights to formerly enslaved people, ensuring protections in contracts, property ownership, and legal proceedings. This was followed by the Civil Rights Act of 1875, which sought to prohibit racial discrimination in public accommodations, transportation, and jury service. However, the Supreme Court's ruling in *The Civil Rights Cases* (1883) declared the 1875 Act unconstitutional, paving the way for the rise of Jim Crow laws and state-sanctioned segregation.

The economic devastation that followed only deepened these systemic assaults on Black communities. As deindustrialization, globalization, and economic restructuring accelerated, the stable, unionized jobs that had once sustained Black families disappeared (W. Wilson, 1987; W. J. Wilson, 1996). In 1970, when manufacturing comprised nearly a third of the workforce, Black unemployment stood at just 7%, only slightly higher than in white communities. But as corporations chased cheap labor overseas and automation gutted factories, Black workers bore the brunt of the collapse. Manufacturing now accounts for just 6.5% of Chicago’s workforce, and in its wake, Black unemployment has soared past 20% (Yousef, 2019). This economic freefall was compounded by exclusionary housing policies, redlining, and the aggressive policing ushered in by the War on Crime and War on Drugs (Alexander, 2012). As stable jobs vanished, punitive policies swept Black men into the criminal justice system, systematically stripping them of employment opportunities, voting rights, and the ability to provide for their families upon release. The erosion of Black labor and the rise of mass incarceration were not isolated crises but interwoven mechanisms of racial and economic control — cementing cycles of poverty, criminalization, and exclusion that persist today.

The economic ramifications of these policies have been particularly devastating for Black men. Longstanding educational and occupational segregation — exacerbated by exclusion from unions, barriers to professional licensing, and racist housing policies — has systematically limited their access to stable, well-paying jobs. The erosion of legitimate labor market opportunities for Black men, particularly those with only a high school education, is starkly illustrated by the link between rising incarceration rates and declining job prospects. The collateral effects of mass incarceration ripple beyond those



directly affected — psychological trauma, legal restrictions on employment, housing, and education, and the loss of fathers, providers, and community leaders have all compounded economic instability in Black communities. In Illinois alone, more than 1,300 statutes continue to restrict the rights of formerly incarcerated individuals, making it even more difficult for Black men to rebuild their lives and achieve financial security (Buitrago, 2020).

Incarceration not only removes Black men from the workforce but also creates long-term economic disadvantages that extend well beyond their release. The stigma of a criminal record significantly diminishes employment prospects, as many employers refuse to hire formerly incarcerated individuals or limit them to low-wage, unstable work. Studies show that

Black men with criminal records are much less likely to receive job callbacks than their white counterparts with similar records, further compounding racial economic disparities (Pager, 2003, 2009; Quillian et al., 2017). Even among those who secure employment, wages remain suppressed, with formerly incarcerated individuals earning 40% less annually than their peers who have never been incarcerated (Western, 2018). These economic penalties accumulate over time, reducing lifetime earnings and preventing Black men from building intergenerational wealth.

The economic consequences of incarceration are particularly severe for Black fathers, compounding financial instability for both them and their families. For Black fathers with court-ordered child support, payments continue to accrue during incarceration, often resulting in overwhelming debt upon release (Haney, 2018). With limited income, many struggle to meet these obligations, leading to wage garnishments, license suspensions, and even re-incarceration for nonpayment, further entrenching cycles of poverty (Pate, Jr., 2016). The financial strain of incarceration extends beyond the individual, as many Black fathers rely on family members — particularly mothers, grandmothers, and partners — for financial support while they attempt to reenter the workforce.

The financial consequences of mass incarceration also extend to families and entire communities. The loss of income due to incarceration places significant economic strain on families, many of whom must navigate the costs of legal representation, prison visits, and court-related fines and fees (deVuono-powell et al., 2015). Black women, in particular, bear much of the financial burden, often supporting incarcerated partners, brothers, or sons while also maintaining household stability. Upon release, many formerly incarcerated Black

men struggle to provide for their families due to employment barriers and ongoing legal restrictions, perpetuating cycles of poverty and instability (Miller, 2022). Housing insecurity is another consequence, as returning citizens face discrimination in rental markets and are often barred from public housing (Boyd, Jr. & Oakley, 2020). Without stable employment and housing, recidivism rates increase, reinforcing the cycle of incarceration and economic disenfranchisement.

The economic struggles Black men face today are not isolated incidents but the consequence of a long history of systemic exclusion, economic exploitation, racial violence, and deliberate policy decisions that have undermined their ability to thrive. Yet, history also tells a story of resilience — of Black men who have defied the odds, created economic opportunities despite systemic barriers, and remained steadfast in their pursuit of financial security and generational wealth. The next section of this report turns to the lived experiences of Black men who have navigated these challenges firsthand. Their stories illuminate the realities behind the statistics, offering a deeper understanding of how historical injustices have evolved into new forms of racial and economic oppression that continue to shape their prospects today, while also revealing the strategies they employ to push forward in the face of adversity.

