

Taking Account: A History of Racial Harm & Injustice Against Black Illinoisans

A report commissioned
by the State of Illinois
African Descent-Citizens
Reparations Commission



**Institute for Research on
Race and Public Policy**

Research that Makes a Difference

Taking Account: A History of Racial Harm & Injustice Against Black Illinoisans is dedicated to Black Illinoisans, past, present, and future.

This report created for the State of Illinois African Descent-Citizens Reparations Commission was authored by Almethia Franklin, Kaimara Herron, Christopher Powell, and Terrion L. Williamson

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NOTE ON LANGUAGE USE

Throughout this report, the terms “Black,” “Black American,” and “African American” are used interchangeably to refer to the descendants of African people who were enslaved in the United States — with “Black” and “Black American” being used most frequently in keeping with recent conventions in the field of Black Studies.¹ We also capitalize “Black” and all other racial designators, including “White” (except where noted by the author or in quoted text), in recognition that all such designations are socially created racial identities that were developed in relation to each other.²

TABLE OF CONTENTS

1	EXECUTIVE SUMMARY
13	Foreword, Mary Pattillo
15	INTRODUCTION: TOWARD REPARATIONS IN ILLINOIS
18	Reparations Efforts Across the United States
20	Reparations Efforts in Illinois
21	About the Report
25	ENSLAVEMENT AND SERVITUDE
27	Mapping Enslavement: Regional Differences in Illinois
29	Public Auctions and Indentured Servitude
30	The Illinois Black Codes and the Criminalization of Blackness
33	Courts as a Legal Instrument of Oppression
34	Conclusion
36	The Many Faces of Slavery In Illinois, Scott Heerman
39	Freedom Seekers and the Underground Railroad: Reframing Illinois Stories, Larry A. McClellan
43	RACIAL TERROR
43	Racial Terror in Illinois Before 1865
44	Racial Terror in Illinois After 1865
47	Springfield Race Riots
47	East St. Louis Massacre
48	May Uprising
49	July Massacre
50	Chicago Race Riot in the Red Summer of 1919
52	State Neglect and Complicity in Racial Terror
55	Violent Resistance to Integration
56	Legacy of Racial Terror
57	Conclusion
59	Sundown Towns, Safety Nets, and White Advantage among Disadvantaged Whites, David Roediger
64	Racial Terror Lynching in the Land of Lincoln During the Second Nadir, 1874–1924, Sundiata Keita Cha-Jua

71	POLITICAL DISENFRANCHISEMENT
71	National Disenfranchisement from the Founding
72	Illinois Antebellum Disenfranchisement
73	The Impact of Black Suffrage in Illinois
75	Chicago: Machine Politics and Resistance
77	Suppression of Chicago's Black Power Movement
78	Conclusion
80	Marginal Lands: Rural Black Farmers and the Case for Reparations in Illinois, <i>Kelley Lemon</i>
85	STOLEN ECONOMIC LABOR
85	Economic Hindrance of "Free" Black Illinoisans
86	Postbellum Labor Exclusion of Black Illinoisans
89	The Great Migration and Onward: Systemic Racial Segregation
90	Black Illinoisans Left Behind in the New Deal
91	World War II and Beyond: Stolen Economic Opportunities
92	1950s to Today: Enduring Structures of Racialized Economic Control
93	Conclusion
96	Nineteenth-Century Black Labor Activism in Illinois, <i>Alonzo M. Ward</i>
99	POLICING AND THE LEGAL SYSTEM
99	Building a System of Control
100	Disproportionate Policing and Surveillance in Illinois
101	Order Maintenance Strategies and the Criminalization of Black Illinoisans
102	Great Migration and Urban Containment: Policing Black Arrival
103	Criminalization, Coercion, and Police Violence
105	The Punitive Turn: Mandatory Minimums and Drug Enforcement
105	Judicial Discretion and Racialized Risk
106	The Rise of Mass Incarceration in Illinois
108	Prison Gerrymandering and the Distortion of Political Power in Illinois
109	Reform Efforts and the Chicago Consent Decree
111	The SAFE-T Act and Racialized Harm in Illinois
113	Conclusion
114	"We Charge Genocide": Black Critiques of Racist Policing in Chicago, <i>Andy Clarno</i>
118	Public Housing Discrimination in Illinois, <i>D. Bradford Hunt</i>
121	HOUSING
122	Redlining and the Federal Endorsement of Inequality
125	Racial Covenants and Blockbusting in Illinois

127	White Flight, Exclusionary Zoning, and Suburban Segregation
129	Public Housing as a Tool of Racial Containment
131	Sundown Towns in Illinois
132	Home Ownership and the Creation of the Racial Wealth Gap
134	Conclusion
137	Chicago: THE Home of Racialized Real Estate, <i>LaDale Winling</i>
141	Painting the Wealth Gap, <i>Amber S. Hendley</i>
147	EDUCATION
148	Historical Foundations of Racial Inequality in Illinois Education (1818–1870)
150	A New Constitution (1870–1900)
153	Twentieth-Century Transformations (1900–2000)
156	Resegregation (2000–2022)
158	School Closures and Modern Resegregation
162	Conclusion
163	Black Struggles for Education in Illinois, <i>Elizabeth Todd-Breland</i>
167	Reparations as Redress for Educational Debt: Schools, Community Determination and Justice in Illinois, <i>David Stovall</i>
171	FAMILY
171	Historical Foundations of Black Family Life (1818–1915)
173	The Great Migration (1915–1970)
175	Family Norms and Contemporary Systems of Inequality (1965–Present)
180	Conclusion
183	Black Women and Violence in Illinois: A Reparative Justice Issue, <i>Terrion L. Williamson</i>
187	HEALTH
188	Historical Foundations of Health Disparities, 1818–1965
190	Hospital and Sanatorium Care in Early Twentieth-Century Illinois
191	Contemporary Systems of Inequity, 1965–Present
199	Conclusion
203	Segregating Recreation in Chicagoland, <i>Lynn M. Hudson</i> 203
207	CONCLUSION: BLACK REPARATIONS, BLACK WORLDMAKING
209	TIMELINE OF KEY EVENTS
212	REPORT AUTHOR & EXPERT COMMENTARY AUTHOR BIOS

217 REPARATIONS: A CONTEMPORARY READING LIST

- 217 Books
- 217 Articles
- 218 Reports

219 BLACK LIFE IN ILLINOIS: A BIBLIOGRAPHY

- 219 Activism, Protest, and Social Movement History
- 220 Cultural History
- 221 Early Black Settlement, Freedom Towns, and Rural Communities
- 222 Freedom Seekers and the Underground Railroad in Illinois
- 223 Education
- 224 Health and Environmental Studies
- 225 Housing, Residential Segregation, and Neighborhood Redevelopment
- 226 Labor History, Unions, and Underground Economies
- 227 Migration
- 228 Policing, Carcerality, and the Criminal Legal System
- 228 Political History
- 230 Religious History
- 230 Slavery, Jim Crow, and Racial Terror
- 233 Urban Studies

235 ENDNOTES

ILLINOIS COUNTY AND CITY MAP



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The State of Illinois stands at a defining moment. Over more than two centuries, Black Illinoisans have faced deep, widespread, and state-sanctioned inequities that have shaped where they live, how they work, the degree of safety they experience, and the opportunities available to them and their families. Although Illinois technically joined the Union as a free state, in reality freedom for Black residents was severely limited by laws, policies, and practices that criminalized mobility, restricted political participation, denied economic opportunities, and perpetuated violence, displacement, dispossession, and surveillance against Black residents. This “unfreedom,” rooted in slavery and carried through Reconstruction, Jim Crow, urban renewal, mass incarceration, and racialized policymaking — among many other historical moments and processes — continues to create stark disparities in every aspect of life for Black Illinoisans.

This report, the first of its kind in Illinois, presents a thorough assessment of how slavery and its vestiges enabled the racial harms and injustices Black Illinoisans experienced historically and continue to experience today. Drawing on scholarly analyses, historical archives, government data, and community perspectives, this report describes not only individual harms, but the accumulated impact of harm over generations. Ultimately, it provides an evidence-based accounting of Black life in Illinois that will help to inform the critical debate over how to repair, redress, and ameliorate these lasting harms.

The report is broken into the following nine broad categories of harm, each of which is briefly outlined below: Enslavement and servitude; racial terror; political disenfranchisement; stolen economic labor; policing and the legal system; housing; education; family; and health. Throughout the report, commentaries written by researchers add in-depth perspectives related to each of these broad categories of harm. These commentaries are also summarized below.

Enslavement and Servitude

Illinois’s early legal and economic systems were built on the exploitation of Black labor and the restriction of Black freedom. Although Illinois officially entered the Union in 1818 as a free state, it maintained slavery’s logic through state-sanctioned indenture, restrictive laws, and economic practices that reproduced racial hierarchy. These foundations created enduring harms that continue to shape Black life in Illinois.

Key Findings

- Although the Northwest Ordinance of 1787 banned slavery, an exception for hiring enslaved labor within the federal salt works in the southeast part of the state was granted during the Illinois territorial period and subsequently written into the Illinois Constitution of 1818.
- The Illinois Constitution of 1818 only proscribed slavery “hereafter” introduced, thus allowing for the continued enslavement and servitude of people brought to the territory prior to 1818.
- Although there were never more than about 1,000 enslaved people in the state at any one time, the labor of enslaved people was an important part of the early Illinois economy.

Expert Commentary: “The Many Faces of Slavery in Illinois,” Scott Heerman

The institution of slavery in the region which would eventually become the state of Illinois persisted through French, British, colonial Virginian, and US government contexts. Despite antislavery laws, enslaved Black persons labored in brutal conditions, generating immense profits that were safeguarded by legal exceptions to ordinances limiting slavery, systems of indentured servitude, as well as the sanctioned abduction of free Black persons back into bondage. As a result, slavery and slavery-like arrangements endured in Illinois until the eve of the Civil War.

Expert Commentary: “Freedom Seekers and the Underground Railroad: Reframing Illinois Stories,” Larry A. McClellan

In the decades before the Civil War, the growth of Illinois was fueled partly by the journeys of people escaping enslavement in the southern states. These freedom seekers were supported by a range of abolitionist networks collectively known as the Underground Railroad. Contemporary research has worked to identify and highlight the experiences of these freedom seekers, moving beyond a simplistic dichotomy of White Saviors and Black Bravery to explore the human cost of slavery, its associated indignities, and the courage and risk faced by Black abolitionists, women, and other marginalized persons.

Racial Terror

Racial terror has been wielded against Black Illinoisans since the state’s formation. Violence and intimidation enforced racial hierarchy from the antebellum era to the civil rights movement and beyond. Despite being a free state, Illinois sanctioned laws and extralegal practices that criminalized, terrorized, and excluded Black residents. From

lynchings and race riots to housing bombings and anti-integration violence, racial terror in Illinois mirrored the brutality of the South and left a legacy still seen today in persistent racial inequities and generational trauma.

Key Findings

- Between the Civil War and World War II, Illinois had the third largest number of reported lynchings outside of the South.
- Major race riots in cities including Springfield (1908), East St. Louis (1917), and Chicago (1919) resulted in the deaths of hundreds of Black residents and millions of dollars in property damage to Black homes and businesses.
- In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Illinois led the nation in the number of Sundown Towns — locales in which Black people could not safely live or be present after dark — within its borders.

Expert Commentary: “Sundown Towns, Safety Nets, and White Advantage among Disadvantaged Whites,” David Roediger

Sundown Towns, the communities that barred Black Americans after dark, have left an ongoing legacy of Black exclusion and White advantage in the United States. Drawing from personal family experience, David Roediger highlights how intergenerational wealth, inherited security, and access to exclusive jobs and subsidized housing shape life opportunities and argues that honest reckoning with these structural advantages is necessary for a meaningful conversation about reparative justice.

Expert Commentary: “Racial Terror Lynching in the Land of Lincoln During the Second Nadir, 1874-1924,” Sundiata Cha-Jua

Despite its reputation as the “Land of Lincoln,” Illinois has a deeply entrenched history of anti-Black racial terrorism and White Supremacist violence that proportionally rivals southern states such as Georgia. From the late nineteenth to early twentieth centuries, Illinois experienced dozens of major incidents of racial terrorism, including large-scale attacks in Springfield, East St. Louis, and Chicago as well as dozens of lynchings.

Political Disenfranchisement

Black political power in Illinois has been curtailed from the founding era to the present. Despite constitutional amendments and landmark reforms, disenfranchisement persisted through law (Black Codes, literacy tests, poll taxes), violence, machine politics, gerrymandering, and carceral policies. These tactics were also used to thwart

participation in mass movements and political organizing. Illinois's political history reflects both early legal exclusion and later manipulation of Black voting strength. These historical and contemporary harms contribute to depressed voter turnout and diluted political representation, perpetuating inequities in wealth, housing, education, and health.

Key Findings

- Black Illinoisans were denied the right to vote pursuant to the Illinois Black Codes (also known as Black Laws), which were in effect from 1819 until 1865. Black men secured the right to vote with the ratification of the Fifteenth Amendment in 1870; Black women secured the right to vote with the ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment fifty years later, in 1920.
- In August 1966, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and other demonstrators were assaulted with rocks and bottles while participating in an action against housing discrimination as part of the Chicago Freedom Movement. King subsequently declared that even given the many demonstrations he'd seen in the South, he'd "never seen anything so hostile and hateful" as what he had witnessed in Chicago.
- Until the passage of HB3653 in 2021, the practice of prison gerrymandering — counting incarcerated people as residents of a prison's location rather than using their last known place of residence — worked to funnel political power away from urban communities in Illinois and into districts that are often rural and majority White.

Expert Commentary: "Marginal Lands: Rural Black Farmers and the Case for Reparations in Illinois," Kelley Lemon

In the early twentieth century, Black farmers in rural Illinois cultivated land and agricultural resources that were vital to their economic and cultural stability. Steered toward undervalued tracts and excluded from federal support, these pioneering Black families faced immense challenges with resilience. Over time, however, conservation initiatives, legal barriers, and persistent structural inequities have continued to dispossess Black landowners.

Stolen Economic Labor

The history of Black labor in Illinois mirrors the national story of racialized economic exploitation. From slavery and restrictive "Black Laws" to postwar industrial exclusion

and present-day prison labor, Black Illinoisans have faced systematic barriers to fair employment and wealth accumulation. State institutions, private employers, and unions each played roles in suppressing Black economic advancement. The cumulative effect has been a persistent racial wealth gap and structural inequities that define Illinois's modern economy.

Key Findings

- In the nineteenth century, racial violence and mob attacks on Black residents by White residents in places like Braidwood (1877), Virden (1898), and Pana (1899) reinforced racial subjugation by targeting Black workers competing for jobs.
- New Deal programs that required workers to hold union membership incentivized the displacement of Black workers in favor of White workers and elevated unions, which often discriminated against Black workers, to unprecedented power.
- Black labor activists developed a hybrid form of activism in which they fought both for broad workers' rights and for racial inclusion in skilled labor and labor unions.
- Today, the median household income for Black Illinoisans is \$40,000 less than that of White Illinoisans and Black Illinoisans are three times as impoverished as White Illinoisans.

Expert Commentary: “Nineteenth-Century Black Labor Activism in Illinois,” Alonzo M. Ward

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Black Illinoisans faced racist hiring practices and exclusion from white-dominated unions. Despite entrenched systemic racism, Black workers built their own labor organizations and called for racial inclusion within the labor movement, fought for the rights and dignity of Black workers, and developed strategies to protect them against abusive and discriminatory hiring practices.

Policing and the Legal System

Illinois built a policing and legal system that criminalized Black mobility and survival, evolving into modern forms of surveillance, punitive sentencing, and mass incarceration. These practices destabilized families, extracted wealth, and disproportionately punished Black residents.

Key Findings

- Long before formal police departments existed, Illinois's public safety system relied on sheriffs, constables, and county militias whose duties included monitoring Black movement, questioning Black travelers, detaining Black people suspected of escaping bondage, and facilitating forced returns to bondage.
- Between 1978 and 1998, Illinois's prison population grew by more than 260 percent. By 2000, Black residents made up over 60 percent of the incarcerated population in Illinois, even though they were less than 15 percent of the state's population.
- In 2015, Chicago passed a landmark reparations ordinance after acknowledging that Chicago Police Commander Jon Burge and officers under his command tortured and coerced confessions out of at least 120 people, mostly Black men, between the early 1970s and early 1990s.
- In 2017, the US Department of Justice found that the Chicago Police Department (CPD) had engaged in a "pattern or practice" of excessive force, unconstitutional stops, and discriminatory policing. Two years later, CPD entered into a binding consent decree requiring it to reform its policies, training, and practices in several key areas.
- In 2023, Illinois passed the SAFE-T Act, making it the first state to end the cash bail system, which was widely considered to be inequitable and discriminatory toward low-income people and Black people and other people of color.

Expert Commentary: "'We Charge Genocide': Black Critiques of Racist Policing in Chicago," Andy Clarno

In 2014, the organization We Charge Genocide submitted a report to the United Nations documenting the Chicago Police Department's pervasive violations of the UN Convention Against Torture. In response to a history of more than a century of state violence against Black Illinoisans, We Charge Genocide joined generations of activists and organizers, from Ida B. Wells to Black feminist abolitionist groups such as BYP100, Assata's Daughters, and Black Lives Matter Chicago, who were guided by a vision of safety grounded in community investment and structural transformation and who achieved important police reforms.

Expert Commentary: "Public Housing Discrimination in Illinois," D. Bradford Hunt

Illinois municipalities have a long history of using the federal public housing program to discriminate against Black Americans and reinforce racial residential segregation

rather than promote integration. Intentional discrimination, underfunding, chronic neglect, resistance to affordable housing, and the demolishing of Black-occupied housing underscores how systemic racism has undermined the promise of federal public housing and of affordable housing as a fundamental right for all.

Housing

In Illinois, housing has long served as a mechanism of racialized control designed not simply to exclude Black communities, but to contain and exploit them strategically. From the early twentieth century through the present day, a convergence of federal, state, and local policies, in conjunction with private actors, have created a state-sanctioned architecture of segregation that systematically deprives Black residents of the benefits of homeownership while concentrating harm in their neighborhoods.

Key Findings

- Redlining, racial covenants, blockbusting, and exclusionary zoning ordinances were mechanisms used by both government and private entities to structure and reinforce residential segregation in communities throughout Illinois.
- 75 to 85 percent of homes purchased by Black Chicagoans between 1950 and 1970 occurred through contract sales — a predatory lending model that left buyers vulnerable to high interest rates, inflated purchase prices, and excessive down payments, but without the protections afforded to buyers with conventional mortgages.
- By the mid-twentieth century, Black Illinoisans were being disproportionately funneled into public housing developments that were underfunded, stigmatized, and structurally neglected. These developments evolved into sites of surveillance and social regulation that functioned to criminalize, endanger, and stereotype residents.
- The HOPE VI program, a public housing development program initiated by the federal government in the 1990s, the Plan for Transformation launched by the Chicago Housing Authority in 2000, and other related programs led to the wholesale demolition of public housing across the state. The promised mixed-income housing that was to replace these developments was often slow in coming and these programs largely worked to displace residents, deepen housing instability, decrease the availability of affordable housing, and accelerate gentrification.

Expert Commentary: “Chicago, the Home of Racialized Real Estate,” LaDale Winling

Throughout the twentieth century, Illinois real estate institutions used property valuation through racially restrictive covenants, discriminatory appraisal standards, so-called ethics codes, and redlining as tools to enforce and entrench racial segregation. In turn, racial exclusion was embedded into the organizational practices of the Home Owners’ Loan Corporation and Federal Housing Administration during the New Deal, creating housing patterns that continue to shape residential inequality in the present day.

Expert Commentary: “Painting the Wealth Gap,” Amber S. Hendley

From the end of the Civil War to the present, discriminatory US policies have systematically denied Black families the wealth, stability, and economic opportunity afforded to White Americans. Using their family history as a case study, Dr. Hendley shows the resilience and solidarity of Black households in the face of structural barriers that shuttled them into underpaid labor, denied them access to quality schools and housing, burdened them with high costs of living and immense debts and produced the profound racial wealth gap that persists to this present day.

Education

Racial discrimination in Illinois’s education policy and infrastructure has created structural barriers to Black residents’ ability to access quality education. In the early years of statehood, Illinois made little provision for the public and formal education of Black residents. Even as public schooling expanded, Black students were segregated into unequal and under-resourced schools. Into the twenty-first century, Black Illinoisans have continued to organize to fight de facto segregation, to push for equitable funding of public schools, and to have the full history of Black people included in public curricula.

Key Findings

- The Great Migration brought millions of Black Americans to Illinois between 1910 and 1970, expanding the need for public education infrastructure. The growing Black population entered into the existing mostly de facto segregated school systems.
- The 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* decision reverberated in significant ways across Illinois, bringing to light how entrenched racial discrimination continued to limit and compartmentalize the educational opportunities of Black Illinoisans. Districts across the state experimented with busing programs to bring some Black students into White schools, but

busing was often met with resistance from White families and ambivalence from Black families.

- Despite steadily expanding educational access across the twentieth century, the struggle for high-quality schooling for Black Illinoisans continues today. Illinois public schools remain highly segregated, with recent data showing Illinois among the top four nationally on some indices of segregation.

Expert Commentary: “Black Struggles for Education in Illinois,” Elizabeth Todd-Breland

From the nineteenth century to the present, Black Illinoisans have faced state-sanctioned racial exclusion and segregation in the ongoing fight to secure equal education. Despite efforts to build independent schools and legal and policy mandates that challenged discriminatory laws, Black children were systematically denied access to adequately funded public education through gerrymandered attendance zones, racist housing policies, restrictions on school transfers, and the underfunding of Black schools compared to White schools. Today, Illinois remains one of the most segregated states for education and predominantly Black schools continue to experience the burden of systemic disinvestment.

Expert Commentary: “Reparations as Redress for Educational Debt: Schools, Community Determination, and Justice in Illinois,” David Stovall

Black families in Illinois have always had to fight for equal access to education. The persistent educational inequities that Black children in Illinois face constitute an “educational debt,” a structural deficit created by the state’s refusal to provide high quality schooling and by the relationship of housing segregation to inequities in education. As such, the redress for these harms must be structural and statewide, building on existing reparations-forward legislation to pay the educational debt owed to Black Illinoisans.

Family

Structural racism has systematically undermined Black family life in Illinois from statehood to the present. Across every era — enslavement, migration, industrialization, and modern welfare reform — the state’s laws and institutions have destabilized Black households through exclusion, surveillance, and economic marginalization. Early state policies sanctioned family separation, denied access to education and housing, and criminalized the survival strategies of Black families. Despite centuries of policy-driven

harm, Black families have sustained community life through self-organized mutual aid, women's clubs, churches, and advocacy movements that filled gaps left by the state. Understanding Black family life in Illinois requires confronting how racialized policy design — rooted in the White, male-breadwinner ideal — continues to define which families are deemed legitimate, deserving, and worth protecting.

Key Findings

- During the active enforcement of the Illinois Black Laws (1819-1865), Black children and adults were vulnerable to kidnapping under the Fugitive Slave Law or to being sold through legal indentures, thus ripping them from their loved ones and forever severing familial and communal bonds.
- In the twentieth century, Black women's labor as caregivers, breadwinners, and organizers was central to family survival. Their leadership in mutual aid societies and women's clubs built parallel welfare systems where the state failed to provide protections and services that were routinely provided to White families.
- Today, Black families receiving public assistance in Illinois are significantly more likely than White families to be sanctioned, placing them at greater risk of losing benefits altogether.

Expert Commentary: “Black Women and Violence in Illinois: A Reparative Justice Issue,” Terrion L. Williamson

Racialized gender violence such as the disappearance and murder of Black women in Peoria in the early 2000s is entwined with long-term disinvestment, abandonment, mass incarceration, failed policing, economic deprivation, and societal apathy toward Black women. Serial murder cases involving Black women across Illinois illustrate how marginalized victims of violence are made uniquely vulnerable and invisible, which in turn creates impunity for perpetrators of gendered violence and requires a response that centers the needs and experiences of victims and survivors.

Health

Racism operates as a public health crisis in Illinois, shaping health outcomes for Black residents from the state's founding to the present. Across more than two centuries, health inequities have been systematically produced through policy, environment, and institutional design. Historical exclusion from hospitals, medical training, and professional networks intersected with segregation, redlining, and labor exploitation

to create structural barriers to care. Today, these inequities persist through limited access to quality health services, environmental degradation, housing instability, and systemic bias within the health care system.

Key Findings

- In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, medical facilities in Illinois were often segregated and most Black residents did not have access to quality health care. In 1891, Provident Hospital and Training School in Chicago became the first hospital in the US to admit both Black and White patients and one of very few at the time that would educate, train, and employ Black medical professionals.
- The *Healthy Illinois 2028* plan identifies racism as a core determinant of health disparities statewide.
- Black people in Illinois are eight times more likely than White people to experience homelessness and, due to their housing status, unhoused people often receive poor or low-quality healthcare.
- In Illinois, rates of diabetes, adult asthma, cancer, hypertension, obesity, high cholesterol, COVID-19 mortality, maternal and infant mortality, drug overdose deaths, and HIV infection are all higher among Black Americans. Overall, Black Illinoisans experience higher rates of chronic illness and premature death.
- Black Illinoisans in communities such as Altgeld Gardens, East St. Louis, and Cahokia Heights are disproportionately exposed to hazardous environmental conditions due to industrial development, toxic waste, and dilapidating infrastructure.

Expert Commentary: “Segregating Recreation in Chicagoland,” Lynn M. Hudson

Recreational spaces in Chicago such as beaches, parks, pools, and playgrounds were central but often overlooked sites of racial segregation and violence against Black Illinoisans in the twentieth century. The violent enforcement of the color lines was tragically exemplified by the 1919 murder of Eugene Williams, whose death sparked the Chicago Race Riot. Despite discriminatory city policies and harassment by White gangs, Black Chicagoans fought tirelessly to desegregate recreational areas, recognizing them as vital markers of true citizenship and equality. Their struggles reveal how public spaces reinforced systemic segregation in Chicago and across Illinois.

