



— CREATING —
AN
EQUITABLE
FUTURE
IN WASHINGTON STATE

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BLACK WELL-BEING & BEYOND

THIS STUDY IS DEDICATED TO
GARY CUNNINGHAM FOR HIS DEVOTION AND ENDLESS
SUPPORT TO SEEING THIS THROUGH.

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LETTER FROM SPONSOR

The publication of this report is a moment, a step forward, for the people of our great state. It reveals the power of community when leaders, advocates, and citizens join together in raising their voices for Black people in Washington. Many poor or struggling Black people are living out their lives quietly in our cities and neighborhoods, working diligently to make it on their own, pursuing education and jobs to get ahead even when those seem out of reach. They are living and working next to us. They are Americans and they are going after their chance, their hope for a better life. This report acknowledges their efforts, their achievements, and yet strives to show that their paths are not on equal footing with other races and ethnicities.

The contributions that Black Washingtonians have made in spite of the barriers they face should inspire all of us. Imagine what we could accomplish if these barriers were gone. If the same opportunities were available to everyone. This report is a step toward making this vision a reality.

This report is based on facts, not opinions. We focused on the facts in the hope that meaningful dialogue can come as a result of this study. We are starting the conversation.

ANDREA CAUPAIN SANDERSON
CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICER
BYRD BARR PLACE

We would like to thank the many people and organizations that have helped us achieve a study of this scale and magnitude. First and foremost, thank you to the Northwest Area Foundation for its visionary financial support of the study. Thank you to Byrd Barr Place, a community-based organization in Seattle that spearheaded the effort and brought everyone to the table. Thank you to the Washington State Commission on African American Affairs and the African American Leadership Forum–Seattle for their leadership in elevating and amplifying the voices of Black Washingtonians. Thank you to Lori Pfungst at the Washington State Budget & Policy Center for her very thorough contributions to the quantitative research and development of the study. Thank you to Angela Powell of Imago, LLC, for her insights and guidance in tapping into the wealth of culture and knowledge within the Black community.

“Creating an Equitable Future in Washington State” is a monumental body of work that will be sent far and wide to keep the conversation going. It is also a communication and analytical tool, designed to help people get involved with the civic process and, ultimately, help each other. Join us in telling the true story of Black families, children, neighbors—whether stranger or friend. Their struggle is our struggle, until equity can be achieved by all.

EDWARD O. PRINCE
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR
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ONE

INTRODUCTION

Progress. As individuals and as a society, it's what we all want and strive for every day—for each generation to experience a life more rich and full of opportunity than the last. It is a promise we pass on to our children and grandchildren, and a value we collectively aspire to as a nation.

Progress. We hold it dear but, if we are to be just, two essential questions emerge: How is progress actually defined? And how do we know it when we see it? It depends on who you ask, making one thing certain—progress cannot be a one-size-fits-all proposition. For too long, our definition of progress has assumed uniformity, with a lens too narrow to gauge whether the diverse people and communities of Washington state are advancing together and at the same pace.

If we are to fulfill the promise of progress for **everyone**, we must rethink our assumptions about progress. As Washington becomes a state where people of color are the majority of the population, changing the one-size-fits-all approach becomes even more critical. Our collective well-being depends on and is enhanced by everyone having equal opportunity to reach his or her full potential in life.

Put simply, there is no progress without equity.

This report focuses on the well-being of Black Washingtonians. It is a small, but important, contribution to a much larger, evolving movement to create an equitable and just future for everyone in our state. Nearly a quarter-million (238,000) strong, the Black community has a wide range of diversity and depth of experience, and has made sizable contributions to the social, economic, cultural, and political landscape of our state.

Systemic barriers to opportunity and racial oppression have impeded progress for Black people, with devastating consequences for nearly every indicator of their well-being. For example:

- A history of exclusion from economic and educational opportunities has systematically denied Black people access to the middle class and the intergenerational benefits of prosperity. This history has affected generations of Black Washingtonians, resulting in poorer job prospects, lower rates of college completion, higher rates of poverty, and lower net worth than their peers.
- The cumulative impact of social and economic exclusion takes a toll on every area of well-being. For example, Black children and adults in Washington state have higher rates of illness and death than many of their peers, and the second lowest life expectancy of any racial and ethnic group.
- National and state systems have evolved to threaten progress for Black people. Since 1980, following the roll-out of the War on Drugs, the prison population has increased 300 percent in Washington state. Black people are disproportionately more likely than white people to be sentenced to prison—for drugs and other crimes—even when their backgrounds and circumstances are similar.
- In a political system so heavily influenced by wealth, and one that limits the right to vote for people

with a felony conviction, fewer economic resources combined with unequal criminal justice outcomes put Black Washingtonians at a disadvantage politically.

The contributions that Black Washingtonians have made in spite of such barriers should inspire all of us. Imagine what we could accomplish as a state if barriers to opportunity were removed for everyone. This report is one contribution to making this vision a reality.

GOALS OF REPORT & AUDIENCE

This report is the first phase of a longer effort by African American Leadership Forum–Seattle, Byrd Barr Place, and the Washington State Commission on African American Affairs to elevate and amplify the voices of Black Washingtonians in the decision-making processes that influence their everyday lives. It is inclusive of all people with a common ancestry in Africa and who racially identify as Black in Washington state, while also honoring the vast differences in history, experience, and culture within the community as a whole.

The primary audiences for this report are policymakers and the people who influence them, but we hope the findings are shared in communities throughout the state. The purpose is threefold:

To evaluate barriers to opportunity and conditions in key areas of well-being for Black Washingtonians.

Five barometers of well-being are analyzed in the report: economic security, education, criminal justice, health,

and civic engagement. Each measure has its own section in the report, but the relationship among them (for instance, the influence of economic security on health, the relationship between involvement with the criminal justice system and voting rights) is highlighted whenever possible and appropriate, as the systemic barriers directly tied to one area can have a significant impact in another.

To support a public dialogue on race generally, but be specific about the unique experiences of Black people in Washington state.

People of color are rich in diversity, representing a wide range of racial, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds. While they may share commonalities with one another, the diversity between and within different racial and ethnic groups should be acknowledged, celebrated, and understood to advance racial equity in Washington state. This report focuses on Black Washingtonians, but recognizes and supports a larger dialogue on race and a deeper level of understanding for all people of color.

To contribute to a movement that builds an equitable future for Black Washingtonians and supports community-driven public policy solutions.

This report is just one contribution to building an equitable future for Washington state. It is our hope that the findings and discussion that ensue will ripple throughout families, friends, schools, businesses, and neighborhoods across the state so we can all work together to advance racial equity and opportunity for all.

LIMITATIONS

This report is not an exhaustive representation of the Black experience in Washington state, nor is it intended to be. A comprehensive study that blends detailed data analysis with deep community engagement to tell the most accurate story of all Black Washingtonians—men and women, boys and girls, those from different countries and ethnic and cultural backgrounds—is necessary and needed, but beyond the resources available for this report.

Though limited in scope and representation, the story told in the following pages does identify major systemic barriers the Black community faces in gaining opportunity, and how those barriers affect the lives and futures of Black children and families. While we know that in many ways the findings here will raise more questions than provide answers, we are looking forward to a robust, respectful, and on-going conversation throughout our communities to answer those questions.

CREATING AN EQUITABLE FUTURE

Past does not have to be prologue. We must aspire to a social and economic model that has not yet been realized—one that is fully inclusive of people from all backgrounds by providing equal opportunity to prosper. This report is our contribution to making that vision a reality.