FINDINGS

The following findings lay bare the economic realities confronting Black men — realities shaped by systemic exclusion yet met with unwavering resilience. Their voices expose the deep and far-reaching consequences of economic marginalization, from persistent barriers to employment and wealth-building to the hidden costs of exclusion that strain families, erode trust in institutions, and perpetuate financial instability. Yet, these men are not merely enduring — they are forging new pathways, turning to entrepreneurship, leveraging informal economies, and applying hard-earned skills to carve out opportunities where none formally exist. Their stories are both an indictment of structural inequities and a testament to the untapped potential stifled by these barriers. This section invites you to read closely, to truly hear their voices, and to understand that dismantling these systemic barriers is not just a matter of justice, but of unleashing the vast potential that remains too often hidden and unrecognized.

SYSTEMIC ROADBLOCKS TO ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY

Racism and Discrimination

Racial discrimination isn't limited to access to employment; it also manifests in wage differentials that devalue the work of Black men. Even when participants managed to secure jobs, the wages offered were lower than those given to their non-Black counterparts. One participant expressed, *"They might be making \$20 an hour, but we [formerly incarcerated people] are making \$16."* This disparity not only reduces immediate earning potential but also reinforces a broader system that undervalues Black labor.

It has been over two decades since University of Chicago researchers demonstrated that white

applicants were 50% more likely to be invited for interviews than Black applicants with equivalent qualifications (Bertrand, 2004). More recent investigations, including a 2024 study that controlled for industry and career levels, revealed that discrimination is most pronounced in entry-level positions — with a 26% hiring preference for white men over Black applicants — while the gap narrows at senior levels (Kline et al., 2024). Some participants reported perceptions that certain companies consistently hired more non-Black workers than Black applicants and that non-Black employees were more frequently offered overtime opportunities. Participants have reported a range of responses to racist discrimination, from dismissing it as an unfortunate but inevitable reality to pursuing legal actions against employers. Those who minimized these experiences acknowledged them as racist yet ultimately regarded racist discrimination as an unfortunate fact of life as a Black man. One participant summed it up succinctly, *"Racial discrimination is the norm."* Others who took more extreme measures, filing lawsuits or escalations through HR, were typically disappointed with the outcomes, with some being fired or transferred following such actions.



It's difficult to motivate yourself to get another job that's going to let you go after a few weeks. I might as well go back to what I know."

Discrimination based on criminal records poses a major barrier to employment and career growth. Many participants shared stories of being offered a job or even starting work, only to have

their positions rescinded after a background check uncovered a criminal history. This type of discrimination is hardly masked and hard to ignore, with many individuals experiencing termination or exclusion from jobs as soon as their background is revealed. One participant shared, *“It’s difficult to motivate yourself to get another job that’s going to let you go after a few weeks. I might as well go back to what I know.”* In this context, the participant is referring to the informal economy — the network of side hustles, temporary gigs, and off-the-books work that many have come to rely on after being pushed out of formal employment. As Nik Theodore explains in the *Survival Economies Report*, many Chicagoans, especially in areas hit hard by deindustrialization and chronic unemployment, have turned to these survival economies as a means of making ends meet (Theodore, 2019).



I had a security job that I was referred to by a friend. They worked me like a slave for two days, on three events, thirty hours total. After that, they wouldn’t give me any shifts. When I called, they told me they wouldn’t hire me because of my background.”

These experiences were not isolated. Numerous participants from every focus group, all from various industries, with different levels of work experience and education, reported similar challenges. One participant explained, *“I was driving trucks for 25 years before I was incarcerated. Now when I apply for driving jobs, I don’t hear back.”* Another recounted a security job experience, *“I had a security job that I was referred to by a friend. They worked me like a slave for two days,*

on three events, thirty hours total. After that, they wouldn’t give me any shifts. When I called, they told me they wouldn’t hire me because of my background.” These accounts illustrate how legal discrimination based on criminal records not only nullifies past work experience but also creates a lasting barrier to career advancement, perpetuating economic marginalization.

Impact of Public Systems

Unemployed Black men in Chicago overwhelmingly report that public systems and services intended to support them — such as workforce development programs, re-entry services, and child support enforcement — often fall short of meeting their economic needs. Rather than easing their economic precarity, these services are frequently seen as inadequate or even counter-productive. Many Black residents in Chicago rely heavily on public services for essential needs like education, healthcare, housing, transportation, and emergency support. Yet, despite their critical importance, these systems have long been criticized for inefficiencies in mitigating the barriers to economic advancement faced by poor people (McKernan, et al., 2021).

Participants in our study expressed significant disappointment with the specialized public services designed to promote economic stability. They noted challenges in accessing consistent, high-quality support and described a lack of clear understanding of how to navigate these services effectively. This, in turn, has fostered a deep distrust in the very programs meant to provide a safety net. The men in our focus group have utilized public transportation, lived in public housing, and attended public schools. Given the fundamental role of these public systems in our participants’ lives, it is worth taking some time to understand what, if any, role these systems have had on their ability to secure stable employment at a livable wage.

A critical shortcoming of post-incarceration workforce reintegration is the lack of transferable certifications. Many credentials that post-incarcerated Black men receive are not recognized by formal employers, effectively barring them from reclaiming the very jobs they performed while incarcerated. Participants reported denied opportunities despite having extensive practical experience. Moreover, the valuable skills acquired through informal work — often honed over years in community settings or even during incarceration — are dismissed by formal employers. One participant explained, *“I learned carpentry from my uncle and have been doing that since I was a teenager, but no company recognizes that without certificates.”* This disconnect between informal skill acquisition and formal employment requirements not only undermines the value of lived experience but also traps these individuals in a cycle of economic disenfranchisement.



