

AMERICA 250

**IS THE
AMERICAN
DREAM
DEAD?**



About the National Urban League

The National Urban League is a historic civil rights and urban advocacy organization. Driven to secure economic self-reliance, parity, power and justice for our nation's marginalized populations, the National Urban League works toward economic empowerment and the elevation of the standard of living in historically underserved urban communities.

Founded in 1910 and headquartered in New York City, the National Urban League has improved the lives of more than three million people each year nationwide through direct service programs run by 93 affiliates serving 300 communities in 37 states and the District of Columbia.

The National Urban League also conducts public policy research and advocacy work from its Washington, D.C., bureau. The National Urban League is a BBB-accredited organization and has earned a 4-star rating from Charity Navigator, placing it in the top 10% of all U.S. charities for adhering to good governance, fiscal responsibility, and other best practices.

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SCAN TO READ THE
FULL REPORT.

ABOUT *STATE OF BLACK AMERICA*®

When we first embarked on this report 50 years ago, under the stewardship of our late President Emeritus Vernon Jordan, 5th President and CEO of the National Urban League, the nation had endured a decade of social turmoil that reshaped the country for generations.

Political violence claimed the lives of civil rights leader Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and President John F. Kennedy. Protests, compounded by a growing resistance to the war in Vietnam, pushed communities to the brink of chaos. A sitting President resigned on national television, and the country sank into the worst recession since the Great Depression.

The first *State of Black America*, published in 1976, found that the economic crisis didn't impact Americans equally. The Black unemployment rate was nearly double that of Whites, and joblessness among Black youth was estimated as high as 60 percent. And despite the progress won during the civil rights movement, including the Fair Housing Act of 1968 and the creation of the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, the economic conditions of Black Americans grew more precarious. Citing growing representation in sports and media, in the minds of many Whites, "Blacks were better off than ever," according to a 1975 assessment by Dr. James Comer¹ of the Department of Psychiatry at Yale University.

Fifty years later, we watched the same cycle play out. A year of racial reckoning and a wave of federal policies and corporate commitments to right historic wrongs gave way to the greatest rollback of civil rights since the 1960s.

For the 50th anniversary edition of the *State of Black America, Is the American Dream Dead?*, we examine how this pattern has repeated across 250 years of American history. We document how each attempt to guarantee every American the right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness has been met with racism, social violence, and political retrenchment.

We also chart a way forward. America is changing racially, culturally, and economically, and a new technological revolution is reshaping what is possible. We believe the future holds real promise, if we demand it, and if our leaders rise to meet this moment with the maturity and moral seriousness it requires.

This report questions what becomes of an America where millions support policies that threaten individual freedom and physical safety rather than securing every person's right to a full life.

This is more than a diagnosis. It is a warning. If America gets this moment wrong, the consequences will not stay contained to Black and marginalized communities. They will define the nation's next 250 years.

¹ <https://www.nytimes.com/1975/08/05/archives/an-uneasy-racial-peace-prevails-amid-recession.html>



FROM THE PRESIDENT'S DESK

A Letter from Marc H. Morial

Fifty years can feel like a lifetime, and at the same time, a blink of an eye. It is long enough to watch the world change and trends invent and reinvent themselves. It's also long enough to recognize that, as much as things change, they stay the same.

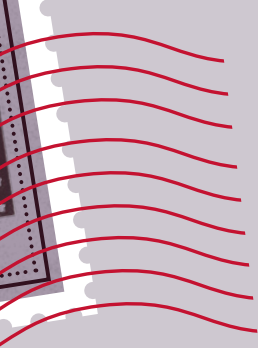
The America we live in today is riddled with challenges, structural inequities, and opportunities out of reach for too many. But none of that is new. In fact, this report has captured how all of those have impacted our lives for generations.

When Vernon Jordan published the first *State of Black America* in 1976, Black unemployment was nearly double that of white Americans, and the recession had exposed what the civil rights victories of the previous decade had not yet fixed: that legal equality and economic equality are not the same thing. That report was a document of candor, a refusal to let the nation look away from what the data made plain.

Fifty years later, we are still in that work. And this milestone asks us not just to measure how far we've come, but to reckon honestly with how far we still have to go.

The distance is real. Today, a Black family is three times more likely to live in poverty than a White family. The racial homeownership gap is wider now than it was before the Fair Housing Act of 1968. And in the past four years, we have watched the most significant rollback of civil rights protections since Reconstruction not as a slow erosion, but as a deliberate dismantling.

That is the moment we are in. We should name it clearly.



“The American people, when presented with the full picture, have consistently chosen a more just nation over a more fearful one.

But we should also name what we know about moments like this, because history has taught us something the architects of this rollback seem to have forgotten, and Black America has never accepted the terms handed to it. Not after the collapse of Reconstruction. Not after Plessy. Not after Birmingham. And not now.

The 50th anniversary of the *State of Black America* carries a question that this country has never fully answered: Is the American Dream Dead? We are not asking it to be provocative. We are asking it because 250 years into this experiment, the evidence demands an honest accounting. The Declaration of Independence promised every American the right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. For much of this country's history, that promise was written to exclude us. The progress we've made in the laws passed, the doors forced open, and the representation won represents a sustained campaign to close the gap between what America promised and what it delivered.

Inside these pages, you will find the data, the analysis, and the voices of people who have devoted their lives to understanding where we are and where we need to go. You will find an honest account of what has been taken from us in recent years, and a clear-eyed map of what it will take to fight back. We are not here to sound an alarm and leave you in the dark. We are here to show the work.

The National Urban League was founded in 1910 to meet the nation at its worst and push it toward its best. We have done that in every era, from the Great Migration through the Depression, the Civil Rights Movement, and the long decades of backlash that followed. This era is no different, except that the stakes are higher and the window may be narrower.

There is reason for hope. The civil rights community is more organized, more legally sophisticated, and more connected than at any point in our history. A new generation of leaders understands that the fight for Black America is a fight for all Americans. Coalitions are holding.

Courts have not entirely abandoned their role. And the American people, when presented with the full picture, have consistently chosen a more just nation over a more fearful one.

But hope is not a strategy. The work of the next 50 years begins with the decisions made in the next few. We must defend democracy at the ballot box, in the courtroom, and in the streets. We must demand diversity not as a program, but as a principle that reflects what this country actually is. And we must build economic power that is durable enough to withstand whatever comes next.