FOREWORD

Mary Pattillo, Northwestern University

The name “Illinois” is the French representation of a word that means “he/she speaks in the ordinary way.” That powerful sentence might be updated to the colloquial phrase “real talk.” This volume is a first step towards living up to the state’s name.

Illinois, it’s time for *real talk* on the history of racial harms in the state. Illinois, it’s time to face the facts that despite the founding claims of “free soil,” slavery existed for decades in our state. Illinois, it’s time to come to grips with the reality that lynchings, *de jure* segregation, exclusion from neighborhoods, schools and hospitals, and the targeted destruction of Black property all happened with frightening regularity within our state. Illinois, it’s time to confront the social and financial costs that Black people have borne for just trying to live and thrive in our state. Illinois, it’s time to realize that the entire state cannot prosper if the roughly 1.8 million Black people don’t prosper. Illinois, real talk requires real accounting, real deliberation, real reconciliation, real answers, and real action.

Real talk combats one of the most common strategies of denial: ignorance. The *Taking Account: A History of Racial Harm & Injustice Against Black Illinoisans* report compiles detailed information from across the state, from the eighteenth century to the present, and across the most important domains of social, political, and economic life. It reports the precise dollar amounts for which specific Black people were bought and sold in Illinois. It documents the laws that deprived Black people of political voice by curtailing voting, jury service, and service in elected office. It narrates the benefits that one White family earned from living in a “Sundown Town,” where Black people certainly could not live, but neither could they visit, work, or pass through after dark. This report does not uncover new histories but rather requires us to look plainly at the past that has always been there.

Now, in 2025, is a peculiar time to do this work, but every moment is a peculiar time for real talk about race and racism in America. Now, in 2025, the federal government is waging an ardent campaign to un-know, obscure, and erase the histories of how the United States has fallen short of its paper promises, to the grave detriment and disadvantage of Black Americans. At the same time, however, by authorizing and commissioning this report, the state of Illinois is leaning into learning more about its failures to protect Black people, its complicity in allowing private citizens and institutions to abuse and exploit Black people, and the debt owed to Black Illinoisans as a result. These are strange times when both kinds of work are unfolding

simultaneously, when the revelations and the backlash are concurrent. These contests and contrasts of narratives and truths are an important part of the process because taking the next step towards redress will require that Illinoisans are not just *told* these stories, but that they are *convinced* and *moved* toward a just response.

The *Taking Account: A History of Racial Harm & Injustice Against Black Illinoisans* Report is the most comprehensive document to date about harm against Black people in Illinois. By providing robust evidence of the long-term effects of past wrongs and the perpetuation of wrongs into the present day, the report renders common claims of personal and collective innocence untenable. Yet *guilt* is also not the point. Such labels and judgments are not productive. Rather, speaking in the ordinary way brings people together to discuss the responsibility of righting wrongs and repairing harm. Real talk is about real lives and real solutions to real problems that were spawned both long ago and just yesterday. This report is an invitation to that urgent, promising, and ultimately liberating conversation.

INTRODUCTION: TOWARD REPARATIONS IN ILLINOIS

It as though we have run up a credit-card bill and, having pledged to charge no more, remain befuddled that the balance does not disappear. The effects of that balance, interest accruing daily, are all around us.

—Ta-Nehisi Coates, “The Case for Reparations”

In 2014, author and journalist Ta-Nehisi Coates published the article “The Case for Reparations” in *The Atlantic*, where he was then a national correspondent. In the 16,000-word article, Coates narrates the story of Chicago resident Clyde Ross. Ross, a Black man who was born in the Mississippi Delta in 1923, arrived in Chicago in the late 1940s as a veteran of World War II intent on building the kind of life that had seemed impossible in the Deep South of his youth. Ross and his family eventually settled in North Lawndale but, as Coates explains, he was excluded from obtaining a legitimate mortgage, as were so many Black people throughout the country, due to a racist system of redlining, blockbusting, and restrictive covenants buttressed by the Federal Housing Authority.³

Without being fully attuned to the consequences, Ross purchased his home “on contract” and was left with all of the responsibilities of home ownership but none of the equity, financial security, or buyer protections enjoyed by White homeowners who were able to obtain traditional mortgages.⁴ In time, Ross joined the Contract Buyers League, an organization made up of Black Chicagoans from the South and West Sides of the city who had also purchased their homes via predatory housing contracts. Through a series of actions, including a payment strike and two class-action lawsuits they ultimately lost, the League confronted contract sellers — who had largely become rich off the backs of the Black buyers they exploited — with their demands. They insisted that the sellers repay the money that had been paid to them on contract, plus interest, and, crucially, that they be made to account for the extensive harm they had caused the buyers, their families, and their communities. According to Coates,

Ross and the Contract Buyers League were no longer appealing to the government simply for equality. They were no longer fleeing in hopes of a better deal elsewhere. They were charging society with a crime against their community. They wanted the crime publicly ruled as such. They wanted the

crime’s executioners declared to be offensive to society. And they wanted restitution for the great injury brought upon them by said offenders. In 1968, Clyde Ross and the Contract Buyers League were no longer simply seeking the protection of law. They were seeking reparations.⁵

For Coates, the story of Clyde Ross, the Contract Buyers League, and North Lawndale — where still today only about 25 percent of the mostly Black residents are homeowners — is the opening to a history of Black American plunder that began more than four hundred years ago when enslaved Africans were first brought onto the shores of colonial Virginia. However much we might want to move beyond this difficult history, the vestiges of slavery continue to shape the lives of Black Americans who, across economic strata, continue to face significant disparities in everything from income, employment, wealth accumulation, and homeownership to health outcomes, exposure to environmental hazards, mortality rates, educational attainment, and incarceration levels. Given this reality, Coates contends that “reparations would mean a revolution of the American consciousness, a reconciling of our self-image as the great democratizer with the facts of our history.”⁶

“The Case for Reparations” is often credited with mainstreaming the conversation around reparations for Black Americans and helping to turn reparations, as one journalist put it, “from a punchline into a policy objective.”⁷ The national reckoning with racism that was spurred by the police killing of George Floyd in Minneapolis in May 2020, and the ensuing protests and calls for racial redress throughout the country, further galvanized the contemporary reparations movement. But the push for reparations for Black Americans has a genealogy that stretches back at least to the Civil War and its immediate aftermath, when formerly enslaved people and their advocates began seeking redress from former enslavers and the federal government for lifetimes spent in bondage.

These early claims were bolstered by Union General William T. Sherman, who in January 1865 issued Special Field Order 15, which designated some 400,000 acres of land confiscated from Confederate landowners in South Carolina, Florida, and Georgia to be distributed in forty-acre allotments to people freed from slavery. The order was quickly followed by the establishment of the Freedmen’s Bureau, the short-lived government agency that was charged with supporting the needs of the formerly enslaved and administering the order — but President Andrew Johnson, who had assumed office following the assassination of Abraham Lincoln in April 1865, reversed the order just months after it was issued. All the same, Sherman’s order became the basis of the claim for “40 acres and a mule” and a key impetus of the reparations movement.⁸

In the 160 years since the end of the Civil War and the beginning of Reconstruction — the contentious post-war period during which the Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth Amendments to the US Constitution were ratified and the nation was grappling with the end of slavery — individuals, groups, and organizations grounded in varying political and ideological philosophies have initiated a range of efforts toward securing restitution for Black people and have put forward innumerable reparations proposals. One of the earliest and most ambitious of these efforts was initiated by the Ex-Slave Mutual Relief Bounty and Pension Association, a national grassroots organization of roughly 300,000 members that was led by Callie House, a formerly enslaved washerwoman and widowed mother of five, beginning in the late nineteenth century. Among its efforts, the association organized local branches to provide mutual assistance to its members and advocated for the government to provide pensions to freed people of various amounts, dependent on age, as restitution for their labor and suffering during slavery.⁹

In the late twentieth century, another visionary Black woman would play a significant role in advancing the cause of reparations. “Queen Mother” Audley Moore began advocating for the integration of reparations into grassroots Black organizing after years spent developing her consciousness as a member of Marcus Garvey’s Universal Negro Improvement Association, the Communist Party, and the Civil Rights Congress, among other groups. Working across multiple organizations, geographic locations, and ideological affiliations over the span of four decades, she developed a class- and gender-inclusive reparations framework that foregrounded grassroots leadership and Black self-sufficiency. While Moore had her detractors and there were certain limitations to her vision, ultimately “her dogged persistence of the possibility and utility of reparations ensured that discussions of repayment remained a part of Black political agendas.”¹⁰

Callie House, Audley Moore, and other people and organizations who worked tirelessly to make the case for reparations in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries laid the foundation for the reparations movement of the twenty-first century and the groundswell of related organizing that has taken place since 2020. Proposals that have advanced out of these later efforts include stipulations for direct monetary payments based on precise financial calculations; land banks; college admission preference and tuition waivers; endowment funds for Black cultural institutions; historical monuments and markers; and projects directed toward addressing specific harms such as housing discrimination and racially motivated violence.

Whatever their ideological backgrounds or commitments, advocates of reparations are concerned with addressing the questions at the heart of the debate: What form or forms should compensation take? Who should pay? Who should benefit?

How should eligibility be determined? Though the answers to these questions can vary widely depending on who is responding, what remains consistent across proposals is the refusal to be defeated by the bigness of the questions and the very real challenges they present.

The underlying claim, steadfast and enduring, is that a debt is owed to Black Americans. Reparations — what leading thinkers in the field such as William Darity and Kirsten Mullen define as “a program of acknowledgement, redress, and closure for a grievous injustice” — are the mechanism through which that debt can be paid.¹¹

Reparations Efforts Across the United States

There has yet to be any significant reparations legislation addressing Black descendants of slavery at the national level. In 1989, Representative John Conyers of Michigan first introduced the Commission to Study Reparations Proposals for African Americans Act. The act, which came to be known as H.R. 40, proposed a federal commission to study slavery’s effects on its descendants and, based on those findings, recommend appropriate remedies to Congress. The commission would not allocate any funds for the payment of reparations.¹²

Over the years, H.R. 40 has received support from many national and community-based Black reparations organizations. Two groups in particular, the National Coalition of Blacks for Reparations in America (N’COBRA) and the National African American Reparations Commission (NAARC), have had significant input on the bill’s text, though not without some concern from within the movement.¹³ Conyers continued to reintroduce H.R. 40 until his retirement in 2017. Other representatives have continued to sponsor the bill, and it now has a Senate companion, S. 40, introduced by Senator Cory Booker of New Jersey in 2021. There was also a surge of support for H.R. 40 in the wake of the 2020 protests and the launch of the “Why We Can’t Wait” campaign, which brought together a coalition of reparations groups and other social justice organizations to show support for the bill and call for its immediate passage.¹⁴ But while H.R. 40 was finally advanced out of committee for the first time in 2021, more than thirty years after its initial introduction by Representative Conyers, it has yet to be taken up for consideration by the full House of Representatives and continues to face steep odds against becoming law.¹⁵

Given the many years of federal inaction on the issue, most reparations initiatives in recent years have been driven by community groups; institutions such as universities, museums, and churches; and state and local municipalities. In 2020, California became the first state to create a task force to study the continuing effects of slavery on its residents and recommend remedies. Its final report, which provides more than 115 recommendations, was released in 2023.¹⁶ In October 2025, Governor

Gavin Newsom, under whose administration the California task force was created, signed legislation establishing a state agency to administer and determine eligibility for restitution to the descendants of enslaved people. At the same time, Newsom vetoed several measures that would have provided benefits to those descendants, such as preference in college admissions and home loan assistance.¹⁷

In 2022, Illinois became just the second state to establish a reparations commission. New York's commission was established the following year and Colorado established its commission in 2024. The work of these commissions is ongoing as of this writing. After several failed attempts at convening a state-level task force in New Jersey, the independent New Jersey Institute for Social Justice established the New Jersey Reparations Council, which in 2025 released its report on harms of slavery along with recommendations for reparations.¹⁸ Several other states have introduced legislation to create reparations task forces or have enacted commissions dedicated to studying specified harms. For example, the Maryland Lynching Truth and Reconciliation Commission was established in 2019 to “research cases of racially motivated lynchings [...] where a lynching of an African American by a White mob has been documented.”¹⁹

While state-level reparations efforts often face difficult political headwinds and are still relatively few and far between, reparations initiatives have fared better at the local level. In 2021, a cohort of mayors from across the country who pledged to pay reparations to at least some Black residents of their cities came together to create Mayors Organized for Reparations and Equity (MORE).²⁰ Due in part to the visible advocacy of MORE mayors, cities including Chicago, New York, Los Angeles, Denver, Atlanta, St. Petersburg, Kansas City, Detroit, and Washington, DC, have established task forces charged with developing proposals to address the harms of slavery on their residents. Smaller cities like Burlington, Vermont; Asheville, North Carolina; Decatur, Georgia; Wilmington, Delaware; and Santa Monica, California have done the same. Even cities located in states where broad reparations initiatives are less likely to succeed have passed measures toward providing redress for certain historic events. In Saint Paul, Minnesota, for instance, an “Inheritance Fund” was established in 2023 to provide assistance for down payments and home renovations to direct descendants of residents of Rondo, where 80 percent of Saint Paul's Black community once lived. Hundreds of homes and businesses, and consequently millions of dollars in generational wealth, were lost due to the construction of Interstate 94 through the community between 1956 and 1968.²¹ And in Tulsa, Oklahoma, a \$105 million plan was announced in 2025 to address racial disparities resulting from the 1921 Tulsa Race Massacre, during which Greenwood, the community known as “Black Wall Street,” was decimated by White residents and up to three hundred Black residents were killed.²²

Reparations Efforts in Illinois

Illinois has been at the vanguard of the contemporary reparations movement. Not only is it one of a handful of states to have a legislatively enacted reparations task force, two Chicago-area initiatives have led the nation in developing programs meant to address specified harms to Black community members. In 2015, after more than two decades of survivor- and community-led advocacy, Chicago passed an ordinance providing reparations to the survivors of Chicago Police Commander Jon Burge and the officers under his command in the Chicago Police Department. Burge and others were found to have tortured and coerced confessions from at least 120 people, mostly Black men from the South and West Sides of Chicago, between 1972 and 1991. It was the first time a US municipality acknowledged and provided redress for racially motivated police violence. The \$5.5 million reparations package included compensation to survivors in the form of cash payments, as well as free city college tuition and mental health services for survivors and their immediate family members. It also required that information about the case be added to the Chicago Public Schools curriculum, provided for the creation of a public memorial, and the establishment of the Chicago Torture Justice Center, a counseling center which opened its doors in 2017.²³

In 2021, the city of Evanston launched the Restorative Housing Program, which provided grants for home repairs, mortgage assistance, or down-payment assistance as redress for historic housing discrimination experienced by Black residents between 1919 and 1969. The city initially allotted \$400,000 to the program (part of a larger, ten-year, \$10 million reparations package); to be eligible, applicants had to provide proof that they or their ancestors were residents during the designated time period, or that they experienced housing discrimination because of city policy after 1969.²⁴ While some criticism has been leveled at the design and implementation of the program — including concerns about whether such a narrowly tailored program should be considered reparations at all — and it has already become subject to at least one lawsuit,²⁵ it remains the case that Evanston is the first city in the country to fund an effort to redress Black residents' historical harms related to housing. It provides a relevant test case for considering how reparations proposals might be designed moving forward.²⁶

While the Chicago police torture survivors and the Evanston housing discrimination programs have received national attention, community groups, grassroots organizations, and institutions across Illinois have been advocating for reparations and developing their own proposals for addressing the injustices experienced by Black Americans. For instance, in 2024 the BlackRoots Alliance in Chicago worked with the Black Researchers Collective and Liberation in a Generation (LibGen) to survey and conduct interviews with hundreds of Black Chicagoans via the

“Reinvest to Repair” initiative. BlackRoots Alliance and its collaborators developed policy recommendations and built momentum for a community-centered reparations framework in Chicago that represents the needs, experiences, and visions of everyday Black Chicagoans.²⁷ Similarly, the Chicago Urban League established the South Side Community Reparations Coalition, which interviewed and surveyed community members from ten neighborhoods on the South Side between 2021 and 2022 with the goal of defining community-based reparations strategies.²⁸

Outside of Chicagoland, the Champaign-Urbana Reparations Coalition has joined the movement for Black reparations, and organizers in East St. Louis have called for reparations for the victims of the 1917 race riot in their city during which, according to some estimates, more than one hundred Black residents were killed by a White mob.²⁹ Even in some downstate municipalities where the language of reparations is not being invoked, there is still an intentional focus on addressing racial disparities affecting Black residents. In Peoria, for example, a joint city-county commission was established in 2021 to “investigate and propose action plans on issues related to racial justice and equity.”³⁰

FirstRepair, the organization founded and directed by Robin Rue Simmons, the former Evanston councilwoman who introduced the city’s reparations ordinance and was largely responsible for its passage, has developed an interactive mapping tool in collaboration with the Decolonizing Wealth Project that tracks reparations initiatives in Illinois and across the country.³¹

About the Report

This report was commissioned by the African Descent-Citizens Reparations Commission (ADCRC) — established to develop and implement “measures that ensure equity, equality, and parity for African American descendants of slavery” in Illinois³² — and is designed to support the Commission’s ongoing work. Our specific charge was to provide a historical overview of the systemic injustices experienced by Black Illinoisans since statehood as a foundation for the Commission’s forthcoming reparations recommendations. To do this, we have focused on nine broad categories of harm: enslavement and servitude; racial terror; political disenfranchisement; stolen economic labor; policing and the legal system; housing; education; family; and health. We provide a historical overview of each of these nine core areas, informed by key research in the relevant fields.

The research team began its work in August 2024. Over the next year, we undertook a wide-ranging and ambitious review of the literature relevant to our nine core areas. This literature included deeply researched books and articles written by both academic and non-academic writers; newspaper articles; data-driven reports

produced by research centers, think tanks, and community-based organizations; archival documents; legislative acts and judicial opinions; documentary films; and digital exhibitions created by scholars, museums, and cultural institutions, among other materials. During this period, we met several times with the ADCRC Research Subcommittee, with whom we regularly discussed our process and the progress of our work. The subcommittee supplied critical sources and research leads to the team throughout the process and provided comprehensive verbal and written feedback on the report drafts.

The research team also received feedback on an early draft of the report as part of a peer-review process conducted by a small cohort of scholars who have written extensively about Black communities in Illinois and who have expertise in areas relevant to this report, including Black Studies, African American history, and reparations. In April 2025, the research team met with these scholars at the University of Illinois Chicago for a day-long workshop to discuss their feedback and recommendations.

Given that this report is intended to provide a broad overview of an expansive history and could not begin to address in detail all of the varied harms Black Illinoisans have experienced, we have included an extensive bibliography of texts about the lives and experiences of Black Illinoisans. For people interested in learning more about the history of the reparations movement, we have also provided a reading list of key texts.

We also commissioned fourteen expert commentaries from scholars and practitioners who provide a deeper look into the report's nine core areas. Some of these authors use their personal experiences in Illinois as the grounding for their analyses; others provide overviews that help to situate the lived experiences of Black Illinoisans; and others make explicit arguments for reparations derived from their knowledge of the disparities and injustices Black people have experienced and are experiencing throughout the state.

As the third-largest city in the nation and the most populous city in the state, Chicago obviously has a significant footprint in Illinois. Despite relevant concerns about the outward migration of Black people from the city in recent years,³³ Black residents continue to make up nearly 30 percent of the city's population and Black residents have long played key roles in every level of city governance, including the mayoralty. Historically, Chicago has also been seen as a kind of "Black mecca," especially in regard to political power. It was the home and political base of the first and only Black US president, Barack Obama, and its long history of political organizing preceded Obama's ascendancy. Chicago also has a deep and storied history of Black grassroots community activism that continues into the present and the city is a nerve center of Black American cultural production, with a seemingly endless list of Black writers, visual and performance artists, filmmakers, musicians, athletes, and other prominent

cultural producers staking a claim to the city. As one Chicago author succinctly put it, “Black Chicago culture is American culture.”³⁴

For these reasons, the literature on Black Chicago is quite robust. Innumerable books, research studies, news articles, and reports focus on the experiences of Black Chicagoans. In comparison, the literature on the small and mid-size communities outside of Chicagoland where Black Illinoisans have also made their lives is much less extensive and data on these communities is typically harder to find. Given Chicago’s size and demographics and its critical role in the history of Black Illinois, as well as the disparity in the available scholarship, this report focuses more heavily on Chicago than other parts of the state. Still, we have endeavored to attend to the entirety of the state’s Black population, recognizing that some of the most critical struggles for Black freedom in Illinois have occurred in some of the least known and most under-studied places.

1823 CERTIFICATE OF FREEDOM FOR NELSON PENDLETON

Record of Freedom Certificates issued to men Colour whose
freedom were obtained in our County, &c.

To George a Blackman — on the record book.
State of Illinois, } I John Hay Clerk of the ^{Circuit} Court of the said County of St. Clair do hereby
St. Clair County, } certify that I have on record in my office sufficient proof of the freedom of
one George a Blackman. Now be it known that the aforesaid George a man of
Colour about six feet high of a light black colour and woolly hair, having a
scar on the middle of the upper part of his arm from the Elbow to the shoulder, also a
small scar on the upper part of his nose between the two eyes, also a scar on the
leg and bottom of the right foot, is a free man —
In testimony whereof do. dated 8th Aug^r. 1822 J. Hay Clerk

To Nelson Pendleton —
State of Illinois do. I John Hay Clerk of the Circuit Court of the County of St. Clair
do hereby certify that I have on record in my office, sufficient proof of the freedom of
one Nelson Pendleton a blackman (late the property of Richard Graves).
Now be it known that the aforesaid Nelson Pendleton, a negro man
about six feet ten inches, of a black colour and woolly hair, of slender
make, a scar on the left side of the forehead, a scar by a cut of an axe on
the middle of the left leg below the calf of the leg, aged about twenty five years,
is a free man — In testimony do. ~~the 22nd~~ ^{on} April 21st. 1823
of the said Co. 47th John Hay Clerk

The second entry of this “Record of Freedom Certificates issued to men Colour whose freedom were obtained in our County” for Nelson Pendleton reads as follows:

To Nelson Pendleton

State of Illinois, I John Hay Clerk of the Circuit Court of the County
of St. Clair do hereby certify that I have on record in my office, sufficient proof of the
freedom of

one Nelson Pendleton a blackman / late the property of Richard Graves.

Now be it known that the aforesaid Nelson Pendleton, a negro man
about five feet ten inches, of a black colour and woolly hair, of slender
make, a scar on the left side of the forehead, a scar by a cut of an axe
on the middle of the left leg below the calf of the leg, aged about twenty five years
is a free man. — In testimony fix — 21st April of 1823

John Hay Ck

Source: Illinois State Archives. The Pendleton family also preserves copies of this record and continues to steward their family history and legacy.

ENSLAVEMENT AND SERVITUDE

This is the 1823 certificate of freedom for Nelson Pendleton, a Black man formerly enslaved under Richard Graves. Issued by the State of Illinois, the document legally acknowledges Pendleton's free status. In early nineteenth-century Illinois, freedom for Black residents was never presumed; it had to be formally proven, recorded, and physically carried.

The certificate includes detailed physical descriptors of Pendleton — his complexion, hair texture, and identifying scars on his forehead and leg — reflecting a legal system that cataloged Black bodies in ways reminiscent of enslavement records. Even when recognized as free, Black individuals navigated systems of surveillance and scrutiny aimed at controlling their movement and identity. This record stands as a testament to Black resilience, family memory, and historical survival. It preserves one man's claim to freedom within a society structured to deny it and it continues to speak to the tenacity required for Black families to safeguard their histories across generations.

Illinois's history with slavery was neither accidental nor peripheral; it was intentional, structured, and state-sanctioned. Understanding this early system of racial control is critical to any discussion of reparations because it reveals how the state's legal and economic foundations were built through the exploitation of Black labor and the denial of Black freedom. While publicly claiming the title of a "free state," Illinois used law and policy to preserve slavery's logic and perpetuate racial harm that continues to shape inequities today.

From its founding, although geographically part of the North, Illinois was deeply entangled in the institution of slavery and the racial hierarchies that sustained it. While the state entered the Union under the banner of free soil, lawmakers and local authorities worked relentlessly to maintain systems of racial control and coerced Black labor. Illinois leveraged legal loopholes, territorial exceptions, and political alliances to uphold such labor and protect White economic and social interests. Territorial leaders adopted pro-slavery statutes from the Indiana Territory, permitted long-term indenture agreements that functioned as slavery in all but name, and carved out explicit legal spaces. State officials resisted federal efforts to curb these practices, defended the rights of slaveholders, and facilitated the capture and forced return of enslaved people seeking refuge across state borders.

The origins of this system date back to 1720, when, under French colonial rule, enslaved Africans were brought into the Illinois Country from Saint Domingue

(now Haiti) to work in agriculture, mining, and religious missions.³⁵ This marked the beginning of a racially based labor system that bound Black people in slavery and allowed White settlers to profit. When control of the region shifted from France to Britain and later to the United States, the system did not disappear; it simply adapted under new authorities. The Northwest Ordinance of 1787, which governed the territory that would become Illinois, declared in Article Six: “there shall be neither slavery nor involuntary servitude in the said territory.”³⁶ On paper, this positioned Illinois as part of the free North. In practice, however, the ordinance’s enforcement was weak and riddled with contradictions. It included a clause allowing for the capture and return of fugitive enslaved people, effectively recognizing the legitimacy of slave property claims from the South. Moreover, the ordinance provided no federal mechanism to enforce its ban on slavery, leaving interpretation and implementation to local officials who were often sympathetic to or directly involved in slaveholding practices.³⁷

This absence of oversight allowed Illinois settlers and lawmakers to sustain slavery through a range of legal fictions and contractual disguises. Enslaved people were often reclassified as “indentured servants,” bound by contracts that could last decades or even for life. Territorial leaders passed local laws that extended the reach of slavery under the guise of regulating labor. Early statutes borrowed from the French Code Noir, which had governed enslaved populations under French rule, and incorporated its racial logic into Illinois’s emerging legal order.³⁸ These codes sharply restricted the freedoms of free Black residents, prohibited interracial marriage, and authorized severe punishment for resistance or escape.