I learned carpentry from my uncle and have been doing that since I was a teenager, but no company recognizes that without certificates.”

Strict child support enforcement further undermines the financial stability of unemployed Black men. Participants detailed how these policies — designed to secure child welfare — often impose punitive financial obligations on fathers who are already struggling to secure stable employment. The burden of mandatory payments leaves little room for economic advancement, as it reduces the resources available for investing in further training or even relocating for better opportunities. Additionally, many participants report that the inability to consistently meet these financial

obligations takes a significant mental toll, diminishing their self-worth and exacerbating feelings of failure and isolation. Participants burdened with child support debt or unreasonably high court-ordered payments often experience intense stress and emotional turmoil, grappling with feelings of helplessness, anxiety, and depression as they struggle to meet financial obligations while maintaining a meaningful presence in their children’s lives (Edin et al., 2019; Hahn et al., 2019).

Place-Based Discrimination

Participants unanimously described how long-standing disinvestment and racial segregation have confined predominantly Black neighborhoods to the margins of economic opportunity. Research has documented that Black neighborhoods have been systemically disinvested in due to policies such as redlining and discriminatory lending practices, which have stripped these communities of essential resources (Egede, et al., 2023). Growing up in areas that have suffered from systemic neglect is yet another challenge Black men face. Many communities lack the resources and infrastructure that facilitate economic mobility. This segregation not only limits local job prospects but also contributes to a broader pattern of economic isolation, making it difficult for residents to secure well-paying, sustainable employment within their communities.

Inadequate public transportation and discriminatory zoning practices have compounded the challenges of accessing quality jobs. Many participants reported that they have either quit, foregone, or been forced to leave jobs due to excessively long or costly commutes. When comparing employment opportunities, they noted that similar work found outside of Chicago typically offers better compensation and benefits — a discrepancy linked to how public



transportation systems and zoning regulations in Chicago create practical barriers to employment. These limitations restrict not only immediate job access but also long-term career advancement, perpetuating economic inequality for those living in historically marginalized areas.

STRUCTURAL INEQUITIES IN THE WORKFORCE

Occupational Segregation

When asked what kinds of jobs they have applied for, participants frequently mentioned roles in warehouse operations, low-wage factory settings, retail stocking, fast food, and delivery driving. These positions are typically part-time, often lack benefits, and seldom offer prospects for

upward mobility. Many participants expressed that they felt overqualified for these roles; however, the options available to them were frequently influenced by recommendations from career services, urgent hiring needs, or personal connections that channeled them into these types of employment opportunities. The funneling of Black men into low-wage, low-mobility jobs — despite their qualifications and aspirations — reflects a broader pattern of labor market discrimination that systematically excludes them from higher-paying opportunities (Hamilton et al., 2011). This persistent racial sorting is not driven by differences in skills or occupational interests but by structural barriers and discriminatory hiring practices that sustain the

racial earnings gap between Black and white men, ultimately reinforcing economic disparities within Black families and communities (Rodgers, 2019).

Historically marginalized communities not only face economic constraints but also see the undervaluation of the practical skills developed through informal work — a dynamic that contributes to the concentration of Black men in low-wage, low-growth roles. Many of the men in our study were born and raised in historically marginalized neighborhoods characterized by food insecurity, underfunded schools, and the adverse impacts of the War on Drugs. Communities such as West Garfield Park, Austin, Englewood, South Shore, and North Lawndale are all marked by high rates of poverty, a predominance of rental housing, and low-wage employment. These conditions have forced many Black men to build their informal networks to leverage for their personal and economic development.

When participants were asked to identify their marketable skills, many participants fell silent, reflecting an uncertainty about their formal qualifications. In response, the facilitator — himself a formerly incarcerated Black man — stepped in to share his personal experience. He illustrated that although much of his work had been outside the bounds of formal employment — and sometimes even criminalized — these experiences had nonetheless equipped him with a wide range of valuable skills that may not be acknowledged in formal employment settings. This lack of acknowledgment of informal skills further excludes Black men from accessing high-paying roles with opportunities for career mobility.

Workplace Fit and Culture

Our participants described the challenges of adapting to formal workplace environments

that are often designed to exclude them. For formerly incarcerated Black men, these challenges are compounded by inadequate reentry support, entrenched employer biases, and exclusionary hiring practices that severely hinder their ability to secure and maintain formal employment. Many participants recounted being dismissed for not being a “cultural fit” — a term that served as a thinly veiled form of discrimination — typically following background checks or conflicts with managers. Such incidents expose the structural barriers that block their integration into formal work environments and reinforce feelings of marginalization and uncertainty about career advancement.

Many participants emphasized that the absence of established professional networks leaves them isolated, depriving them of the mentorship and sponsorship essential for career growth. Without access to these critical connections, Black men struggle to navigate workplace politics, develop necessary soft skills, and identify pathways to higher-paying roles. Several participants expressed doubts about their ability to thrive in formal work settings — stemming either from limited prior exposure or negative experiences, including overt or subtle discrimination. This isolation, coupled with a lack of support systems, reinforces the structural barriers that prevent equitable economic participation.