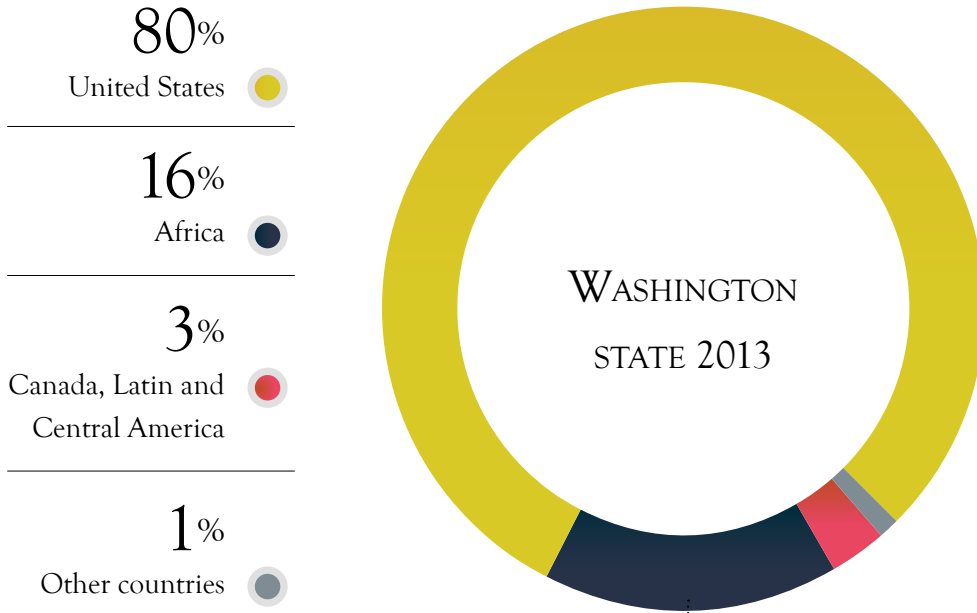
TWO

THE DEPTH & DIVERSITY OF BLACK WASHINGTONIANS

The 238,000 Black people living in Washington state today encompass a wide range of diversity and depth of experience. They share a history as the descendants of survivors of the Middle Passage who became enslaved in the antebellum South, and are the ancestors of the Freedom Riders, the poets of the Harlem Renaissance, the founders of jazz and blues, the veterans of every American war, epic sports heroes and Olympians, and the leaders of the Civil Rights movement, among countless other economic, social, political, and cultural influences. Their ancestors arrived in the Pacific Northwest as far back as 1788¹, but came en masse during The Great Migration—the period between 1910 and 1970 when large numbers of Black people left the South to pursue greater opportunities in the urban centers of the North, Midwest, and West.² Since 1970, the number of African-Americans living in Washington state has almost tripled.³

The 1970s also saw the beginning of an increase in the number of Black people in Washington state who were born outside of the United States, as several federal laws⁴ made it easier for immigrants and refugees to come here. The number of Black immigrants and refugees in Washington state was small initially, and they largely came from Europe, Canada, and Latin America to seek education and job opportunities. As political instability, famine, and violent conditions grew in Africa, however, the number of Black immigrants and refugees from that continent increased dramatically.⁵ Today, the vast majority (83 percent) of Black people born outside of the United States were born in Africa (*see map*),⁶ bringing their own unique brand of knowledge, culture, skills, and experience to Washington state.

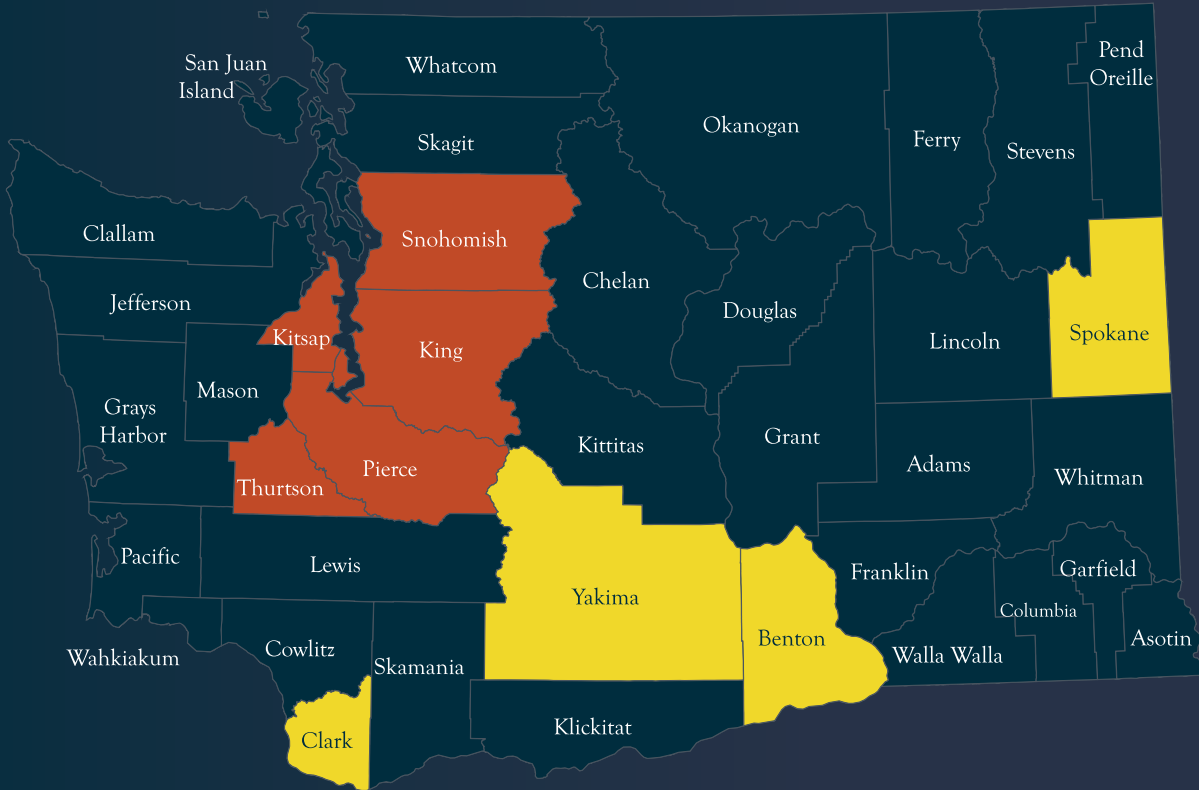
BLACK POPULATION BY PLACE OF BIRTH



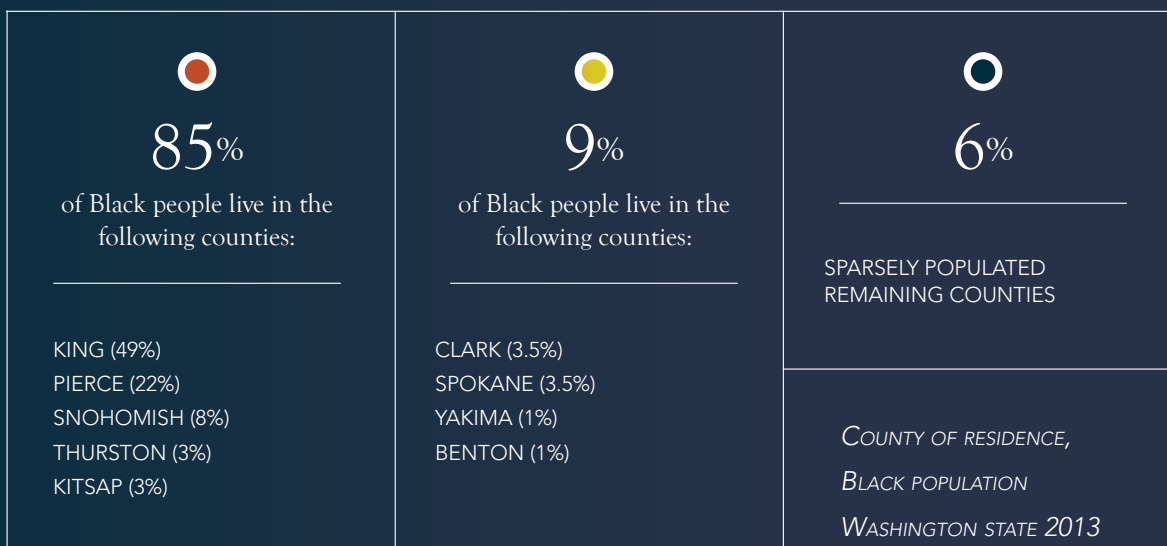
BLACK WASHINGTONIANS BORN OUTSIDE OF THE UNITED STATES ARE FROM AFRICA, ESPECIALLY THE EASTERN COUNTRIES. (NOTE: 5% UNSPECIFIED)

66%	14%	9%	6%
ETHIOPIA KENYA SOMALIA TANZANIA	BENIN BURKINA FASO CAMEROON CENTRAL AFRICAN REPUBLIC CHAD CONGO COTE D'IVOIRE DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF CONGO EQUATORIAL GUINEA GABON	GAMBIA GHANA GUINEA GUINEA-BISSAU LIBERIA MALI MAURITANIA NIGER NIGERIA SENEGAL SIERRA LEONE TOGO	ALGERIA EGYPT LIBYA MOROCCO SUDAN TUNISIA WESTERN SAHARA
			ANGOLA BOTSWANA LESOTHO MADAGASCAR MALAWI MOZAMBIQUE NAMIBIA SOUTH AFRICA SWAZILAND ZAMBIA ZIMBABWE

WHERE BLACK WASHINGTONIANS LIVE



NEARLY NINE OF EVERY 10 BLACK WASHINGTONIANS LIVE IN FIVE COUNTIES SURROUNDING THE SOUTH PUGET SOUND.