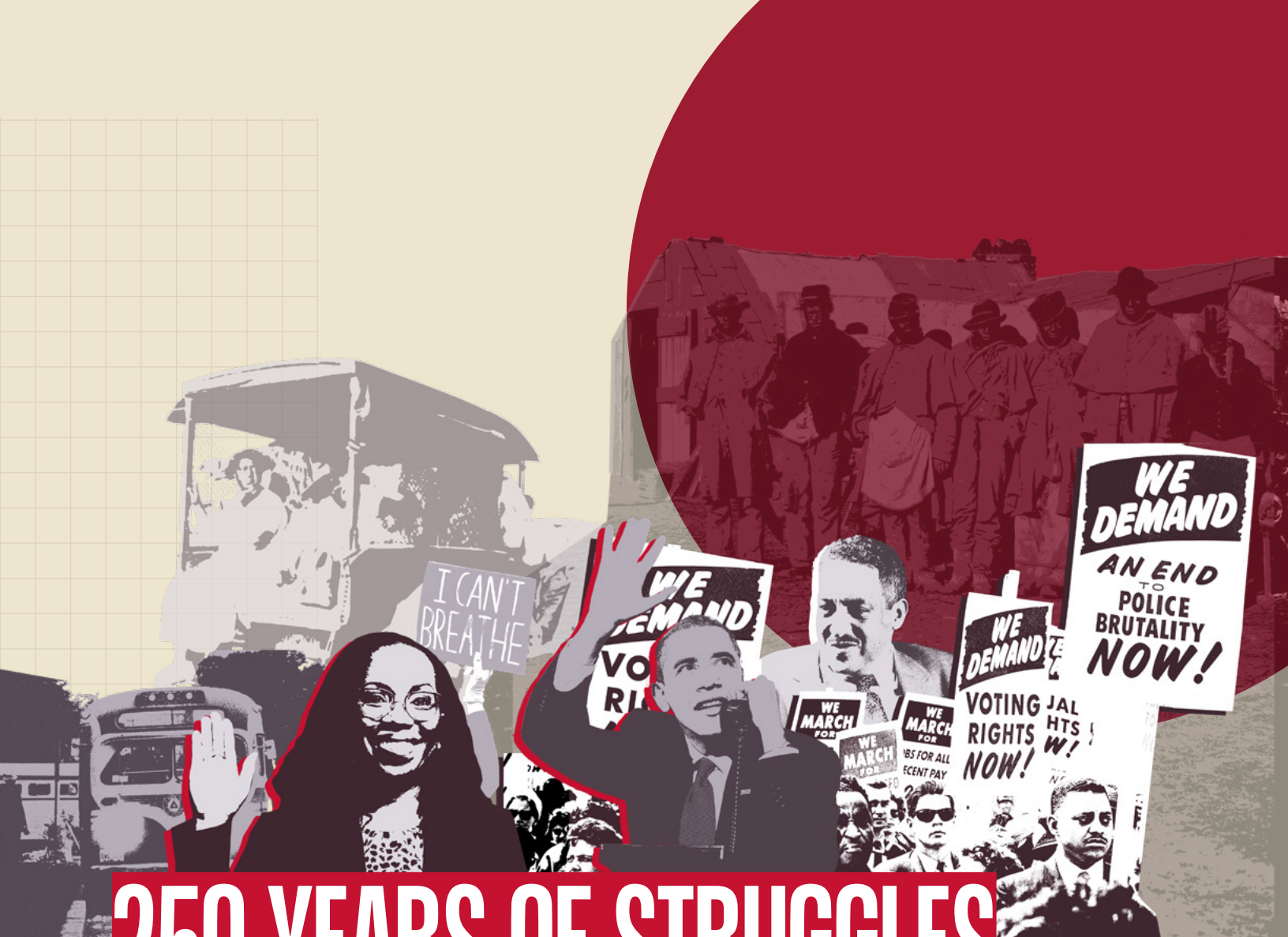
The American Dream is not dead. But it is in danger. And it will only survive if those of us who believe in it are willing to fight like it.

We are.



Marc H. Morial

PRESIDENT & CEO,
NATIONAL URBAN LEAGUE



250 YEARS OF STRUGGLES AND PROGRESS

When we first decided to make the country's 250th anniversary the focus of this report, we reflected on what makes America who it is on the global stage.

The trademark of our exceptionalism is our Democracy, our freedoms, and the idea that anyone can become anything here. The root of that belief dates back to the signing of the Declaration of Independence, when Thomas Jefferson penned the words, "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness."

11%

increase in Black college applicants in fall 2025,

making them the fastest-growing group in the country, even after the Supreme Court gutted affirmative action.

Source: Common App Deadline Update Report, January 2026.

Those unalienable rights have come to be known as the American Dream. And the image of the American Dream has been defined for generations as success in the form of stability and the ability to provide a better life for the generations who come after us.

Up from Slavery

Black Americans have come a long way since our ancestors arrived in bondage on the first ship docked in Virginia in 1619.

We are the fastest growing demographic of young people applying to college, according to the latest data from common application,² in spite of the 2023 Supreme Court decision to strike down Affirmative Action.³

Black women are the fastest growing group of entrepreneurs⁴ in the country; showing resilience in an economy that is increasingly hostile to them being in the workplace.⁵

Everywhere you look, from mannequins in storefronts to the rhythmic sounds pumping your speakers, our impact on American culture is visible. Films like *Sinners* breaking the box office⁶ and barriers in Hollywood, Olympians like Simone Biles making history,⁷ and musicians redefining sound in genres historically unwelcoming to us, are just some of the latest examples of our influence. Even words that the political right has weaponized like “woke,”⁸ originated with us.

And politically we’ve broken every ceiling placed on us. From Thurgood Marshall and Ketanji Brown Jackson ascending to the Supreme Court to President Barack Obama leading the White House for two successful terms.

But every barrier we’ve broken has come at a cost.

A New Generation Facing an Old Battle

This country’s response to Black Americans entering the mainstream as figures other than servants has never been welcomed.

Generations of enslaved people fought, resisted and died trying to escape the hellscape of cotton and tobacco plantations, leading to the birth of an abolitionist movement that collapsed the system of slavery on itself in a violent civil war.

The response was segregation, subpar living conditions, and exploitation and violence that plagued our communities throughout Reconstruction and well into the 20th century.

But we marched on.

Black Americans navigated segregation by attending historically Black colleges and universities and building our own commercial centers, such as Tulsa’s Black Wall Street.

