

# Landscape of Black student trajectories and experiences in Illinois

## Early Childhood

### Health Indicators

Although the majority of Black Illinois residents do not live in counties considered maternity care deserts<sup>1,2</sup>, Black women still have the lowest rates of adequate prenatal care, the highest pregnancy-related mortality rates, and are most likely to experience pregnancy-related deaths when discrimination was a contributing factor.<sup>3,4</sup> Moreover, Black infants have the highest preterm birth rates, the lowest birthweight rates, and the highest infant mortality rates compared to other racial groups.<sup>5-7</sup>

### Enrollment

Black children (ages 0-3) represent about 30% of all public Prevention Initiative (PI) program enrollees (making them the second largest group of enrollees in the state), with Black children more likely to enroll in Early Head Start and Baby Talk programs.<sup>8</sup>

44% of all Black children are enrolled in public pre-K programs, with about half enrolled in full-day programs, 58% enrolled in school-based programs, and 47% enrolled for 2 years.<sup>8</sup>

For comparison, Black children represent about 14% of all kindergarten students in the state.<sup>9</sup>

### Kindergarten Readiness

Between 2018 and 2022, Black children (along with Hispanic/Latino students) were less likely to be kindergarten ready across all three KIDS domains (SEL, language and literacy, and math) compared to other students. Moreover, Black children suffered the largest declines across all three KIDS domains since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>10</sup>

Even among children entering kindergarten with similar KIDS scores, Black students (as well as Hispanic/Latino and low-income students) were less likely to score at or above state proficiency levels in math and language in grade 3 IAR scores, indicating disparities by race grow in early elementary school.<sup>9</sup>

### Program Spotlight

Three Chicago-area initiatives have missions to close the pregnancy-related mortality gap and improve maternity care for Black mothers.

**South Side Birth Center.** Set to open in 2027, the South Side Birth Center will have birthing suites and a reproductive health clinic with culturally relevant midwifery care with the hope of empowering Black patients and Black health care workers.<sup>11,12</sup>

**Kennedy-King Midwife Program.** City Colleges of Chicago Kennedy-King campus, a predominately Black institution, will have the state's first Certified Professional Midwife degree program beginning in fall 2026.<sup>13</sup>

**UChicago Labor & Delivery Doula.** Around the clock doulas are now available in UChicago's labor and delivery unit at no cost with qualifying insurance and/or Medicaid.<sup>14</sup>

### Discipline

Black children represent a higher percentage of all exclusions, expulsions, transitions, and withdrawals relative to their enrollment in early childhood education. After the passage of Illinois' Early Childhood Expulsion Law (Public Act 100-0105), some discipline incident rates decreased for Black students, but not all.<sup>15</sup>

### Social Services

From birth to early childhood, Black families are overrepresented among those receiving social services benefits such as Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC), and Medicaid, as well as those receiving housing subsidies.<sup>8,16,17</sup>

## Family and Community Needs

In a statewide survey aimed at understanding the needs of families and communities for early childhood education, Black respondents (among others) believed the early childhood system should develop children's social and interpersonal skills and provide a high-quality education for students of all abilities and backgrounds. Black respondents also emphasized the need for their early childhood program to be a safe space while also supporting their children's concrete knowledge of academic skills. Black respondents also noted the challenges of navigating the early childhood system to find a high-quality and affordable program.<sup>18</sup>

**Figure 1.** Components of family and community needs for early childhood education in the state.



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# Landscape of Black student trajectories and experiences in Illinois

## K-12



The majority of data in this section were newly analyzed as part of this project. The data comes from the Illinois State Board of Education's Report Card.<sup>1</sup>

### Black-serving schools and districts

We define Black-serving schools and districts as enrolling 30% or more Black or African American students. Just less than 10% of Illinois districts are Black-serving districts (N = 84) and about 19% of Illinois schools are Black-serving schools (N = 712). Compared to all schools and districts, Black-serving schools and districts are more likely to have higher percentages of low-income students, have higher percentages of students experiencing homelessness, be in evidence-based funding (EBF) Tiers 1 and 2 (i.e., have less than adequate funding), and be in either cities or suburbs.

### Achievement

Across several achievement measures including 9th grade OnTrack, Advanced Placement (AP), dual credit, enriched, or honors coursework participation, and 4-year graduation rates, Black students had better participation or higher achievement in all schools or districts compared to Black students in Black-serving schools and districts. Moreover, Black-serving schools and districts were less likely to assess any students for giftedness and therefore identified fewer Black students (and all students) as gifted compared to all schools and districts. These findings likely point to issues of Black-serving schools and districts being under-resourced and therefore may impose barriers to Black students' success.