WHERE BLACK WASHINGTONIANS LIVE

Nearly nine of every 10 (85 percent) Black Washingtonians live west of the Cascade Mountains in the counties surrounding the Puget Sound (see map).⁷ The highest concentration is in King County (49 percent), followed by Pierce (22 percent), Snohomish (8 percent), Thurston (3 percent), and Kitsap (3 percent) counties. A smaller, but still sizable, number of Black people live in Clark (3.5 percent), Spokane (3.5 percent), Yakima (1 percent), and Benton (1 percent) counties. The remaining population is very sparsely scattered in each of the remaining counties throughout the state.

The depth and diversity of the Black community run deep, and to consider it a homogeneous group would be to oversimplify a complex picture. The unique experience of African-Americans in the United States and Washington state, for example, has been undeniably one of oppression, with a cumulative impact spanning every generation, including babies born today. Black immigrants coming to our state have a different history, with the majority intentionally arriving to seek opportunities the United States has to offer. Black refugees come to Washington state not by choice, but to escape intolerable conditions in their home countries, such as war, famine, genocide, and politically oppressive regimes. The differences in experience and culture paint a far more vivid picture than the single label “Black” suggests. Without a deep understanding of the unique circumstances and experiences facing Black Washingtonians, we cannot develop effective and culturally appropriate policies to ensure progress for everyone.

These diverse groups within the Black community do, however, share a history of unjust barriers to opportunity and unique forms of oppression that undermine their progress and, by extension, the progress of all Washingtonians. They also share a desire for equal access to opportunity for their children and families and the freedom to reach their full potential in life.

In the sections that follow we report on five key areas of well-being—economic security, education, criminal justice, health, and civic engagement—to highlight conditions in the Black community and contribute to a robust conversation about what an equitable future in Washington state looks like. Each section begins by highlighting systemic barriers to opportunity—major obstacles that can be attributed to social and economic systems designed to produce unequal results—and connecting those barriers to outcomes for Black Washingtonians. We end each section with a set of *initial* questions policymakers should explore with the Black community to begin a thoughtful and constructive dialogue on race and equity that is necessary to create a future where all Washingtonians can reach their full potential.



THREE

ECONOMIC SECURITY

The premise of the American Dream—that if you work hard you can get ahead—has long defined the social contract between the United States and its people. The ability of families and individuals to meet basic needs and save money for the future is a precondition to long-term economic security and underpins every domain of well-being. When a critical mass of people is able to get ahead, the benefits ripple throughout communities, businesses, and the economy at large.

The American Dream was realized for some in the aftermath of World War II, when a series of public policies were intentionally designed to support the creation of the middle class. The G.I. Bill—perhaps the single most important piece of legislation to expand educational opportunities and home ownership in the history of the United States—was pivotal to the economic security many Americans realized in the post-war period of “Great Prosperity” that lasted from 1947 to 1979. Beneficiaries of the G.I. Bill built wealth through home ownership and better job opportunities, ultimately passing it on to their children and laying a foundation for family economic security for several generations.⁸

Black people, who also fought for their country during World War II, returned to the United States still fighting for their full human and civil rights. Largely excluded from the G.I. Bill and other public benefits, Black people were denied the same opportunities to pursue education and home ownership as their peers. Throughout the 20th century, for example, Black people in Washington state and across the country were residentially segregated from economic and social opportunities.⁹ Two notorious practices in that regard were racially restrictive “covenants”—agreements between owners and developers of real estate that prohibited Black people (and other racial groups and religious minorities) from living in specific areas—and “redlining,” which labeled entire Black communities as too financially risky for mortgage loans. These types of exclusion, combined with a history of institutionalized discrimination, systematically denied Black people access to the middle class and the intergenerational benefits of post-war prosperity.

2x

The unemployment rate for Black Washingtonians in 2013 was 14 percent, twice as high as the state rate of seven percent.



6 in 10

The number of jobs that pay less than what is needed for a family of three to meet basic needs on one income in Washington state.



54%

The share of monthly income a Black family of three pays for housing and child care—the two biggest expenses a family has.

The average family in Washington state pays 36 percent.

MAJOR OBSTACLES TO ECONOMIC SECURITY

The economic security of Black people in Washington state today, and the future of the entire middle class in our state, cannot be understood or envisioned apart from this history. The barriers to economic security for Black Washingtonians today have taken on new forms, but they have evolved from old challenges that must be tackled if we are to create equal economic opportunities moving forward.

Disproportionally high rates of unemployment. As the Great Recession gripped Washington state, policymakers' attention rightfully focused on a soaring unemployment rate, which reached a peak of 10 percent in 2010. The concern about such high unemployment was warranted—an economy cannot function when such a large number of people are without work and businesses are without customers. The total unemployment rate, however, masked a more troubling trend for the Black community. The rate among Black Washingtonians rose to a staggering 21 percent in 2010, and remained at 14 percent at the end of 2013, compared to the state rate of 7 percent.¹¹ The same level of concern for the general population should apply to all groups. The Black community cannot thrive when such a large share of the community cannot find work.

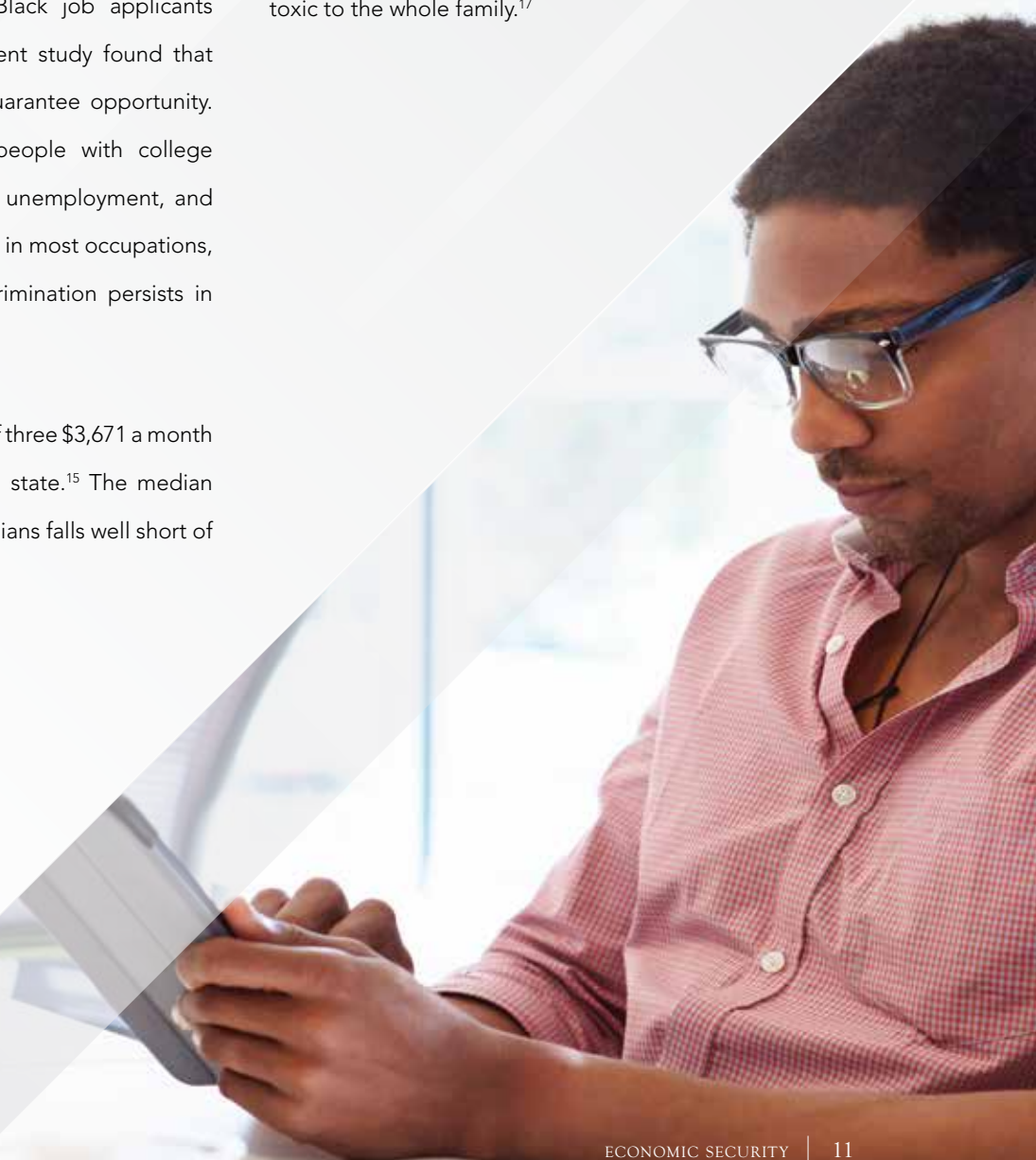
A low-wage job market with racial discrimination. The lack of employment opportunities for Black people is compounded by the low quality of the jobs available. While Washington state has the largest share of high-wage, high-skill science, technology, engineering, and math