We led America into a new era during the Civil Rights Movement, expanding rights and opportunities for generations of Americans. And again during the post-2020 racial reckoning in response to the murder of George Floyd.

At each juncture of our fight for equal rights to liberty, life, and the pursuit of happiness, racism forced the pendulum to swing violently in the opposite direction.

A Racist Resistance

The end of slavery ushered in a new era of racially motivated terror. The Ku Klux Klan was born right after the Civil War and the group has been responsible for countless kidnappings, murders, lynchings, and domestic terrorist attacks for over a century.

Jim Crow laws bisected the country into a racial caste system that not only stripped the humanity from Black Americans by barring them from setting foot into public spaces like parks, but also

13%

growth rate of Black women-owned businesses between 2024 and 2025,

nearly triple the rate of women-owned businesses overall (4.4%).

Source: Wells Fargo Impact of Women-Owned Businesses Report, 2025.

Fewer than 100

GI Bill mortgages went to non-white veterans out of 67,000 issued in New York and New Jersey.

The bill built the American middle class for white families.

Source: Historical records cited in JSTOR Daily / Congressman Moulton congressional press release, 2024.

² <https://www.commonapp.org/files/DAR/deadline-updates/2025-26/Common-App-Deadline-Update-2026.01.15.pdf>

³ <https://www.scotusblog.com/2023/06/supreme-court-strikes-down-affirmative-action-programs-in-college-admissions/>

⁴ <https://www.fastcompany.com/91509694/black-women-are-the-fastest-growing-group-of-entrepreneurs>

⁵ <https://www.epi.org/blog/black-women-suffered-large-employment-losses-in-2025-particularly-among-college-graduates-and-public-sector-workers/>

⁶ <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2025/dec/20/sinners-ryan-coogler>

⁷ <https://www.nbcolympics.com/news/simone-biles-becomes-most-decorated-us-olympic-gymnast-leads-team-usa-womens-team-gold>

⁸ <https://www.naacpldf.org/woke-black-bad/>

The Promise of Progress: National Urban League Policy Wins Since 2020

The years following the pandemic produced some of the most consequential federal investments in Black America since the Great Society. What was achieved, through legislation, executive action, and relentless advocacy from the Urban League movement, amounts to a record of progress worth naming, even as the work of defending it has already begun.

- ➔ The Black unemployment rate dropped to a record-low of 4.7% in April 2023 driven in part by a deliberate strategy to rebuild the economy from the bottom up.
- ➔ As part of the American Rescue Plan, the \$1.9 trillion COVID relief package signed in March 2021, \$25 billion in emergency rental assistance prevented Black households from slipping into poverty.
- ➔ The passage of the Minority Business Development Act of 2021, embedded in the bipartisan Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act, made the Minority Business Development Agency a permanent federal agency, fulfilling a 30-year goal of the National Urban League.
- ➔ \$148 billion invested in low-income, Black, brown, and Indigenous communities through The Inflation Reduction Act and the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act.

Not every promise was kept, and the current administration is pushing to roll our wins back, but these wins serve as a blueprint for what is possible through sustained advocacy and a clear vision.

300,000

Black women left the workforce or were laid off in just three months in 2025,

even as Black women-owned businesses posted record growth. Resilience should not require choosing between survival and ambition.

Source: EPI analysis of BLS data; Fast Company, March 2026.

out of the possibility of sharing space with Whites. The laws turned a blind eye to racial violence, extreme poverty, and exploitation like sharecropping; in some cases, it was encouraged. The notion of “separate but equal” was codified by the Supreme Court in *Plessy v. Ferguson* in 1896.

Even when Black Americans built our communities, we faced complete destruction from hostile, racist white men. Just two years after *Plessy v. Ferguson*, the thriving Black town of Wilmington, North Carolina, experienced the first coup in American history,⁹ when a group of White Supremacists burned the city, its newspaper, and city hall to the ground, killing hundreds. Twenty years later, the Tulsa Massacre¹⁰ continued this pattern of destroying Black advancement. But the violence was also met with policy.

The GI Bill,¹¹ which historians and economists alike have credited for the development of the middle class, sidelined Black veterans while providing their white counterparts with access to an education and homeownership as repayment for their service.

The assault on Black wealth generation was codified by redlining, a practice to deny mortgages and other financial services to Black and minority communities and deny

them access to living in white communities. While the Fair Housing Act of 1968 banned these practices, their effects can be seen today. Formerly redlined areas often face lower property values, higher vacancy rates, higher poverty, and reduced investment in infrastructure. And Redlined neighborhoods today have lower life expectancies, higher risks for asthma and lead exposure, higher preterm birth rates, and higher exposure to environmental hazards.

The Civil Rights Movement opened doors previously closed off to Black Americans by effectively ending state-sanctioned segregation and discrimination practices, but instead of being vanquished, they persisted latently for generations.

Until this administration.

15 cents—

what the median Black household holds for every \$1 in wealth held by the median white household.

Source: NCRC Racial Wealth Snapshot, February 2026.

⁹ <https://enr.com/news/wilmington-massacre-of-1898/>

¹⁰ <https://www.zinnproject.org/news/tulsa-race-riot/>

¹¹ <https://billofrightsinstitute.org/essays/the-gi-bill/>

21 years—

the life expectancy gap between residents of formerly redlined neighborhoods and nearby white communities in cities like Houston and Richmond.

Redlining was banned in 1968. Its consequences are still killing people.

Source: Episcopal Health Foundation analysis; NPR Health Shots reporting on Richmond, VA life expectancy data.

250 Years Later, We Are Again Under Attack

Looking at our current political landscape, the calls for racial healing and righting of this nation's wrongs in the aftermath of the murder of George Floyd feel like a fever dream.

When the Secretary of the Department of War blatantly refuses to promote Black military leaders, fires them discriminately, and goes as far as to refuse to have them photographed with the sitting President, there can be no other explanation than racism.

Watching the Civil Rights division of the Department of Justice and the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, which were created to combat racist practices in the federal government and the workforce, become bastardized and morphed into tools to favor white men, our government has sanctioned racism.

And every case on the Supreme Court docket, from the *SAVE Act* and *Louisiana v. Callais* to *Watson v. the Republican National Committee*, is an assault on voting rights that disproportionately silences our community.