### District Spotlight

Chicago Public Schools created the **Black Student Success Plan** with the goal of "improving daily learning experiences and life outcomes for Black students and eliminate opportunity gaps."<sup>2</sup> The Plan uses several anchor strategies that focus on the whole child and how best to support them from every aspect. On-going community roundtables are hosted as a means to share updates, solicit feedback, offer collaboration, and include community members in the implementation of the Plan.

### School Climate

On the 5Essentials school climate survey, average scores for Effective Leaders, Collaborative Teachers, and Involved Families increased for Black-serving schools (and all schools) since 2022. In 2024, Black-serving schools had higher scores on Ambitious Instruction, on average, compared to all schools that year.

Black-serving schools and districts have larger class sizes than the state average, and class size in Black-serving schools and districts have increased since 2022.

On average, discipline incident rates were higher in Black-serving schools and districts than in all schools and districts. Black-serving schools and districts had higher rates of out-of-school suspensions and removals compared to all schools and districts, which had higher rates of in-school suspensions.

### Educators

Compared to all schools and districts, there are higher percentages of Black teachers, Black National Board-Certified Educators, and Black administrators in Black-serving schools and districts. Black-serving schools and districts have higher percentages of teachers with a master's degree compared to all schools and districts, but Black-serving schools and districts also have lower retention rates for teachers compared to all districts and schools.

As of 2022, Black teachers represented only 6% of the teacher workforce, when Black students represented 17% of the pre-K-12 student body in Illinois. Along the teacher pipeline, there are notable points where Black representation plummets: first at the transition from bachelor's degree enrollment to teacher preparation program enrollment, and second at the transition point from licensed teacher preparation program completion to newly hired teachers.<sup>3</sup>

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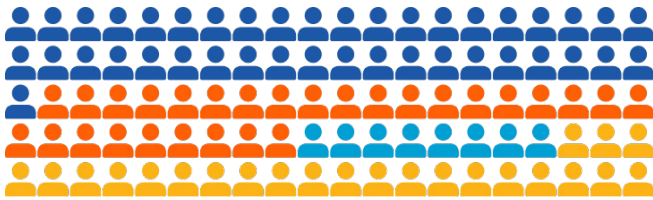
# Landscape of Black student trajectories and experiences in Illinois College



## Attainment

As of 2022, of Black Illinoisans age 25 and older, 41% held a high school diploma or equivalent, 28% had some college but no degree, 8% held an associate degree, and 23% held a bachelor's degree or higher.<sup>1</sup>

**Figure 2.** Educational attainment of Black Illinoisans (age 25+), including high school diploma, some college, associate degree, bachelor's degree or higher.



## Choice

In a 2022 survey of Illinois high school seniors, Black students noted factors such as admission processes, diversity and support for diverse students, athletics and extracurriculars, family input, and work opportunities as important to their college choices.<sup>2</sup> Black students were more likely to have federal Pell Grants and work-study to finance college and more likely to learn about college from counselors or college fairs.

## Enrollment

Between 2013 and 2021, Black enrollment in public undergraduate programs decreased by 37%.<sup>3</sup> In 2025, Black students represented 14% of all associate degree program enrollees, 13% of all bachelor's enrollees, 11% of all master's enrollees, and 9.5% of all doctoral enrollees, all while Black Illinoisans represent about 17% of the state's population.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, Black students were between 2 and 8 times more likely to be enrolled in a private for-profit degree program across all degree levels compared to their peers.

## Community College Transfer

Compared to all Illinois community college students, Black community college students had an overall lower transfer rate to 4-year institutions, a lower rate of transferring with a 2-year degree or certificate, lower retention rates 2 years after transferring into a 4-year institution, and a lower completion rate of a bachelor's degree within 4 years of transferring into a 4-year institution.<sup>5</sup>

## Black-Serving IHEs

We identified Black-serving institutions of higher education (IHEs) in the state that have an enrollment of 30% or more of Black students. These institutions included 6 community colleges, 2 4-year public institutions, 12 4-year not-for-profit institutions, and 2 4-year for-profit institutions across varying degree types. Enrollment of Black students in these institutions ranged from 30% to more than 80%.<sup>4</sup>