Even as Illinois entered statehood in 1818 with a constitution that nominally barred slavery, state officials created exceptions to keep the practice alive. Enslaved labor persisted in the salt mines of Gallatin and in private homes under the state’s so-called voluntary indenture laws, which forced Black people into servitude through economic and legal coercion. White settlers from Southern states brought enslaved individuals into Illinois, trusting that local officials would turn a blind eye. In this way, Illinois was a “free state” in name only, with legal systems designed to maintain racial control and economic exploitation.

Illinois’s connection to slavery was not just incidental or peripheral; it was central to the development of the state itself. The laws and practices established during this time formed a lasting system of racial control that persisted even after slavery was formally abolished. The Illinois Black Codes, enacted in the following decades, continued this pattern of racial domination into the nineteenth century, further criminalizing Black mobility, limiting economic independence, and enforcing racial inequality through law and order.

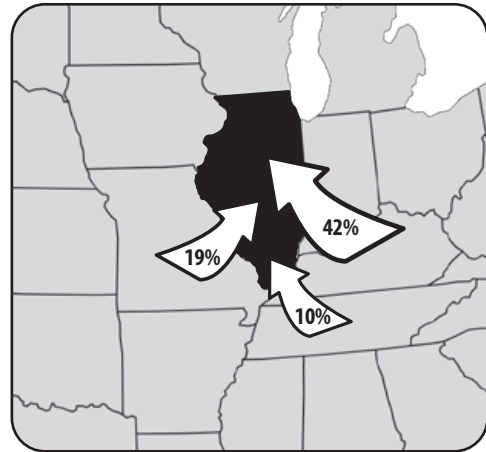
ENSLAVERS IN ILLINOIS POST-EMANCIPATION

6,985

**Number of Enslavers
Relocating to Illinois Following
1863 Emancipation**

**Most Common States Former
Enslavers Relocating to Illinois
Originated from Pre 1863**

Kentucky	42%
Missouri	19%
Tennessee	10%



Most Common Occupations for Former Enslavers in Illinois

Farmers	47%
Managers, Officials, and Proprietors	8%
Laborers	4%

Source: USA Linked Censuses, 1850 through 1940. Estimates compiled by IRRPP and derived from identifying enslavers in 1850 and 1860 (pre-emancipation) who moved to Illinois.

Mapping Enslavement: Regional Differences in Illinois

When Illinois entered the Union, Black residents' freedom was shaped less by the state constitution than by the actions of local officials, lawmakers, and White communities. Across much of the state, especially in the southern counties bordering Missouri and Kentucky, leaders exploited Illinois's position between North and South to preserve racial hierarchy and forced labor. This borderland reality produced a dual racial system: While northern Illinois held pockets of abolitionist activity, southern Illinois functioned as an extension of the slaveholding South. In these regions, enforcement of anti-slavery statutes was weak and local governments actively upheld pro-slavery customs and policies despite federal prohibitions. Legal protections existed on paper, but decisions made by White powerholders ensured that exploitation continued in practice.

The most prominent example was the Illinois Salines in Gallatin County, where enslaved labor sustained salt production. State and federal authorities carved out explicit exceptions allowing slavery at the salt works and even leased the operations

to private contractors, ensuring federal profit from Black labor. The 1818 Illinois Constitution codified this exploitation by permitting enslaved labor at the Salines, a stark demonstration that economic interests took priority over the state's professed anti-slavery stance.³⁹ When the exemption expired in 1825, forced labor did not end; instead, southern counties turned to Black Codes and vagrancy laws to continue extracting labor through the criminal legal system.⁴⁰ Mississippi River towns such as Chester served as transit points for the illegal slave trade, demonstrating how geography and commerce intertwined to uphold slavery despite formal prohibition.

As Black communities sought autonomy and safety, freedom remained precarious. Settlements like Miller Grove in Pope County illustrated both resilience and vulnerability.⁴¹ As a stop on the Underground Railroad, Miller Grove relied on secrecy, mutual aid, and constant vigilance. Its existence proved that Black resistance flourished but also that such resistance was necessary because state and local authorities could not be trusted to protect Black life. Scholars describe southern Illinois during this period as a “borderland of freedom,” where proximity to slave states enabled White residents and officials to defy anti-slavery laws and maintain systems of racial control.⁴²

State politics reinforced these dynamics. Illinois leaders, including Stephen A. Douglas, supported pro-slavery measures such as the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850, compelling officials to return enslaved people even from free territory.⁴³ The 1853 Black Law criminalized Black migration into Illinois, while local courts and sheriffs enabled kidnapping and re-enslavement under false fugitive claims.

These policies produced tangible consequences for Black people living in Illinois. One example is Julia Leakes, a Black woman held in bondage and forced to labor in Chicago while under the control of Senator Stephen A. Douglas. Leakes was not an outlier; she was one of many Black people whose coerced labor enriched powerful Illinoisans.⁴⁴ Douglas's participation in this system and the wealth he accumulated, which enabled his donation of the land on which the University of Chicago was founded, underscore how slavery's profits helped build major political and educational institutions in the state. Leakes's story is a testament to the broader system through which Illinois leaders profited from Black servitude.⁴⁵

At the same time, northern Illinois, particularly Chicago, became a critical site of resistance. Abolitionist networks, industrial growth, and a larger free Black population created conditions where escape, organizing, and advocacy were more possible than in the state's southern counties. But even there, racism persisted in segregated schools, restricted civic participation, and employment discrimination. Illinois contained two interconnected racial regimes: one in the south that reproduced slavery, and one in the north that offered limited opportunities for resistance while still maintaining racial hierarchy.

Public Auctions and Indentured Servitude

The persistence of racial exploitation in Illinois was sustained through the calculated decisions of lawmakers, judges, and local officials who used the law to legitimize coerced labor. Indentured servitude functioned as a legal façade for slavery, with contracts often imposed on Black individuals without their consent, offering no real avenue for freedom or agency.⁴⁶ Public auctions provide clear proof of Illinois's participation in slavery. In southern counties, these sales were openly authorized with licenses, taxes, and oversight by local officials.⁴⁷ State and local governments profited from exploiting Black labor, leasing individuals for public projects like road construction and courthouse repairs, often under sheriffs' or county commissioners' supervision. These practices were core to the state's civic and economic life, supported by institutions that prioritized White Supremacy over justice.⁴⁸

Before Springfield became the state capital in 1837, for example, it was a place where human trafficking was disguised as legal indentured servitude. In July 1827, two Black girls, Nance and her sister Dice, were sold on the courthouse steps to settle the debts of Thomas Cox, a prominent settler and land speculator. Nance was sold for \$151 and Dice was sold to the county sheriff for \$150.⁴⁹ Though called indentures, these were essentially slave auctions that legally maintained slavery in a state claiming to prohibit it. Nance's later court case, *Bailey v. Cromwell* (1841), during which future president Abraham Lincoln successfully argued for her freedom, is often viewed as a legal milestone.⁵⁰ Yet this exception underscores a harsher reality: Black Illinoisans subjected to indenture, debt bondage, and forced labor had limited access to justice. They remained ensnared in systemic exploitation upheld by sheriffs, probate courts, and lawmakers committed to maintaining White dominance.

As Illinois law made chattel slavery increasingly difficult to justify, indentured servitude gained popularity as a more acceptable alternative that maintained the conditions of slavery while appearing legally legitimate. Often presented as voluntary, these agreements were effectively coercive and non-negotiable. The case of Peggy, a twenty-year-old Black woman living in Kaskaskia in 1812, exemplifies this manipulation. Peggy was bound to William Morrison, a well-known trader and enslaver, and was sold three times — each time without her consent. Her indenture, though nominally legal, exhibited all the characteristics of chattel slavery.⁵¹ She and her children were sold for \$500 and traded between White men as property. The terms and duration of her contract provided no chance for independence, no protection from abuse, and no acknowledgment of her humanity.⁵²

For many Black people, signing indenture contracts was more about survival than choice, driven by the constant threat of kidnapping, imprisonment, or sale into the Deep South.⁵³ These long-term agreements, which sometimes lasted decades,

served as tools of control that blurred the lines between servant and slave. At the Gallatin Salines, even after slavery's formal abolition in 1825, Black labor persisted under these exploitative arrangements, supporting an economy based on racial exploitation while giving the illusion of compliance with the state's constitution.⁵⁴ The legal difference between an enslaved person and a servant was a false distinction, designed to conceal a system that, in practice, closely resembled slavery.

The story of Phillis Singleton and her family highlights the uncertain nature of Black freedom in early Illinois. In 1815, three years before Illinois became a state, Revolutionary War veteran Joseph Ogle freed Phillis and her children.⁵⁵ However, their freedom, like that of many Black families at the time, remained fragile. Phillis's husband, James Singleton, was bound by a nine-year indentured servitude contract and was later illegally sold into slavery in Madison County.⁵⁶ Their son, John, was kidnapped and sold into slavery in Alabama, then regained his freedom through legal means, only to be kidnapped and enslaved again.⁵⁷ Phillis was likely trafficked to Louisiana in 1824 but later reappeared in Brooklyn, Illinois — a Black-founded town formed in defiance of systemic violence.⁵⁸ Her survival signifies resistance, yet her hardships highlight the violent instability that Black families faced in a state that promised freedom but delivered betrayal.

These examples dispel the myth of voluntary servitude. Black Illinoisans were not part of a fair labor system but were instead captives within a structure that legalized coercion, upheld racial hierarchy, and broke apart families. Indenture contracts provided no safeguards. Once bound, individuals could be sold, moved, abused, or imprisoned, actions sanctioned fully by Illinois law. What the legal system called “servitude” essentially functioned as slavery. These arrangements enabled White communities to sustain racial dominance while giving the appearance of moral and legal superiority over the South.

The Illinois Black Codes and the Criminalization of Blackness

Illinois's early legal system enforced a series of racially restrictive laws known as the “Black Codes,” also referred to in some historical documents as “Black laws.” Although Illinois claimed to be a free state, these statutes controlled the movement, labor, and daily lives of Black people from the early 1800s through the Civil War. In practice, they functioned as a system of racial control that mirrored slavery in purpose and effect.⁵⁹

Modeled on pro-slavery laws from the Indiana Territory, Illinois's Black Codes required Black residents to carry proof of their legal status at all times, such as manumission papers (legal documents freeing enslaved people), birth certificates, or residency permits. Anyone unable to present these documents could be arrested,

fined, whipped, or sold at public auction into forced labor.⁶⁰ Simply traveling more than ten miles from home without written permission could trigger the same penalties.⁶¹ White residents who hired or sheltered Black people without approved documents faced fines, while anyone who assisted an enslaved person seeking freedom risked criminal prosecution and economic ruin.⁶² These laws created a racial surveillance system that monitored where Black people lived, worked, and traveled. Even those born free lived under constant threat of being seized and forced into servitude. In Illinois, freedom had to be continuously proven and could be stripped away at any moment.

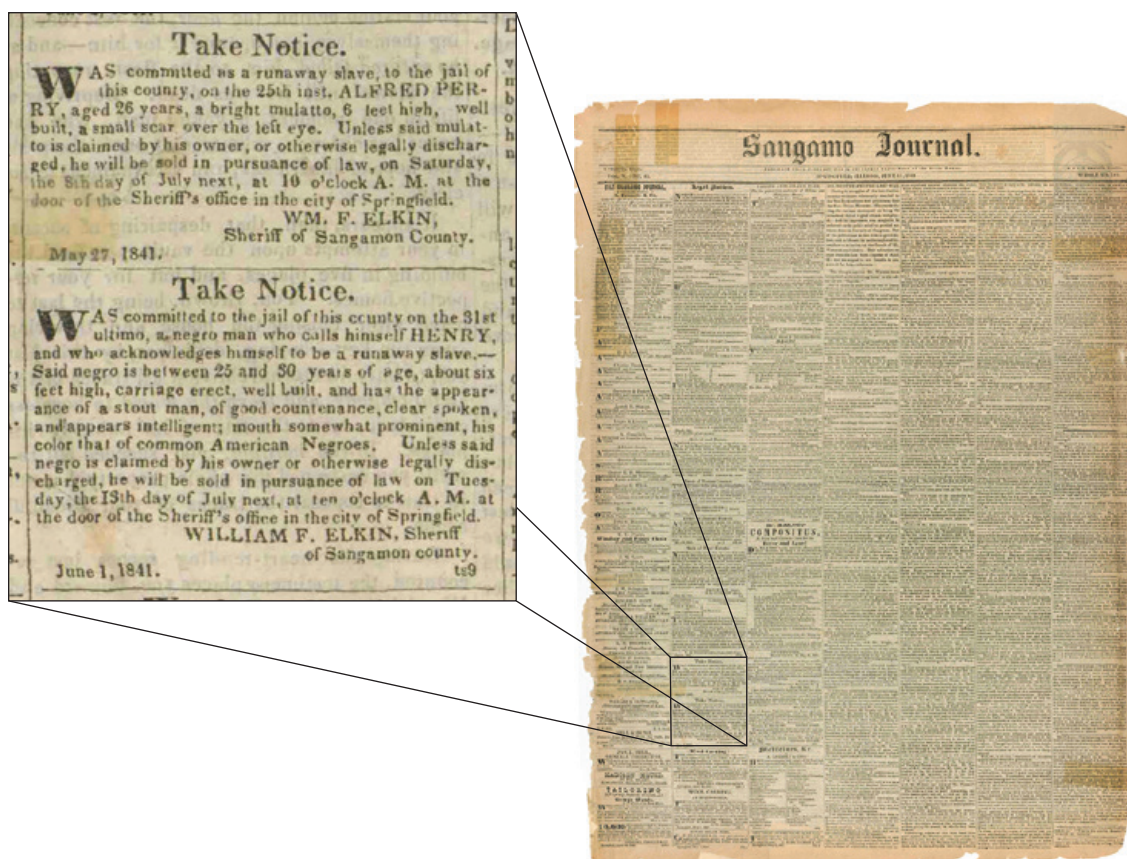
Federal laws strengthened this system. The Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 empowered slave catchers to operate openly in Illinois, often with help from local officials. Free Black residents could be kidnapped, transported out of state, and sold into slavery with little legal recourse, further blurring the line between freedom and bondage.⁶³ The state increased its efforts in 1853, when legislator John A. Logan sponsored a law banning Black people from entering Illinois. Anyone who remained longer than ten days could be fined \$50 and expelled; inability to pay meant public auction and forced labor. The statute also rewarded White residents who aided enforcement, embedding racial profiling into everyday life and encouraging ordinary citizens to participate in surveillance and racial control.⁶⁴

Taken together, the Black Codes did far more than restrict rights. They created a legal and social order designed to regulate, punish, and exploit Black life. Illinois did not merely tolerate racial subjugation; it legislated it, enforced it, and normalized it as part of public life. These early laws laid a foundation for the systems of exclusion and criminalization that would shape the lives of Black residents long after slavery's formal end.

The press played a direct role in sustaining slavery-era systems in Illinois. Papers such as the *Illinois Herald* regularly printed notices advertising enslaved people for sale; rewards for the capture of men, women, and children seeking freedom; and services offered by “slave catchers.” These ads appeared next to land sales, public appointments, and government announcements, treating the buying, selling, and policing of Black bodies as routine business.⁶⁵ By publishing these notices, Illinois newspapers gave legitimacy to slavery and its enforcement. They signaled to the public that the capture and sale of Black people was not only acceptable but woven into everyday economic and civic life. In doing so, the press became a powerful institution supporting racial control, reinforcing the legal and social systems that criminalized Black presence and protected White dominance.

Yet even in the midst of these oppressive structures, Black Illinoisans resisted and organized.

1841 NOTICES OF “RUNAWAY SLAVES”



Source: Sangamon Journal, June 4, 1841. Courtesy of Illinois Digital Newspaper Collections, University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign.

One defining moment occurred at the 1853 Colored Convention in Chicago, where Black leaders from across the state gathered to challenge the Black Codes and demand full citizenship rights. Under Illinois law, simply moving through public space without papers could lead to arrest and forced labor, making it risky to participate in political organizing.⁶⁶ Resistance grew stronger as debates over slavery intensified nationally. But so too did White efforts to restrict freedom in Illinois. At the 1862 Illinois Constitutional Convention, delegates pushed proposals to bar Black people from voting, holding office, serving in the militia, or even entering the state. Although Illinois voters rejected the new constitution as a whole, they overwhelmingly approved every anti-Black provision, demonstrating broad public support for racial exclusion at the height of the Civil War.⁶⁷

Achieving full civic and political equality for Black residents remained an elusive goal. Constitutional guarantees of citizenship were not formally established

until the 1868 enactment of the Fourteenth Amendment, granting citizenship to all persons born or naturalized in the United States, and the 1870 enactment of the Fifteenth Amendment, which prohibited denying the right to vote based on race, color, or previous condition of servitude. Even then, enforcement across the states remained inconsistent and often hostile.⁶⁸ For Black residents, life in Illinois was technically free but was constantly monitored, economically exploited, and politically marginalized.

Courts as a Legal Instrument of Oppression

While Illinois's exclusionary laws shaped public policy, the courts gave these laws force and permanence. Judicial rulings transformed racial ideology into binding precedent, validating indentured servitude, criminalizing poverty, and sustaining generational labor bondage. Rather than acting as neutral arbiters of justice, the Illinois judiciary played an active and foundational role in maintaining Black subjugation.

Illinois courts enforced and legitimized this subjugation by interpreting and applying the law in ways that preserved White dominance and denied Black residents even the most basic protections of citizenship. From the early 1800s through the Civil War, Illinois courts consistently supported racialized practices that bound Black people to involuntary labor. This was evident in *Phoebe v. Jay* (1828), a case in which the Illinois Supreme Court upheld the validity of an indenture contract that bound a Black woman, Phoebe, to nearly thirty years of unpaid labor. Although the indenture was labeled voluntary, the circumstances surrounding Phoebe's entry into it were never thoroughly examined. The court's ruling made clear that as long as documentation existed, the element of coercion in the agreement was irrelevant.⁶⁹ This decision entrenched the use of indentures as a legal substitute for chattel slavery, permitting White employers to replicate the conditions of slavery within the boundaries of a free state.

In *Booth v. Commonwealth* (1832), the court further developed this logic, upholding the enforcement of vagrancy laws against Black people who lacked formal employment or written labor contracts. This ruling institutionalized the criminalization of Black presence and economic independence, enabling the state to control Black lives under the rationale of public order.⁷⁰ In effect, Illinois weaponized poverty as a legal justification for incarceration and forced labor, foreshadowing future systems of racialized punishment. The judiciary's role extended beyond isolated rulings, constructing a comprehensive legal framework that rendered Black labor both inheritable and disposable. In *Cornelius v. Cohen* (1825), the court ruled that an indenture contract could be sold to another individual, treating the labor of the indentured as transferable property.⁷¹ This logic was further extended in *Boon v. Juliet* (1836), where the court upheld the servitude of a child born to an indentured Black

woman, condemning the child to decades of labor.⁷² These decisions functionally recreated the generational transmission of slavery under the guise of contract law, codifying Black servitude as something that could be inherited and sold. Even when courts addressed the outright legal fraud, they still upheld the broader framework that enabled exploitation. In *Sarah v. Borders* (1843), the Illinois Court found that an indenture contract had been forged and was therefore invalid.⁷³ However, the ruling challenged only the forgery, not the legality of indentures themselves. This distinction reveals the court's fundamental position: legality, not justice, defined Black freedom.

A rare but important exception arose in *Jarrot v. Jarrot* (1845), where the court ruled that descendants of enslaved people brought to Illinois during the French colonial period could not be legally held as property.⁷⁴ While this ruling delivered a blow to one specific legacy of slavery in the region, it did not dismantle the system of coerced labor and racial subordination that courts had helped entrench. These rulings must be understood in the broader context of Illinois's political and legal culture. Many state leaders, including Illinois's first governor, Shadrach Bond, openly enslaved people by exploiting constitutional loopholes.⁷⁵ These southern transplants shaped the state's early laws and judicial appointments, ensuring that the courts would reflect and reinforce White Supremacist ideology. Consequently, the Illinois judiciary was not merely interpreting the law — it was constructing a racial hierarchy through legal means, embedding White dominance in the very structures of state governance. The judiciary's actions made clear that Black freedom in Illinois was conditional, precarious, and consistently undermined by the rule of law. Courtrooms became places where family separations were legitimized, indentures were enforced, and Black children were forced into labor. Legal rulings allowed White residents to exploit Black labor through contracts and auctions, shielded by judicial approval. Even after the ratification of the Thirteenth Amendment in 1865, Illinois used the amendment's punishment clause to continue extracting labor from Black people through criminalization and imprisonment — another manifestation of judicially-sanctioned forced labor.⁷⁶

In this way, the Illinois judiciary upheld not only the letter of racially biased laws but also the essence of slavery itself. The courts provided the legal justification for a system that governed Black people through coercion, surveillance, and economic exploitation. As legal scholar Randall Kennedy has argued, the absence of explicit slavery does not imply the absence of subjugation.⁷⁷ In Illinois, slavery lived on as a practice sanctioned by legal briefs, courtroom rulings, and judicial reasoning.

Conclusion

Illinois did not simply move on from slavery; it reshaped it. While calling itself a “free state,” Illinois created and protected systems that continued to confine Black freedom,

shape Black labor, and restrict Black life. Through the legal system, policies, and political alliances, state leaders made sure that slavery's goal of controlling Black lives and extracting value from Black people persisted long after slavery officially ended in the US. Indenture laws forced Black people into long-term labor contracts. Black Codes regulated their movement and punished their presence. Vagrancy and apprenticeship laws gave officials the power to seize Black children and force adults into servitude. Courts upheld these systems and political leaders defended them, not as relics of slavery but as tools of "order" and "public safety." In practice, Illinois claimed freedom while building a framework designed to limit it for Black residents.

These systems were not brief departures or isolated policies; they defined early Illinois law and governance. They shaped who could own land, build wealth, move freely, testify in court, and participate in civic life. They established where Black families could live and under what conditions. And they normalized the idea that Black people could be controlled, monitored, and punished simply because of their race. The consequences did not disappear with emancipation or statehood. The same logic that once justified indenture and Black Codes later justified racial zoning, restrictive covenants, discriminatory lending, unequal school funding, aggressive policing, and unequal sentencing. These policies continue to confine opportunity and dignity for Black people across generations, creating a pattern that remains visible in today's disparities in wealth, housing stability, health, safety, and access to justice.

THE MANY FACES OF SLAVERY IN ILLINOIS

Scott Heerman

Coming to terms with the history of slavery is always challenging, and the case of Illinois is no exception. Slavery had no single form or simple geographic distribution in the state, and enslavers held both African-descended and Native American people together, adding further complexity to the story. Slavery long predated the arrival of European settlers, but it took on a new set of characteristics in the first decades of the eighteenth century when French migrants built villages on the banks of the Mississippi River in modern-day Randolph and St. Clair counties.⁷⁸ Those settlers used enslaved labor to clear land, plant grain, harvest the grain, process it into flour, load it onto vessels, and row the cargo on the voyage to the lower Mississippi Valley. With the onset of European settlement, French colonizers held African and Native people in slavery to enrich themselves and the communities of the wider French empire.

In rapid succession, the region changed from French (1699–1763) to British (1763–1778) to Virginian (1778–1784) and ultimately to US territorial control (1784–1818). Each period of occupation saw an increased reliance on enslaved people. British merchants shipped hundreds of enslaved people into the Illinois Country; by the end of the eighteenth century, some Virginians had relocated to the territory with enslaved workers in tow.

Those workers continued to labor in agriculture and shipping; new mining economies also came online at the turn of the nineteenth century. In the southeast of the state, the salt marshes in modern-day Gallatin and Saline counties relied heavily on enslaved people's labor. The mines generated sizable revenue for the state: In the 1820s, the salt works produced nearly 160,000 bushels annually, generating nearly \$30,000 in state tax revenue.⁷⁹ Writing to a territorial governor in 1812, one of the salt makers reported that his workers were “mostly negroes.”⁸⁰ In the northwest corner of the state in modern-day Jo Daviess County, enslaved people worked in lead mines and refineries that also generated profits for the White settlers.⁸¹ And enslaved people also worked in a variety of domestic settings, including as cooks or seamstresses. From the shipping economies of the Mississippi River basin to the agrarian economies of the state's southern counties, enslaved people's labor was an important part of the Illinois economy.

It is true that there were never much more than a thousand enslaved people in the state at any one time, so it might appear that maintaining such a system of slavery

took little effort. For instance, 1810 census-takers recorded scarcely two hundred enslaved people in their official tabulations, and the numbers only ever grew to 917 enslaved people in the 1820 census.⁸² In fact, the opposite was true: Keeping people in bondage across such a wide sector of the state required many different kinds of legal and political work.

Most significantly, the state's leaders carved out a series of evasions and exceptions to antislavery laws that were on the books or written into state constitutions. The first such evasion came in the late eighteenth century, when the US government abolished slavery and involuntary servitude in the Northwest Territories by provision of Article Six of the 1787 Northwest Ordinance. Yet the territorial governor, Arthur St. Clair, informed his superiors in Washington, DC, that he treated "the Article respecting slaves as a prohibition to any future introduction of them[.]" He continued that it would "not ... extend to the liberation of those the people were already possessed of[.]"⁸³ State leaders ultimately wrote that policy into the first constitution in 1818, declaring that "neither slavery nor involuntary servitude shall *hereafter* be introduced into this state."⁸⁴ They went further, and permitted settlers to hire enslaved workers from Kentucky and other neighboring regions to work in the salt marshes uninterrupted until 1825. Importantly, roughly 40 percent of the delegates to the state's constitutional convention were slaveholders, and they crafted a charter to their liking.⁸⁵

Members of Congress took note, and during the debates over Illinois's petitions for statehood some objected to its provisions. Congressman James Tallmadge of New York asserted that "the principle of slavery, if not adopted in the constitution, was at least not sufficiently prohibited."⁸⁶ His objections did not prevent Illinois's entry into the Union, but underscored that it did not enter as a state free of slavery. Still, for all the work these provisions accomplished, the overall impact of the laws curtailed the expansion of slavery into the nineteenth century. Undeniably, the number of enslaved people in the state declined over the years, with just over three hundred recorded in 1840.