(STEM) jobs in the nation, the majority of available jobs skews toward those that pay lower wages. For the state as a whole, six out of 10 (62 percent) jobs are in occupations that pay an hourly wage less than what is needed for a family of three to meet basic needs, let alone get ahead.¹²

Lack of educational opportunities affect both the quantity and quality of employment opportunities for Black Washingtonians described above (see *Education section for more detail*), but research repeatedly shows that, all other qualifications being equal, Black job applicants are less likely to get hired.¹³ A recent study found that even a college degree does not guarantee opportunity. Compared to their peers, Black people with college degrees have much higher rates of unemployment, and are more likely to be underemployed in most occupations, strongly suggesting that racial discrimination persists in the labor market.¹⁴

High cost of living. It costs a family of three \$3,671 a month to meet basic needs in Washington state.¹⁵ The median monthly income of Black Washingtonians falls well short of


that—\$3,380 (compared to \$4,867 for the total population). Housing and child care are the two biggest expenses, together costing a family of three one third (36 percent) of its monthly income. For a Black family of three, the cost is even greater—more than half (54 percent) of its median income.¹⁶ Such high costs of living make it difficult to meet other basic needs, including food and transportation to school or work. When parents do not have the peace of mind that their children are well-nourished, safely housed, or able to get to school, stress can reach levels that are toxic to the whole family.¹⁷



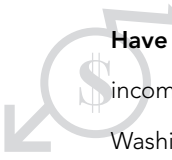
MAKING PROGRESS ON ECONOMIC EQUITY: KEY GAPS TO CLOSE

As a result of these barriers, Black people are far more likely to face economic hardship than many of their peers, and often lack the savings and assets to invest in their future or withstand the impact of a personal financial crisis or weak economy.


COMPARED TO WASHINGTONIANS GENERALLY, BLACK PEOPLE:




Are less likely to have a job that pays enough to meet basic needs. Just more than one quarter (28 percent) of Black workers in Washington state are in a job that pays enough for a family of three to meet basic needs—such as food, shelter, utilities, and child care—on one income.¹⁸ The reason, in part, is due to Black workers being overrepresented in lower-paying jobs, such as retail sales, food service, and administrative work, and underrepresented in the higher-paying STEM occupations, such as computer science, architecture, engineering, and biotech.¹⁹



Have lower household incomes and higher rates of poverty: Weaker job opportunities translate into lower household incomes for Black families, and higher rates of economic hardship. The median household income of Black households in Washington state is nearly \$18,000 less than the state median, and nearly 60 percent of Black children are living in poverty, compared to 39 percent of children overall.²⁰



Less likely to own a home or have enough assets to weather a personal financial crisis or weak economy. Fewer resources, especially given the high cost of living in Washington state, prevent Black families from accumulating the kinds of assets needed to build wealth, such as buying a home or saving for retirement. Just 35 percent of Black people live in households that own their homes compared to 65 percent of Washington households overall.²¹ Nationally, 25 percent of Black households have enough assets to weather a personal financial crisis or weak economy, compared to 46 percent of households overall.²²



Lower median net worth. Systemic barriers to building assets put current and future generations of Black Washingtonians at a significant disadvantage. With net worth 11 times less than the state average, they do not have the resources to achieve permanent economic security or pass down wealth from one generation to the next.²³

DIALOGUE FOR AN EQUITABLE FUTURE

Economic security is the foundation for all other areas of well-being. When families have the peace of mind that comes with having enough to eat, a safe place to stay, and savings on which to fall back, the benefits can be seen through better education and health, greater community and civic engagement, and reduced risk of involvement with the criminal justice system. While barriers exist for all Washingtonians, solutions cannot be one-size-fits-all given such large disparities in economic opportunities between Black Washingtonians and others. Below, we suggest a set of initial questions policymakers should explore with the Black community to address systemic barriers to economic opportunities and identify solutions that create an economy that works for all Washingtonians.

1. What are the most significant barriers to economic opportunity for Black Washingtonians today? In what ways are barriers for African-Americans similar to or different from Black people born outside of the United States?
2. How do barriers to economic opportunities differ for Black men and Black women from different ethnic and cultural backgrounds?
3. What economic policies can be pursued to ensure that all families in Washington state can meet their basic needs? What opportunities are available for the Black community to discuss and inform these policies?
4. How can we increase the share of Black people with access to good jobs? What is the attitude in the Black community toward STEM jobs?
5. Do Black people have adequate access to an education that will allow them to compete for the jobs of today and the future? Does access to education differ for Blacks born in the United States and those born outside of the United States?
6. How has the Black community responded to the high cost of living in the Puget Sound region? Are there ways we can make housing and child care more affordable to advance the economic security of children and families?
7. How is the economic stress a family feels on a monthly basis affecting other indicators of well-being? What are the unique ways in which children experience stress?



FOUR

EDUCATION

High-quality education—from preschool through college—is essential to preparing Washingtonians for success as workers, citizens, parents, and the leaders of tomorrow. Learning begins at birth, and the first five years of a child’s life are particularly important for cognitive, social, emotional, and physical development.²⁴ Higher levels of educational achievement are associated with future success, such as quality job opportunities, higher incomes, good health, and better parenting—the benefits of which pass from one generation to the next.

Our country has a long history of Black Americans fighting to gain equal access to education. From being shut out initially, to “separate but equal” policies under the Supreme Court’s *Plessy v. Ferguson* ruling, to its ruling in *Brown v. the Board of Education* making racial segregation in education unconstitutional, Black people have made significant progress in educational access, achievement, and attainment. Today, more Black Washingtonians hold college degrees than ever before, a testament to that progress, and they have been increasingly joined by many Black people born outside of the United States arriving with higher education degrees from their home countries.²⁵ But much work remains. Unequal access to educational opportunities at every stage prohibits Black students from reaching their full potential. Even those who obtain a degree find it difficult to find work. Many land in jobs that are below their level of education and skill.

\$917

The median cost of child care per month for a family of three in Washington state takes up 27 percent of a Black family's income.

1 in 10

Just one in 10 teachers in Washington state is of color, even though four of every 10 students are of color.



2x

The rate at which Black students in Washington state are suspended or expelled compared to their peers.



\$4.5 BILLION

The amount of additional resources needed to adequately fund K-12 education in Washington state.

25%

The share of a Black family's income needed to pay for average tuition at Washington state's four-year public universities.

MAJOR OBSTACLES TO EDUCATION OPPORTUNITIES

For education to be the great equalizer many people perceive it to be, equal access to high-quality education—across early learning, K-12, and higher education—is a precondition. In practice, today's education system falls short of providing equal opportunity for Black students.