In addition to the Black-serving IHEs, there are 2 4-year public institutions (Chicago State University and Governors State University) and 4 community colleges (City Colleges of Chicago Kennedy-King College and Olive-Harvey College, Prairie State College, and South Suburban College of Cook County) in the state that have federal recognition as Predominately Black Institutions (PBIs).<sup>6</sup> Both 4-year public PBIs in Illinois have the highest percentages of student parents and adult learners among their undergraduate student body compared to all other 4-year public institutions in the state.<sup>1</sup>

Between 2015 and 2023, both 4-year PBIs, Chicago State University and Governors State University, lost 21% and 24%, respectively, of their state funding.<sup>1</sup>

## Program Spotlight

**Hope Chicago** is a scholarship initiative that removes barriers to college success for two generations of families: students and their parents. Their mission is to bring economic mobility to families on the south and west sides of Chicago. 43% of the students they serve are Black, 78% are low-income, and 80% are first-generation college students. Their 2025 Impact Report shows their students achieving higher college enrollment and persistence rates compared to national trends and Chicago Public Schools.<sup>10</sup>

## Degree Programs

Black students are equitably represented in Health Professions and Psychology programs across all degree levels from associate to doctoral.<sup>4</sup> While Black students do not have equitable representation amongst bachelor's degrees in Education programs, Black students are equitably represented amongst master's and doctoral degrees in Education.

Other degree programs where Black students are equitably represented at various degree levels include Business, Management, and Marketing; Communication and Journalism; Public Administration and Social Services; and Theology and Religious Vocations.<sup>4</sup> Black students are systemically underrepresented in Engineering programs across degree levels, as well as Computer and Information Sciences, Biological and Biomedical Sciences, Physical Sciences, and Legal Studies.

In terms of potential earnings related to these degree programs, there were no significant pay disparities in terms of associate degree or master's degree programs where Black students were over or underrepresented.<sup>7</sup> However, degree programs where Black students were equitably represented for bachelor's degrees and doctoral (PhD) degrees are more likely to have lower earnings compared to the programs where Black students were underrepresented.

## Outcomes

Of the Black-serving IHEs serving undergraduate students, 3 institutions had equitable or higher completion rates for their Black students as they did for their overall student body: DeVry University, Generations College, and Prairie State College.<sup>8,9</sup>

The cost of education was the least expensive among Black-serving community colleges, ranging between \$4k-\$5k per year. Black-serving public 4-year institutions like Chicago State University and Governors State University were not far behind averaging about \$9k per year. The Black-serving private (either not-for-profit or for-profit) were the most expensive with costs between \$15k-\$28k per year.<sup>8,9</sup>

Average student (federal) debt for Black-serving IHEs ranged between \$5k-\$30k. The lowest debt came from the Black-serving community colleges (all City Colleges of Chicago). The highest debts were seen at Chicago State University, East-West University, Trinity International University, and DeVry University.<sup>8,9</sup>

Median salaries 3 years after graduation for Black-serving IHEs ranged between \$27k-\$51k. Some of the highest earnings were seen at DeVry University, Governors State University, Chicago State University, and Trinity International University.<sup>8,9</sup>

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# Landscape of Black student trajectories and experiences in Illinois Workforce



## The Illinois Black Workforce

In 2023, there were more than 712,000 Black workers in the Illinois workforce. Black women represented the largest proportions of the Black workforce at each age group between 15 and 75+ years old. However, on average, Black men earn higher wages at each age group compared to Black women.<sup>1</sup>

Compared to average state data, residents of mostly-Black neighborhoods were more likely to speak only English, be younger in age, earn less money, experience poverty and higher unemployment rates, and work in the arts, entertainment, and food service sector, in the education, health care, and social assistance sector, or in the transportation, warehousing, and utilities sector.<sup>2</sup>

## Labor Force Participation

The **labor force participation rate** is percentage of the total working age population that are in the labor force, which includes both employed and unemployed people. In 2023, Black Illinoisans had the lowest labor force participation rate (59%) compared to any other racial group.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, Black Illinoisans trail behind national trends for the Black workforce whose labor force participation is higher (63%). Labor force participation for Black Illinoisans has been increasing since 2021. However, Black men are driving much of this increasing rate, while the participation rate for Black women has declined since 2022.

The **employment rate** is the percentage of the total working age population that is employed. In 2023, the employment rate for Black Illinoisans (54%) was lower than the state rate (61%) as well as lower compared to all other racial ethnic groups.<sup>3</sup> However, Black Illinoisans saw a 1% increase in their employment rate since 2022, which was the highest increase of any group.