Despite the numbers, slaveholders did not simply relent in the face of these laws; instead, they kept slavery alive by other means. The two most common ways for slaveholders to accomplish this were through indentured servitude or through taking their unfree workers out of the state to avoid the laws, effectively kidnapping them back into slavery. Servitude laws allowed slaveholders who arrived in Illinois a window of time to convert their enslaved workers into servants, and to hold children of enslaved workers as servants. In many cases, servitude contracts allowed slavery

to survive in all but name, as enslavers recorded labor contracts that forced slaves to work in lifelong, uncompensated servitude. In some cases, individuals signed on for ninety years of unpaid labor.

Yet the servitude system defied simple characterization, because in some cases the contracts spanned shorter periods of time and offered payment at their expiration. Contracts for five or ten years gave people at least some plausible hope of escaping their unfreedom. Over time, shorter contracts appear to have become more common, indicating that the servitude system, like antislavery provisions, did eventually curtail the role of unfree labor in Illinois.⁸⁷

By the 1830s, slavery was undeniably on a rapid decline in the state — but that does not mean enslaved people could live in freedom in Illinois. Instead, systems of kidnapping Black people into slavery existed, and slaveholders took people out of the state. Because this was a criminal process, it is almost impossible to reliably establish the number of kidnappings, but juries indicted kidnappers in counties across the southern swath of the state. Together, the systems of servitude and abductions represented ways enslavers could continue to profit off Black people's labor even as the law forbade it.

Understanding how slavery operated in Illinois requires connecting its antebellum history to its colonial past and centering the many different iterations of slavery that existed across this long span. While it would be tempting to break up the history into eras, looking to the passage of the Northwest Ordinance or the 1818 State Constitution as key turning points, the reality is that slavery proved to be remarkably adaptable in each different period. Slaveholders in the early nineteenth century pointed to the long continuity of slaving in French and British colonial settings to claim a right to keep slaves in the state, regardless of what US laws might say. And the evidence of slavery's ongoing nature was public: Slaveholders relied on newspapers to buy and sell African Americans; some baptized enslaved infants in Catholic churches well into the 1830s; still others turned to courts to publicly defend their prerogatives to hold people as property and profit from their stolen labor. Through these legal proceedings and political machinations that created new statutes, slaveholders and their many allies created exemptions to abolition laws that kept people trapped in bondage until the eve of the US Civil War.

FREEDOM SEEKERS AND THE UNDERGROUND RAILROAD: REFRAMING ILLINOIS STORIES

Larry A. McClellan

In the decades before the Civil War, the growth of Illinois was fueled partly by the journeys of people escaping their enslavement in Southern states. Thousands of enslaved people found the means as individuals, families, and small groups to seek their freedom, and other people formed the networks of assistance that came to be called the Underground Railroad.

Over the past 160 years, the overwhelming focus of the narrative has been on these networks and not on the people undertaking the journeys. However, as Dr. Keith Griffler of the University of Buffalo has said, “The Underground Railroad did not organize the flight from slavery, but was organized by it.”⁸⁸ The story must be reframed to center the enslaved people seeking their freedom as the protagonists.

Nineteenth-century language and law labeled people escaping enslavement in the South as “fugitive slaves,” defining them through unjust laws and as a category of property. As we describe the journeys of people defined by their human intention to seek their own freedom, we need to adopt a new descriptor. They were freedom seekers, not fugitives.

Nineteenth- and twentieth-century histories of enslavement and abolition were written largely by White men and focus heavily on the support provided by White men. However, the assistance provided to freedom seekers came from a diverse array of people — women and men, Black and White individuals and families, and people both well-established and on the margins. Just as freedom seekers defied dangerous laws, those responding to them not only sought to abolish slavery but also were willing to break the law to assist them.

From 1818 into the Civil War years, between forty-five hundred and seven thousand freedom-seekers moved into and through Illinois. While a few came from Eastern states, most freedom seekers came from Missouri, Kentucky, and Tennessee; others came from Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama, and Arkansas. They traveled up the Illinois River and overland from the Mississippi River to the towns of Cairo, Chester, Alton, Quincy, Galena, and innumerable smaller places. Some came north through Indiana; some came by foot, coach and horseback from Iowa and Wisconsin; and, starting in the mid-1850s, some came by train. Significant points of response and assistance emerged across the state in the 1830s, including in historic Black

MAJOR ROUTES FOR FREEDOM SEEKERS IN 1850



Major routes for freedom seekers included movement from communities in the Mississippi River Valley up the Illinois River Valley, east out of Iowa and Missouri, and overland including north in the corridor of the old Vincennes Trace/Hubbard's Trail.

Source: Map from Larry A. McClellan's *Onward to Chicago: Freedom Seekers and the Underground Railroad in Northeastern Illinois*. Courtesy of the author.

communities and neighborhoods. By the early 1840s, communications across Illinois had grown rapidly, and those assisting freedom seekers self-identified collectively as the Underground Railroad.

Over time, some freedom seekers saw themselves as refugees, remaining in Chicago's relatively open and safe environment. However, the goal for most was to travel through Detroit to free settlements in Ontario, Canada.

Key elements in the journeys of freedom seekers reflect embedded discriminatory attitudes and practices. Until recently, stories usually portrayed enslaved people arriving in Illinois as passive, needing assistance, and traveling in bewildered ignorance. The implicit (and sometimes explicit) point was that freedom came from the actions and moral courage of abolitionists, typically presented as righteous White men. The histories of the Underground Railroad have not included the critical importance of Black families and Black leadership in Chicago and other communities across the state, and the role of established Black settlements in Illinois (e.g., New Philadelphia, Brooklyn, and those in and near Alton).

The work of the Underground Railroad has been referred to as Illinois's first civil rights movement, reflected in the collaboration and friendships that emerged among Black and White families and leaders as they assisted freedom seekers and absorbed some into their local communities. However, even among abolitionists, there continued to be a compelling distinction between freedom and equality. Yes, enslaved people had a right to freedom; but, for many White citizens of Illinois, that did not mean they were equal human beings.

A profound human dilemma remains inside our reframed understanding of the journeys of freedom seekers and the networks of the Underground Railroad. It is crucial that our history reflect the agency of freedom seekers and explore more deeply the rich diversity of those involved in providing aid for their journeys. However, just as older narratives focused on "righteous White men," we may focus too much on the resilience, courage and empowerment in the stories of freedom seekers. We need to be clear-eyed in our research and reflection about the great human costs that we do not deeply know (and therefore end up not telling). Most of the people who journeyed to and through Illinois, escaping their enslavement, left behind family and friendships. Many enslaved people did not make it to freedom — they were captured, kidnapped and returned to slavery. Many showed courage by remaining with their families in enslavement. We cannot see these stories only through the lenses of Black bravery or White saviors. And in expanding the histories of these struggles and commitments, it is crucial to acknowledge what has been ignored and suppressed,

to tell the full stories, and to understand that stories of freedom seekers and the Underground Railroad contribute to the healing of our own self-understandings and views of our national history. Acknowledgment and healing are critical elements in any process of reparation.

To date, we researchers have only been able to specifically identify one to three hundred of the thousands of freedom seekers who traveled across Illinois before slavery's abolition. Many of them chose to stay in Illinois after escaping enslavement. We are also working to confirm the identities of Black residents and activists who engaged with freedom seekers, breaking unjust laws and providing resources such as food, clothing, lodging, and travel assistance.

These areas of inquiry are underway through the Midwest Underground Railroad Network, the Illinois Freedom Corridor project at Illinois College, the Underground Railroad Center at Knox College, several African American history centers, the three National Heritage Areas in Illinois, and the New Philadelphia National Historical Park. Research that develops at the community level will be reinforced through the work of the Illinois Freedom Trail Commission, established by the state legislature in 2025. In anticipation of the work of the Commission, a new Illinois Network to Freedom Collective is being organized across the state.

Over time, this work will continue to identify individuals and families who were directly involved in the struggle to end slavery while operating under the oppressive Black Codes, the horrendous directives of the 1850 Fugitive Slave Law, and the daily indignities of discrimination.

RACIAL TERROR

Racial terror — violence and violent intimidation used to subjugate — has been a pervasive threat for Black Americans since the inception of slavery on the continent. Violence was necessary to perpetuate slavery in the antebellum era, with enslavers enjoying unlimited rights of coercive control over enslaved people. After the end of the Civil War, racially motivated violence increasingly took place at the hands of ordinary citizens empowered to intimidate, maim, and kill Black citizens with impunity.⁸⁹ The extrajudicial punishment and execution of Black people for violating racial norms took many forms, most infamously that of the lynch mob hanging, shooting, and burning its victims. This phenomenon is most well-known as a feature of the South during Reconstruction, though it was a regular occurrence in northern states from before the Civil War to the middle of the twentieth century. In addition to unorganized racial terrorism, organized White Supremacist vigilante groups including the Ku Klux Klan were able to establish footholds in northern states such as Illinois.⁹⁰

Racial terror functioned to enforce the racial hierarchy that dominated United States society long beyond the end of slavery. The 1955 murder of fourteen-year-old Emmett Till, who was born and lived in Chicago but lynched in Mississippi, cast the issue into the national spotlight, providing undeniable photographic evidence of a customary practice that had terrorized Black Americans across the country.⁹¹

Racial Terror in Illinois Before 1865

As the previous section of this report has established, though Illinois was technically a free state at the time of its admission to the Union in 1818, it was neither a welcoming state for Black Americans nor an unwelcoming one for enslavers. Some of the state's earliest White settlers were enslavers, an unsurprising fact given the proximity of the state's southern region to the Upper South. While an 1824 referendum settled the state's vague statutes on involuntary servitude in opposition to slavery, the rationale behind this came from the fear of unrestricted Black immigration rather than any moral objection to chattel slavery. Over the ensuing antebellum decades, Illinois tightened legal limits over its marginal Black population. The state denied Black Illinoisans the rights to vote or to testify in court against Whites. In 1853, the state legislature passed the Illinois Black Laws, which allowed free Black entrants to the state to be captured and sold into slavery. These legal restrictions show that public White sentiment toward Black residents of Illinois was markedly hostile, particularly in the southern "Little

Egypt” region of the state, heavily settled by tradesmen and agricultural laborers from the Upper South.⁹²

Given the willingness of Illinoisans to use legal means to drive out Black residents and maintain White Supremacist control over those who remained, it is unsurprising that extralegal acts of terror also occurred, even in a “free” state. Indeed, White Supremacist mob justice was as much a part of the social fabric in Illinois as in Southern states. For example, in 1846 a mob of angry White citizens in the southern Illinois city of Vienna whipped an innocent Black man to death over charges of thievery. In 1854, a Black man who had threatened to blow up a courtroom was cornered adrift on his boat by an enraged posse who finally burned him out, resulting in his death by drowning.⁹³ In 1856, a lynch mob in southeastern Golconda shot and mutilated a Black man accused of raping a White woman.⁹⁴

These examples of antebellum racial terror in Illinois show the climate of fear and terror for Black residents that existed at the hands of their neighbors and fellow citizens. A lynch mob could form as quickly in Illinois as anywhere else in the country, depriving the guilty and innocent alike of their rights to due process. Sometimes the target of this mob violence was not an individual but an entire community. In 1842, a band of White vigilantes coalesced to drive all free Black citizens out of Gallatin County, an effort that, according to one historian, led to the county’s Black residents becoming “as scarce as squirrels on a windy day.”⁹⁵

Racial Terror in Illinois After 1865

After the Civil War, racial terrorism exploded in the South, an expression of Whites’ resort to extralegal violence against formerly enslaved people after the dismantling of the legal architecture of slavery. Less commonly discussed is the prevalence of this form of violence in Northern states such as Illinois. Black Illinoisans no doubt hoped that the end of slavery would portend an improvement in their place in the social hierarchy. The Illinois legislature had repealed the draconian Black Laws and, at the federal level, the Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth Amendments promised suffrage for Black men and equal citizenship rights.

However, laws and amendments do not necessarily change hearts and minds and Illinois did not become an immediate refuge for free Black men and women. Black Illinoisans had little political power in the face of systemically segregated schools and housing, problems that persist in the present day. Meanwhile, racial terror still threatened these nascent communities. According to the Equal Justice Initiative (EJI), Illinois has the third largest number of reported postbellum lynchings outside of the South (fifty-six), just behind Oklahoma (seventy-five) and Missouri (sixty).⁹⁶ These were instrumentally powerful forms of racial terrorism, serving both to satiate the desire

1898 POSTER ADVERTISING WORK FOR BLACK MINERS IN VIRDEN



The spread of information via the printing press, new railroads, and publications like the *Chicago Defender* and new network of railroads enabled the first wave of the Great Migration. Black workers who arrived in Virden to work during a strike were attacked by White miners when they attempted to disembark their train.

Image Source: <https://www.theroute-66.com/images/illinois/miner-leaflet.jpg>

for retribution against violators of racial norms and also as a deterrent to keep Black citizens from challenging the racial hierarchy.

At the turn of the twentieth century, in the rapidly expanding news market facilitated by railroads and telegraph lines, newspapers faced increasing demand for timely content to capture new readers. Few events proved as sensational as lynchings and local newspapers wasted little time in reporting (and more often embellishing) lurid details of the depravity of a Black individual murdered by a White mob.⁹⁷ The coverage from White publications was typically slanted as an exoneration of the righteous mob and an ex post facto indictment of the mob's victim.

In response to this coverage, several activists and writers in Illinois began to publish critical accounts of lynchings that centered the brutality of the White vigilantes and the helplessness of the accused. Illinois became a focal point for Black anti-lynching activism and media. Of these critical accounts, few were more rhetorically gifted than Ida B. Wells. Born in Memphis, Tennessee, Wells was violently exiled from the state in 1892 due to her anti-lynching editorials. She came to settle in Chicago in 1895, the same year she published the “Red Record” of lynchings in the United States. While her focus was on Southern states, she was unsparing of Illinois:

In the month of June, 1893, the proud commonwealth of Illinois joined the ranks of Lynching States. Illinois, which gave to the world the immortal heroes,

Lincoln, Grant and Logan, trailed its banner of justice in the dust—dyed its hands red in the blood of a man not proven guilty of crime.⁹⁸

Wells proceeded to document the grim facts of what was, to her knowledge, the first lynching in Illinois. In Decatur, a Black man allegedly assaulted a White woman. Based on circumstantial testimony, authorities arrested a Black man named Samuel Bush. A mob went to the jail and, with no resistance from law enforcement, took the man out to a nearby telegraph pole and hanged him from it. The grand jury convened in the matter refused to indict the participants. Tragically, instances of lynchings were an all-too-common outcome of instances of racial terror throughout the country and in the Prairie state. As the following examples illustrate, the climate of racial terror permeated life for Black residents and communities across Illinois.

1909 LYNCHING OF WILLIAM JAMES IN CAIRO, ILLINOIS



Spectators crowd together in Cairo, Illinois, to watch the lynching of William James on November 11, 1909.

Source: Postcard image from Wikimedia. <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Lynching-of-will-james.jpg>

Springfield Race Riots

On August 14, 1908, Springfield police detained a Black man accused of raping a White woman. Another Black man accused of murdering a White man the previous month waited in the same prison. As evening approached, an increasingly restless White mob demanded that the authorities hand over the two men. When they realized that the police, anticipating such an outcome, had moved the men out of town, the mob morphed from a lynch mob into something even more sinister. Over the next two days, the mob destroyed homes and businesses in Springfield's Black business district and lynched two Black men, William Donnegan and Scott Burton. Subduing the mob eventually required a show of force by the state militia.⁹⁹

The incident stoked mocking headlines south of the Mason-Dixon Line as editorialists lampooned the hypocrisy of a North that had spared no criticisms against White Supremacist violence in the South. Many in the North saw violent, racialized terror as a peculiar moral failing of the South. But nowhere in America, including the Land of Lincoln, did Black residents have the guarantee of safety from vigilante terrorism. Illinois had long been a hotbed of White Supremacist sentiment, with the state's Democrats capitalizing on general discontent among the White populace over the resettlement of formerly enslaved people.¹⁰⁰ Opposition to slavery was one thing; overcoming deeply entrenched White Supremacist views was an entirely different obstacle altogether. And, as ever, racial violence followed these attitudes in the aftermath of the Civil War. The recognition of this fact in the aftermath of the Springfield riots was the catalyst for the founding of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) in 1909.¹⁰¹

East St. Louis Massacre

East St. Louis became another city in the Prairie State in which racial tensions would lead to large-scale mob terror. Situated in southern Illinois along the Mississippi River, East St. Louis arises from a stretch of land in St. Clair County known as the American Bottom. In the antebellum years, this land became home to a Black community largely comprised of fugitive and formerly enslaved persons.¹⁰² Many of them resided in the village of Brooklyn, the first Black-majority municipality in the country, near what would become the city of East St. Louis.¹⁰³

Black migration to the city gained steam in the post-Reconstruction decades, particularly from former slave states where White Supremacists had regained political power and employment prospects for Black laborers were dim. From 1870 to 1915, East St. Louis built a burgeoning Black community as the city industrialized and expanded, becoming a rare example of a city with substantial Black political power. The city attracted Black laborers with expanded manufacturing work driven by the

industrial demands of World War I. This was a part of a national pattern termed the Great Migration, during which impoverished Black Americans moved north in large numbers to escape the indignity of Jim Crow and secure more stable employment.¹⁰⁴

With the influx of many more Black workers to East St. Louis, tensions between White and Black stakeholders intensified. Union leaders openly blamed labor shortages on Black migration, even though most new arrivals to the area were White.¹⁰⁵ Over the course of several major industrial strikes, White union leaders portrayed Black workers as strikebreakers even though many strikebreakers were White and many strikers were Black. Black arrivals would also receive the blame for housing shortages and crime.¹⁰⁶ From 1900 to 1915, Black Americans in East St. Louis managed to establish a sizeable presence in the growing industrial economy. They proved politically resourceful, securing political access to the levers of power in the city's government by voting as a bloc and exploiting tensions among competing White factions. They were able to swing contested elections and bargain for patronage. In the process, they came to represent a threat to White political interests such as labor unions and real estate, which in turn resorted to racial terror as a means of suppressing Black political power.¹⁰⁷

May Uprising

On the Monday evening of May 28, 1917, the Central Trades and Labor Union (CTLU) organized a meeting with Mayor Mollman and city councilmen to discuss the resolution of the ongoing Aluminum Ore strike as well as a potential ban on Black migration into the city. The meeting opened to the public and was quickly taken over by uninvited agitators and nonunion citizens who decried Black migrants. Some in the meeting advocated violence and the union personnel permitted the meeting to continue. A popular Belleville attorney named Alexander Flannigan declared there was “no law or rule or anything else to curb mob violence,” advocating for vigilantism.¹⁰⁸

That night, police detectives in the assembly announced the arrest of a Black man for shooting a White man. In response, the crowd rushed to the jailhouse where a mob had formed demanding that police surrender the accused for lynching. City officials tried in vain to disperse the mob and, once the rioters began to assault Black passersby and commuters, Mayor Mollman requested that the governor send in the National Guard. The violence lasted the rest of Monday night and into Tuesday, with mob assaults on Black citizens and the destruction of homes and property. Assailants targeted businesses that Black customers patronized with ransacking, bricks thrown through windows, and arson. While White police officers stepped in to prevent fatal violence against Black residents, they arrested and jailed more than seventy armed Black men acting in self-defense. Police arrested far fewer members of the White mob. By Tuesday evening, the National Guard had stepped in to restore order, in part by

arresting armed Black townspeople. Police also arrested a handful of White inciters, but did not charge Flannigan or other prominent ringleaders. The final count reported no official deaths, but seventy-five Black people were injured along with three White men.¹⁰⁹

July Massacre

The May 1917 uprising proved a shadow of the pogrom that would take place later that summer. In July, the lingering tensions triggered a full-fledged race riot in downtown East St. Louis, during which a White mob conducting indiscriminate vandalism, shootings, and lynchings chased Black residents into neighboring St. Louis, Missouri. On July 1, gunmen drove through Black neighborhoods in the city, firing into inhabited homes. Policemen, including Harry L. Walker and former patrolman Gus Masserang, participated in the attacks. In one encounter, White men set upon and killed two Black workers commuting from work. Another gang of White men attempted to kill prominent Black politician Leroy Bundy, who only escaped because of a White associate's warning to leave town.¹¹⁰ In response to these attacks, groups of Black residents armed themselves. The inciting event of the July massacre occurred during an encounter between police and a group of Black men, some of whom opened fire on the police and killed Sergeant Samuel Coppedge while wounding two other officers.¹¹¹

The reaction from White agitators upon learning that Black men had killed a White police officer was a furious and indiscriminate exercise in vigilante terrorism. Unlike the May pogrom, White assailants did not stop at mere assault and property damage. They targeted Black victims in the open streets with beatings, burnings, lynchings, and mutilations, all with the encouragement of spectators.¹¹² Jack Lait, a reporter for the *St. Louis Republic*, wrote of boys as young as 13 joining the violence alongside “girls and women, wielding bloody knives and clawing at the eyes of dying victims.”¹¹³ Attackers Leo Keane and Herbert Wood led a dozen men to drag Black teamster Scott Clark through the streets and stone him. They attempted to hang him but guardsmen on the scene intervened. Clark later died from his injuries.¹¹⁴ By the time the National Guard brought the massacre under control, at least thirty-nine Black residents and nine White residents lay dead, though estimates vary and some place the Black death toll as high as two hundred. Unsurprisingly, many property-owning Black families permanently fled the city.¹¹⁵ Initial estimates placed the property damage at \$3 million, though fire marshal John H. Richards revised that figure down to \$373,605 in his testimony to the House Special committee investigating the riots.¹¹⁶ Even accepting this adjustment, the figure comes out to over \$9 million in 2025 dollars.

This mass act of racial terror was enabled by a wide range of official inaction or outright complicity, and the perpetrators of the actual violence and mayhem were able

to avoid accountability with the help of local business leaders, government officials, and law enforcement. For instance, Maurice Ahearn, Mayor Mollman's secretary, ordered that anyone filming the riot be arrested or have their photographic equipment destroyed.¹¹⁷ The state's attorney for St. Clair County, Herbert Schaumleffel, attended some of the mob executions and released eighty-nine of the arrested attackers before police could book them. Policemen and national guard troops at times helped assailants by forcibly disarming Black townspeople and even handing them over to the mobs.¹¹⁸ While a state grand jury convened in August 1917 to investigate the massacre, the structure of the proceedings reflected officials' attempts to diffuse blame among perpetrators and victims. The defendants, a greater proportion of whom were Black than White, sat in front of a nearly all-White jury. None of the city's prominent White businessmen, bureaucrats, or politicians faced trial, and prosecutors abandoned grand jury indictments of the mayor and dozens of other businessmen without public comment.¹¹⁹

Chicago Race Riot in the Red Summer of 1919

Two years after the tragic mass killing in East St. Louis, racial terrorism sparked in Chicago. For a full week, White Chicagoans waged war against Black residents, leaving thirty-eight dead and hundreds injured in the aftermath.¹²⁰ The uprising was one of several instances of mass racialized violence throughout the country in the summer of 1919, which saw a spate of lynchings and race riots so violent that James Weldon Johnson, field secretary of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, dubbed it the "Red Summer."¹²¹ Much of the racial conflict and hatred that found expression in the Chicago race riot of 1919 traced back to the massive growth in the city's Black population during the Great Migration. From 1910 to 1920, Chicago's Black population grew from 44,130 to almost 110,000.¹²² Part of the reason for this swell was the return of 50,000 Black veterans from the battlefields of World War I to the Chicago area. This caused the Black population of Chicago, traditionally confined to the city's Black Belt, to expand east and west into White neighborhoods. In addition to their increased presence in Chicago, Black residents became more involved in the city's civic life. They were active in local politics, securing patronage from mayor William Thompson in exchange for bloc voting.¹²³ White Chicagoans resented these perceived intrusions on the racial hierarchy and violence soon followed. Between 1919 and 1921, arsonists exploded nearly sixty firebombs in Black homes. Racial terrorists also firebombed the homes and offices of real estate professionals who worked with Black families. No one was ever successfully convicted for these acts, even though they claimed two lives and injured many more.¹²⁴

The acts of racial terror that became known as the Chicago Race Riot of 1919 began on Sunday, July 27, 1919, when a White crowd threw stones at Black beachgoers for crossing over onto the unofficially White section of the Twenty-Ninth Street beach. The attack killed a teenage Black boy named Eugene Williams who drifted across the invisible racial divide and drowned under the onslaught of rocks.¹²⁵ The news of Williams's killing prompted an angry crowd of Black citizens to assemble at Twenty-Ninth Street. When police intervened to disperse the crowd, an enraged Black citizen named James Crawford opened fire. Police shot and killed him immediately and with this second death the Chicago Race Riot began. White rioters shot, stabbed, and beat

1919 CHICAGO RACE RIOT



Armed National Guard and Black men stand on a sidewalk during the 1919 Chicago race riot.

Source: Russell L. Lewis, Jr. Nitrate Photography Collection at the Chicago History Museum, catalog record 143994.
Photograph by Jun Fujita.