The high cost of early learning opportunities. High-quality early learning experiences, such as those provided in child care settings, are essential for development and help prepare children to be successful in school. The cost of child care, however, is prohibitive for many families in Washington state. Child care for a family of three can cost up to 18 percent of monthly household income; for a Black family of three it can consume up to 27 percent of income, given their generally lower earnings.²⁶

Inadequate state funding for K-12. In 2012, the Washington State Supreme Court ruled in *McCleary v. State of Washington* that the state is not fulfilling its paramount duty under the state constitution to fund basic K-12 education. The court recognized that funding for schools varies by geographic location, and that many schools rely too heavily on local taxes to make up for resources that should be provided by the state.²⁷ In its ruling, the Supreme Court gave the Legislature until 2018 to invest an additional \$4.5 billion into the K-12 system to meet its constitutional obligation.²⁸

The lack of adequate school funding is a major barrier for all students, but particularly for students of color, who are more likely than their peers to experience gaps in opportunity within the education system and outside of it. In addition, the unique social and economic circumstances many Black students face—particularly those born outside of the United States—may require specialized, culturally competent investments to help them excel in school. The amount of school funding, as well as the ways in which resources are spent, are both critical to achieving greater equity in Washington state’s K-12 system.

Disproportionality in student discipline. Being suspended or expelled from school is associated with falling behind in coursework and dropping out, and increases the chances of a student becoming involved with the criminal justice system.²⁹ At nine percent, the rate of suspension or expulsion for African-American children in Washington state is more than twice as high as the state average of four percent. Black students born outside the United States have a rate of six percent.³⁰

Lack of teacher diversity. Teachers of color bring a broad range of experience and perspective that is essential for a rapidly diversifying student population. Not only do they serve as positive role models in the community, research shows that students of color who are taught by teachers of color do better in school.³¹ Of every 10 students in

Washington state public schools, four are of color, yet just one of every 10 teachers is of color.³²

Rising cost of college tuition. The growing cost of higher education is felt by all Washingtonians, but is particularly significant for students with low incomes and those of color. College tuition for four-year public universities has increased by 81 percent since the start of the Great Recession.³³ Today one year of tuition at a four-year public university in Washington state would take one quarter (25 percent) of a Black family’s median income.³⁴



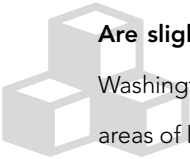
MAKING PROGRESS ON EQUITY IN EDUCATION: KEY GAPS TO CLOSE

For the 80,000 Black children in Washington state public schools, difficulty finding affordable, high-quality early learning opportunities, lack of adequate school funding for K-12, disproportionate disciplinary action, a lack of teacher diversity, and the prohibitive cost of higher education combine to affect their achievement and attainment across the education pipeline, as well as their future opportunities in the labor market.

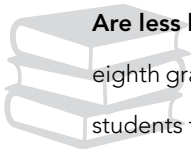
COMPARED TO THEIR PEERS, BLACK STUDENTS IN WASHINGTON STATE:



Have lower rates of preschool enrollment. The cost of child care is likely just one reason why less than half (45 percent) of Black children are enrolled in preschool compared to their peers (53 percent).³⁶ Other reasons may include a shortage of child care availability in neighborhoods, lack of culturally competent child care, or differences in care preference by racial or ethnic background.



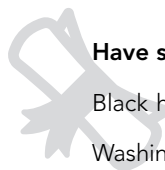
Are slightly less likely to be prepared for kindergarten. At 41 percent, the share of children ready for kindergarten in Washington state is low overall; Black kindergarteners are only slightly behind their peers, with 39 percent prepared in all six areas of kindergarten readiness.³⁷



Are less likely to meet standards in third grade reading and eighth grade math. Proficiency in third grade reading and eighth grade math are key predictors of future success in school.³⁸ The achievement gap is evident by third grade, with Black students trailing their peers in reading proficiency by 15 percentage points. By eighth grade, Black students trail their peers in meeting math standards by 22 percentage points.³⁹



Are less likely to graduate from high school on-time. Graduating from high school is an essential step in transitioning into adulthood. Sixty-five percent of Black students entering ninth grade graduate within four years, compared to 76 percent of students overall.⁴⁰



Have similar rates of college enrollment after they graduate high school, but have lower degree completion rates. Black high-school graduates have similar rates of college enrollment as their peers. However, colleges and universities in Washington state are less likely to retain Black students. For students entering college in 2005, for example, the rate of completion at public universities was 68 percent overall, but 52 percent for Black students.⁴¹

DIALOGUE FOR AN EQUITABLE FUTURE

Access to an affordable, high-quality, and integrated system of early learning, K-12, and higher education remains one of the most important opportunities Washingtonians need to reach their full potential and compete in the 21st century economy. Each stage of education serves as a building block for the next, and when students receive the opportunities they need to excel and achieve, the impact is cumulative and lifelong. Higher educational attainment is associated with increased earnings and economic security, greater job satisfaction, and a greater sense of control over one's life—all of which enhance individual well-being and have large returns for society.⁴² Below are questions to be explored in collaboration with the Black community to improve opportunities and outcomes across the entire education pipeline.

1. How can we expand high quality early learning opportunities for Black children and families? How does the Black community define “quality” in education, and how is it similar or different for African-Americans and Black people born outside of the United States?
2. How will the state provide adequate funding to close the achievement gap? What resources do Black students need to stay in school and excel? Are different resources needed for African-American students and Black students born outside of the United States?
3. What are the root causes of Black students being disciplined more than their peers? How can we reform discipline policy and devise more constructive strategies to keep Black children engaged in school?
4. How can we bring greater diversity into our children's classrooms?
5. If Black students who graduate are just as likely to enroll in college, why do they have lower rates of obtaining an associate's degree or more? In addition to the prohibitive cost of higher education, what are the major reasons colleges cannot retain Black students, and what strategies can be pursued to improve their rates of college completion?



FIVE

CRIMINAL JUSTICE

Strong communities depend on trust. When people feel confident that they are protected and have the opportunity to live, work, and play without the fear of violence, harassment, or discrimination, stronger bonds form within communities.

The criminal justice system is responsible for protecting neighborhoods and building trust, but there is perhaps no other institution more devastating to Black children, families, and communities today. The United States has the highest incarceration rate in the world—there are more than two million people in U.S. prisons. Of these, a staggering 38 percent are Black men and women.⁶⁰

Importantly, trends in incarceration and racial disproportionality in the criminal justice system cannot be explained by greater criminal activity or higher rates of crime within the Black community. On the contrary, a recent review of research conducted by the *Task Force on Race in the Criminal Justice System* concluded that “race and racial bias affect outcomes in [Washington state’s] criminal justice system and matter in ways that are not fair, that increase disparity in incarceration rates, that do not advance legitimate public safety objectives, and that undermine public confidence in our criminal justice system.”⁶¹

While racial bias has been present in our criminal justice system throughout history, the most recent wave of racially biased laws has resulted in such widespread incarceration of Black people that the period from 1980 to today has been referred to as “the new Jim Crow.”⁶² Exacerbating these trends are several recent high-profile killings of Black men by police—most recently Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri, and Eric Garner in New York City, among many others—that have elevated racial tensions between law enforcement and the Black community across the country, deepening mistrust and reigniting a nationwide conversation about race and racial bias in the criminal justice system.

#1

The United States incarcerates its population at a higher rate than anywhere else in the world, even though it has a marginal effect on reducing crime. The prison population in Washington state increased more than 300 percent between 1980 and 2011.



“THERE IS A PROBLEM IN [WASHINGTON STATE’S] CRIMINAL JUSTICE SYSTEM ... PUT SIMPLY, WE HAVE FOUND DISPARITY AND MISTRUST. TOGETHER WE MUST FIX IT FOR THE SAKE OF OUR DEMOCRACY.”

Task Force on Race in the Criminal Justice System

18%

In Washington state, the share of Black people in prison (18 percent) is four times higher than their share in the state population.

OBSTACLES TO EQUITY IN THE CRIMINAL JUSTICE SYSTEM

If we want communities throughout Washington state to be places where people truly feel protected and trust local law enforcement, a deeper understanding of the disproportionate involvement of Black people in the criminal justice system is needed.