THE HIDDEN COSTS OF ECONOMIC MARGINALIZATION

Focus group participants highlighted the profound yet often overlooked costs of economic marginalization, describing its deep impact on their economic, emotional, and social well-being, as well as on their families and communities. Their experiences reveal three interrelated themes: Income Instability and Emotional Stress; Financial Instability, Family Strain, and the Cycle of Poverty; and Institutional Betrayal.

Income Instability and Emotional Stress

Chronic financial insecurity driven by unstable employment, low wages, and precarious job conditions — places a significant emotional and psychological burden on Black men and fathers (Williams & Collins, 2016). Many participants described the daily stress of uncertain income, where financial instability not only impacts their ability to meet basic needs but also takes a toll on their mental and emotional well-being. As one participant shared, *“It’s stressful. I’m not always guaranteed to get work. So, bills aren’t always guaranteed to get paid on time.”*

The weight of economic precarity extends far beyond material hardship, contributing to heightened anxiety, depression, and diminished self-worth (Brown & Bell, 2021). Several fathers spoke of the deep frustration and shame they experience when unable to provide for their children, reinforcing internalized feelings of inadequacy. One participant expressed this emotional toll, stating, *“When you have to tell your kids no because you don’t have [money], it’s like saying ‘I’m not a man.’”* The inability to fulfill traditional provider roles — due to factors beyond their control — creates a profound sense of distress, further exacerbating mental and emotional struggles.



When I can’t take my lady out to eat, when I can’t buy diapers for my kids... I feel inadequate.”

Beyond personal hardship, participants highlighted how income instability limits long-term financial security, making it difficult to plan for the future or pursue opportunities for economic advancement. Many described

being funneled into low-wage, temporary jobs that offer little stability or upward mobility. For those with criminal records, these challenges are compounded by hiring discrimination and background checks that severely restrict job prospects.

Ultimately, the intersection of economic insecurity and emotional distress reinforces a cycle of hardship that extends beyond the individual, affecting families and entire communities. The persistent struggle to secure stable, dignified employment not only perpetuates financial instability but also erodes mental well-being, underscoring the urgent need for systemic change that acknowledges and addresses both the economic and emotional costs of marginalization.

Financial Instability, Family Strain, and the Cycle of Poverty

Economic instability not only limits Black fathers’ ability to provide for their families but also disrupts their relationships with co-parents and partners, as traditional expectations of financial provision remain deeply ingrained. Many fathers in our study described how their inability to live up to the breadwinner role created conflict, resentment, and emotional distance within their relationships. The frustration of not being able to contribute financially often led to tensions with co-parents, who, in turn, had to shoulder a disproportionate share of economic responsibility. One participant expressed his distress, sharing, *“When I can’t take my lady out to eat, when I can’t buy diapers for my kids... I feel inadequate.”* These financial struggles frequently translated into strained communication, with some fathers feeling dismissed or disrespected when they were unable to meet financial expectations. As another participant put it, *“They lose respect for you.”*

For many fathers, this economic disempowerment extended beyond financial strain — it challenged their identity as men and providers, making it harder to maintain stable, supportive relationships. Some described how economic hardship led to emotional withdrawal or avoidance, as ongoing financial stress made them feel unwelcome in their own families. Others spoke about how these tensions reinforced stereotypes of Black fathers as absent or disengaged, despite their desire to be present for their children. The structural barriers to economic stability — discriminatory hiring practices, limited job opportunities, and the burden of child support debt — exacerbated these challenges, making it difficult for Black fathers to fulfill their role in the ways society expects. As a result, economic marginalization not only deepened financial hardship but also weakened family bonds, perpetuating cycles of poverty and relational instability across generations.

Institutional Betrayal

Many participants expressed a deep sense of disillusionment with public and private institutions designed to support economic stability, describing how workforce programs, public assistance, and employment systems have repeatedly failed them. Instead of offering meaningful pathways to financial security, these institutions often reinforce cycles of exclusion, leaving Black men feeling deceived and abandoned. One participant shared his frustration after encountering discriminatory hiring practices despite securing a job: *“I had a security job... they worked me like a slave for two days... After that, they wouldn’t give me any more shifts. When I called, they told me they wouldn’t hire me because of my background.”* His experience reflects a broader reality — research shows that employer discrimination against individuals with criminal records significantly limits employment opportunities, further

exacerbating economic vulnerability and increasing the risk of recidivism (Pager, 2009; Western, 2018)

Ultimately, institutional betrayal does more than deepen economic insecurity — it reinforces a cycle of systemic exclusion that stretches across generations. For many Black men, the failure of public institutions is not an isolated event but a lifelong reality, eroding trust and reaffirming the belief that these systems were never meant to serve them. From childhood to adulthood, they navigate schools that push them out, courts that criminalize survival, workforce programs that offer false hope, and employers who see their past rather than their potential. The persistent denial of economic opportunity is not just a policy failure; it is an intentional design of a system that profits from Black economic exclusion. Without bold, systemic reforms that acknowledge and address these structural injustices, Black men will remain locked out of the very opportunities that define financial security and mobility. The cost of inaction is not just continued economic hardship; it is the deliberate erosion of hope, dignity, and the right to build a future free from systemic barriers.