Black citizens in the night; on Monday, gangs of White youth began targeting Black workers returning home. Mobs diverted trolleys and dragged Black passengers out to beat them. A cycle of reprisals quickly began as racial communities near the borders of the Black Belt hunkered down. The means of terrorism also escalated, with White automobile shooting raids terrorizing Black neighborhoods. The violence reached its peak on Tuesday, with the burning and looting of Black homes as well as outright killings of Black citizens on their way to work. Black Chicagoans built barricades and organized return fire against automobile gunners. Some also struck out against White citizens. Tuesday morning, two White men were murdered in the Black Belt while walking to work.¹²⁶ When the conflict spread to Chicago's heavily Italian West Side, a mob lynched a Black man named Joseph Lovings.¹²⁷

On Wednesday, July 30, the state militia arrived and the riot began to peter out, though it would take another few days before the violence stopped altogether. The final death toll was twenty-three Black citizens and fifteen White citizens. Of the injured for whom racial data could be collected, 178 were White and 342 were Black.¹²⁸ However, criminal prosecutions focused on Black defendants. The all-White grand jury stated: "It is the opinion of this jury that the colored people suffered more at the hands of the white hoodlums than the white people suffered at the hands of the black hoodlums. Notwithstanding this fact, the cases presented to this jury against the blacks far outnumber those against the white."¹²⁹ George Stauber, the man indicted for throwing rocks at Eugene Williams, was acquitted of manslaughter.¹³⁰

The economic effects on Chicago's Black community were equally devastating. Major employers such as the Union Stockyard forbade Black workers from returning in the immediate aftermath of the riot.¹³¹ An investigation by the Chicago Commission on Race Relations made strong recommendations for reforms in areas of housing, employment, and policing, but the city did little to implement them. As Ida B. Wells lamented in her autobiography in 1931, "many recommendations were made, but few, if any, have been carried out. Chicago has thus been left with a heritage of race prejudice which seems to increase rather than decrease."¹³²

State Neglect and Complicity in Racial Terror

The foregoing forms of racial terror were committed by citizens (or police officers functioning as citizens) and not as official exercises of state power. Government complicity in acts of extralegal and extrajudicial terror compounded their effect. Even if state officers and officeholders did not give lynchings and other acts of White Supremacist terrorism the official color of law, there is little doubt that, as in the South, these acts would not have been possible without the silence and tacit permission of the state.

CHICAGO RACE RIOT COMMEMORATION PROJECT



**William J.
Otterson
marker**



**Harold
Brignadello
marker**



**John Waller
Humphrey
marker**

The Chicago Race Riot of 1919 Commemoration Project (CRR19) commemorates the worst incident of racial violence in the Chicago's history. The event has been long forgotten despite its impact on the subsequent shape and development of the city – particularly the long shadow of residential segregation. Inspired by a Holocaust memory project based in Berlin, CRR19 is partnering with Firebird Community Arts to create 38 artistic glass markers (one for each person killed) and install these at each location someone was killed in 1919.

Source: Images courtesy of The Chicago Race Riot of 1919 Commemoration Project. <https://chicagoraceriot.org/>

Lynchings in America were aided or allowed by government officials, including police officers, judges, and prosecutors.¹³³ Officers of the law granted lynch mobs access to prisoners and even joined in lynch mobs themselves.¹³⁴ A vanishing minority of perpetrators were ever prosecuted for lynching, largely due to prosecutors' reluctance to build cases against lynchers as well as Black citizens' exclusion from juries and witness boxes.¹³⁵ Dogged prosecutors were rare and would find themselves stymied by the rigid code of silence among the White public. Ordinary citizens comprised lynch mobs and refused on principle to cooperate with lynching investigations.¹³⁶

In Illinois, law enforcement officers were known to join or even initiate lynch mobs. For instance, in 1882, thousands of police officers from Chicago set out after a Black man accused of killing a fellow officer. Their instructions were to take the suspect dead, if possible. The organized search ended in a hail of bullets as officers intent on lynching the suspect opened fire and killed him in an abandoned mill. The furor of the mob only relented after the public display of the corpse.¹³⁷ More common was participation by inaction. In nearly all instances of mob terrorism discussed here, local law enforcement made little, if any, attempt to stop the illegal rendition of suspects by violent mobs.¹³⁸

This is not to say that all officials in the state embraced mob terror. During the early twentieth century, police were evolving and professionalizing as an institution, both nationwide and in Illinois.¹³⁹ Municipal and state authorities also began to eschew the spectacle and loss of legitimacy incurred by racist mob violence. In 1905, Illinois Governor Charles S. Deneen signed a bill that levied fines against counties where such riots occurred and ordered the dismissal of police officers who allowed it.¹⁴⁰ In Vermilion County, Sheriff Hardy Whitlock stood against a violent mob intent on breaking into the jailhouse and lynching a Black prisoner. The mob battered the door and threatened to break in by force, prompting the sheriff and his deputy to open fire in defense of the jailhouse. The sheriff wounded several of the rioters and went on to issue arrest warrants for all identifiable participants.¹⁴¹

Such incidents of law enforcement defiance in the face of racial terror are crucial to understanding the complex interplay between official law enforcement action and lynching. As police began to suppress this type of mob violence, they increasingly took on the role of executioner themselves. For instance, in 1915, the sheriff of Jackson County prevented a mob from executing a Black suspect, only to hang the man the following morning and invite the members of the mob as spectators. To ensure that this lynching met the color of law (which prevented public hangings), the sheriff deputized onlookers en masse.¹⁴² In 1916, Chicago police officers used dynamite to kill a Black suspect who had shot several officers as well as his hostage. Afterward, the police chief openly congratulated them.¹⁴³ And lynching often involved

pseudo-legal elements taken from official legal procedures to establish the guilt of the victims. These efforts included attempting to extract confessions or have victims of alleged rape identify perpetrators before their lynching.¹⁴⁴

By the end of the 1960s, lynchings had all but ceased in the United States.¹⁴⁵ In Illinois, despite the end of lynching as a customary practice, the legacy of official complicity remains. The notable yet scant examples of law enforcement figures standing firm against lynch mobs only underscore the willful cooperation between those mobs and law enforcement. Unfortunately, for most of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Black Illinoisans were bereft of official protection against the constant threat of racial terror.

Violent Resistance to Integration

Historian Arnold Hirsch describes the period from the late 1940s to the early 1960s as an “era of hidden violence” with respect to large-scale racial conflagrations. For Chicago, he maintains, the issue of housing in particular sparked persistent racial violence as White neighborhoods bitterly resisted integration.

Beginning in 1944, arsonists and vandals targeted Black homes in previously all-White communities. Most of these incidents occurred at the boundaries of Chicago’s residential Black Belt. Initially, the incidents of petty vandalism and stoning of homes received little press attention. The violence soon escalated in frequency and severity. Between May 1944 and July 1946, attackers targeted forty-six Black homes. Twenty-nine attacks were arson or bombing.¹⁴⁶

White mobs also began to make a show of force against perceived Black intrusion. In 1947, for instance, a mob of thousands of White protestors assaulted Black residents at a Chicago Housing Authority housing project for veterans in Fernwood. The crowd fought police and assaulted Black motorists and streetcar passengers. The final (incomplete) injury count included thirty-five Black citizens injured by the roving mobs that had broken from the crowd and one hundred vehicles attacked.¹⁴⁷ In 1951, a mob of between two thousand and five thousand White rioters in the suburb of Cicero attacked an apartment building that housed a Black family. They set fires and looted the units of the complex for a period of several days before law enforcement finally dispersed the mob.¹⁴⁸ Many more such incidents erupted in around the Chicago area during the 1940s and 1950s, though few garnered the same extensive press coverage as the Cicero riot.

In addition to housing, public accommodations in Chicago (particularly beaches and parks) became sites of racial violence during the 1950s and early 1960s. On July 28, 1957, a mob of six to seven thousand White picnickers attacked a group of one hundred Black attendees who attempted to use a part of the park customarily reserved

as White-only. The conflagration lasted for two days as the White mob attacked and besieged Black parkgoers, ending with at least forty-seven injuries and dozens of vehicles stoned. On July 5, 1961, when Black residents in South Chicago staged a “wade-in” at the informally segregated Rainbow Beach, a group of one thousand White beachgoers attacked them with rocks and racial abuse.¹⁴⁹

The second half of the 1960s saw a continuation of this form of racial violence as the civil rights movement spread to northern cities. The Chicago Freedom Movement (CFM), a collaboration between local activist groups and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) led by Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., experienced vicious counterprotest violence. This was particularly true of their marches into Chicago’s White neighborhoods. On July 31, 1966, the CFM led a march through the Marquette Park neighborhood of Chicago’s racially segregated Southwest Side and encountered an angry mob that spit on marchers and threw rocks, bottles, and firecrackers into the procession. Members of the mob pushed several marchers’ cars into a lagoon and torched, turned over, or otherwise damaged other vehicles. These attacks occurred despite the presence of a police escort and law enforcement abandoned the marchers during their return journey.¹⁵⁰ During another march in Marquette Park on August 5, counterprotestors struck King in the head with a thrown bottle. In the words of Nancy Jefferson, a local Chicago activist who attended the march:

I was right there when Dr. King was hit in that march in Marquette Park, when he felt that this was the most racist town that he had been in. Having come from the South — I grew up in Tennessee — I don’t think we saw as much hatred out of Bull Connor and all of them as we saw in Marquette Park in Chicago.¹⁵¹

These incidents of racialized mob violence paint a vivid picture of how White mobs wielded the threat of assault and injury in the state of Illinois to enforce racial boundaries and suppress Black political activity. The move-in riots in and around Chicago were no different in character to the pro-segregation mobs of the Deep South, illustrating how deeply ingrained White Supremacy was and the extraordinary challenge it posed for Black Illinoisans seeking equal rights and opportunities.

Legacy of Racial Terror

The consequences of racial terror cannot be relegated to the distant past. The targeting of Black communities and properties has, over time, decimated Black Americans’ ability to create and maintain generational wealth.¹⁵² The same holds true for Black residents throughout the history of Illinois. Racial terror served to enforce a host of discriminatory arrangements, from segregated schooling and housing to political disenfranchisement to elimination from economic opportunities in the labor market.

A significant body of scholarly research finds that past racial terrorism is a predictor of present-day inequities and harms. For instance, research has shown statistically significant associations between areas with high lynching prevalence in the past and high segregation rates in the present.¹⁵³ Historical lynching rates have also been associated with higher current Black incarceration rates,¹⁵⁴ less police compliance with hate crime reporting laws,¹⁵⁵ educational segregation,¹⁵⁶ and higher poverty and unemployment.¹⁵⁷ Related work on Ku Klux Klan activism suggests a relationship between Klan activity in the 1960s and homicides in the South over the ensuing decades.¹⁵⁸

Similarly, scholarship on grief and trauma illuminates the depth of harm that accumulates with persistent racial violence. Historical traumas experienced by survivors of mass traumatic events can be intergenerationally transmitted via biological and behavioral mechanisms, manifesting as a range of psychic and bodily harms.¹⁵⁹ Horrific incidents of racial violence such as the Emmett Till murder in 1955 and acquittal of the guilty parties, J.W. Milam and Roy Bryant, have been theorized as “cultural traumas,” processes which affect an entire community’s well-being and sense of identity.¹⁶⁰ The message that is then spread and internalized by subsequent generations is one of vulnerability and alienation. Describing the trauma narrative following the acquittal of Milam and Bryant, Angela Onwuachi-Willig writes, “the [acquittal] was part of a longstanding practice of disregarding African American life and rights, exhibiting lawlessness toward African Americans, denying African Americans all protections from the justice system, and depriving African Americans of full standing as American citizens.”¹⁶¹

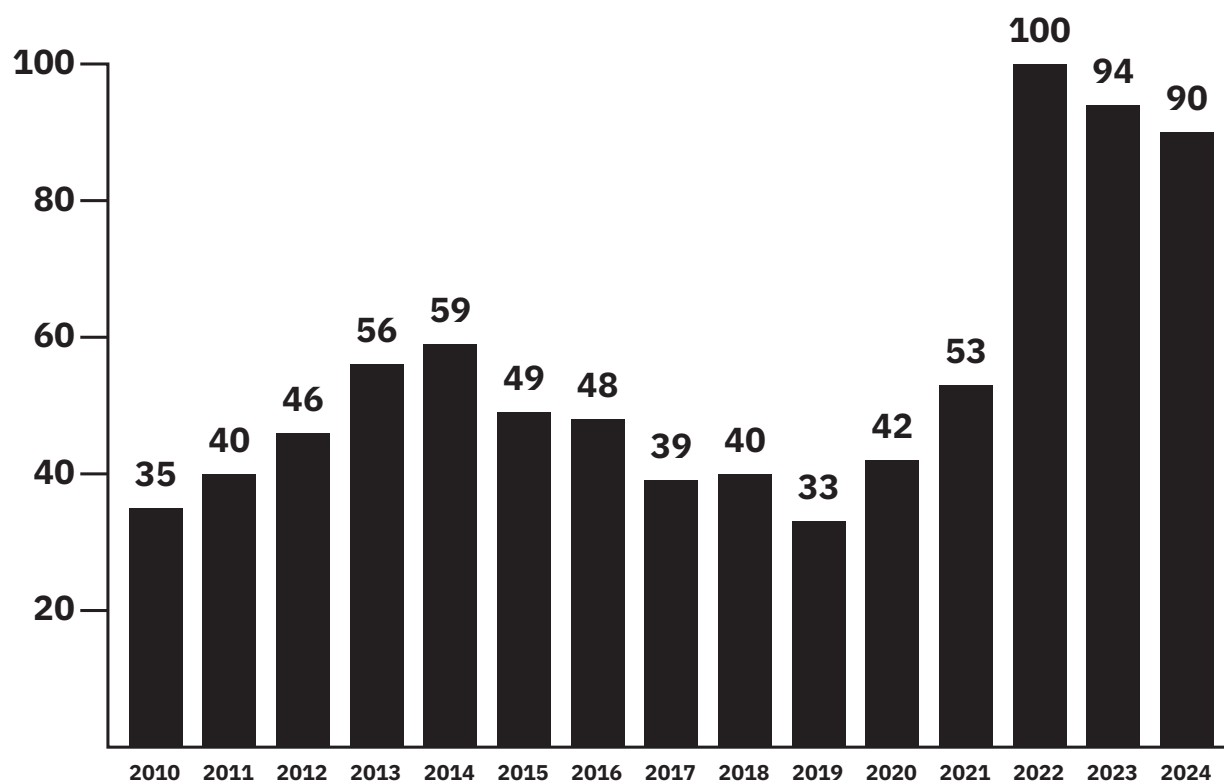
Conclusion

Racial terror underlies all the other dimensions of harm targeting Black Americans. It is the instrument by which government officials and private citizens enforced White Supremacist ideology in Illinois and maintained control over Black citizens. The incidents of racial terror discussed here only scratch the surface of a deep and troubling history of violence wielded against Black individuals in the state. Government officials at the state and local level failed to protect Black residents and hold perpetrators accountable, thus enabling a bloody history of violent suppression against Black individuals in the state of Illinois. While summary mob executions are no longer part of the state’s racial landscape, incidents of criminal racial hate remain an ongoing reality. There were one hundred anti-Black hate crimes reported in the state of Illinois in 2022 alone, with ninety-four in 2023 and ninety in 2024.

Far from being a specter of the distant past, the legacy of racial terror persists in the present. It is evident in the continuation of expressive anti-Black hate every year

as well as the massive racial inequities that anti-Black terrorism helped to entrench. Progress toward true racial equality and justice in the state of Illinois must take this stark history of violence and intimidation against Black citizens into account.

REPORTED ANTI-BLACK HATE CRIMES IN ILLINOIS, 2010 - 2024



Source: FBI Crime Data Explorer. Crimes reported by offense for each victim.

SUNDOWN TOWNS, SAFETY NETS, AND WHITE ADVANTAGE AMONG DISADVANTAGED WHITES

David Roediger

Dismissing the idea of addressing — let alone redressing — past racial injustices marks an achievement of those who wish to keep reparations out of public debates. Some large share of the population, including many whose religions are committed to an idea of healing, opposes “repair,” much as many in my generation (I’m seventy-two) came to be against the word “welfare.” The ease with which politicians can refuse to consider questions of reparations rests in significant measure on two matters that are marketed as “common sense” but are oversimplified and wrong.

The first oversimplification waves away debate by holding that slavery was a long time ago and that no one profiting from it, or victimized by it, lives today. Sometimes, even we advocates of reparations encourage this by casting a case for redress as being simply about reparations *for slavery*, forgetting to add subsequent impacts of new forms of discrimination that range from Jim Crow to the carceral state.

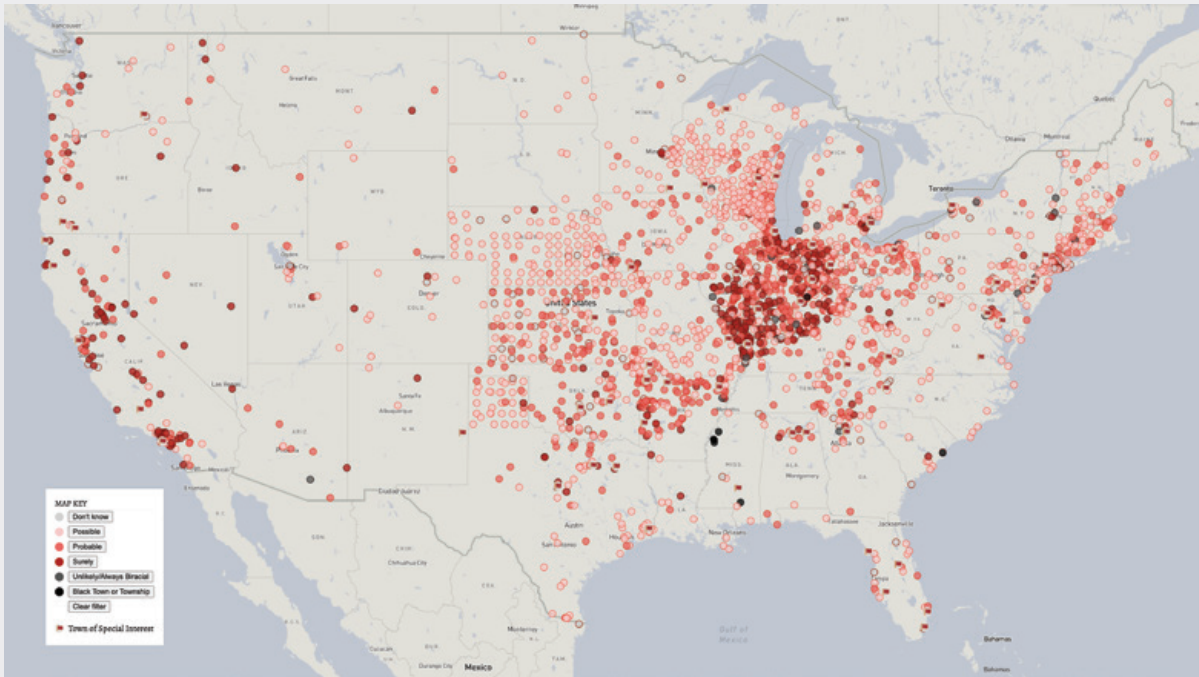
The second rejection of engagement with reparations rests on an undeniable fact: Some Whites are also disadvantaged. For some people, this suggests that the problem of poverty lies outside of race. Others sometimes opt for what seems a politically easier path toward repair by avoiding talking about racial disparities in favor of a broad, if vague, economic appeal to help the poor.

I want to question such views by talking about how White advantage pervades my own life and the history of my family of disadvantaged Whites. In doing so, I draw in part on stories told in my most recent book, *An Ordinary White*.¹⁶² These highlight the economic advantages conferred, even within misery and poverty, on Whites living in a racially exclusionary town, as well as the impact across generations of Whites benefitting from color bars that reserve the better working-class jobs for Whites.

“Sundown” identifies, simply and remorselessly, towns in which African Americans could not stay after dark and therefore could not live. Sometimes such communities had ordinances and even signs on roads, railway stations, or bus stops to announce such policies. More commonly, popular knowledge and policing practices enforced prohibitions. Some Sundown Towns, especially those on railroads, had a six p.m. whistle to remind all about enforcement of their policy.

In much of the twentieth century, the Sundown Town was a dominant town form in much of the Midwest. The county seats of two-thirds of Wisconsin counties were

U.S. SUNDOWN TOWNS



The pink circles on this U.S. map mark possible historical sundown towns; the slightly darker circles mark probable sundown towns and the deep red circles identify those that surely have histories of sundown exclusionary practices. Initial research by the late sociologist James Loewen (born in Decatur, Illinois) and the continuing support of Tougaloo College make such mapping possible.

Source: Image courtesy of Mapbox, OpenStreetMap, and the Sundown Towns Project.
See <https://justice.tougaloo.edu/sundown-towns/><https://doi.org/10.1038/s41597-024-04330-9>

Sundown Towns. With more than five hundred Sundown Towns, Illinois led the nation in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, according to a recent reckoning by the project Loewen spearheaded.¹⁶³ The state's practices of exclusion so closely followed the rapid and bloody ethnic cleansing of Indigenous people by early Illinoisans that they suggest an early and broad propensity in Illinois to solve "racial problems" by force and removal.

I grew up in a Sundown Town. It was on a railroad. It had a six p.m. whistle. It is Columbia, Illinois, which sits on the southwestern edge of that very large, very red, vaguely beet-shaped outcropping of such towns on the map.

The map offers a chance to reflect on intergenerational advantages among Whites of modest means. Every town in the county where I grew up was a Sundown Town where

all relatively good (though dangerous) quarrying jobs went to Whites. Some Illinois Sundown Towns were actually cities — the steel center of Granite City, for example, and the industrial twin cities of LaSalle-Peru. Their housing segregation contributed mightily to employment discrimination. My granddad on my father's side, Otto Roediger, had a good union job as a machinist — the census said “repairer” — in the limestone quarry just outside Columbia. He supported a family of nine in a modest house he owned. Even during the Great Depression, all the children completed high school. He also had fruit trees in a big yard next to woods with wild game, morel mushrooms,

ROEDIGER FAMILY PHOTOGRAPH CIRCA 1922



Photograph of the author's maternal grandfather and mother.

Source: David Roediger. Used with his permission.

and berries. He could hunt and fish on quarry lands. He and his sons always had good hunting and fishing gear.

Otto was also able to accumulate impressive tools — saws, trowels, hammers, and more. As my birth approached, my father and grandfather used those tools to help my uncle build a solid house for his family in a new development, enjoying the post-World War II subsidies that typically went to White homeowners. They then turned to building the house in which I grew up, similarly subsidized, one lot up the hill. Otto died in an accident shortly after that house was finished and I was born. His widow and two of his children had the safety net of not having to pay rent as they coped with his death.

Our house cost \$9,000 when built in 1952, the equivalent of about \$101,000 in 2022 when my mother died after having lived there for seventy years. The house sold for about \$200,000 in 2023. Realtors enthused about what a desirable location Columbia was. The town had quintupled in population since my youth, approaching eleven thousand residents — only four of whom were African American. It has remained rare for Black families in the nearby cities of St. Louis and East St. Louis to transfer wealth intergenerationally through home ownership over the last fifty years, as the historian Colin Gordon’s work has meticulously shown in his important study *Mapping Decline*. But I, not some ancestor in the distant past, accrued the advantages of Whiteness when I sold our little family house two years ago.

The family photograph above was taken in a setting very different from a Sundown Town but likewise speaks to the coexistence of White advantage and disadvantaged Whites. It pictures my mother as an infant in the arms of her dad. They lived in Cairo, at the southern tip of Illinois. With a population that was about half White and half African American, Cairo was anything but a Sundown Town, but it was still very much marked by racial hierarchies.

Shortly after this picture was taken, my mom became an orphan. She had lost her mother in a calamitous childbirth that her twin brothers survived, and then she lost her dad to an industrial accident. He was a railroad worker, employed in a skilled and organized craft notorious for the segregationist practices of both employers and unions. His good union job and benefits, protected by Jim Crow prohibitions barring African American workers from such jobs, made it possible for my mother and her brothers to be raised together by relatives.

He left behind a house plus two others partially built. Those assets, one lived in and two sold, helped to make it possible for the three children to avoid foster care or an orphanage and enabled them to avoid separation. All three kids could attend excellent (segregated) Catholic schools and stay in school through high school graduation. The small African American Catholic school in Cairo, meanwhile, cancelled class for long periods during fall and spring to force children into agricultural labor — Alexander County was, of all things, a cotton-growing area in Illinois — especially if their families received welfare assistance from the state.

Though she was often hungry, my mom managed, through contributions of kin and her own wage work, to attend the “normal school” for teachers that later became Southern Illinois University. It was all-White and heavily subsidized by taxes. It took a further twenty-five years for her to finish her undergraduate degree, one course at a time, but she was able to teach all of those years on a certificate allowing for

instructors with only two years of college. She became a leader in her union. Her colleagues in a nearly fifty-year teaching career were never anything but White.

She was a single mother after I reached age seven, but we were reasonably comfortable in the small house that my paternal grandfather had built. She could take ideas seriously and enjoy the arts in St. Louis as an important intellectual in a small town. She could support me in an intellectual life on whatever stage I chose to pursue. Whatever successes she, and I, had were the personal accomplishments of relatively disadvantaged Whites. They nevertheless rested on significant advantages that adhered to a White identity and that deserve consideration in discussions of inequality and repair.

RACIAL TERROR LYNCHING IN THE LAND OF LINCOLN DURING THE SECOND NADIR, 1874–1924

Sundiata Keita Cha-Jua

For a century, from Emancipation into the 1960s, racial terrorism was largely characterized by the deadly practices of lynching and racial pogroms. The first refers to extrajudicial murders of persons suspected of a crime or violation of racial etiquette, the white supremacist culture that demanded deference.

To account for lynching's terroristic character, I adopt radical Black sociologist Oliver Cromwell Cox's definition. He defined lynching "as an act of homicidal aggression committed by one people against another through mob action for the purpose of suppressing either some tendency in the latter to rise from an accommodated position of subordination or for subjugating them further to some lower social status."¹⁶⁴

The second, racial pogroms denotes "race riots," but because these incidents in which Euro-descendant mobs invaded, assaulted, destroyed property and robbed, raped, and murdered African Americans were not spontaneous events but organized massacres they are more appropriately understood as pogroms.

William J. Northern, Georgia's ex-governor, declared in 1899, "We think that six lynchings in Illinois in a year is not so badly out of proportion to the number in our own state."¹⁶⁵ This controversial comment comes from "The White Man's Burden," a speech he gave at the Congregational Club in Boston, Massachusetts. Northern's statement questions the historic image of the state whose slogan, "the Land of Lincoln," binds it to Abraham Lincoln's undeserved reputation as the Great Emancipator. The ironically named Northern's observation correctly implied that Illinois's liberal reputation masked a hideous "racial" social scape.