The **unemployment rate** is the percentage of workers in the labor force who do not currently have a job but are actively looking for a job. In 2023, the statewide unemployment rate was 4.5%. Black Illinoisans faced a much higher unemployment rate (9.6%) compared to other racial groups and statewide unemployment.<sup>3</sup> Despite the high rate, unemployment for Black Illinoisans has decreased since 2020.

## Industries

In 2021, Black Illinoisans had a high proportion of employment as service workers (28%), laborers (20%), operatives (19%), and office and clerical workers (17%).<sup>3</sup> Many of the occupational categories that employ high percentages of racially minoritized groups including Black workers tend to pay lower wages.

In 2023, Black workers held the highest percentage of state government jobs including officials, managers, and professionals compared to other racially minoritized groups.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, the number of Black state employees has grown since 2014 and reached the highest in 2024 to more than 10,500.

In 2022, a record-high number of 39,276 Black Illinoisans were employed in STEM.<sup>4</sup> Black employees made up about 8% of the total STEM workforce in Illinois. That said, STEM degrees for Black students were lagging during this same period with Black students representing only 4% of all STEM degrees in Illinois.

## Earnings

In 2024, Black households had the lowest median income (\$51,174) compared to other racial groups, as well as the state median income (\$83,211).

In a 2025 study following cohorts of Illinois students 9 years after graduating high school, Illinois students were more likely to earn more in the workforce if their parents' earnings were also high.<sup>5</sup> However, Black (and Latino) students went on to earn less than other racial/ethnic groups across parent earnings groups and were disproportionately represented among students with low-income parents.

## WIOA

In Illinois Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) programs, 11% of participants are Black.<sup>6</sup> On average, they earn about \$800 per week, which is \$0.75 to every dollar White participants earn. Black women who participate in WIOA programs were more likely to have additional barriers to employment compared to their peers such as receiving Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), Supplemental Security Income (SSI), and Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits and being low-income. Black men who participate in WIOA programs were more likely to have additional barriers to employment compared to their peers such as experiencing homelessness or being formerly incarcerated.

## Housing

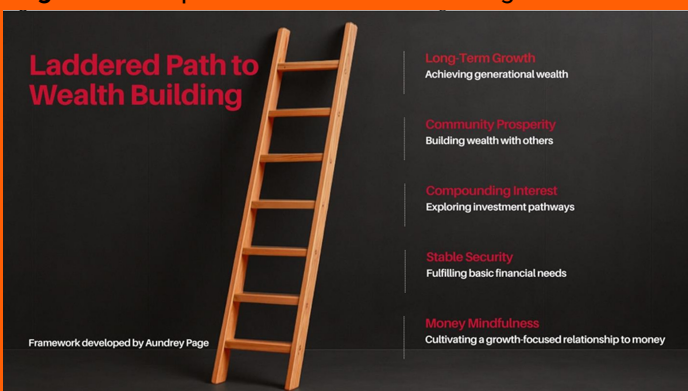
In 2024, Black families were almost twice as likely to be renters compared to their representation in the housing market. Only 8.5% of all Illinois housing units were owned by Black families. This home ownership disparity was the largest of any racial group.

In Chicago, 19% of Black families were threatened with foreclosure or eviction in the last three years, more than double any other racial group.<sup>7</sup>

## Report Spotlight

The **2025 State of Black Chicago Report** outlines the current state of aspects related to financial wealth building (entrepreneurship, workforce development, and homeownership) and holistic wealth building (education, health, leadership and civic engagement, and criminal justice) and provides opportunities, policy recommendations, and cross-sector collaborative solutions in these areas that may help Black Chicagoans build wealth.<sup>8</sup>

**Figure.** Conceptual framework for building wealth



Source: Page et. al (2025)

## Wealth

In a 2024 study on Chicago Metro Area families, Black families were among the least likely to have liquid assets such as having a checking, CD, savings, or retirement account as well as owning stocks.<sup>7</sup> Black families also had the least amount of liquid assets compared to other groups, with an average of \$1,000. Black families were the least likely to own a home, with 76% of Black homeowners with mortgage debt around \$150k. Median home value for Black families was \$247k with home equity at roughly \$111k. In all, Black families had about \$20k in total assets, the lowest of any group. When it came to debt, about half of the Black families who responded had credit card debt. Black families also had the highest percentage of student loans (45%), medical debt (30%), legal debt (8%), and loans from relatives (15%). Median debt for Black families totaled \$17k, the highest of any racial group. Taking together Black families' income, assets, and debts, Black families had an estimated net worth of \$0.

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