FORGING NEW ECONOMIC PATHWAYS

Entrepreneurship as a Tool for Economic Independence

For many focus group participants, entrepreneurship represents a way to circumvent the systemic discrimination they have faced in traditional employment settings. Background checks, employer biases, and a lack of upward mobility in low-wage jobs have led many Black men to seek economic opportunities where they can control their own income and professional trajectory. One participant articulated this frustration, stating, *“I want to own my business so I can’t be fired.”* Others echoed similar

sentiments, viewing entrepreneurship as a way to reclaim agency over their financial futures.

The men in our study identified a wide range of entrepreneurial aspirations, spanning industries such as construction, real estate, trucking, music production, auto repair, fashion, and food services. These industries not only reflect personal passions but also highlight a desire to build businesses that serve their communities. From owning auto shops and restaurants to starting nonprofit organizations and mentoring youth, participants envisioned businesses that would generate income while fostering social impact.

Strength in Informal Economic Networks

Participants described how engaging in informal economic activities — such as peer-to-peer exchanges, barter systems, and independent trade work — has become an essential strategy for generating income and building financial resilience. The informal economy, defined by economic pursuits that are not regulated or protected by the state, provides flexible opportunities that often arise through personal networks of friends and family. As Nik Theodore (2019) explains in his *Survival Economies Report*, “stubbornly high unemployment rates, especially in South Side and West Side communities, have pushed many Chicagoans into the informal economy. Living in neighborhoods that have been hollowed out by deindustrialization, inadequate investment, and economic development programs delivering too few jobs and business opportunities, many residents have turned to the informal economy to make ends meet.” Many men in our study emphasized that the informal sector, including roles in construction, delivery driving, and various trade skills, can offer higher daily earnings compared to traditional formal jobs. One participant remarked, “*I make more in a day doing carpentry on my own than I would in a*

week at a retail job.” Another shared, “*Before I got incarcerated, I was a diesel mechanic working for JB Hunt. I was making \$22 an hour. It was a good job, but the streets called with a better offer.*” This ability to secure immediate income, despite the lack of benefits or job security, highlights the innovative ways in which these men adapt to an economy that often excludes them.

Despite facing systemic exclusion from formal employment opportunities, participants demonstrated that robust informal networks can form the backbone of community survival and support. These networks thrive by leveraging shared experiences and mutual assistance, creating ecosystems where skills and resources are exchanged freely. However, challenges persist with the informal work, most notably the income inconsistency. One participant explained, “*The money is good when it’s there, but some months are lean and the bills pile up.*” This cycle of variability underscores the strain on personal and family financial stability, yet it also reinforces the critical role of informal networks as a safety net. In these community-based systems, Black men find not only economic sustenance but also the social support needed to navigate an economy that continuously undermines their formal participation.

Transferable Skills and Adaptive Expertise

Focus group participants described how they are increasingly applying transferable skills gained from both formal and informal experiences to create economic opportunities outside of traditional employment. Many shared that they had developed expertise in areas such as construction, auto repair, logistics, food services, and creative industries — not through formal education or certification programs but through hands-on experience, mentorship, and necessity. Despite possessing marketable skills, participants explained that traditional hiring

processes often overlooked their abilities, prioritizing credentials over demonstrated expertise. In response, many turned to self-employment, gig work, and entrepreneurship as more viable and sustainable paths to financial independence. By leveraging skills in problem-solving, adaptability, craftsmanship, and leadership, they are creating their own economic opportunities — whether through independent contracting, small business ownership, or side hustles that provide a more reliable income stream than low-wage jobs with little stability.

Beyond direct job skills, participants emphasized the importance of social and economic capital in sustaining alternative career pathways. Many described how networking, negotiation, and self-promotion were critical to securing work outside of traditional employment settings. Some shared how they had built side businesses, offering services such as auto repairs, carpentry, and landscaping, while others used skills in

artistry, music production, and fashion design to generate income. Many participants spoke about the interconnected nature of their skill sets, where abilities gained in one area could be applied across different industries — such as project management from construction translating into entrepreneurial ventures or communication skills developed in informal work helping with business negotiation. Several also expressed a strong desire to mentor younger generations, ensuring that trade skills, business knowledge, and financial literacy were passed down within the community. While participants demonstrated resilience in leveraging their skills outside of conventional career pathways, they also underscored the need for greater recognition of transferable skills in workforce development programs, business investment, and alternative hiring models that acknowledge experience beyond formal credentials.



CONCLUSION: A CALL FOR BOLD AND TRANSFORMATIVE ACTION

Chicago's economic landscape tells a story of both injustice and resilience. Black men, who have played a central role in shaping the city's history and culture, continue to be systematically excluded from the economic opportunities they helped build. The labor force crisis facing Black men today is not the result of individual failures but of deliberate policies, structural racism, and economic neglect that have constrained their mobility for generations.

This report is more than a documentation of hardship; it is a demand for action and a call for justice. The findings make clear that Black men are not simply passive victims of economic exclusion but active agents of resilience and innovation. Whether through entrepreneurship, informal economies, or skill-building outside of traditional pathways, they continue to forge their own economic futures despite the barriers that stand in their way. However, resilience alone cannot dismantle structural inequities. It is time for institutions, policymakers, and society at large to meet their determination with the systemic change they deserve.

The policy recommendations laid out in this report provide a roadmap to economic justice — one that prioritizes wealth redistribution, workforce development, fatherhood support, investment in Black entrepreneurship, and more. These are not abstract ideas; they are real, evidence-based solutions rooted in the lived experiences of Black men and fathers. Implementing these policies is not just a matter of fairness — it is an economic imperative for Chicago and the nation as a whole.