If examined proportionally, rather than by total numbers, then Northern's argument has merit. The 1900 US Census lists 1,034, 813 Afrikan* Americans who comprised 46.7 percent of Georgia's population. That same census identified 85,078 Black folk who composed 1.8 percent of Illinois's population. The Equal Justice Initiative (EJI) identified 56 Black folk among the 71 lynch victims reported that year — nearly 79 percent. African Americans comprised 82 percent of Georgia's lynch victims. So, Northern certainly had a point.¹⁶⁶

* Many Black liberation movement activists spell Afrika with a "k" because no Afrikan language has a soft "c" sound.

My count differs from that of the EJI. They include forty Afrikan Americans murdered in the East St. Louis Racial Pogrom of 1917 as lynchings. I don't. Oddly, they don't count as lynchings the Afrikan Americans killed in racial pogroms in Rapid City in 1800, Spring Valley in 1895, Virden and Pana in 1898, Carterville in 1899, Vienna in 1910, and across multiple years in Springfield and Chicago (see Table 1). If we count the Black folk killed during these racial pogroms, the number of lynchings in Illinois would rise at least into the eighties.

In the fifty-year period between 1874 and 1924, I calculate forty-one major incidents of racial violence in Illinois, including lynchings, racial pogroms or White onslaughts on Black communities, and racially motivated assaults on Black workers, i.e., strikebreakers (see Table 1). Significantly, three of Illinois's twelve racial pogroms — Springfield (1908),¹⁶⁷ East St. Louis (1917),¹⁶⁸ and Chicago (1919)¹⁶⁹ — occurred during the Second Nadir (1877–1924). This was a dismal moment in which life worsened for Afrikan Americans and in which the most violent, deadly, and costly acts of racial terrorism in the history of US empire occurred.

Lynching is a specific act of extrajudicial murder, but it is also a broader terrorist act of racial control. As an extralegal action, lynching involves the killing of one or more Black persons by a mob of at least three White individuals who seek to impose punishment for an alleged criminal deed; the violation of "racial etiquette" or the prevailing mores of racial deference; or simply because they were present when the mob could not find the accused. At the beginning of Emancipation, lynching was a biracial phenomenon. White people lynched other White people as well as a smaller number of Afrikan Americans. In fact, in the early 1880s, Black folks lynched other Afrikan Americans and, on very rare occasions, White individuals.

In 1886, the number of Black persons exceeded the number of Whites lynched, and by 1890 lynching had become a racialized instrument of social control that included enormous spectacle, or terror, lynchings. Therefore, I believe it's best to distinguish lynching as a mechanism for racial control from the extrajudicial hangings of White persons by other Whites and from Black vigilantism.¹⁷⁰

The necessity of a criminal accusation or a specific charge of violating racial etiquette establishes as lynchings the killings of Scott Burton, a prosperous barber whose clientele was exclusively White, and William Donigan, a well-to-do shoemaker married to a White woman, during the Springfield racial pogroms. Lacking such accusations or allegations, the random murders of Afrikan Americans during the East St. Louis racial pogrom should not be categorized as lynchings.¹⁷¹

Racial terrorism — lynching, pogroms, and attacks to prevent Black folk from working in specific industries and particular jobs White workers deemed their exclusive preserve — was quite common in Illinois. Furthermore, though they occurred predominantly in the southern part of the state, anti-Black racial terrorism was not confined to a particular region of Illinois. It took place across the length and breadth of the state.

The Multitude and Complexity of Racial Terrorism in Illinois in 1903

In terms of lynching's history in the United States empire, 1903 was an average year. Its ninety-nine lynchings, 85 percent of which victimized Afrikan Americans, were well below the 230 (including 161 Black folk) during the peak year of 1892, but far above the thirty-three (including twenty-nine Afrikan Americans) in 1924, the Second Nadir's last year.¹⁷² There were five lynching episodes in 1903 in Illinois, the most to occur in a single year in Illinois.¹⁷³

Northern argued that six lynchings a year in Illinois was comparable to the yearly lynching percentage in Georgia. Between late April and late July 1903, anti-Black racial terrorism peaked in Illinois. The number of racial terrorist incidents in that three-month period seem to confirm Northern's analysis. In that year, there were five lynching episodes in different regions of the state: three lynchings and two attempted lynchings with racial pogroms.

On April 26, a posse illegally executed an unnamed 17-year-old Afrikan American youth in Thebes in Alexander County for allegedly assaulting a White girl in Santa Fe, a township in Clinton County in the southwest of the state.¹⁷⁴ Six weeks later, a mob lynched, burned, and mutilated Afrikan American schoolteacher David Wyatt in Belleville, the county seat of St. Clair County, also in the southwest. In a shootout, Wyatt fatally shot Charles Hertel, superintendent of St. Clair County Schools.¹⁷⁵ Two weeks after that, in Peoria, Superintendent of Police William W. Rhoades prevented the lynching of John E. McCray by secretly transporting him to Galesburg.¹⁷⁶ And between July 25 and 29, a racial pogrom took place in Danville, during which a mob lynched John D. Metcalfe and attempted to lynch James Wilson.¹⁷⁷

In raw numbers, the total of Afrikan Americans lynched in Illinois is quite small—but proportionately, the number of Black folks lynched was significant. Lynching must be viewed as part of a complex of anti-Black terrorism that included racial pogroms and violent attacks on Black workers.

Given the state's extensive history of anti-Black racial terrorism (and despite the current revanchist right-wing environment), the legislature of the "Land of Lincoln"

should pass a comprehensive reparations bill. This legislation should acknowledge past atrocities, issue a formal apology, and provide compensation and restitution to the survivors and descendants of lynchings, racial pogroms, and murderous assaults on Black workers. Reparations should be comprehensive and include direct monetary payments, first-time homeowner assistance, tuition-free higher education, endowments for historical and cultural institutions, the creation of monuments and markers, and programs that help reconnect families with their relatives, ethnic identities, and heritages on the Afrikan continent.¹⁷⁸

RACIAL TERRORISM: LYNCHINGS, RACIAL POGROMS & PREVENTED ATTACKS IN ILLINOIS, 1874 - 1924¹⁷⁹

Date	Site	Victims (if known)	Type of Violence / Accusation	Toll (if known)
February 1874	Robert Lemen Mines, St. Clair County		Racial pogrom; attacks on Black miners	
February 1874	Mt. Carbon, Jackson County	Alexander White	Lynching / Murder	1 Black person killed
May – August 1877	Braidwood, Will County (sundown town)		Attacks on Black workers	
September 1877	Winchester, Scott County	Andrew Richards	Lynching / Rape	1 Black person killed
March 25, 1880	Rapids City, Rock Island County (sundown town)	Anthony (last name unknown)	Attacks on Black strikebreakers	1 Black person killed
Summer 1882	Elizabethtown, Hardin County	Young Black man	Unknown	1 Black person killed
July 6, 1883	Mounds City, Pulaski County	Nelson Howard	Lynching / Unknown	1 Black person killed
May 1886	Grape Creek, Vermilion County		Attacks on Black strikebreakers	
February 14, 1888	Pinckneyville, Perry County	Alonzo Holly	Lynching and shooting / Assault of White woman	1 Black person killed
June 3, 1893	Decatur, Macon County	Samuel J. Bush	Lynching and mutilation / Assault of White woman	1 Black person killed
July 14, 1893	Lawrenceville, Lawrence County (sundown town)	Allen Butler	Lynching / Criminal abortion	1 Black person killed
July 13 – August 1894	Chicago, Cook County		Attacks on Black strikebreakers at meatpacking plant	
August 4, 1895	Spring Valley, Bureau County		Racial pogrom; attacks on Black strikebreakers	1 Black person killed; 14 injured 11 White people killed; 19 injured 6 Black people missing
October 13, 1898	Viriden, Macoupin County (sundown town)		Racial pogrom; attacks on Black workers	1 Black person killed; 4 injured 11 white people killed; 19 injured
April 10, 1898	Pana, Christian County (sundown town)	J.L. James, Lewis Hooks, Sharper Douglas, Charles Watkins, Julia Dash	Racial pogrom; attacks on Black workers	5 Black people killed; 7 injured 2 White people killed; 7 injured
November 7, 1898	Lacon, Marshall County (sundown town)	S. W. Stewart	Lynching / Assault of White woman	1 Black person killed
June 30, 1899	Carterville, Williamson County (sundown town)	Name Unknown	Train attacked	1 Black person killed; 20 injured
September 17, 1899	Carterville, Williamson County (sundown town)	Names Unknown	Racial pogrom; attack on Black miners	5 Black people killed
1899 (date unknown)	Chicago, Cook County		Racial pogrom; attacks on Black strikebreakers at sewer construction site	

Date	Site	Victims (if known)	Type of Violence / Accusation	Toll (if known)
April – Fall 1900	Chicago, Cook County		Attack on Black strikebreakers during building trades strike	
May 29 – June 17, 1902	Eldorado, Saline County		Racial pogrom; attack on home of Rev. Peter Green, several Black residents, and Eldorado Normal and Industrial Institute	
April 26, 1903	Thebes [Santa Fe], Alexander County (sundown town)	Name Unknown; age ~17	Lynching, shooting, racial pogrom; attack on Black construction workers (who return fire) / Assault of White girl	1 Black person killed
June 6, 1903	Bellville, St. Clair County	David Wyatt	Lynching, burning, mutilation / Shot county school superintendent	1 Black person killed
June 26, 1903	Peoria, Peoria County		Lynching prevented: sheriff moves alleged murderer of detective to Galesburg	
July 25, 1903	Danville, Vermilion County	John Metcalf(e)	Lynching, burning, racial pogrom / Murdering White man	1 Black person killed
June – August, 1904	Chicago, Cook County		Assaults on Black strikebreakers in stockyards	
April – May, 1905	Chicago, Cook County		Assaults on Black folks during Teamsters' strike	
August 14 - 16 1908	Springfield, Sangamon County	Scott Burton	Lynching , shooting / Shot into White mob	1 Black person killed
August 14 - 16 1908	Springfield, Sangamon County	George Donigan	Lynching, burning, racial pogrom / Married to White woman	1 Black person killed
November 3, 1909	Cairo, Alexander County	Will James	Lynching, shooting, burning	1 Black person killed
December 20, 1909	East St. Louis, St. Clair County	Will Clark	Lynching prevented: Illinois National Guard moves prisoner to Belleville	
January 11, 1910	Vienna, Johnson County (sundown town after 1950)	Hosea Taborn, Harry Taborn, Alexander Jenkins	Lynching prevented: Illinois National Guard stops mob of 800	
February 18, 1910	Cairo, Alexander County	John Pratt	Attempted lynching	
Nov. 11, 1910	Mounds, Pulaski County		Lynch mob hunt / Purse snatching	
Sept. 12, 1913	Tamms, Alexander County		Shooting / Use of counterfeit money	
August 30, 1915	Harrisburg, Saline County	Joe Deberry	Lynching prevented: troops move alleged murderer	
November 7, 1915	Taylorville, Christian County	Zach Phillips	Shot after surrendering	
May 28 – 30, 1917	East St. Louis, St. Clair County	Names Unknown	Racial pogrom	38 -150 Black people killed
July 27 – August 3, 1919	Chicago, Cook County	Names Unknown	Racial pogrom	23 Black people killed; 342 injured 15 White people killed; 178 injured Races of 17 people not recorded
August 7, 1924	Mounds, Pulaski County		Lynching prevented: sheriff moves three prisoners to Menard State Prison	

POLITICAL DISENFRANCHISEMENT

Black Americans have never enjoyed unfettered access to the political rights and privileges promised by US democracy. From the nation's founding until the Civil War, most states, including Illinois, restricted the right to vote to men of the White landed class.¹⁸⁰ Even as the population of free Black people grew in both the North and South, laws continued to deny them access to the ballot box. Though the ratification of the Fifteenth Amendment secured Black men the right to vote, Black women waited fifty more years for voting rights until the passage of the Nineteenth Amendment in 1920.¹⁸¹

The Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments emerged as the most tangible legal legacies of the Civil War, with their guarantees that Americans of all races enjoyed equal protection and rights under the law. For Black Americans, these guarantees proved illusory. In many states, particularly in the South, racist legislatures implemented voter suppression through poll taxes and literacy tests that prevented Black people from voting.¹⁸² Mob violence was another tool used to suppress would-be Black voters, with White instigators being near-universally assured that their terrorism would not be punished by the state.¹⁸³

Illinois both mirrors this picture and diverges from it in essential ways, with an early constitutional ban on Black suffrage and later efforts to manipulate the Black vote. Chicago in particular used machine politics to control the Black vote and undermine Black political resistance. This history helps to clarify why mere political equality, even when eventually obtained, is not a panacea for remedying past and present inequities. The struggle for full representation continues.

National Disenfranchisement from the Founding

The founders of the United States left control over voting rights to the states, most of which restricted the vote solely to White men who owned property. Ironically, though Black Americans could not vote, congressional apportionment still counted them in population totals used to allocate political power even as they remained enslaved or, at best, second-class citizens.¹⁸⁴

To expand voting rights to poor White men without extending the same rights to Black Americans, Congress passed laws such as the Naturalization Act of 1790, which explicitly granted citizenship only to free White persons.¹⁸⁵ While a handful of Northeastern states allowed some Black residents to vote before the Civil War, most states excluded them from the political process entirely.¹⁸⁶

This legal reality changed in two concrete ways after the Civil War. First, as a condition of rejoining the Union, the Reconstruction Act of 1867 required former Confederate states to amend their constitutions to allow all men, regardless of race, to vote.¹⁸⁷ Then, two constitutional amendments targeted explicit racial discrimination. In 1868, the Fourteenth Amendment punished states that prohibited adult males from voting by proportionally reducing their representation in Congress. It also guaranteed all persons equal protection under the law and due process rights.¹⁸⁸ The Fifteenth Amendment of 1870 went even further, barring states from disenfranchising voters based on “race, color, or previous condition of servitude.”¹⁸⁹ The same year the Fifteenth Amendment took effect, Congress passed the Enforcement Act to ensure that its terms would be upheld.¹⁹⁰ However, this legislation would soon be drastically undercut by the Supreme Court, removing the stronger voting rights protection at the federal level.

Illinois Antebellum Disenfranchisement

As detailed in the “Racial Terror” section, from its earliest days Illinois tacitly permitted the institution of slavery within its borders and created laws to control the lives of Black residents. As scholar Jerome B. Meites points out, Illinois law after the 1819 Black Codes contained the “presumption” of enslavement by requiring Black Illinoisans to obtain and carry certificates of freedom from the county clerk. Without this documentation, the state considered them runaway enslaved persons.¹⁹¹ Legislators designed these laws both to discourage free Black settlement in Illinois and to keep the free Black population already in the state under surveillance. Former Illinois Governor Thomas Ford later wrote that White Illinoisans feared the spread of the “abolition excitement of modern times,” and worried that newly freed people would flood Illinois.¹⁹²

Even provisions in state law that seemed progressive on paper, such as an 1825 law against kidnapping free Black citizens, were undercut by other restrictions like the 1827 exclusion of testimony by Black citizens against Whites in Illinois courts.¹⁹³ Black Illinoisans were effectively stripped of legal protection: They could not vote, serve on juries, or testify in court against White men.

The state’s 1847 constitutional convention was initially assembled to discuss banking concerns, but the issue of Black residents’ status soon overtook the debate.¹⁹⁴ Delegates considered revising the 1818 constitution, which held that White males who had resided in the state for at least six months could enjoy the privileges of an elector.¹⁹⁵ One proposed alteration to remove the qualifier “White” from the constitutional provision was soundly rejected by a vote of 137 to 8. Illinoisans’ stance against Black suffrage was shared by neighboring states like Wisconsin, Michigan, and Iowa, all of which voted down Black suffrage provisions with similar majorities. As

historian James Davis notes, many Illinoisans opposed slavery but also rejected Black political equality.¹⁹⁶

In 1864, thanks in no small part to the efforts of John Jones, a prominent free Black tailor and businessman, the Illinois General Assembly gathered to debate the repeal of the Black Codes.¹⁹⁷ The Civil War was raging and the US Congress was considering the ratification of the Thirteenth Amendment to free all enslaved persons. Illinois lawmakers felt compelled to address the foreseeable influx of formerly enslaved persons, particularly if the state was perceived as too accommodating to freed people.¹⁹⁸ The repeal was not a sure thing, given that just a few years previously Illinois voters had passed ballot measures that would exclude Black residents completely.¹⁹⁹

The ratification of the Fifteenth Amendment took the most pressing considerations out of state legislators' hands. Black American men now had a constitutional right to vote, a move that angered Illinois Democrats but sparked hopes for many residents that the "Negro Question" would be settled once and for all.²⁰⁰ The new version of the Illinois Constitution passed with entirely race-neutral language for the first time.²⁰¹ Black suffrage was finally a reality in Illinois, though only for Black men.

The Impact of Black Suffrage in Illinois

Granting Black men the right to vote reshaped government at all levels. The change was most notable in former slave states, where allowing Black men to vote was a requirement for rejoining the Union; the presence of federal troops ensured that Black voters, many of them formerly enslaved, could participate in the electoral process (though not without the significant threat of White Supremacist terrorism).²⁰²

Just three years after the Civil War ended, more than seven hundred thousand Black men had registered to vote in former slave states. This new voting bloc led to a surge in Black government officeholders at the local, state, and even federal levels. Between 1869 and 1901, twenty-two Black men, most of them formerly enslaved, won election to Congress, creating a new voting bloc that was, in the main, more racially progressive than White legislators of either party.²⁰³

Illinois, too, saw a marked increase in the political participation of its Black citizens. In 1871, John Jones became the first Black elected official in Illinois when he ran for Cook County Commissioner.²⁰⁴ In 1873, John J. Bird was elected police magistrate of Cairo.²⁰⁵ And in 1876, a Black schoolteacher named John W.E. Thomas was elected to the Illinois House of Representatives despite vociferous objections from fellow Republicans.²⁰⁶

Tensions grew as state Republican governance became more conservative on racial equality and Black voters decried the lack of political patronage and representation for Black civil appointees. For instance, in 1878, Black political representatives from

Cairo asked Governor Shelby M. Cullom to appoint a Black commissioner of the Southern Illinois Penitentiary, protesting the lack of such appointments in light of Black political support for Republicans.²⁰⁷ Political leaders such as Bird, who had advocated for Republicans, called for a Colored State Convention in 1880 to address this and other grievances, such as inferior schools and lack of racial representation in the party.²⁰⁸

These tensions were merely a prelude to the most egregious of Republican betrayals. In 1883, the US Supreme Court declared significant portions of the Civil Rights Act of 1875 unconstitutional, finding that Congress lacked authority to regulate private citizens or corporate entities.²⁰⁹ This decision, in effect, removed federal public accommodations protections. A convention of thirty-two prominent Black political leaders in Illinois responded swiftly to the news by denouncing Republicans for allowing such a critical rollback of civil rights and announcing their break with the Republican Party. They resolved to stop voting along party lines, instead supporting only candidates who officially recognized the right of Black citizens to hold elected office.²¹⁰

When Grover Cleveland won the presidency in 1884, it was the first time a Democrat had held the office in more than two decades — proof that the political power of the South and its sympathizers had fully recovered. In Illinois, John W.E. Thomas introduced legislation that would restore public accommodation protections at the state level, which passed in 1885 after a brief period of hesitation in the state Republican senate.²¹¹

Of course, any initial successes in the political franchise were only successes for Black *male* Illinoisans. Women had no national right to vote and the most prominent suffrage organizations did not include Black women as members or advocate for Black women's voting rights — so Black women founded their own organizations. The first of these was the Alpha Suffrage Club, founded in 1913 by Ida B. Wells in Chicago.²¹² The club helped achieve a significant victory that year with the passage of the Illinois Equal Suffrage Act, which allowed women to vote for a limited number of government offices (allowing women to vote in congressional and gubernatorial elections would require amending the state constitution).²¹³

With their persistent organizing and voter registration efforts, the Alpha Suffrage Club became instrumental in several electoral campaigns for Black political candidates, most notably the 1914 election of a Black man, Oscar DePriest, as alderman of Chicago's Second Ward. The first male politician to actively court the Alpha Suffrage Club's support, he went on to become the first Black congressperson of the twentieth century.²¹⁴ Thanks to the efforts of Wells and her fellow suffragettes, the "Black vote" was no longer a shorthand exclusively for Black men.

Chicago: Machine Politics and Resistance

Even without legal barriers to voting, an adroit political machine can dilute a community's political effectiveness toward any end but the machine's survival. From the late 1950s to the late 1960s in Chicago's Black Belt (the narrow chain of neighborhoods to which Black Chicagoans were restricted), Democratic machine operatives routinely threatened constituents with the loss of welfare, employment, and public housing if they did not vote Democratic.²¹⁵

Meanwhile, the Democratic mayor, Richard J. Daley, and his political machine used intimidation and outright violence to silence political enemies.²¹⁶ Residential and educational segregation still plagued the city, despite the lofty promises of Daley, and civil rights protesters soon took aim at the mayor personally. In 1965, Black and White marchers demonstrated in front of Daley's home in Bridgeport. In a scene that would not have been out of place in the explicitly segregationist South, White neighborhood residents formed a mob that attacked the marchers by throwing food, rocks, and firecrackers.²¹⁷ While Chicago might not have had Jim Crow laws on the books, it was clear that its policies were those of de facto segregation and that while the Daley Democratic machine demanded Black votes, it was uninterested in ameliorating oppressive conditions for Black voters.

Chicago's persistent racial oppression attracted the attention of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. in the mid-1960s. Local Black leaders had already formed political organizations to protest the racially disparate conditions in the city. For instance, while formal segregation in education had been declared unconstitutional nationwide, administrative policies in Chicago created a de facto system of segregation that disadvantaged Black students by forcing them into overcrowded schools and denying them access to nearby schools serving White students.

The Coordinating Council of Community Organizations (CCCCO) formed in 1962 to organize boycotts and litigation targeting Chicago's public-school policies. On Chicago's West Side, the American Friends Service Committee (AFSC) campaigned and organized against the city's pervasive housing discrimination. Both organizations welcomed the assistance of King and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), which had gained national attention for their use of tactical political nonviolence in the South. The collaboration between these local groups and the SCLC would give rise to the Chicago Freedom Movement (CFM).²¹⁸ King targeted Chicago in part because of the persistent inequality its increasingly ghettoized Black residents faced and, in part, because, to King's mind, the machine structure of Chicago politics meant that there was one man (Daley) with whom to negotiate.²¹⁹ King had already visited Chicago several times and, according to the executive director of the SCLC, harbored guilt about the movement's relative neglect of racial problems in the North.²²⁰

In late 1965, the SCLC sent a handful of staff to Chicago's West Side to learn about conditions in the segregated slums there and, with the CCCO, the SCLC launched the CFM in January of 1966. In a show of solidarity, King immediately moved into one of the slum units in the North Lawndale neighborhood. The King family's fourth-story walkup apartment had no stair lighting and no functioning heat in the middle of winter. The following month, the CFM helped organize a rent strike in a dilapidated apartment building at 1321 South Harlem Avenue, creating an escrow account to receive rent funds and use them to repair the broken furnace and buy coal. More rent strikes soon followed, as well as an increased focus on housing discrimination, the issue in Chicago most analogous to Jim Crow in the South. Real estate agents funneled Black home seekers away from White neighborhoods, effectively trapping Black families into a narrow range of neighborhoods where slumlords could demand higher rents without commensurate upkeep.²²¹

On July 10, 1966, the CFM hosted thirty thousand supporters for a rally against housing discrimination in Chicago, demanding effective legislation to prohibit housing discrimination.²²² The next week, a direct-action campaign targeted segregated spaces such as real estate offices, community parks, and grocery stores. During a march on Chicago's Southwest Side on August 5, King was hit on the head by a rock thrown by a violent counterprotestor.²²³ The flurry of marches that followed that summer were met with similar violence from angry White mobs, conjuring the spectacle of pro-Jim Crow protests in the South.

The unrest produced by these demonstrations eventually prompted the Daley administration to negotiate with the CFM. On August 26, 1966, Mayor Daley gathered representatives from the real estate sector and the CFM to negotiate on open-housing commitments.²²⁴ This "Summit Agreement" was to be a breakthrough in ending housing discrimination and included provisions to limit the height of public housing and end racially discriminatory mortgage decisions. Had these reforms materialized, they would have been excellent examples of political activism yielding tangible gains for Black citizens — but without an enforcement mechanism or deadline, the agreement withered away in a few short months.²²⁵ In the end, the nonviolent tactics used brilliantly by King and others in the South failed to penetrate the Gordian knot of Chicago machine politics.