Building a Better Tomorrow: The National Urban League Vision

Alongside the diagnosis is a declaration. We do not simply document the crisis. We insist on the possibility of something better and offer a concrete argument for how to get there, organized around the National Urban League's three imperatives: *Defeat Poverty*, *Defend Democracy*, and *Demand Diversity*.

In this report, we're diving into the status of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness today. While we document the assaults against each of those and the American Dream itself, we're proposing a way forward.

The story of what America owes Black Americans is not abstract. It is measured in dollars withheld, opportunities denied, and lives cut short. The three pillars of the American Dream, life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, have each been systematically dismantled for Black Americans. What follows is the accounting.

AHEAD

I **DEFEAT** **POVERTY**

Life in America at 250 (Life)

II **DEFEND** **DEMOCRACY**

The Decline of Freedom (Liberty)

III **DEMAND** **DIVERSITY**

Every American Deserves to Feel Like They Belong (Pursuit of Happiness)

I. DEFEAT POVERTY

LIFE IN AMERICA AT 250

Up until recent memory, the country has lived up to its promise for generations of white Americans who were able to flourish due to investments from the GI Bill, redlining that disproportionately increased their property values and the wealth that they could bequeath to their children. And for nearly a century before the Civil Rights movement, Black Americans were virtually locked out of the workforce in meaningful numbers, unable to take on nonservice jobs because of segregation and institutionalized racism.

But like at every other point in our history when progress has been met with resistance, we all pay a price. And if we want a clear example of how that plays out in the quality of life in this country, look no further than the undermining of Gen Z.

A Generation Locked Out

For the children born between 1997 and 2012, many of their earliest memories are of a nation under siege. Raised in a world of mass surveillance after 9/11 and navigating a historic assault on public education, they watched their parents navigate the global recession of 2008, extreme acts of racial violence, school shootings unfold on their cell phones, and lived through a pandemic that changed the world forever. Now, they're navigating a treacherous economy they inherited as a result of poor electoral decisions made by a divided, uninformed public.

Underemployment and skyrocketing housing costs have half of Gen Z living at home¹² with their parents. To pour salt in

the wounds, government infighting and a lack of executive branch accountability have held our economy hostage and driven instability that has affected all of us.

But as we saw during the COVID-19 pandemic, no group is impacted by the unraveling of America as we know it more than Black people.

Another Steep Reversal

Between 2021 and 2024, the four-year period following the murder of George Floyd, Black life in America saw historic wins. Black unemployment dropped to a record low,¹³ and the number of Black households living in poverty dropped to the lowest point on record.¹⁴

That progress was short-lived when the current administration took office in January 2025. Aggressive anti-diversity initiatives didn't just discourage corporate America from hiring diverse candidates; they also made such programs illegal. Within months, companies, law firms, and colleges and universities were threatened

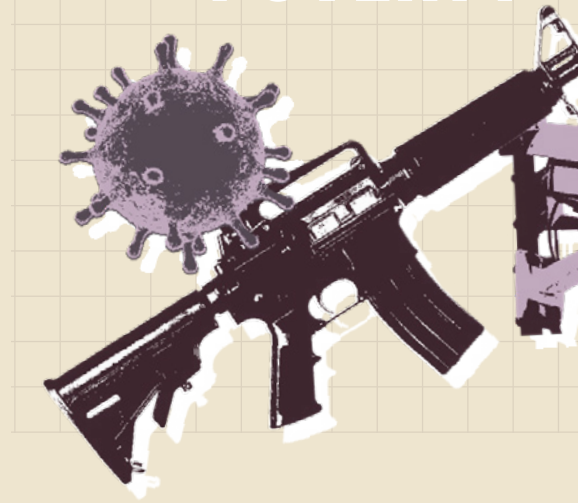
with lawsuits and withheld funding for attempting to rectify a history of racism that drove inequality in our economic system since 1776.

In 2025, an estimated 250,000 to over 300,000 Black women lost their jobs,¹⁵ with some estimates reaching 600,000, according to 2025 Bureau of Labor Statistics data. And between November 2025 and February 2026, approximately 567,000 Black men lost their jobs.¹⁶ These job losses cost Black America about \$87 billion in lost income,¹⁷ impacted Black buying power and Black-owned businesses, and widened the racial wealth gap.

The economic assault hasn't stopped at job losses; it's also seen in the rising costs and increased restrictions on healthcare and higher education.

When Dollars Determine Life or Death

The Big Ugly Bill was easily one of the most dangerous pieces of legislation signed into law in years. Signed July 4, 2025, the bill impacts Medicare by enacting approximately \$500 billion in cuts from 2027–2034,¹⁸ increasing drug



¹² <https://www.statista.com/statistics/595249/millennials-live-in-their-parents-home-gender/>.

¹³ <https://fred.stlouisfed.org/series/LNS14000006>.

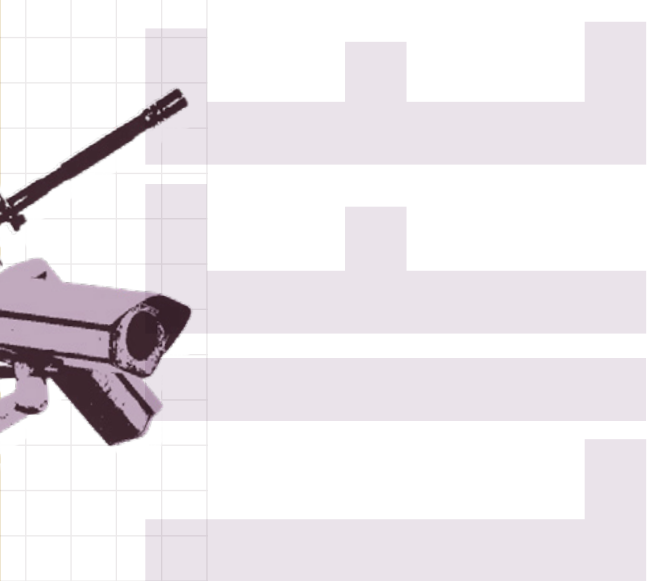
¹⁴ <https://www.census.gov/content/dam/Census/newsroom/press-kits/2023/iph/20230912-iph-slides-poverty.pdf>.

¹⁵ <https://www.epl.org/blog/black-women-suffered-large-employment-losses-in-2025-particularly-among-college-graduates-and-public-sector-workers/>.

¹⁶ <https://blackdemographics.com/black-unemployment-hits-another-2025-high-in-november/>.