For too long, the exclusion of Black men has been treated as an inevitable reality rather than a systemic failure that must be corrected. Ignoring this crisis is not an option. Failing to act will not only perpetuate generational poverty and economic instability but will deepen racial and social divides that threaten the city's long-term prosperity. This moment demands bold and transformative action — not small reforms, but a fundamental restructuring of the economic systems that have failed Black men for far too long. It is time to move beyond performative commitments and toward real investment, accountability, and systemic change. Black men have waited long enough.

The question is no longer whether change is needed — it is whether Chicago, its leaders, and its institutions have the courage to finally deliver the justice and opportunity that Black men have been denied for generations. **This is not just a moral or political obligation; it is an undeniable demand for justice. To delay is to uphold an inherently flawed system, to hesitate is to perpetuate harm. The fight for equity is not optional — it is a defining test of our integrity, our will, and our commitment to a future where justice is not promised but delivered. The era of half-measures is over. The time to act is now.**

ACTIONABLE INSIGHTS & POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

As the nation increasingly shifts toward colorblind and merit-based policies, the systemic barriers that have long denied Black men access to economic opportunity remain largely unaddressed. Despite overwhelming evidence that racial injustice continues to shape employment, wealth accumulation, and economic mobility, current policy trends dismiss the need for targeted interventions. The false promise of race-neutral solutions ignores the historical and structural realities that have kept Black men on the margins of the economy.

This report challenges that approach by putting forth a comprehensive set of recommendations that center racial equity as a necessary condition for economic justice. The strategies outlined in the following section do not call for preferential treatment but rather for a long-overdue correction of structural disadvantages that have hindered Black men’s financial stability and wealth-building for generations. Addressing these disparities requires bold, targeted investments that go beyond symbolic reforms and directly dismantle the policies and practices that sustain economic exclusion.

The following recommendations provide a clear roadmap for philanthropists, policymakers, elected officials, researchers, nonprofit leaders, and community members committed to meaningful change. These solutions — including wealth redistribution, public budget realignment, workforce development, expanded fatherhood programs, education access, entrepreneurship support, and more — are grounded in both research and the lived experiences of Black men.

Ignoring race in policymaking will not close racial gaps in employment, income, or wealth. Only by recognizing and confronting these inequities directly can we create an economic system that is equitable, fair and just. The time for incremental progress has passed. What is needed now is a decisive commitment to economic transformation — one that ensures Black men are not merely participants in the economy but leaders, innovators, and architects of their own financial futures.



1. WEALTH REDISTRIBUTION POLICIES FOR BLACK MEN

A. Reparations: Develop a comprehensive reparations program centered on eliminating the racial wealth gap between Black and white Americans as its chief aim. This proposal should be guided by the United Nations’ five pillars of reparations (i.e., compensation, restitution, rehabilitation, guarantees of non-repetition, and satisfaction) to directly address the historical and present-day injustices and economic harms caused by slavery and the enduring effects of systemic racism. It should prioritize wealth-building strategies such as direct financial compensation, land and asset transfers, education and business investment, alongside the development of an educational and instructional component to document, preserve, and communicate America’s history of racial injustice and the conditions that led to the adoption of a reparations program. By

doing so, the program can serve as both a corrective and preventive measure, ensuring pathways to economic justice and long-term prosperity for Black communities, assuming no new atrocities occur.

B. Guaranteed Income for System-Impacted Black Men: Implement guaranteed income (GI) targeting system-impacted Black men to support their ability to meet basic and family needs while building savings. GI programs should not affect recipients' eligibility to receive other necessary public aid (TNAF, SNAP, Section 8, Medicaid, etc.). Payments should be handled by community organizations that will also be able to play a role in connecting recipients with vital resources and encouraging involvement in community programming.

C. Baby Bonds for Black Children: Establish government (state and local) and philanthropic-funded savings accounts for Black children that grow over time, helping their families build generational wealth.

D. Progressive Tax Credits for Black Families: Offer tax credits directly benefiting low- and middle-income Black men, especially fathers (i.e., childless Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC) and a noncustodial parent EITC).

E. Shared Equity Housing Models: Shared equity housing models, such as community land trusts (CLTs), provide Black men with affordable homeownership opportunities by reducing upfront costs, stabilizing long-term housing expenses, and enabling wealth-building through equity growth, community investment, and generational wealth transfer.

F. Real Estate Investment Co-Ops: Real estate investment co-ops enable Black men to collectively invest in and manage properties, building wealth through shared ownership, rental income, property appreciation, and reduced individual financial risk.



2. REDESIGNING PUBLIC BUDGETS TO SUPPORT BLACK MEN AND DRIVE EQUITY

A. Shifting Funds Toward Preventive Solutions: Redirect government spending from punitive systems like incarceration to preventive programs that uplift Black men. Prioritize initiatives such as culturally relevant behavioral health services, legal aid services, fatherhood programs that strengthen families, and holistic reentry initiatives. These measures address root causes and foster resilience, self-sufficiency, and healthier communities. Community budget hearings, where system-impacted residents receive incentives for participation, should guide the development of solutions.