Politically active Black Chicagoans saw the CFM as a failed enterprise in the politics of nonviolence.²²⁶ What had worked in the South against explicit racism was less effective in the North, where discrimination was real but rarely codified. In the words of John McDermott, executive director of the Chicago Catholic Interracial Council, "[We] were in a northern city which had lots of laws against discrimination, where the problem was not the same as in the South. How do you deal with de facto segregation and discrimination? That is what we were confronting."²²⁷

Suppression of Chicago's Black Power Movement

Meanwhile, federal and state law enforcement ruthlessly suppressed attempts to establish a more revolutionary Black political apparatus. In 1966, Huey Newton and Bobby Seale established the Black Panther Party for Self Defense in Oakland, California. Originally Southerners, they had relocated to Oakland to escape racist oppression, only to find similar conditions on the West Coast: police brutality, housing discrimination, segregated education, and political corruption. Their organization was born in the tradition of political radicalism and Black Power ideology, grounded in an ethos of armed resistance to racial oppression.²²⁸

In Chicago in 1968, Fred Hampton presided over the founding of the Illinois Black Panther Party (ILBPP) in response to similar conditions. The Chicago Democratic machine had become outright hostile to Black political organizing after the unrest following King's assassination. Responding to riots on Chicago's South Side, Mayor Daley directed police to "shoot to kill" anyone they believed was an arsonist and to shoot to maim perceived looters. The sheriff of Cook County, Joseph Woods, assembled three thousand, mostly White, civilian volunteers to act as riot control forces in Black communities.²²⁹

The perceived failure of the Chicago Freedom Movement, King's assassination, and the overt conservative tone struck by government officials galvanized a generation of young, politically conscious Black men and women to seek a more militant form of political activism against racism, classism, and imperialism.²³⁰ Among the most innovative strategies of the Illinois Black Panthers was the "Rainbow Coalition," a political organization effort that spanned race and class and even included street gangs. Chicago activists bridged fierce racial, ethnic, and gang divisions to organize marches, strikes, and ballot signatures for the Party's candidates.²³¹

The ILBPP's rhetoric and methods attracted law enforcement scrutiny from the start. At the federal level, the FBI had branded the Panthers a threat to national security and prioritized their destruction. J. Edgar Hoover, the director of the FBI, hated politically leftist organizations and in 1956 launched COINTELPRO, a collection of covert domestic programs aimed at degrading and eliminating targeted groups.²³² Chicago law enforcement and political leadership cooperated fully.²³³

To engineer the Panthers' demise, the FBI and the Chicago Police Department spied on the Panthers, cultivated informants, and relied heavily on raids and pretextual arrests. In the summer of 1969 alone, there were 111 arrests of Chicago Panthers, most of whom never faced trial.²³⁴ This harassment had increasingly stark consequences. On July 31, 1969, Chicago police raided the Chicago Panthers' headquarters, destroying the building and seizing cash, legal firearms, and organizational documents. Two

months later, police officers initiated an exchange of gunfire by shooting up the ILBPP headquarters. The return fire from members inside prompted police to arrest those shooting back and burn down the entire building. Most infamously, on December 4, 1969, a specialized unit of Chicago police officers organized by the Cook County state's attorney raided Fred Hampton's apartment. Law enforcement killed Fred Hampton and Mark Clark, Defense Captain of the Peoria branch of the Black Panther Party, while they beat and arrested seven surviving Panthers, charging them with attempted murder and aggravated assault.²³⁵

Conclusion

On the surface, Illinois appears to compare favorably to most other states in Black citizens' political power. The state has some of the most robust voter protection legislation on the books, has sent more Black candidates to Congress — including three Black senators — than any other state, and was home to former President Barack Obama. Yet as impressive as these metrics are, they were carved from a legacy of complete disenfranchisement; even the concentration of Black political power in Chicago resulted from the exclusionary housing and zoning policies that defined the city in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.²³⁶

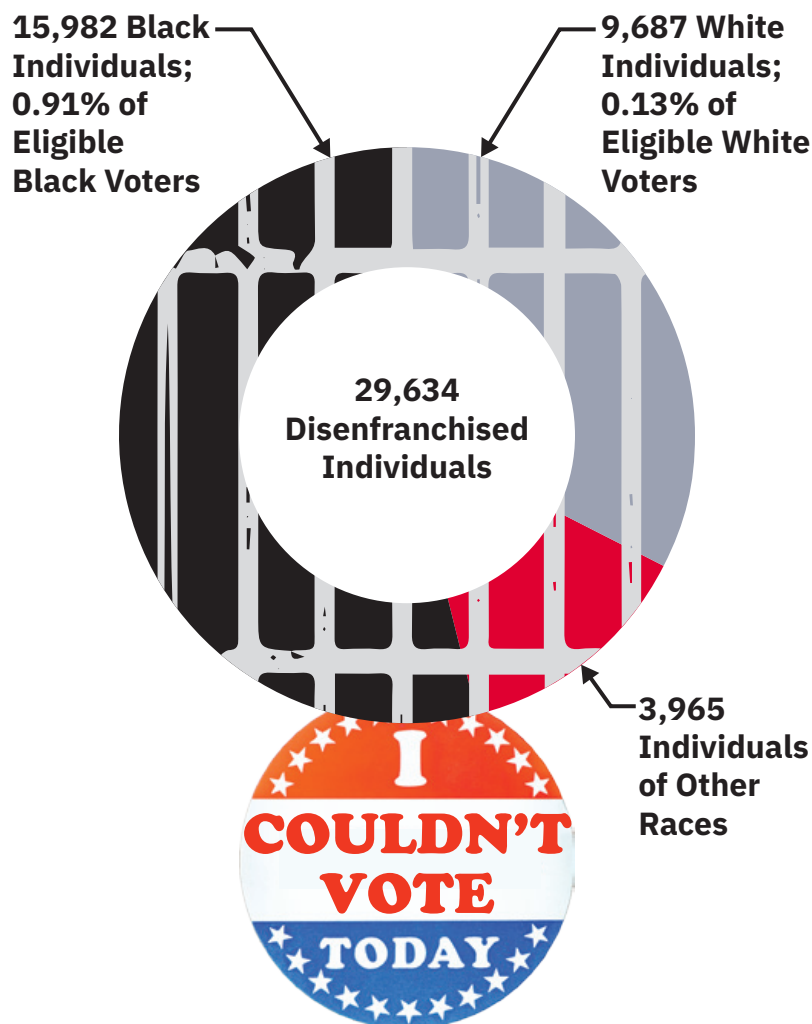
In Illinois, voter access is still heavily associated with race. For example, Black voters in the area surrounding East St. Louis filed suit in federal court alleging that in drawing district lines, lawmakers had diluted Black political strength in House District 114 by moving portions of the majority-Black district into nearby districts.²³⁷ In Chicago, according to a WBEZ analysis of voter turnout during the November 2022 midterm election, turnout was strongest in the North, Far Northwest, Mid-South, and Far Southwest parts of the city. The weakest turnout was found on the Near Northwest, West, Near Southwest, and South Sides. Voter turnout in majority-White precincts was approximately 60 percent, while it was under 40 percent in majority-Black precincts.²³⁸

A University of Illinois Chicago analysis found that in Chicago's 2023 mayoral election, White residents voted at a much higher rate (61.1 percent) than Black residents (29 percent).²³⁹ Furthermore, it was only in 2021 that Illinois ended the practice of prison gerrymandering: counting incarcerated persons as residents of the place in which they are incarcerated.²⁴⁰ This inflates the population count and thus representation of districts containing prisons while weakening political representation of areas that do not. Given that the prison population is vastly disproportionately Black and that prisons are located in largely rural White counties, prison gerrymandering represents an effective siphoning away of representation from Black communities.²⁴¹ While the 2021 law will end this practice, the effect of the law won't be felt until the

2030 redistricting cycle. Relatedly, given that incarcerated individuals are ineligible to vote, inequities in incarceration also create political disenfranchisement in the present. Black Illinoisans face an incarceration rate seven times higher than their White counterparts. In 2022, this amounted to 15,982 Black persons disenfranchised due to incarceration in the state of Illinois, comprising 1 percent of all eligible voters.

The state of Illinois's political disenfranchisement of Black citizens has significant consequences, most evident in the persistent racial inequities observed throughout the state. In Chicago, the 2023 poverty rate for Black residents was 26.4 percent compared to 9.4 percent for White residents. These numbers mirror those of the state, where Black Illinoisans' poverty rate was 23 percent compared to 8.6 percent for White residents.²⁴²

VOTING DISENFRANCHISEMENT DUE TO PRISON INCARCERATION IN ILLINOIS, 2022



Moreover, a lack of Black representation impacts financial resources provided to Black communities. For instance, analyses of tax-increment financing (TIF) allocations have found that White-majority wards in Chicago receive more TIF funding than Black-majority wards.²⁴³ As is detailed extensively throughout the other sections of this report, harmful racial disparities for Black people in the state persist across metrics such as education, income, and health. The state's history of suppressing Black political power has helped entrench racial disparities and limited Black Illinoisans' abilities to advocate for change.

Source: Prison population derived from Vera Institute. Data on eligible voting population derived by 2022 American Community Survey (ACS) Five-Year Sample.

MARGINAL LANDS: RURAL BLACK FARMERS AND THE CASE FOR REPARATIONS IN ILLINOIS

Kelley Lemon

The Negro is preeminently the small farmer, cultivating 50 acres while the white farmer has 160.

—The Negro Farmer, W.E.B. DuBois, 1904²⁴⁴

Throughout Illinois history, rural Black farmers cultivated — and continue to cultivate — some of the most ecologically complex yet economically undervalued landscapes in the state. Though often dismissed as unproductive or “marginal,” these lands were critical to the salvation, autonomy, and cultural continuity of Black families who left the South in search of opportunity.²⁴⁵ The agricultural landscapes they build now serve as historical evidence of both ecological stewardship and systemic exclusion.

This commentary focuses on rural Black farmers in early twentieth-century Illinois — a period that fostered the highest concentration of Black farmers and was followed by a sustained decline over the next century. The well-documented structural and legal reasons for this include discriminatory lending, exclusion from federal support, and ongoing redefinition of what constitutes a “farm.” These injustices unfolded alongside environmental and ecological challenges — floods, droughts, poor-quality soil — that made farming in certain regions especially difficult.

Black farmers’ placement on marginal agricultural lands was not accidental. These stories must be understood through three interrelated dynamics: deliberate efforts to steer Black farmers and their families to ecologically vulnerable and undervalued lands; environmental phenomena that compounded farming challenges; and the emergence of modern conservation efforts that, while purporting to protect landscapes, have accelerated dispossession and land loss. Together, these forces shaped a geography of exclusion that demands reparative recognition.

Land, Railroad and Settlement: Shaping the Rural Black Agricultural Landscape

The history of Illinois begins with colonization and forced removal of Indigenous people from their lands. One of the most influential forces was the Illinois Central Railroad Company, established in 1851, which played a central role in shaping the state’s agricultural geography.²⁴⁶ Funded by a federal land grant, the company launched an aggressive land and real estate campaign along its route from Cairo to Chicago and Dunleith.

The railroad company promoted its land in the mid 1800s, mapping out towns and stations along its line to attract European immigrants and northern Illinois settlers.²⁴⁷ Land sold for five dollars to twenty-five dollars per acre, with the best farmland — tallgrass prairie in the central region — reserved for revenue-generating commodity crops. Southern Illinois featured dense woodlands of poplar, oak, cottonwood, sweetgum, cypress, and sycamore.²⁴⁸ Despite the region's deep, rich soils suitable for cotton, tobacco, and fruit, it was difficult to sell this land. Colloquially known as "Egypt,"²⁴⁹ it bordered the Mississippi and Ohio Rivers and was riddled with wetlands. Northern newspapers derided the region, describing it as unsuitable for cultivating wheat, and citing the prevalence of cholera and malaria outbreaks.²⁵⁰

The company faced difficulty selling this land and shifted its strategy first by recruiting a Black supervisor as a land agent, who began working with the Freedman's Relief Bureau to encourage Black southerners from Mississippi and Alabama to settle there, with great success.²⁵¹ Alexander, Pulaski, and Massac counties became home to hundreds of Black farmers. Other significant settlements emerged in St. Clair, Madison, Sangamon, and Kankakee counties. These farmers often grew crops outside of the state's commodity norms, including tobacco, pumpkins, and strawberries, citing their familiarity with rural agricultural landscapes of the South.²⁵²

Environmental Challenges

The agricultural regions occupied by Black farmers were particularly vulnerable to extreme weather, which made farming difficult and life in these communities unstable. The Great Mississippi Flood of 1927, the most catastrophic flood in US history, affected much of the Mississippi River Valley, including Illinois, Missouri, Kentucky, Tennessee, Arkansas, Mississippi, and Louisiana. It created thousands of Black refugees, mostly farmers.²⁵³

In Illinois, farmers in Cairo and Mounds (Pulaski and Alexander counties) were hit hard. Homes, fields, and infrastructure were destroyed. Events like the 1927 flood were not anomalies but an important part of the ecological character of the Mississippi River basin, altered by human intervention.²⁵⁴ The region's fertile soils are the product of sediment deposition over millennia, a process that creates abundance and vulnerability in equal parts. Such landscapes were not suited to monoculture commodity farming, and care required ecological sensitivity and resilient, adaptive strategies — qualities that many Black farmers brought and passed down through generations.

Marginal to Stewardship: Black [Agricultural] Ecologies²⁵⁵

Owning land conferred rights and protections. For Black families, this was reason enough to settle in regions others dismissed due to ecological and environmental qualities. But what made these landscapes “marginal”? The rise of environmentalism in the 1970s brought an ideological shift. Lands previously considered marginal — seen as “barren, rough, inaccessible, or possessed of other undesirable characteristics” — are now seen as ecologically vital.²⁵⁶ USDA programs pay farmers to lease their land for habitat restoration and ecosystem protection, a program many farmers in Illinois take advantage of.²⁵⁷

Modern conservation narratives ignore that marginal landscapes were never unused or abandoned. Black farmers and other farmers of color cultivated, cared for, and lived on these lands. While working outside of mainstream agriculture, many were sustaining ecosystems with practices that we now call regenerative agriculture, mixed cropping, and agroforestry. These strategies were rooted in resilience and cultural knowledge, and often developed without the government subsidies and assistance afforded to White farmers. These landscapes were not just productive; they were the foundation of Black ecological heritage.

Illinois’s largest Black farming communities were situated in ecologically vulnerable areas prone to flooding and drought, with poor soils and extensive wetlands. These were not random settlements; they reflect the layered dynamics of exclusion and adaptation. The ecological marginality of these lands and regions made them less attractive to White farmers and more available to Black farmers. Yet these same features also gave rise to unique future ecological preservation practices. These landscapes are now valued by federal, state, and conservation groups for their biodiversity and environmental potential, even as the Black rural presence on them continues to be overlooked or displaced.

Ongoing Dispossession: A Modern Problem

Despite the legacy of rural Black farmers in Illinois, land ownership is in decline. Dispossession today takes many forms, including tax delinquency and informal land titles that are unrecognized by formal legal structures. In southern Illinois, one landowner described hand-delivering property tax payments to ensure proper processing, citing a lack of trust in local systems.²⁵⁸

In Kankakee County, land loss has occurred not only through coercion but also through conservation. As recently as 2022, ProPublica documented land loss among Black

farmers in the ecologically significant region known as the Kankakee Sands,²⁵⁹ a rare biodiverse landscape identified by the World Database of Protected Areas (WDPA).²⁶⁰ Featuring native black oak trees and prairie savannah, the landscape draws particular interest from nonprofit organizations and conservation groups.²⁶¹ While many of the efforts are well-meaning, they frequently lack meaningful engagement with Black landowners.²⁶² In some cases, land is taken under the guise of ecological protection, a new chapter in the long history of exclusion and dispossession.

Toward a Reparative Landscape Ethic

In the US, land has been a pathway to rights, autonomy, and the building of generational wealth. For Black farmers, it also represented dignity and belonging. Their presence and labor transformed the Illinois landscape, and their influence remains even where they no longer reside. Meaningful reparations must address rural agricultural land not only as a site of past dispossession and harm, but as a foundation for future justice. Recognizing and investing in historically Black agricultural land is an essential step toward equity and reparative justice. These are not just sites of loss. They are sites of ecological wisdom, care, and possibility.

STOLEN ECONOMIC LABOR

The Black experience in the United States is inescapably characterized by the state-sanctioned exploitation of labor and the denial of equal economic opportunity. From the country's inception, enslaved Black persons were bought and sold, principally to work the massive plantations fueling the Southern economy. Slavery was instrumental to the economic survival and eventual dominance of the United States, turning it into a powerhouse for critical goods such as cotton and tobacco. Subsequently, ideological racism and the failure of the postwar Reconstruction enabled entirely new systems of repression and exploitation against Black Americans that forced them into menial employment and subsistence wages. Government officials at the state and local levels failed to protect Black workers who were violently targeted by White mobs and failed to enforce legal protections against discrimination. Labor unions systematically denied Black workers the ability to organize and compete on a level playing field.

The history of the state of Illinois reflects this national pattern. From the end of slavery to the present day, this section of the report chronicles some of the major ways in which the state permitted or exercised economic and labor discrimination against Illinoisans of African descent.

Economic Hindrance of “Free” Black Illinoisans

The “Racial Terror” section of this report catalogues the myriad ways in which Illinois, a free state, was an active participant in the institution of slavery before the Civil War. This complicity in forced labor and the corresponding regime of racialized legal repression harmed the economic well-being of all Black Illinoisans, whether free or in bondage.

This repression did not end with the formal end of slavery in the state. As the Civil War neared and tensions between North and South grew, many Northern legislatures (including that of Illinois, which bordered slave states) took up the issue of free Black Americans settling within their borders. The state tightened immigration rules even further with the Illinois Black Law of 1853, making it illegal for free Black persons to enter the state under penalty of fine or summary sale. Even during the midst of the Civil War, the Illinois Supreme Court ruled in *Nelson v. the People* (1863) that the sale of a Black person did not equate to slavery.

In the meantime, Illinois had furnished more than eighteen hundred Black soldiers to the war, all of whom received less than 80 percent of White soldiers' wages.²⁶³ Contemporary accounts show how this irony affected Black enlistees. In one Republican publication, Black Chicagoan Joseph Stanley argued:

If our services are needed, enlist us as free men, with the same bounty and pay which you give white men ... colored men at the north cannot consent to assign themselves to a regulation which is degrading to their manhood, and which would be indignantly spurned by every white American.²⁶⁴

The Union expected Black soldiers to fight and die on behalf of the “free” state and country under which they had never enjoyed full rights and freedoms.

It was not until 1865, the year the Civil War ended, that the Illinois Legislature at last erased the Black Laws.²⁶⁵ In their campaigning against these racial restrictions, pro-repeal activists had to reassure anxious Whites that free Black persons (and their labor) would remain in the South and not surge into Illinois.²⁶⁶ The end of the Civil War and of the Illinois Black Laws were not the end of the racial tensions that defined northern Whites’ hostility to Black labor. In the rapidly advancing industrial age, White laborers in Illinois would come to see a growing Black population as an existential threat meriting the harshest of responses, all with the explicit or implicit sanction of the state.²⁶⁷

Postbellum Labor Exclusion of Black Illinoisans

In the immediate aftermath of the Civil War, Black Illinoisans tended to enjoy (relative) security as subsistence farmers in small rural communities, but the economic shift toward industrialized labor produced several consequences. First, Black Americans began to migrate north in waves, in search of manufacturing jobs in urban centers such as Chicago. Second, White Illinoisans began to view Black laborers as direct competition for work and an inversion of the racial hierarchy.

The backlash took both legal and extralegal forms, repressing Black Illinoisans’ opportunities to work, compete, and build wealth. Working-class White Americans sought to preserve their precarious status in the changing economic landscape by viewing labor through a racialized lens consisting of “White” work and “Black” work. This distinction was employed, often violently, to reduce competition from free Black Americans and maintain a White Supremacist status quo.²⁶⁸

In 1864, Illinois Democrats suffered decisive defeats in both houses of the state legislature. The party, widely perceived as hostile and obstructionist to the Union war aims, receded into a legislative minority. However, as the state Democratic Party began to rebuild from this disastrous showing, the economic anxiety of White labor was one of the key issues in which it found a foothold.²⁶⁹ Newly freed Black citizens entering the state to seek employment met sharp resistance. Newspaper editorials characterized them as both shiftless layabouts and as serious competition for scarce jobs.

The *Chicago Times*, for instance, advocated for the removal of freed people to the western territories where “their inferiority would not be placed in competition with the superiority of the Saxon.”²⁷⁰ Canny pro-Democrat columnists began to tailor their

message to returning Union soldiers, lamenting that they had fought and bled for Black Americans only to be saddled with the indignity of lower wages and job competition. They portrayed Black Illinoisans' attempts to attain equality in the labor market as a betrayal of their liberators. Black Illinoisans lacked the political and economic capital to successfully undercut these narratives.²⁷¹

Union Exclusion

Anti-Black prejudice affected the economic fortunes of Black Illinoisans in all vocational categories. For instance, as this report's expert commentary "Marginal Lands: Rural Black Farmers and the Case for Reparations in Illinois" by Kelley Lemon documents, Black farmers were systematically relegated to the land considered least productive and valuable in the state. These same discriminatory pressures resulted in fierce opposition to Black union membership across the postbellum North, including Illinois.

The National Labor Union (NLU) is a telling example of how quickly Northern appetites for racial equality disappeared. A year after the NLU's founding in 1866, leaders at its national convention tabled the question of admitting Black workers to preserve delegate unity. The issue remained dormant because the union did not *explicitly* bar Black members, but at the local level many chapters had unwritten rules that excluded Black workers. Meanwhile, Black delegates to the convention felt frustrated by NLU's refusal to address issues of primary concern to Black workers.²⁷² The union's strategy of "kicking the can down the road" signaled to Black workers that their labor as free persons was clearly not welcome in the coalescing labor movement. Indeed, Black Illinoisans, like Black workers across industrial America, faced exclusion from labor unions, intimidation, and violence.

Contemporary accounts paint Black non-union labor as a singularly destabilizing phenomenon and an existential threat to White labor. In 1901, John Mitchell, serving as the president of the United Mine Workers, stated, "I know of no element that is doing more to create disturbance in mining circles than the system of importing colored labor to take white men's place and to take colored union men's place."²⁷³ In 1905, the president of the American Federation of Labor claimed that "if the colored man continues to lend himself to the work of tearing down what the white man has built up, a race hatred far worse than any known will result."²⁷⁴ Meanwhile, influential Black leaders such as Booker T. Washington and W.E.B. DuBois had come to view Black strikebreaking as a consequence of what Washington termed the "two-edged sword" of racial prejudice.²⁷⁵ In other words, White unions, in discriminating so virulently against Black labor, had harmed their own self-interests by creating the conditions under which Black workers saw no choice but to become strikebreakers. They had no one to blame but themselves.

Illinois's burgeoning Black population in the late nineteenth century quickly realized the necessity of mobility in a fractious postwar Illinois. The Ku Klux Klan had strongholds in southern Illinois — entire “Klan counties” — where the population of Black Illinoisans had dwindled to negligible numbers.²⁷⁶ Southern counties such as Pulaski offered menial, subsistence farm labor and little else. On the other hand, the city of Cairo offered more skilled and diverse manufacturing jobs, but also more challenges from White workers. Employers paid Black workers less than White workers and funneled them into jobs considered too dangerous for Whites.²⁷⁷ As a result, Black workers faced a lack of equal footing in the competitive economic landscape.

Violence Against Black Workers

In the first decade after the end of the Civil War, free Black miners who could not join White unions worked as strikebreakers, which radically fueled racial resentment in postbellum Illinois. In one searing incident in 1877, White strikers in Braidwood violently expelled four hundred Black miners from their homes and out onto the prairies. Alanson Sweet, the superintendent of the Chicago, Wilmington and Vermilion Coal Company, had brought these Black men to work the mines during the work stoppage. A message to stockholders sent soon after the expulsion made clear that the company preferred Black workers precisely because they would be unable to mount a successful strike. After White miners drove them out, the Black workers were only able to return to their homes under the armed guard of the Illinois state militia.²⁷⁸

This pattern and the bitter racial tension with White workers appeared in other growing industries such as meatpacking and steelworking, and in other mining communities as well. In 1898, when a trainload of Black workers arrived in Virden to work the mines, union miners fought to prevent their disembarkment and a violent battle ensued, during which seven strikers and four company guards were killed. The National Guard prevented the violence from expanding farther on that day. The following year in Pana, a similar tragedy unfolded when Black miners, under threat from White strikers, gathered near the mines. The arrest of one of the Black strikebreakers led to a riot between hundreds of Black and White miners. Seven men died in the violence, four of them Black miners.²⁷⁹

In response to incidents of this kind, the Illinois General Assembly introduced and then passed a ban on hiring out-of-state workers in response to strikes.²⁸⁰ This was undoubtedly aimed at Black miners and reflected a virulently racist popular sentiment, evidenced by race riots throughout the state in the early twentieth century. Towns began to introduce informal segregationist policies, most notoriously the “sundown” laws that barred Black individuals from remaining within their borders after sunset.²⁸¹ The use and wage theft of cheap Black labor, the exclusion of Black workers from

unions, and the failure to protect these workers from racially exclusive union violence in the postbellum period stands as another example of Illinois's exploitation of Black workers.

The Great Migration and Onward: Systemic Racial Segregation

These trends in the maltreatment of Black Illinoisans intensified with the massive influx of Black arrivals in the First Great Migration. America's entry into World War I in 1917 created an enormous demand for northern manufacturing labor. The South had also, in the preceding decades, become increasingly hostile to Black citizens. The Supreme Court upheld the doctrine of "separate but equal" in *Plessy v. Ferguson*, allowing Southern states to implement harsh Jim Crow laws that strictly segregated all areas of public life.

After World War I, many Black Southerners relocated to Northern states like Illinois, enticed by the promise of better jobs in cities such as Chicago, Springfield, Peoria, East St. Louis, and Cairo, as well as relief from the oppressive racism of the rural South. The reality of Black opportunity in Illinois paled in comparison to these expectations. Illinois may have eschewed the de jure segregation of Southern cities in the Jim Crow era, but its White majority was still not ready to accept egalitarian working or housing conditions for Black residents.

The ongoing employment discrimination in Northern states particularly affected Black women. While women rarely had access to manufacturing jobs, Black women could rarely obtain sales and clerical work for which employers preferred White women. Those lucky enough to enter the industrial economy typically got the lowest-paying jobs, while others were relegated to domestic labor in White households. The dire economic conditions facing most Black families meant that Black wives were also more likely to work compared to White married women in the North, all in addition to the gendered expectations of uncompensated domestic work.²⁸²

The city of Chicago limited Black arrivals to racial enclaves on the South and West Sides of the city, a geographical ghettoization whose influence persists in the present day.²⁸³ The expanding Black population produced more resentment as White Chicagoans found themselves in an increasingly integrated city. Competition for jobs and housing, exacerbated by the return of Black and White soldiers from the war, led to an increase in racial violence during the immediate postwar years. The borders of the narrow strip of land to which Black Chicagoans were largely restricted became known as the "Black Belt," and became an increased locus of violence as Whites engaged in terrorism and violent intimidation to restrict Black housing expansion.²⁸⁴ Similar explosions of anti-Black violence in Springfield (1908) and East St. Louis (1917) sprang, in part, from the same racial resentment and fierce opposition to Black

economic freedom. In his meticulous documentation of racial conflict in American cities, Stephen Grant Meyer characterizes the civil disorder carried out by opponents of integration as “thousands of small acts of terrorism.”²⁸⁵ While this report contains an extended discussion of racial terrorism in the state, its mention here is meant to underscore the extreme lengths to which White society went to stifle labor competition from Black individuals.