A weak relationship between declining crime and rising incarceration. The total crime rate in Washington state has been declining for the last two decades, decreasing from 60 per 1,000 people in 1994 to 40 per 1,000 people in 2013.⁶³ The violent crime rate has been declining as well, dropping by more than half (54 percent) during the same period.⁶⁴ Some policymakers have speculated that increases in incarceration are the major reason crime is declining, but the reality is more complicated. The impact of incarceration varies widely depending on the time frame and geographic location analyzed, suggesting other factors are largely at play.⁶⁵ For example, one study found that 25 percent of the drop in crime rates in the 1990s can be attributed to the increase in incarceration; the remainder is due to other factors, including the strong economy of the 1990s, the waning crack epidemic, and successful community-led efforts to address crime.⁶⁶ Given the extraordinary toll of incarceration on society generally, but for the Black community especially, a discussion of reversing trends in incarceration is needed.

The long shadow of the War on Drugs. In Washington state the prison population increased 300 percent between 1980 and 2011. Much of this rise began in the 1980s as the Reagan administration launched the War on Drugs, which escalated the policing, arrests, and conviction of drug offenders on a much larger scale than previously seen. Even though rates of overall drug use among Black people are similar to their peers,⁶⁷ a combination of greater policing in Black neighborhoods and the targeting of drugs sold in public—especially crack cocaine—contributed to disproportionate arrests of Black drug offenders.⁶⁸ Greater poverty within the Black community left drug offenders with limited resources to navigate the criminal justice system, and harsher sentencing policies for crack cocaine—the only drug Black people were more likely to use than their peers—resulted in an unprecedented and disproportionate number of Black people being sent to prison. In Washington state, one study found that Black drug offenders were 62 percent more likely to be sentenced to prison than white drug offenders with similar circumstances.⁶⁹ Another study, based in Seattle, found that racial disparities in drug arrests were being driven by police targeting crack cocaine to the exclusion of almost all other drugs, even though powder cocaine and ecstasy—more popular among white drug users—are more prevalent in the city.⁷⁰

The Fair Sentencing Act of 2010 reduced disproportionate sentencing for drug crimes in Washington state, but the legacy of the War on Drugs still casts a long shadow on the Black community. Defendants of color in Washington

state—regardless of age and especially if they are Black—experience harsher sentencing than white people for most crimes, even when their backgrounds and circumstances are similar.⁷¹

Violence, trust, and transparency between law enforcement and the Black community. The events in Ferguson, Missouri, and New York City have renewed efforts to collect and publish data on what many Black people believe an all-too-common occurrence in their communities: racially charged and violent experiences with police. In Washington state, statewide data needed to systematically evaluate whether use of force by police is happening disproportionately in the Black community does not yet exist. However, an investigation of the Seattle Police Department (SPD) conducted by the U.S. Department of Justice found “a pattern or practice of constitutional violations regarding the use of force that result from structural problems, as well as serious concerns about biased policing.”⁷²

In the wake of the Michael Brown and Eric Garner tragedies, many news outlets⁷³ have attempted to uncover data on the use of force by police for cities across the country,⁷⁴ to no avail. The SPD investigation, in addition to others across the country, suggests the trend is widespread and pervasive, reinforcing the need for more transparency, and better data to deepen our understanding of police practices in the Black community.

MAKING PROGRESS ON EQUITY IN THE CRIMINAL JUSTICE SYSTEM: KEY GAPS TO CLOSE

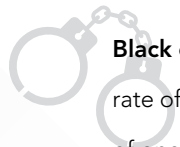
The collateral damage of mass incarceration affects the economic security, health, and civic engagement of entire communities. If current trends continue, one in three Black men and one in 18 Black women in the United States will spend some time in prison, removing a critical mass of workers, parents, brothers, sisters, friends, and voters from the Black community. Nearly two million children in the United States currently have a parent in prison, many of whom struggle to maintain relationships with their incarcerated parents, face more economic hardship than their peers, and struggle in school. Use of excessive force and violence in the Black community will only serve to further undermine trust between the community and law enforcement.

IN WASHINGTON STATE:



Black adults have a rate of incarceration five times higher than the state average.

The rate of incarceration for Black adults is 33 per 1,000, compared to the statewide rate of six per 1,000.⁷⁵



Black children are detained at a rate four times higher than the state average.

The rate of juvenile detention is four per 1,000 for Black children, compared to the state rate of one per 1,000.⁷⁶

DIALOGUE FOR AN EQUITABLE FUTURE

Black Washingtonians cannot make progress without policies and programs that reduce disparities in the criminal justice system, support families most affected by mass incarceration, and reduce violence within and against the Black community while building greater trust with law enforcement. Below are a set of questions policymakers should explore with the Black community to promote greater equity in the criminal justice system.

1. In what ways do higher incarceration rates among Black people in Washington state affect the Black community as a whole?
2. Given the high incarceration rates among Black men, what unique circumstances do women and children with an incarcerated family member face? What unique needs do children with an incarcerated parent have? How can policies or programs help address the needs of families with an incarcerated relative?
3. What are the contributing factors to higher rates of juvenile detention for Black youth? How can state policies and programs better meet the needs of Black youth to keep them out of the criminal justice system?
4. How do sentencing policies and practices in Washington state contribute to disparities in incarceration? Are there changes to sentencing policy that could reduce racial and ethnic disparities in the criminal justice system?
5. Are there innovative ways that law enforcement can work with the Black community to reduce racial bias and rebuild trust? In what ways can we support prisoners, particularly if they are non-violent, in re-entering their communities and rejoining their families?
6. How can we build greater diversity within the police force?
7. Can we improve data collection efforts so they are culturally competent and adequately evaluate racial biases in the criminal justice system?

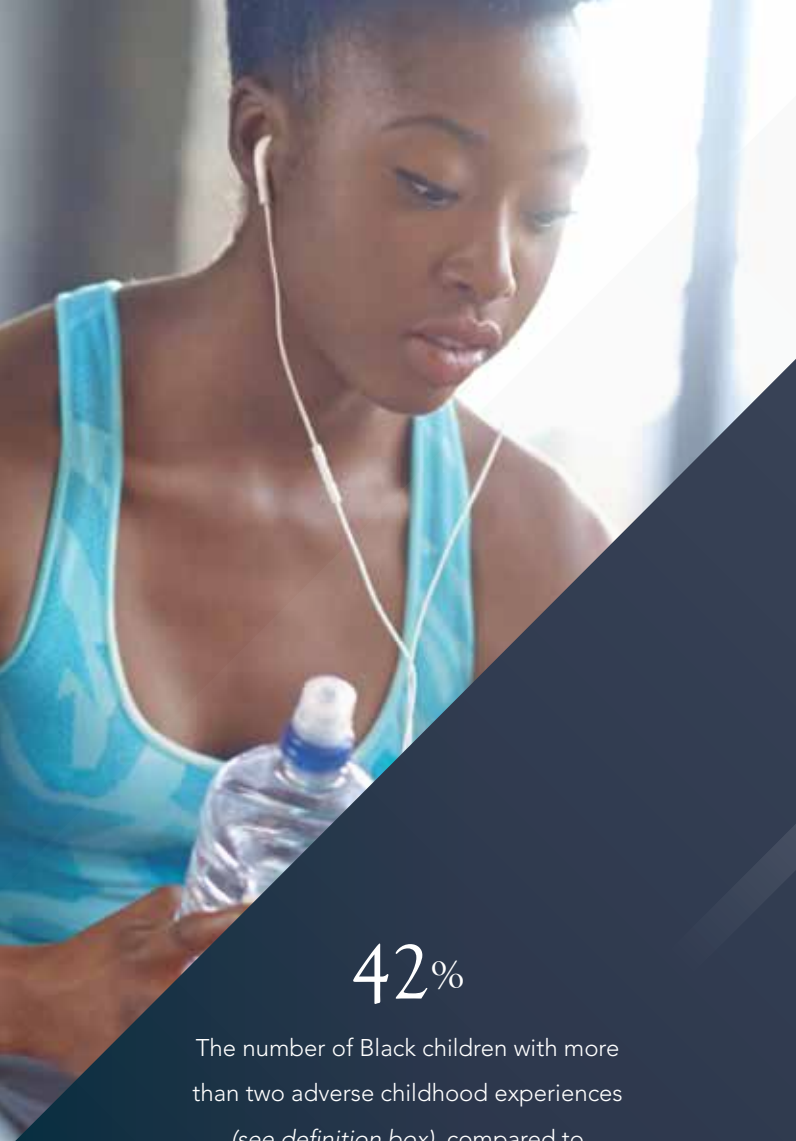


SIX

HEALTH

Good health is essential to quality of life, and our health is substantially affected by the environments in which we live. Living in a safe home, having enough food to eat, having stable employment, attending good schools, and living in neighborhoods where people trust one another and feel protected are all essential to a healthy life.⁴³

Such social conditions play a significant role in the health of Black Washingtonians. Lack of economic and educational opportunities have made it harder for Black people to find stable, living-wage employment that allows families to meet basic needs like housing and food, as well as invest in their own future or that of their children. In addition to the threat to physical well-being posed by hunger or not having a safe place to call home, the mental stress of such instability can reach levels so toxic that it can take a toll on every aspect of child and family health,⁴⁴ with consequences that can last well into the future.