B. Expanding Resources for Reentry Support: Increase funding for reentry programs tailored to the unique needs of system-impacted Black men. These programs should include transitional housing, vocational and entrepreneurship training, and small business grants to create sustainable economic

opportunities and facilitate reintegration into society. These programs should be provided by community organizations run by and for system-impacted people.



3. INVEST IN FATHERHOOD PROGRAMS TO EMPOWER AND STRENGTHEN FAMILIES

A. Trauma-Informed System of Care for Fathers: Invest in fatherhood programs that adopt a trauma-informed approach, recognizing and addressing the unique emotional, psychological, and relational challenges that many fathers — particularly those impacted by systemic oppression and adverse life experiences — face. These programs should focus on promoting healing and well-being through services such as conflict resolution, effective communication, co-parenting support, mental health counseling, and nutrition education, all delivered within a culturally responsive framework.

B. Culturally Responsive Fatherhood Programs: Invest in fatherhood programs designed to affirm the cultural heritage, strengths, and resilience of Black families. These programs foster greater self-confidence, self-love, and self-assurance in fathers by creating supportive spaces where their experiences and contributions are valued. Through culturally tailored mentorship, parenting education, leadership development, and healing-centered practices, fathers are equipped to grow and thrive, unlocking their full potential. As fathers gain a stronger sense of self-worth and empowerment, they are better positioned to lead, protect, and nurture their families. This positively impacts their children, who benefit from greater emotional security, role modeling, and family stability. Communities, in turn, become stronger and more resilient as engaged fathers contribute to a cycle of care, leadership, and generational success. Investing in these programs is essential to advancing equity and creating sustainable pathways for family and community well-being.

C. Supporting System-Impacted Fathers Through Reintegration Programs: Expand fatherhood programs to provide targeted support for fathers before, during, and after incarceration, recognizing that strong family connections are essential to personal growth, healing, and successful reintegration. These services could begin six to nine months prior to release, offering transition planning and skill-building, and extend into the community post-release to provide ongoing resources for stability. Fathers with recent criminal justice histories could also benefit from these programs as they work to rebuild their lives and strengthen their roles within their families. Key services could include parenting and relationship education, financial literacy, domestic violence screening and support, mentoring, and opportunities for child-parent visits and family engagement activities. Comprehensive case management could assist fathers in securing employment, modifying child support obligations, finding stable housing, and accessing mental health or substance abuse treatment. These programs could transform the lives of justice-involved fathers by helping them address critical needs, strengthen their family relationships, and build the stability necessary to thrive. By reducing the risks of recidivism, enhancing emotional well-being, and fostering long-term family and economic success, these investments could have lasting impacts on both families and communities.

D. Meeting Fathers' Basic Needs: Fathers are at their strongest when their basic needs are met, yet many face daily hardships like food insecurity and limited access to personal care resources. These unmet needs do more than create material hardships; they compound stress, erode mental health, and undermine fathers' ability to be fully present for themselves and their families. Programs that provide essentials such as nutritious meals, take-home food kits, and personal care items help alleviate these pressures, restoring fathers' capacity to focus on their emotional well-being, personal development, and nurturing roles. By addressing these foundational needs, we empower fathers to thrive as caregivers and leaders, creating stronger, more resilient families and communities. Investing in these supports is an investment in long-term stability, generational growth, and collective well-being.

E. Integrate Childcare Services into Fatherhood Programs: Childcare plays a critical role in ensuring fathers can fully participate in programs designed to support their growth as engaged parents and providers. Fathers who take on significant daily caregiving responsibilities often face barriers to program attendance when adequate childcare is unavailable. This lack of access hinders their ability to develop vital parenting, relationships, and life skills. Integrating childcare services directly into fatherhood programs eliminates this obstacle by providing consistent, high-quality care for children. Establishing strong partnerships between fatherhood organizations and early childhood education programs can offer reliable, developmentally appropriate childcare that supports both the child's growth and the father's active participation. These supports not only enable fathers to focus on their own development but also nurture stronger father-child relationships, fostering long-term family stability and generational success. Investing in these services is a crucial step toward empowering fathers and building resilient, thriving communities.



4. WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT AND CAREER ADVANCEMENT FOR BLACK MEN

A. Targeted Job Training in High-Growth Industries: Fund programs that provide job training and certification opportunities tailored to Black men in high-growth industries such as STEM (science, technology, engineering, mathematics), healthcare, advanced manufacturing, and green, clean, and renewable energy. Include essential wraparound supports like childcare, transportation assistance, and personal care items (i.e., soap, toothpaste, toothbrushes, deodorant) to remove common barriers that prevent consistent participation and completion of training programs.

B. Fair Employment Practices: Enforce and strengthen anti-discrimination laws to ensure Black men receive equal pay and promotion opportunities. Increase oversight to address the racial wage gap and encourage employers to adopt transparent and equitable hiring practices.

C. Pathways to Full-time Employment: Build pathways to full-time employment in salaried and insured roles with private-sector employers who fulfill contracts for food service, construction, healthcare, and education inside prisons. Businesses that have contracts with prisons (especially

those that rely on prison labor for key elements of their business model) should have streamlined processes for returning citizens in search of full-time employment. This includes paid training and certifications to foster success in their respective field.