¹⁷ <https://cepr.net/publications/black-jobs-deficit-cost-black-america-87-billion-in-2025/>.

¹⁸ <https://www.americanprogress.org/article/house-republicans-big-beautiful-bill-would-make-health-care-more-expensive-for-americans-with-medicare-and-other-insurance/>.



A Budget for All Americans

In response to the Big Ugly Bill, the National Urban League launched a civil rights alliance called the Fair Budget Coalition:

- **Fair & Inclusive Revenue Policy:** Ensuring the wealthy and large corporations contribute their fair share.
- **Investing in Economic Mobility and Strengthening the Social Safety Net:** Fully funding and protecting essential programs that are lifelines for working families.
- **Smart & Sustainable Public Investments:** Securing funding for housing, education, infrastructure, and safeguarding local-federal partnerships.
- **Protecting Civil Rights & Equal Opportunity:** Defending and ensuring fair representation and access to economic opportunity.

costs, and reducing subsidies. It limits eligibility for low-income programs and for immigrant beneficiaries, likely leading to higher premiums, fewer services, and reduced access to coverage.

To put the impact of this bill in numbers, approximately 30%¹⁹ of Black Americans rely on Medicaid, despite representing about 14% of the population.²⁰ One in five²¹ Black families rely on SNAP.

One lesser discussed subject of this legislation has been the new limits imposed on subsidized student loans and financial aid. Beginning July 1, 2026, new borrowers of federal student loans²² and Grad PLUS loans²³ will accrue interest while students are in school. As the cost of college continues to rise, this will significantly increase student debt, with estimates suggesting up to \$21.6 billion in additional costs over ten years.

Now, Black borrowers who already carry more student debt²⁴ than any other group face increased costs on top of a hostile workforce.

This assault requires a coordinated response from the civil rights community, a commitment from elected officials to mitigate the impact of these policies as much as possible at the state and local level, and a vision for what's next.

PROPOSED SOLUTION: An Economy That Works For Us All

At the same time as our current economic system faces threats from automation, inflation, and reckless leadership, it's in the middle of an industrial revolution.

Artificial Intelligence, clean energy, and biomedical engineering are ushering humanity into a new era. Each of these technological advancements can address the wealth gap by

creating jobs and enabling faster closure of the workforce skills gap. There's also potential to advance climate justice and develop treatments and cures that improve the quality of life and longevity for marginalized groups.

The introduction of telemedicine and medications like GLP-1s has already increased competition for drugmakers, reducing prices and increasing accessibility. Advancements in vibe coding and personalized education programs are becoming commonplace with AI. And breakthroughs in carbon capture and green energy at scale not only make our environment safer but also create jobs.

But with great advancement in technology, we're going to need a government that acts with speed and responsibility to ensure an equitable future. We recommend:

- **Regulation** that mitigates the harm of AI and ensures equitable access in rollout and adoption
- **Stricter enforcement and guidance** on telehealth providers. Ensuring proper review from the FDA and regulations to make new drugs safe and accessible
- **Protecting programs** like 8a and rebuilding the MBDA to ensure that Black business owners have space to participate in the adoption and growth of all industries

To get this done, we need to elect leaders who believe that our diversity is our strength and that defeating poverty is the only way to ensure that the American Dream is possible for the next generation.

Economic exclusion and political exclusion are the same weapon, fired from the same gun. Which is why the fight to defend democracy is inseparable from the fight to defeat poverty.

¹⁹ <https://www.protectourcare.org/fact-sheet-communities-of-color-depend-on-medicare-for-health-care-but-republicans-want-to-strip-it-away/>.

²⁰ <https://www.pewresearch.org/race-and-ethnicity/fact-sheet/facts-about-the-us-black-population/>.

²¹ <https://www.epl.org/blog/cuts-to-snap-benefits-will-disproportionately-harm-families-of-color-and-children/>.

²² <https://studentaid.gov/understand-aid/types/loans/subsidized-unsubsidized>.

²³ <https://fordhamobserver.com/82852/recent/news/grad-plus-loans-eliminated-for-class-of-2026-onward/>.

²⁴ <https://educationdata.org/student-loan-debt-by-race>.

II. DEFEND DEMOCRACY

THE DECLINE OF FREEDOM

The birthright of citizenship and the ability to vote sit at the core of what it means to be America. The concept of “No Taxation without Representation” is what sparked the American Revolution for independence from Britain. Today, thanks to gerrymandering efforts and a Supreme Court case that dilutes voting power for an entire district of Black voters in Louisiana, challenges what it means to be represented in America today.

Freedom Has Never Been Free

At the nation’s birth in 1776, the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution left the right to vote intentionally ambiguous. States stepped in and declared the right to vote sits exclusively with white men who own property; some also added Christianity as a religious requirement.

The intent was to exclude poor Whites and Black people from fighting for equity in an economy driven by human labor and ruled by an elite class.

This changed after the Civil War in 1870, when the 15th Amendment declared that no citizen could be denied the right to vote on the basis of race. It immediately prompted backlash from Southern states, who leveraged racist tactics from poll taxes and literacy tests to sanctioned violence at voting booths to suppress the Black vote.

Suppression of the Black vote persisted for nearly a century and over 40 years after white women gained the right to vote in the 19th Amendment in 1920. The first march for Black voting rights in Selma, Alabama, in 1965 lives in infamy as “Bloody Sunday.” The state responded to peaceful protesters with water hoses, batons, and dogs in a televised broadcast of American carnage against its own citizens exercising their First Amendment right.

Public pressure led to President Lyndon B. Johnson signing the Voting Rights Act of 1965.



“The vote is the most powerful instrument ever devised by man for breaking down injustice and destroying the terrible walls which imprison men because they are different from other men.”

—Lyndon B. Johnson

Photo source: [Library of Congress on Unsplash](#).

A Fight to Wind Back Time

50 years after the Voting Rights Act was signed, we are once again fighting to preserve the right to vote. This time, not just for Black Americans, but for us all.

Aggressive laws to limit polling locations and purge voter rolls alongside a docket of pivotal Supreme Court cases have left American Democracy on life support.

The Stop the Steal movement, built on lies following the 2020 Presidential election, materialized into a five-year span from 2021 to 2025, during which 187 bills restricting access to voting were passed in 23 states. Seventy-eight of these would curb access to mail voting; 59 would create stricter ID requirements for registration or in-person voting; and 37 would either require voters to provide a passport, birth certificate, or similar document to register or expand voter purges in ways that are likely to remove eligible voters, according to the Brennan Center for Justice.²⁵

2026 ushered in the violent SAVE Act. Dubbed the Safeguard American Voter Eligibility (SAVE) Act,²⁶ the law requires proof of citizenship, such as a birth certificate or passport, to cast a ballot in every state.