42%

The number of Black children with more than two adverse childhood experiences (see definition box), compared to 24 percent of children overall.

60%

The number of Black children living in families with economic hardship—the most common adverse experience children face—compared to the state average of 39 percent.



23%

The number of Black working-age (18 to 64) adults without health insurance, compared to the state average of 19 percent.

MAJOR OBSTACLES TO EQUITY IN HEALTH

Improving the health and well-being of Black Washingtonians is largely dependent on how much progress we make on removing the social and economic barriers to opportunity they face, including:

Adverse experiences and toxic stress. A growing body of research suggests that stress resulting from adverse experiences in childhood (see table for definition) can harm the maturing brains of children and have health consequences that last well into adulthood. The more adversity a child experiences, the greater the risk for cardiovascular disease, lung and liver disease, depression, violence, smoking, drug and alcohol abuse, obesity, risky sexual behaviors, and early death.⁴⁵ Forty-two percent of Black children in Washington state have had two or more adverse experiences, compared to 24 percent of children overall.⁴⁶ Economic hardship is the most common adversity children face.⁴⁷ Black children and families in Washington state have a rate of economic hardship one-and-a-half times higher than the state average.⁴⁸

EXAMPLES OF ADVERSE EXPERIENCES

- Economic hardship
 - Divorce or separation of a parent
 - Death of a parent
 - Parent served time in jail or prison
 - Victim of or witness to domestic violence
 - Victim of or witness to neighborhood violence
 - Living with someone who is mentally ill or suicidal
 - Living with someone with an alcohol or drug problem
 - Being treated unfairly due to race or ethnicity
-

Access to health insurance. All people should have the opportunity to see a doctor when they are sick, regardless of their ability to pay. Access to affordable health care increases the chances that people will seek care in a timely manner, which benefits the health of children and families, as well as the public's health. The Affordable Care Act is already improving access to health care for the nearly one million Washingtonians who were previously uninsured,⁴⁹ and our state's health insurance program for children, Apple Health, has dramatically reduced the number of uninsured children.⁵⁰ The latest data on race, however, shows that work remains to close gaps in health care coverage for Black, working-age adults (age 18 to 64), as well as for Black people born outside of the United States. Nineteen percent of working-age adults in Washington state lacked health insurance in 2012, while the rate for working-age Black people was 23 percent. For Black people born outside the United States, the rate is even higher: 32 percent.⁵¹

Environmental injustice. People of color and those with lower incomes have historically suffered from disproportionately high levels of exposure to pollution from toxic waste, landfills, sewage facilities, and industrial sites compared to the population as a whole.⁵² This has been linked to higher levels of lead poisoning, asthma, cancer, and other diseases in the Black community.⁵³ Currently, there is no comprehensive statewide data on environmental injustice in Washington state. However, national data, paired with data in Washington state showing lower levels of economic security and higher rates of asthma (see *outcomes next page*) among the Black population as a whole, warrant investigation into how environmental risks faced by Black Washingtonians impact their health.

MAKING PROGRESS ON HEALTH EQUITY: KEY GAPS TO CLOSE

Social and economic inequality affects the health of many Black Washingtonians from birth onward, playing out across multiple dimensions of health and well-being.

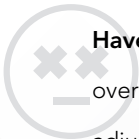
COMPARED TO THEIR PEERS IN WASHINGTON STATE, BLACK PEOPLE:



Are more likely to be born at low birth weight. Babies born at a low weight (less than 5.5 pounds) are less likely to survive than babies born at a normal weight, and have a higher likelihood of experiencing a range of negative health outcomes in childhood and adulthood.⁵⁴ Eleven percent of Black babies are born at low birth weight, compared to six percent of all babies.⁵⁵



Have higher rates of childhood asthma and obesity. Research suggests that the quality of the natural (e.g., air quality) and built environments (e.g., access to healthy food and parks, walkable neighborhoods, and housing quality) plays a major role in health outcomes. In Washington state, Black children have higher rates of both obesity and asthma than their peers,⁵⁶ two illnesses that are strongly linked to economic inequality and environmental factors.⁵⁷



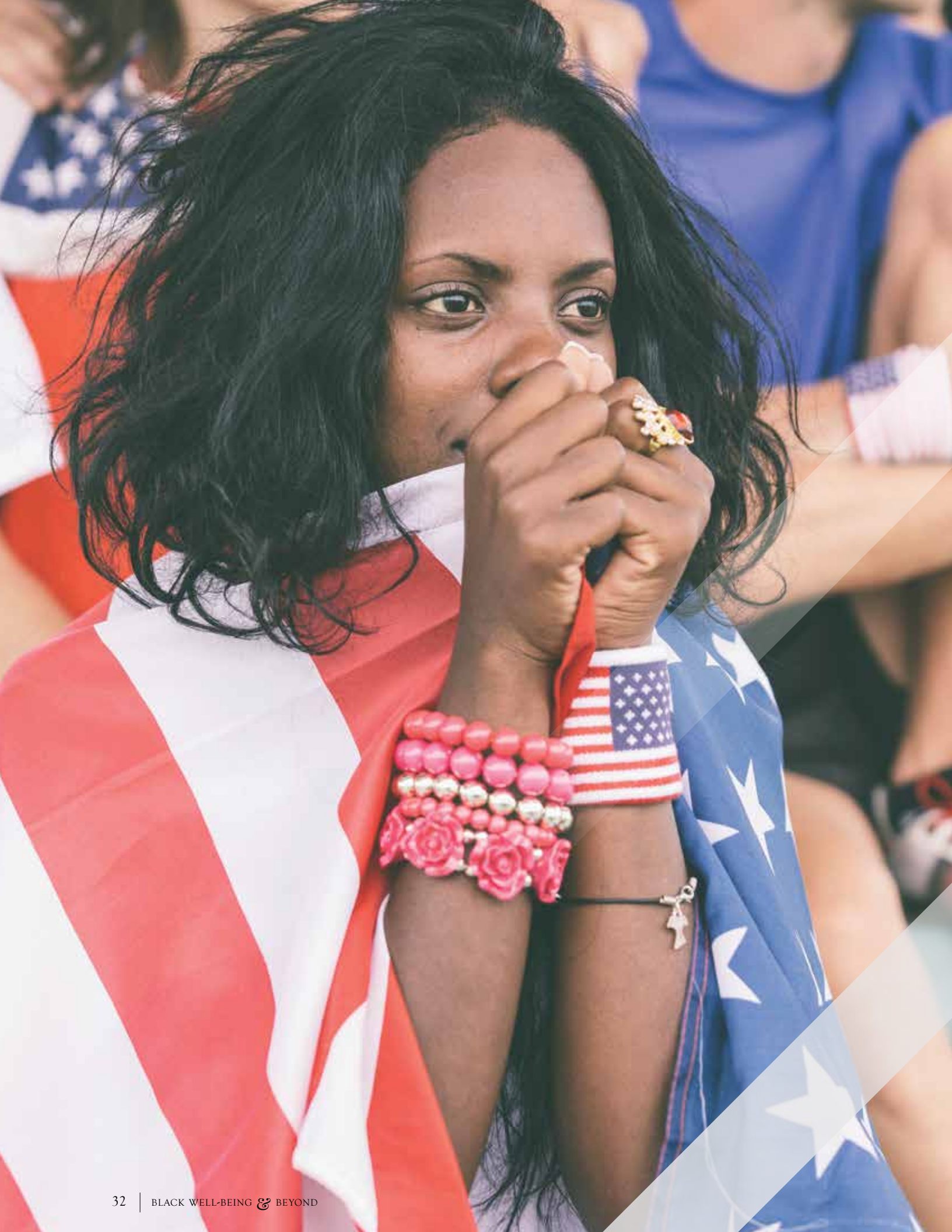
Have higher rates of mortality and lower life expectancy. Barriers to economic and education opportunities accumulate over time and are strongly associated with higher rates of illness and premature death in the Black community. Overall age-adjusted mortality among Black people (885 per 100,000) is significantly higher than the state rate (677 per 100,000).⁵⁸ A Black baby born in Washington state today has a life expectancy four years shorter (76) than the state average (80).⁵⁹



DIALOGUE FOR AN EQUITABLE FUTURE

All Washingtonians deserve the opportunity to lead healthy, productive lives. When children are healthy they do better in school, and when adults are healthy they are better workers and parents—all of which benefit communities and the economy. Recognizing the strong relationship among social, economic, and educational opportunities, and good health, is essential to improving health in the Black community. Below we highlight a set of questions that policymakers should explore with the Black community to advance health equity in Washington state.