D. Trade Union Apprenticeship: Establish collaborations between labor unions, prison officials, and training providers to ensure that certifications and training done while in prison are transferable to employment opportunities upon release. It would behoove unions, which are struggling to recruit new skilled trade workers, to explore opportunities to expand their apprenticeship programs behind the wall. Pre-apprenticeship programs offered inside prisons should allow a clear pathway to trade union apprenticeship upon release. Equally important, strengthen pathways to unionization through existing pre-apprenticeship programs at community organizations.

E. Federal Labor Protections Expansion: Expand existing labor statutes to include protections for prison workers, enabling them to unionize. Prison laborers are forced to work in harsh conditions for little to no pay under the guise of punishment for a crime. Many of the jobs that prisoners perform can be afforded protection under existing workers' unions such as AFSCME and AFL-CIO. Union membership would ease re-entry by giving returning citizens access to the many benefits provided to union workers (job placement, financial assistance, union stewardship, etc.).



5. EDUCATION AND SKILL-BUILDING OPPORTUNITIES FOR BLACK MEN

A. Debt-Free Education for Black Men: Offer scholarships and grants specifically for Black men to pursue higher education, trade certifications, or apprenticeships.

B. Mentorship Programs: Support existing mentorship networks that pair young Black men with successful Black professionals to build skills and social capital. Prioritize funding programs run by and for system-impacted Black men.

C. STEM, HEAL, Green, Clean, and Renewable Energy Access for Black Men: Develop programs that prepare and support Black men to enter and thrive in STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics), HEAL (health, education, administration, and literacy), green, clean, and renewable energy fields, with dedicated resources like tuition subsidies and industry partnerships.

D. Financial Literacy & Coaching for Black Men: Expand access to culturally relevant financial education, covering budgeting, saving, credit, debt, investing, and wealth-building. Personalized coaching and mentorship will provide practical strategies for financial stability and overcoming systemic barriers. Partnering with Black-owned financial institutions and community organizations will ensure effectiveness. Programs should also support system-impacted men and those pursuing education, entrepreneurship, or career growth, fostering family stability, community development, and economic progress.



6. ENTREPRENEURSHIP AND BUSINESS OWNERSHIP

A. Black-Owned Business Funding: Increase grants, low-interest loans, and venture capital specifically for Black men launching or scaling businesses.

B. Business Incubators for Black Men: Establish business development hubs in predominantly Black communities, offering technical support, marketing assistance, and access to investors.

C. Corporate Supplier Diversity: Require government agencies at the federal, state, and local levels to allocate a percentage of contracts to businesses owned by Black men impacted by the criminal legal system. Additionally, establish procurement incentives — such as tax benefits, preferential bidding status, and grant opportunities — for private corporations that commit to contracting with these businesses. Government agencies should also invest in capacity-building programs, including technical assistance, certification support, and access to capital, to ensure these businesses can compete effectively and sustain long-term growth.

D. Legal Protections for Informal Workers: Create legal protections for informal workers whose only crime is in doing otherwise legal activities without a permit or license (i.e., marijuana sales, handy services, hairdressing, rideshare, mechanical repair, toiletry sales, and other independent retailing).

E. Cooperative Business Models: Expand support for cooperative business ownership among Black men by providing financial resources, legal structures, and business education tailored to cooperative enterprises. Encourage worker-owned and community-owned business models as a means to generate collective wealth, increase economic stability, and reduce reliance on extractive business practices. Establish cooperative incubators that offer training on governance, shared decision-making, and equitable profit distribution, ensuring sustainable economic empowerment.



7. INCENTIVIZE BUSINESSES TO HIRE FORMERLY INCARCERATED BLACK MEN

A. Tax Incentives for Businesses: Create local and state tax incentives for businesses hiring formerly incarcerated Black men, encouraging employers to provide stable, well-paying jobs.

B. Employer Education Campaigns: Launch campaigns to educate employers about the benefits of hiring formerly incarcerated individuals, including financial incentives, workforce diversity, and community impact.



8. ESTABLISHING A STATEWIDE DATA SET ON BLACK MEN'S HEALTH AND WELL-BEING

A. Developing a Comprehensive Data Set with a Statewide Focus: Create a statewide data initiative focused exclusively on the health, well-being, and lived experiences of Black men in Illinois, with a particular emphasis on Black fathers. This effort will gather valuable quantitative and qualitative information to document their strengths, talents, and unique contributions, alongside the challenges they face. While prioritizing insights from Black men in Chicago, the data will also capture statewide trends, ensuring a comprehensive understanding that informs targeted local solutions while driving broader systemic reforms across Illinois.

B. Community Ownership and Data Stewardship: To protect the dignity and agency of Black men, the data collected must be owned and managed by a trusted community-based organization or research institution that prioritizes empowerment over surveillance. This entity should have a vested interest in the well-being of Black communities and be responsible for maintaining strict data privacy protections, ethical oversight, and culturally responsive data governance. This approach will foster trust, encourage participation, and ensure that the data is used solely for advancing policies and programs that genuinely benefit Black men and fathers.

C. Capturing Strengths and Talents: Use robust quantitative tools and innovative measurement approaches to identify and highlight the skills, resilience, and talents of Black men and fathers. This effort will counter deficit-based narratives and provide a balanced, strengths-focused understanding of their lives.

D. Data-Driven Prevention Strategies: Leverage the collected data to develop an upstream prevention strategy tailored specifically to the needs of Black men. Use this information to inform system-wide changes in policies and practices aimed at improving their quality of life and creating equitable opportunities.

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