What sounds on the surface like a legitimate way to ensure our elections are safe from foreign interference is a legislative disaster that will disenfranchise nearly 21 millions Americans.²⁷ College students without access to their birth certificates, married adults whose last names have changed on federal documents, and millions of older Americans who do not have access to birth records, which disproportionately impacts Black Americans, will face historic hurdles to voting.

A lesser-discussed threat to our Democracy is the proliferation of mis-and-disinformation.

²⁵ <https://www.brennancenter.org/our-work/research-reports/state-voting-laws-roundup-2025-review>.

²⁶ <https://campaignlegal.org/update/what-you-need-know-about-save-act>.

²⁷ <https://www.brennancenter.org/our-work/analysis-opinion/house-passes-new-version-save-act-brennan-center-responds>.

DEFEND DEMOCRACY



Shock, Awe, and Suppression

With each passing election cycle, Americans are inundated with information from so many directions that it leaves us paralyzed. The information overload tactic known as “shock-and-awe” is designed to disorient, confuse, and divide us to the point of either voting against our interests or sitting out elections altogether.

It’s been proven effective since the first case of mass election interference in 2016, when Russia spread lies on Facebook, primarily targeted towards Black Americans, about candidate records and conflicting election dates that suppressed the vote. The result was a Congressional hearing with Meta founder and CEO Mark Zuckerberg and a commitment to establish a safety team to protect election integrity by censoring accounts and creators who spread misinformation on its platforms.

Ten years later, those teams have been dismantled, and accounts spreading conspiracy theories get billions of views. This has correlated with trust in mainstream media at an all-time low. Users and potential voters are increasingly relying on their own “research,” often misled by podcasters and influencers who intend to drive clicks and monetize audiences by any means necessary, including lying.

Young people, specifically young men, are most vulnerable to these tactics. In the 2024 Presidential cycle, reports showed that young men increasingly voted for candidates whose views mirrored those of their favorite podcasters and influencers.

An internet without guardrails and the proliferation of AI “slop” have created the perfect storm for misdirection and suppression on these platforms.

PROPOSED SOLUTION: Reclaim Our Vote

Civil Rights and civic engagement organizations need to evolve their traditional approaches to voter engagement in this new information ecosystem. But we can’t protect the right to vote alone.

Saving this country will take the work of elected officials who believe in the promise of liberty for all. And it will take voters to educate themselves about who is running for office in their community and to show up on election day to support candidates who still believe that every American has the right to vote.

It is also the responsibility of grassroots organizations, city leaders, and civil rights groups to help voters navigate this labyrinth of barriers. For this election, it is our job to:

- ➔ **Hammer in the message:** register, check your registration, and check it again. We cannot be passive in this moment or at any future moment. Provide steps, provide links, and send reminders to keep it top of mind.
- ➔ **Tell voters why they should vote.** Civic engagement is at a low, especially in the Black community, because of continuous disappointments with leaders who get into office and don’t live up to their promises to make meaningful change.
- ➔ Our job isn’t to make excuses for past letdowns, and it isn’t helpful to frame voting as a responsibility.
- ➔ But we need to clearly lay out what is on the table.
 - **The cost of heating our homes** in the winter and fueling our cars as global conflicts raise prices
 - **The cost of household goods** when Congress and the courts refuse to fight against illegal tariffs
 - **The legalization of racism** when we have candidates who are against diversity initiatives and support favoring white people only for government programs, hiring initiatives, and immigration

We cannot do this alone. We believe the future of Black America is, and has always been, the future of America. Fighting this movement will take all of us, and it’s possible with the right voice, the right information, and by showing up when it counts: at the ballot box on election day.

III. DEMAND DIVERSITY

EVERY AMERICAN DESERVES TO FEEL LIKE THEY BELONG

It is impossible to see an image of American exceptionalism on the world stage without seeing Black Americans.

The legacy of athletic institutions, from the NBA and NFL to the Olympics, has been carried on our backs. The world's most iconic shoe brands and global entertainment are what they are today because of our style, talent, and swagger.

Yet here at home, our "Americanness" has been the subject of debate since the 3/5th Compromise.²⁸ It took the death of nearly 800,000 soldiers in a multiyear war that ripped the nation apart to reach an agreement in the form of the 14th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution²⁹ to grant citizenship to all persons born or naturalized in the United States, including formerly enslaved people.

148 years later, our country is once again debating the question, "Who is American?" As the current administration continues its crusade against our history and our values as a nation, Black people know all too well that the question is a dog whistle rooted in racism and assimilation. And history has shown us that embracing our differences has contributed more to the fabric of this country than falling in line with the status quo.

A History of Suppressing Identity

Since being freed from bondage, Black Americans have attempted to integrate into American society in every way.

To contribute to society, we've worked, built our own schools, and attended Historically Black Colleges and Universities. We built our own businesses, neighborhoods, and main streets across the country. We even modeled our dress and hairstyles to align with White respectability standards. In the century that followed the Civil War, we were also consistently reminded that none of that shielded us from racially motivated violence, segregation, and being subjected to a caste system that diluted our quality of life. And all of this was legalized by the government.

*Plessy v. Ferguson*³⁰ of 1896, the Wilmington Massacre³¹ of 1898, and the Tulsa Massacre³² of 1921 are just a few prominent examples of how assimilation doesn't provide protection.

The attack on Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion today is another form of violence against people of color, despite our attempts to build lives as contributing members of American society.

The message being sent is the same one Black Americans have received at every turning point in this country's history: progress has a ceiling, and you have reached it.

Proof of What's Possible

History doesn't just document what was taken from Black Americans. It documents what Black Americans built, contributed to, and transformed, even when every institution was designed to exclude them.

Thurgood Marshall spent decades dismantling the legal architecture of segregation before he ever wore a robe. As lead counsel for the NAACP Legal Defense Fund, he argued 32 cases before the Supreme Court. He won 29, including *Brown v. Board of Education* in 1954, the ruling that declared segregated public schools unconstitutional and cracked the foundation of Jim Crow. In 1967, President Lyndon B. Johnson appointed him to the Supreme Court, making him the first Black Justice in the nation's history. Marshall's presence on the bench changed what was imaginable for every Black child in America.