1. What stories help illustrate how systemic barriers to social and economic opportunities harm health in the Black community? Are there policies that would improve the overall health of Black Washingtonians until equity is achieved?
2. What are the major health concerns of Black people from different cultural backgrounds and ages, as well as men and women?
3. What community-led responses to adverse experiences and toxic stress will bolster the health of the Black community as a whole? Are the adverse experiences that African-American children face similar to or different than those of children born outside of the United States?
4. What policies need to be enacted so that everyone in the Black community has adequate access to health insurance and care? Are there different strategies needed for African-Americans and Black people born outside of the United States? Has the Affordable Care Act improved access to health care for the Black community as a whole?
5. What strategies do Black families use to remain healthy in challenging environments? What are the main drivers of higher mortality in the Black community? Are Black people born outside of the United States more or less healthy than African-Americans?
6. How can we better protect the Black community from environmental toxins and promote healthy and sustainable natural and built environments in Black communities?



SEVEN

CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

A representative and well-functioning democracy depends on the people it serves making their voices heard and taking action on their own behalf. When communities have an equal opportunity to engage in the decision-making processes that affect their daily lives, problems are more likely to be solved, communities are more likely to thrive, and public policies are more likely to succeed.

A history of discrimination, combined with the effects of lower economic and educational opportunities, has kept Black people from being equally represented at all levels of decision making. Exercising our right to vote, for example, is the most direct way to engage in our democracy. But policies intended to suppress the Black vote—like poll taxes, literacy tests and, more recently, overly restrictive voter identification requirements — taint our history.⁷⁷ In addition, laws that restrict felons from voting have reduced political power in the Black community, one of the many consequences of harsher sentencing policies stemming from the War on Drugs, which disproportionately sent Black people to prison for drug felonies.⁷⁸

Beyond voting, a lack of social and economic resources puts Black people at a significant disadvantage in a political system influenced so heavily by money, which may discourage, or outright prevent, Black people from running for office.⁷⁹ How campaigns are financed significantly hinders Black representation in government, and is a key area where reform is needed. Greater representation in government, as well as in the private and nonprofit sectors, can lead to more racially just decision making, but a larger conversation about the root causes creating such large gaps in wealth and power is needed to ensure equity in policymaking moving forward.⁸⁰

OBSTACLES TO EQUITY IN CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

For public policies and programs to truly reflect the needs of Black Washingtonians, barriers to civic engagement must be removed. In particular, policies that bolster the inclusion of Black people in politics and policymaking need to be a priority for policymakers.

Wealth inequality and the campaign finance system.

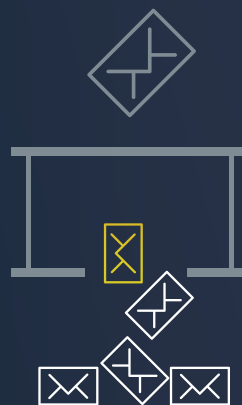
Nationally and in Washington state, the political system is increasingly dominated by wealthy people and corporations, whose interests differ considerably from those of average Americans. Wealthy people, for example, tend to favor policies that will increase their wealth—like lower taxes on capital gains and tax breaks for corporations—and are less likely to favor policies that support the middle class, like adequately funding K-12 education, public transportation, and affordable health care.⁸¹ As a result, the overwhelming influence of money in politics fuels greater inequality and undermines the very premise of a well-functioning democracy—equal representation.

For Black people, whose median net worth (\$6,314) is far below the median for the United States as a whole (\$68,828),⁸² and minuscule compared to the net worth of most wealthy people and corporations, the obstacles to equal political participation are virtually insurmountable. The wealth gaps for Black people are rooted in systemic barriers to economic and education opportunities that should be removed to improve overall conditions for the Black community. But removing those barriers alone will not elevate Black representation in politics and policymaking until the laws that allow wealth to dominate United States and state politics are reformed.

Voter disenfranchisement. A person convicted of a felony in Washington state who is currently serving time in a correctional facility, or is on parole or probation, is unable to vote. The disproportional impact of the War on Drugs on the Black community has disenfranchised a greater share of Black voters with a felony record—four percent compared to just one percent of felons overall.⁸³

11x

The median net worth of the average U.S. household is 11 times greater (\$68,828) than the average Black household (\$6,314). In a political system so heavily influenced by wealth, it is nearly impossible to ensure equal representation for a strong democracy.



4:1

Four percent of Black people with a felony have lost their right to vote, compared to an average of one percent for the felon population as a whole.

MAKING PROGRESS: KEY GAPS TO CLOSE

In Washington state, legislators who are majority white, male, and older are making decisions for a rapidly diversifying electorate that looks much different than them. A political system that fails to guarantee equal representation for people from all social and economic backgrounds is harmful to civic engagement, as is the disproportionate impact of voting restrictions for people convicted of a felony.

IN WASHINGTON STATE, BLACK PEOPLE:



Are less likely to be registered to vote. Among eligible Black voters, 68 percent are registered compared to the state rate of 83 percent.⁸⁴



Have almost no representation in the state Legislature. The lack of the Black community's access and influence in politics and policymaking is evident in our state Legislature, where there is just one Black legislator out of 147 total.

DIALOGUE FOR AN EQUITABLE FUTURE

Equal representation is essential to a strong democracy, and is critical to advancing equity in all areas of Black well-being. Below are a set of questions policymakers should explore with the Black community to improve civic engagement and advance racial equity in policymaking.

-
1. What barriers to civic engagement exist for Black immigrants and refugees? Are they similar or different to native-born Black people?
 2. In addition to addressing voter disenfranchisement, how can we increase voter registration and turnout in the Black community?
 3. What are some community-driven strategies to create a more just and equitable political system? Until we have a more equitable political system, how can we overcome barriers to ensure that Black voices are represented in the state Legislature?
 4. What other aspects of our political systems need to be changed to increase representation and elevate the voices of the Black community in Washington state?



EIGHT

CONCLUSION

CREATING AN EQUITABLE FUTURE FOR BLACK WASHINGTONIANS

What does the future look like for Black Washingtonians? It should not be anything less than a future based on equity, where all people have the same opportunities to reach their full potential.

Some serious work remains to realize that future.

This report outlines some of the major ways the social, economic, and political systems in Washington state intertwine to create barriers to opportunity that impede progress within the Black community. It is just a start and, to get the full picture, these findings must be situated within the reignited conversation about race and racial bias already underway in Washington state. We deeply believe that the community knows itself best. To truly understand how these issues converge in everyday lives and then create solutions that will catapult forward the progress we all seek, Black Washingtonians must speak for themselves through community dialogue and idea generation.

NEXT STEPS

African American Leadership Forum–Seattle, Byrd Barr Place, and the Washington State Commission on African American Affairs promise to continue our work with the Black community to deepen our understanding of the findings in this report, and elevate the voices of Black Washingtonians in the process. During the next year, we will bring this report to communities across the state to support a community-led effort to create the changes we need to realize the future we want.

Past need not be prologue. There is an urgency to take advantage of the moment we are in. Events unfolding throughout the country are providing an opportunity to make meaningful progress in our state and country and to usher in a new era in the long movement for civil rights. It's not just about time, it's the right time. We hope to work together to create an equitable future not just for Black Washingtonians, but for all Washingtonians.

NINE

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