The irony in today's high court is that one of the justices who benefited from that pathway is now attempting to close it. Justice Clarence Thomas, who wrote a scathing dissent against Affirmative action, had the same policies open doors throughout his career, including his admission to Yale Law School.

²⁸ <https://www.britannica.com/topic/three-fifths-compromise>.

²⁹ <https://constitution.congress.gov/constitution/amendment-14/>.

³⁰ <https://www.archives.gov/milestone-documents/plessy-v-ferguson>.

³¹ <https://ejl.org/news/wilmington-massacre-of-1898/>.

³² <https://www.zinnproject.org/news/tdih/tulsa-race-riot/>.

"History teaches that grave threats to liberty often come in times of urgency, when constitutional rights seem too extravagant to endure.

—Thurgood Marshall



Photo source: *Library of Congress Prints and Photographs division under the digital ID cph.3b07878*.

DEMAND DIVERSITY

Attacks on Equal Opportunity

Students For Fair Admissions v. Harvard

2023

The Supreme Court's decision struck down race-conscious college admissions, ending a policy that had opened the doors of American higher education to generations of students who would otherwise have been shut out.

Source: https://www.supremecourt.gov/opinions/22pdf/20-1199_hgdj.pdf.

Executive Orders

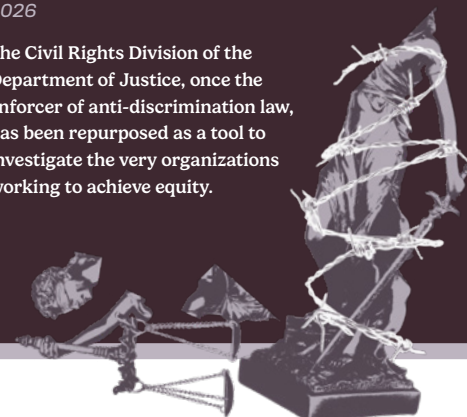
2025

These executive orders made DEI programs in the federal government effectively illegal. Corporations, law firms, and universities were threatened with withheld funding and lawsuits simply for acknowledging that systemic barriers exist. Companies that spent years building diverse pipelines began quietly dismantling them.

The Civil Rights Division

2026

The Civil Rights Division of the Department of Justice, once the enforcer of anti-discrimination law, has been repurposed as a tool to investigate the very organizations working to achieve equity.



The Demand Diversity Roundtable

In 2025, we created the Demand Diversity Roundtable to confront the systematic rollback of civil rights protections and equal opportunity policies across government, the workforce, and public life, and to respond through advocacy, civic mobilization, and legislation.

The coalition is made up of more than 35 civil and human rights, democracy, business, and advocacy organizations representing over 100 million Americans and more than \$5 trillion in collective consumer spending power.

The roundtable has held three convenings since its launch last year and released the America 250 Guide to Defending Democracy, a resource to promote civic engagement and fight for voting rights.

PROPOSED SOLUTION: The Future We're Fighting For

The civil rights community has always known something the opposition refuses to accept: the rights of one are only as secure as the rights of all. When Black Americans fight for the right to pursue and build lives of their own design, we are fighting for everyone. That has always been true. The Civil Rights Act of 1964

expanded opportunity not just for Black Americans but for women, people with disabilities, religious minorities, and communities across every spectrum of American life. The same is true today.

The fight to Demand Diversity is not a fight for preferences. It is a fight for access, and access is the prerequisite to the pursuit of happiness.

Here is what that fight looks like in practice.

The civil rights community must consolidate its legal resistance and turn courtroom wins into durable policy. The lawsuits already filed, including the National Urban League's own challenge to the administration's anti-equity executive orders, are a floor, not a ceiling. Every case won must be accompanied by state and local legislation that codifies the protections federal policy is abandoning. When Washington retreats, statehouses must advance.

At the same time, the movement must build economic infrastructure that doesn't depend on the goodwill of any one administration. That means investing in HBCU pipelines, protecting and expanding the 8(a) business development program,³³ and rebuilding the Minority Business Development Agency to ensure Black entrepreneurs have full access to the

industrial revolutions underway in AI, clean energy, and biomedical technology. The next economy is being built today. Who builds it will determine who benefits from it for generations.

And we must vote as if the stakes were what they are. Every state legislator, attorney general, and governor is on the front lines in this fight. Elected officials at every level must be asked directly: Do you believe that diversity is a strength or a threat? Their answer should determine whether they hold power.

An ideal government on this question looks like one that restores and strengthens the enforcement authority of the Civil Rights Division, invests in pipeline programs that build leadership pathways from underserved communities into every sector of public life, and treats DEI not as a political liability but as the economic and democratic infrastructure it has always been. It looks like a government that understands you cannot have a functioning democracy when whole communities are locked out of its promise.

The Declaration of Independence promised every American the unalienable right to pursue happiness. For 250 years, Black Americans have fought to make that promise real, not just for ourselves but for this country. That fight is not over. And we will not yield.

³³ <https://www.sba.gov/federal-contracting/contracting-assistance-programs/8a-business-development-program>.



REIMAGING OUR EMPOWERMENT GOALS FOR AMERICA'S FUTURE

Our goal since 1910 has been to ensure that the children of the African-Americans who built this nation build economic self-reliance, sociopolitical power, and achieve equal civil rights. Our empowerment goals provide a benchmark and help us create rubrics for our programs, which have touched the lives of over 3 million people.

These goals reflect both the enduring mission of the National Urban League and the urgency of this moment. They are not aspirational in the abstract. They are in demand, backed by 115 years of evidence that when Black America is empowered, America is stronger.

Education and Youth Development

Every child has access to a high-quality education that prepares them for college, work, and life.

The education of Black children remains one of the most contested battlegrounds in American public life. We will fight to ensure that every child, regardless of zip code or income, has access to a high-quality education that prepares them for tomorrow's economy. That means:

- ➔ Early childhood education for all
- ➔ Expanding access and increase the value of pell grant scholarships
- ➔ Defending public schools from defunding and privatization
- ➔ Protecting HBCU pipelines as critical infrastructure for Black economic mobility
- ➔ Expanding STEM access so that the next generation of engineers, scientists, and technologists reflects America's full diversity

Education is not a privilege. It is the foundation of every other freedom.

3%

of U.S. colleges and universities are HBCUs

yet HBCUs produce nearly 20% of all Black college graduates.

Source: UNCF, July 2025.

Health

Every American has access to quality, affordable, and culturally competent health care.

The racial health gap in America is a matter of ill-informed policy. Black Americans die younger, are diagnosed later, and receive less aggressive treatment than their white counterparts because of a century of deliberate disinvestment in the communities where Black people live.

Over the next decade, reaching our empowerment goal will require:

- ➔ Developing a community health worker model that addresses the full spectrum of health disparities, from maternal mortality to mental health to chronic disease
- ➔ Affordable healthcare for all
- ➔ Fighting every effort to repeal the Affordable Care Act
- ➔ Demanding that health equity be treated not as a diversity initiative but as a national security imperative

A nation that allows its people to die preventable deaths is not a healthy democracy. We will not allow that to stand.

Housing

Every American lives in safe, decent, affordable, and energy-efficient housing on fair terms.

Homeownership remains the primary mechanism through which American families build, preserve, and transfer wealth across generations. Yet the racial homeownership gap remains one of the clearest indicators of systemic inequality, and too many Black families continue to face barriers not only to purchasing a home, but to keeping one and passing one on.

Over the next decade, we will fight to close that gap through:

- ➔ Creating a federal affordable and workforce housing trust for the construction and renovation of millions of units
- ➔ Expanding the section 8 voucher program, so that all who are eligible receive it
- ➔ Expanding homeownership counseling, financial coaching, and wealth-building services that prepare families for ownership and long-term stability
- ➔ Aggressive advocacy against discriminatory appraisal practices, predatory lending, and inequitable housing systems, while investing in affordable housing development that strengthens communities rather than displaces them
- ➔ Advancing foreclosure prevention, eviction prevention, and early intervention strategies that help families protect their homes, stabilize during crisis, and preserve hard-earned assets
- ➔ Protecting generational wealth by advancing heirs' property reform, estate planning education, and asset preservation strategies that help families retain ownership across generations

We believe that in the wealthiest country in the world, safe, affordable housing and the opportunity to build generational wealth should never be a privilege.

Workforce Development

Every American has access to employment that provides a living wage, good benefits, and opportunities for career growth.

The American labor market has never been a level playing field for Black workers. The Black unemployment rate has been roughly double the white unemployment rate for every decade since the government began tracking it.

30% gap

between Black and white homeownership rates today,

wider than it was before the Fair Housing Act of 1968. Only 44% of Black Americans own a home, compared to nearly 73% of white Americans.

Source: Brookings Institution / Federal Reserve Survey of Consumer Finances, 2022.

2x

the Black unemployment rate relative to white Americans

every decade since the government began tracking it. As of Q3 2025: 7.8% vs. 3.8%.

Source: *Inequality.org* analysis of BLS data, February 2026.

Over the next decade, we plan to help close that gap by:

- ➔ Expanding the Urban Tech Jobs, Urban Youth Pathways, and Urban Apprenticeship programs to connect tens of thousands of Black workers to careers in the industries shaping the next economy: artificial intelligence, clean energy, advanced manufacturing, and biomedical technology
- ➔ Advocating for a federal minimum wage that is actually a living wage
- ➔ Advocating for portable benefits that follow workers rather than employers

We cannot afford to be left behind in the future economy. We intend to fight for our inclusion from the start.

Entrepreneurship

Every American entrepreneur has access to the capital, contracts, and networks needed to build a business that lasts.

Black entrepreneurship is among the most powerful engines of Black wealth creation and community stability in this country. And yet Black entrepreneurs face a credit market that denies them capital at rates that have nothing to do with the viability of their businesses, a federal contracting system that is actively being dismantled, and a venture capital ecosystem where less than 2 percent of funding goes to Black founders.

191

state legislative seats are projected to be eliminated

following the Supreme Court's April 2026 decision in *Louisiana v. Callais*. These seats are held predominantly by Black lawmakers.

Source: Black Voters Matter Fund Callais State Legislative Report, 2026.

Over the next decade, we will:

- ➔ Expand our Entrepreneurship Centers to serve more clients in more cities
- ➔ Deepen partnerships with community development financial institutions to close the capital access gap
- ➔ Fight to restore and strengthen every federal program designed to bring Black businesses into the economic mainstream

The next industrial revolution in AI, clean energy, and biotech is being built right now. Who owns a piece of it will determine who prospers from it. We intend to make sure Black entrepreneurs are at the table, not on the menu.

Equitable Justice

Every American has an equal right and responsibility to fully participate in our democracy and civic processes, and all people have a right to justice and fairness.

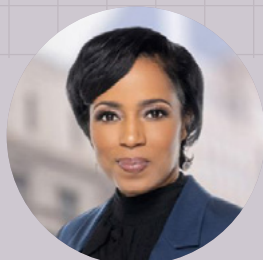
Civil rights and Democracy are under siege. Our unwavering commitment to helping Black America become self-reliant will require us to work with our partners and to affiliate movement over the next decade to:

- ➔ Fight against assaults on the Constitution and push elected officials to restore and advance voting rights
- ➔ Extend voting rights to the incarcerated and formerly incarcerated Americans
- ➔ Mobilize Black voters and communities through the Reclaim Your Vote civic engagement campaign to build lasting political power at every level
- ➔ Work with public institutions to address social issues, promote healthy responses to trauma, and adopt community-led solutions
- ➔ Champion clean slate expungement initiatives that remove barriers to employment, housing, and full civic participation for millions of Americans with criminal records
- ➔ Advocate for a fair and accurate Census that ensures Black communities receive equitable representation and their rightful share of federal resources
- ➔ Push for law enforcement accountability to curb abuses of power at every level of government

The 1965 Voting Rights Act helped grow Black congressional representation from 18 members in 1979 to 65 representatives and 5 senators today. *Callais* puts those gains directly at risk.

Source: Equal Justice Initiative analysis of *Louisiana v. Callais*, May 2026.

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“Black women, in particular, have been central to this struggle, confronting racism, institutional violence, and economic injustice both within the United States and across the globe.”

— **Dr. Keisha Blain**



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“As we reflect
on the future of
this country, the
American Dream
will only be real if
it is accessible.”

— Sheena Meade



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“Black Americans are navigating a political environment in which rights, representation and historical memory are actively contested. Policy decisions reach directly into voting access, education, policing, public health and economic life. In an information environment saturated with distortion, rigorous and sustained reporting is a civic necessity.”

— Donovan X. Ramsey



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