Black Illinoisans Left Behind in the New Deal

While the Great Depression affected Illinoisans of all racial backgrounds, Black Illinoisans bore additional burdens. As historian Arvah Strickland writes about Black Chicagoans during the Depression, “[O]ver one half of the Negroes employable were out of work; for they were the first to lose their jobs and the last to secure new employment, even in work created in governmental bodies.”²⁸⁶ This stark economic vulnerability was in turn exacerbated by the racial discrimination of employers and labor unions in the state.

President Roosevelt spearheaded a raft of federally funded programs, called the New Deal, which poured massive capital into the struggling economy between 1933 and 1943. These programs, thanks to the efforts of southern Democrats in Congress, systematically excluded Black Americans from the New Deal’s most transformative protections. Furthermore, while the New Deal was funded at the federal level, it was administered locally, allowing for regional variation in access to government assistance. White power brokers were able to leverage this assistance in ways that discriminated against Black Illinoisans.

By requiring workers to hold union membership, New Deal programs incentivized the displacement of Black laborers in favor of White workers and elevated unions to unprecedented power. Since many unions, particularly those affiliated with the American Federation of Labor (AFL) discriminated against Black workers, Black jobseekers could not take advantage of their benefits.²⁸⁷ Those lucky enough to secure employment faced the equally daunting task of keeping their jobs. During the Depression years, Chicago employers evinced a clear preference for White workers, including in positions that typically employed Black workers.

Black workers were the first fired during staff downsizes. For instance, Chicago stockyards in the 1930s would typically mark Black employees’ timecards with a black star. When management ordered layoffs, supervisors would gather the black-starred cards and begin firing those individuals.²⁸⁸ In 1935, the Coca-Cola company relocated from Chicago’s South Side to a majority-Italian community on the West Side, firing all their Black workers in the process. Many of the fired workers were union members, but union officials took no action against the company on their behalf.²⁸⁹ While not all unions engaged in anti-Black discrimination — unions affiliated with the Congress of

Industrial Organizations cultivated a reputation for their openness to Black workers, for example — union membership was difficult for Black Illinoisans to secure and, even if obtained, was no guarantee against open discrimination.²⁹⁰

World War II and Beyond: Stolen Economic Opportunities

World War II provided new opportunities and challenges for Black workers across the country and in Illinois. The manufacturing juggernaut needed to sustain America's war machine created a legion of new employment opportunities in the Prairie State. Still, Black workers in the early 1940s faced an uphill battle for labor and union protections. Wildcat strikes (spontaneous unauthorized stoppages carried out by workers without the consent of union officials) were a method favored by White workers to maintain segregated worksites. For instance, in 1942, White workers at the Ammunition Container Company in Harvey launched a wildcat strike when the company brought a Black employee to work on the floor. The strike was unsuccessful and the strikers returned to work.²⁹¹ In December 1944, White workers at the Pullman Standard Car Manufacturing Company went on a wildcat strike after the promotion of a Black worker, Bonnie Morgan, to lead a mixed-race group of workers. The work stoppage totaled more than one thousand workers, interrupting the company's production of naval seacraft critical to the war effort.²⁹²

Employers in the state also systematically denied opportunities to Black women that were increasingly available to White women in the war effort. This included refusal to hire, as in the case of Sophie Brown, a Black woman who tried to apply for work at Chicago's Armour plant. Plant personnel told her to wait outside the hiring office while inviting White women inside to apply. She refused to leave and blocked the entrance, demanding equal consideration for employment. In response, one of the White men present pushed her to the ground and called the police, who promptly arrested her.²⁹³

When hired, Black women faced entrenched resistance from White women coworkers over shared restrooms and work facilities. In 1943, one hundred White women walked out of the Republic Steel facility on Chicago's far South Side to protest having to share bathroom facilities with a trio of Black coworkers.²⁹⁴ While White women's resistance did not typically take the form of wildcat strikes or violence, the objections raised to workplace integration could just as easily cost Black women job opportunities. The George A. Detterbeck Company, for instance, summarily rejected applications from Black women because, as its vice president Lester Detterbeck claimed, he "[knew] beyond a shadow of a doubt that a number of women workers would rather leave than work with Negroes."²⁹⁵

These examples illustrate the broad character of White racial prejudice in the state, particularly with respect to integrating work sites in the first half of the twentieth

century. Although Black workers were able to secure never-before-seen gains in Northern labor markets, we will never know what their economic fortunes would have been if not for the specter of employment discrimination.

Lack of Protection for Black Workers in the War's Aftermath

After the end of the war, many businesses quietly rolled back the wartime concessions made to Black workers. The Fair Employment Practice Committee (FEPC) which had been established by President Roosevelt in 1941 to end racial discrimination in all unions and companies contributing to the war effort, issued a final report in 1946 before shutting down. This effectively ended meaningful federal oversight of racially discriminatory employment practices. In Chicago, a 1953 study found that 85 percent of city-contracted firms utilized racially discriminatory application forms.²⁹⁶

The Selective Training and Service Act of 1940 guaranteed veterans' rights to re-enter their pre-war jobs or receive federal assistance in securing new employment. The GI Bill of Rights, enacted in 1944, provided assistance to returning soldiers that included access to education and job skills training and guaranteed loans for the purchase of a home, farm, or business. However, all veterans did not equally enjoy these substantial benefits. Many Black veterans, for instance, had not been employed before the war and thus had nothing to gain from guaranteed reentry provisions.²⁹⁷ Due to rampant pre-war employment discrimination, moreover, many veterans who were employed lacked seniority to maintain their positions.²⁹⁸ Housing discrimination impaired the effectiveness of low-interest housing loans and funding for education meant little when educational institutions themselves engaged in explicit discrimination.

1950s to Today: Enduring Structures of Racialized Economic Control

From the mid-twentieth century to today, Illinois has continued to reproduce economic systems that disadvantage Black residents — whether through discriminatory public-sector practices or the exploitation of incarcerated people's labor. These patterns reveal how historic anti-Black policies adapted rather than disappeared, shaping the economic landscape well into the present.

Public Sector Discrimination in Cairo

Illinois's patterns of economic anti-Black discrimination persisted into the second half of the nineteenth century, as typified by the findings of a 1973 US Commission on Civil Inquiry into the city of Cairo. The commission found extensive evidence of racial discrimination in hiring, public employment, and promotion, which contributed to the devastating economic disparities between White and Black residents. City officials

had only grudgingly, and with the threat of lawsuits, allowed Black representatives on the city's boards and commissions. This led to a readily identifiable bias against Black employees in local government. Private companies with federal contracts, too, faced allegations of discrimination regarding the hiring and promotion of Black workers. The commission identified these factors as a key contributor to the startling racial disparities in income and public assistance in Cairo as well as the racial unrest that had flared into open violence in March of 1969.²⁹⁹

Exploitation of Prison Labor

While the “Policing and the Legal System” section that follows provides greater detail on the highly racialized nature of incarceration in Illinois, its mention here highlights one significant feature of prisons: the exploitation of labor. The Thirteenth Amendment, which outlawed slavery, conspicuously exempted persons convicted of a crime from abolition. As a result, even in the present, multinational corporations routinely incorporate prison labor in their supply chains.³⁰⁰

According to the Illinois Department of Corrections (IDOC), there were 27,400 incarcerated workers in the state of Illinois in 2023. Their pay ranged from 85 cents to \$2.50 per day, a pittance when compared to the state minimum wage of \$15.00 per hour.³⁰¹ Incarcerated workers in the state perform a range of service, manufacturing, and clerical tasks and Department of Corrections policy prohibits compensation exceeding \$50 per month.³⁰² Given the disproportionate incarceration of Black Illinoisans compared to White Illinoisans, this form of labor disproportionately affects Black individuals. This effectively robs Black prison workers and their families and community of fair compensation for their labor. In one interview with the *State Journal-Register*, Vincent Boggan recounted his two decades of prison labor earning \$30 to \$45 per month as a prison law clerk. His job upon release, doing effectively the same work, yielded \$60,000 per year, a stark illustration of the degree to which the hard work of incarcerated workers is exploited.³⁰³ Legislatively, there have been attempts (most recently Senate Bill 649) to establish minimum wage compensation for Black workers, but they have not progressed out of committee.³⁰⁴ Illinois remains a direct participant in the exploited labor of its disproportionately Black incarcerated population.

Conclusion

The theft and suppression of Black labor in Illinois results from the goals of both public and private actors in the state to diminish Black Illinoisans' ability to compete and thrive in the labor market. This section documents some of the ways in which systematic racial discrimination harmed Black Illinoisans' ability to work in the state with fair and

equitable compensation. The state's history of violent repression of Black workers to systematic union discrimination, unfair distribution of public benefits, and exploitation of prison labor marks a pattern that continues into the present.

In large part due to decades of workforce discrimination, Illinois today has one of the worst racial wealth gaps in the nation.³⁰⁵ In terms of median household income, poverty rate, and net worth, Black Illinoisans fare much worse than the White population of the state. American Community Survey data shows that the median household income for Black Illinoisans is \$40,000 less than for White Illinoisans. Black Illinoisans have three times the poverty rate as White Illinoisans and a median net worth over \$100,000 less. These stark disparities are not accidents of history but rather the result of centuries of economic abuse and discrimination.

Other disparities remain as well. A 2020 analysis of home lending in Chicago found that massive inequities remain between White and Black neighborhoods.³⁰⁶ Another recent economic survey found that Black households in Chicago have more debt, are more reliant on predatory loans, have fewer liquid assets, and have lower net worth than White families. They are far less likely to own stocks, individual retirement accounts, or homes.³⁰⁷ And a recent report on trade apprenticeship programs in the Chicagoland area found that Black workers have a 40 percent lower completion rate of skilled trade apprenticeships than White workers and are underrepresented across all trades.³⁰⁸

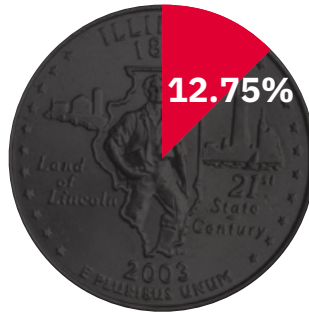
Meanwhile, research has consistently demonstrated that the racial wealth gap observed across the nation reflects how resources and capital have unevenly spread through generations.³⁰⁹ In the words of sociologists Melvin Oliver and Thomas Shapiro:

The past has a living effect on the present [...]. Wealth is one indicator of material disparity that captures the historical legacy of low wages, personal and organizational discrimination, and institutionalized racism. The low levels of wealth accumulation evidenced by current generations of Black Americans best represent the position of Blacks in the stratificational order of American society.³¹⁰

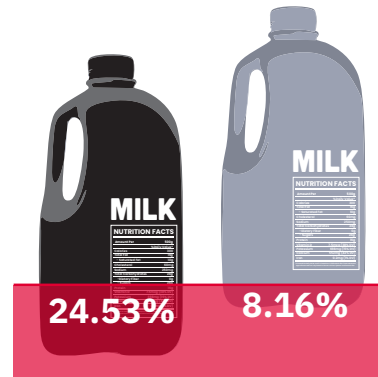
Despite the tremendous advancements that generations of Black Illinoisans have fought for and achieved over the past 150 years, structural racial inequities remain entrenched in Illinois's economic and labor landscape. These gaps reflect the consequences of a history of systematic, race-based suppression and discrimination, generation after generation, against the Black population of Illinois. These stolen opportunities over the state's long history have created an indelible legacy of diminished economic resources in the present.

ILLINOIS ECONOMIC INDICATOR COMPARISON, 2023

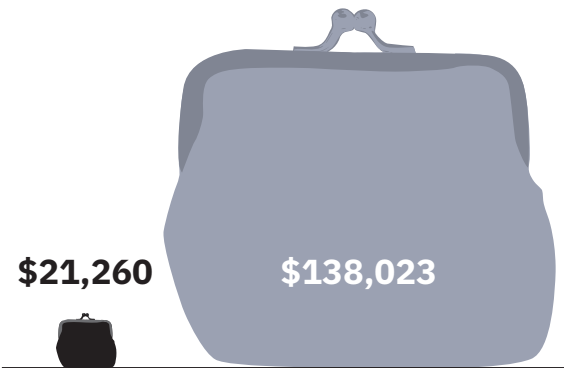
The Black unemployment rate is almost 3 times that of White Illinoisans.*



In Illinois, the Black median household income is 45% less than the White median household income.*



Nearly 1 out of 4 Black people live under the poverty rate in Illinois as compared to less than 1 in 10 White residents.*



The Black median net worth in Illinois is 15% of the White median net worth, or \$116,763 less.†



Over 30% of Black households in Illinois have zero net worth, meaning that they don't have any money or assets to rely on for an unexpected expense.†

Sources: *2023 ACS Five-Year Sample. †US Survey of Income and Program Participation.

NINETEENTH-CENTURY BLACK LABOR ACTIVISM IN ILLINOIS

Alonzo M. Ward

Historically, Black Illinoisans have been disproportionately represented at the bottom of the economic ladder.[†] Of course, the enslavement of Black people was the major factor in causing generational economic underdevelopment. This is not breaking news. Yet, since the current toxic political climate is clamoring to purge Black history from our schools (and our collective memories), it may be best to provide a very brief remedial lesson on the subject.

Black Illinoisans were faced with a difficult choice during the height of Jim Crow racism of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries: Should they continue to fight for inclusion within a predominantly European American labor movement that viewed them as inferior workers? Generally, Black workers supported the same working-class issues as their European American counterparts. In fact, before the advent of government-sanctioned Jim Crow segregation by the turn of the twentieth century, Black Illinoisans were not only part of the labor movement but were also often at the vanguard of the labor movement. But Black labor activists of this period had to develop their own style of activism — a hybrid in which they fought for workers' rights along with racial inclusion for skilled labor and labor unions.³¹¹

The Knights of Labor (KOL) was one of the earliest major unions to recognize the importance of Black workers. By 1877, the KOL had established as many as seven locals in Illinois that openly embraced Black membership. Black waiters in the state had gained a reputation as fierce labor activists and pounced on the opportunity to have the KOL represent them. In 1886, J. Ross Fitzgerald created the William Lloyd Garrison Colored Waiters Local Assembly 8286, and more than four hundred waiters and porters joined during a recruitment drive. A year later, two hundred Black waiters joined European Americans in observation of the first anniversary of May Day and to demand higher wages. The waiters got their increase and put employers on notice: a biracial union could be effective.³¹²

[†] I capitalize "Black" when referring to African Americans. However, I do not capitalize "white" when referring to white people, because that form has long been a weapon utilized by white supremacists and the ultra-right. Therefore, I have used the term "European American" as frequently as possible in this article. This also allows for the inclusion of European immigrants during the period I cover (turn of the twentieth century) — there was much debate then on whether these were "white" people (e.g., Jewish, Italians, Irish, etc.).

Black women in Illinois also showed a strong interest in labor activism. They sought union protection as an increasing number of women entered the workforce, often to supplement the meager incomes of their husbands. Like their male counterparts, Black women were often relegated to menial labor and fought against restrictive occupational opportunities and low pay. The most common job for Black women during the late nineteenth century was that of domestic household servant or washerwoman. Yet even in their limited sphere of economic and occupational advancement, Black women in Illinois managed to establish a measure of dignity and control over their work environments. Black domestic workers organized their own chapter of the KOL and devised a variety of strategies for their protection. For example, domestic workers would routinely leave their jobs without notice or simply refuse to work for families who had a history of abusing their workers.³¹³

Black labor activism was not limited to the working class. Prominent Black Illinoisans insisted on Black workers' need to harness union activity for the sake of their economic survival. In 1888, Galesburg lawyer and labor advocate Frederick L. Magee called for a stronger Black presence in labor unions, placing the blame for limited access to viable jobs on employers and arguing that Black workers were being forced to undesirable jobs because they were Black. Unlike their European American counterparts, Black workers were not afforded the luxury of advocating only for general working-class demands — they also had to fight for their civil rights. Many Black leaders understood this conundrum and viewed the plight of Black workers through the lens of race, so their brand of labor activism included tireless work for federal and state civil rights legislation. Black Illinoisans were predictably elated over the passing of the 1885 Illinois civil rights bill, but were simultaneously disturbed by the corresponding rise in anti-Black sentiment. The increase in racism seemed particularly acute in labor, as more employers elected to use Black workers as strikebreakers to disrupt the labor movement.³¹⁴

Racial restrictions against Black workers also increased substantially, with Black Illinoisans being replaced or excluded from skilled positions. Explicit and tacit approval from European Americans indicated that violence, terrorism, and legal segregation were justifiable measures against “unfit” people. The changes in unionism reflected national white supremacist thought. Biracial unionism was dead, the American Federation of Labor and other craft unions openly excluded Black workers, and European Americans refused to work alongside Black men and women.

Any notion of collective victimhood in the face of this hyper-racist animus is exaggerated, as African Americans were far more resolute during the nadir in race

relations than they are typically credited with. Black Illinoisans often took matters into their own hands by developing strategies to counteract racist labor policies. For example, newspaper editor and labor advocate T. Thomas Fortune formed the National Afro-American League in 1887, establishing branches in several Northern and Southern states and holding the league's first national convention in Chicago in 1890. Led by a philosophy of self-help and racial solidarity, Fortune trained adherents in direct-action protests. He not only demanded more activism, but he also advocated physical retaliation against aggressors — a very risky endeavor during the height of anti-Black racism.³¹⁵

While Fortune was opposed to strikebreaking, he realized that racial exclusion was pushing Black workers in that direction and that Black workers participated in strikebreaking and anti-union activities as a form of self-preservation. This stance on strikebreaking would be tested during the American Railway Union (ARU) strike in 1894. ARU leader Eugene V. Debs had formed the union with the goal of uniting all railroad workers, regardless of race or skill level, but members scoffed at the idea of unionizing and working with Black laborers and many European American workers refused to work with Black men. From the ARU's inception, members adopted explicit provisions in their constitution to ensure the union remained all-white.³¹⁶

Under the leadership of labor activist L.B. Stevens, Black railroad men in Chicago formed an anti-strike union whose express purpose was to replace the ARU strikers and destroy their union. Stevens explained that his organization had no desire to antagonize those who were looking to improve their economic position. He noted that Black workers were left with little alternative and were compelled to act against the discriminatory measures of the ARU. The Black “anti-strike” union easily defeated the ARU — effectively crushing the union.³¹⁷

Black workers throughout Illinois persevered in their defiance against the racialization of labor moving into the twentieth century. While racial violence and rampant racial discrimination continued, Black Illinoisans stood their ground against the ethos of white supremacy. Their labor activism during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was a continuous thread throughout the entire history of Black people in America.

POLICING AND THE LEGAL SYSTEM

The history of policing and the legal system in Illinois shows how the state built a network of laws and practices that still harm Black people in profound and lasting ways. What started with early laws that punished Black people for everyday life — walking without papers, gathering in groups, being unemployed — grew into a system that used police, courts, and prisons to control where Black people could live, work, and move. Police targeted Black neighborhoods through constant stops and arrests, while courts imposed heavy sentences and costly fines that tore families apart and drained community resources. These practices did not end with time; they simply changed shape. Today, they show up in higher arrest rates, longer jail sentences, and heavy surveillance in majority-Black areas across the state. From early curfews to modern policing, Illinois has used its legal system not to protect Black life but to control and punish it, leaving harms that continue to shape daily life for Black residents.

Building a System of Control

Although Illinois entered the Union as “free,” its legal institutions defined Black presence as a condition to be managed through surveillance, detention, and punishment. Freedom for Black residents was never guaranteed by law; it was monitored, contested, and often revoked through the very institutions meant to deliver justice.

Long before formal police departments existed, Illinois’s public safety system relied on sheriffs, constables, and county militias whose duties included monitoring Black movement, questioning Black travelers, detaining suspected fugitives, and facilitating forced returns to bondage. These officials operated as agents of racial order, treating Black people as inherently suspicious and subject to state intervention.³¹⁸ Courts reinforced this racial hierarchy by denying Black residents meaningful access to justice. Judges allowed the detention and sale of Black individuals based on unverified claims of “runaway” status, accepted the seizure of free Black people without proof, and upheld labor coercion through apprenticeship and vagrancy enforcement.³¹⁹ Black testimony was routinely discounted or barred, making the system one in which violence, kidnapping, wage theft, and exploitation against Black people went unpunished, not because protection was unavailable, but because the legal system was not designed to extend to them.

Records across the state illustrate how deeply this system penetrated daily life. County governments kept formal registries of Black residents to monitor movement and identity. In Madison County, officials maintained a “Negro Book” documenting

every free Black resident; while in Sangamon County, individuals like Jameson Jenkins had to file certificates of freedom directly with the court to avoid seizure or sale into servitude.³²⁰ Similarly, the 1829 revision of Illinois residency laws required free Black migrants like Beverly Brown to not only present proof of freedom but also to post a \$1,000 bond to reside in the state, an impossible requirement for most and a clear barrier designed to criminalize Black presence.³²¹ The burden of proof always fell on Black individuals and the penalty for failing to comply was detention, auction, or expulsion.

Jails and holding facilities, too, functioned as instruments of racial control. Across the state, Black residents could be confined for lacking travel papers, for changing employers, or simply for being accused of belonging to someone else. County jails served as temporary holding sites for forced returns to slavery, even after Illinois declared itself a free state. This criminal infrastructure blurred the line between criminal law and slave enforcement, embedding racial confinement practices into the daily routines of local government. Federal partnership deepened this system. With the enforcement of federal fugitive laws, Illinois officials actively collaborated with slave catchers, transported Black detainees across state lines, and used public resources to support forced removal and re-enslavement. Local government did not reluctantly comply; it participated. In practice, Illinois's courts and enforcement agencies extended slave-catching authority into free soil, solidifying a justice culture that equated Black life with property and Black movement with threat.

These practices reveal a foundational truth: Illinois's criminal legal system did not evolve into racial inequality; it began there. From territorial administration to early statehood, institutions of law enforcement, courts, and detention were constructed around the surveillance, containment, and punishment of Black people. This framework established a governing logic that defined Black freedom as conditional and subject to state control. The result was not merely discriminatory outcomes; it was a legal culture built to preserve racial hierarchy and deny Black residents equal protection under the law from the outset.

Disproportionate Policing and Surveillance in Illinois

Policing in Illinois did not emerge as a neutral institution designed to protect the public; it developed as a mechanism to enforce racial hierarchy, regulate Black mobility, and secure White social and political dominance. From the state's founding to the present, systems of law enforcement have consistently framed Black presence as a threat and Black behavior as suspicious, justifying surveillance, detention, punishment, and criminalization. Across two centuries, these systems inflicted cumulative harms: destabilizing families, stripping economic opportunity, undermining political

participation, eroding trust in public institutions, and embedding multigenerational disadvantage. Despite reforms, Illinois continues to deploy policing practices that disproportionately target Black residents, revealing that the foundational logic has not been dismantled, only modernized.

The abolition of slavery in 1865 did not mark the end of the state's control over Black life in Illinois. Instead, policing systems pivoted; where law once explicitly enabled enslavement, it now criminalized conditions associated with Black freedom. Vagrancy laws, "idleness" statutes, and public order ordinances gave police broad discretion to arrest Black residents for unemployment, lack of fixed housing, or simply for standing in public space.³²²

These early policing tools criminalized survival behaviors such as seeking work and traveling; targeted Black laborers and migrants seeking opportunity; enabled forced labor through court sentencing and indenture; and reinforced White control of the workforce and property.

Freedom became conditional as the legal system asserted its right to determine whether Black people were "legitimately free." The police enforced that boundary and early policing laid the conceptual groundwork for future surveillance: Black movement required justification; White suspicion was sufficient cause for state intervention.

Order Maintenance Strategies and the Criminalization of Black Illinoisans

The modernization and professionalization of the police department in Illinois during the early twentieth century did not dismantle racial bias; it institutionalized it. Centralized training, modern record-keeping systems, and formal patrol structures gave policing a new appearance of neutrality and efficiency. Yet these changes did not neutralize racism; they mechanized and bureaucratized it. Black communities became the primary sites for new police tactics and technologies and increased organization simply meant more systematic and justified scrutiny of Black life. A defining feature of this era was the rise of "order maintenance" policing, proactive surveillance, and intervention based not on documented crime but on anticipated disorder. Officers were encouraged to make discretionary decisions about who constituted a threat and to intervene early, dispersing gatherings, questioning people on sidewalks, and making arrests long before any offense occurred.³²³ This strategy was not applied uniformly. Black Illinoisans were treated as a public threat even in ordinary social or economic activity. Racialized suspicion turned everyday life into grounds for intervention. Police discretion widened and Blackness itself became a law-enforcement "risk category," enabling harassment, detention, and force without the need for legal justification.

Once initiated at the street level, these policing patterns flowed directly into the court system, where racialized enforcement translated into criminal records, fines, and incarceration. Even before the late-century punitive shift, Illinois courts routinely imposed harsher penalties on Black defendants, treating them as inherently dangerous and less deserving of leniency. Sentencing did not operate in isolation; it reflected a deeply rooted belief that Black communities required discipline, not protection. Judicial decisions reinforced racially coded narratives about threat and public safety, transforming racial profiling into lasting legal harm.

Great Migration and Urban Containment: Policing Black Arrival

By the early twentieth century, Illinois's demographic landscape, especially in Chicago, had changed significantly with the beginning of the Great Migration. Between 1910 and 1930, the Chicago Black population grew from roughly 44,000 to more than 230,000.³²⁴ White political leaders, business elites, and police officials viewed this rise as a racial threat. They responded with policies designed to contain Black people within restricted neighborhoods and control their public presence. Law enforcement played a central role in this containment. Police patrolled the borders of segregated neighborhoods to enforce informal racial boundaries, intervening to prevent Black families from moving into White blocks. Inside Black neighborhoods, police monitored streets, alleyways, and gathering spaces, conducting stops and interrogations under vague public order justifications.³²⁵ The sites of Black cultural life — jazz clubs, social organizations, civic halls, and street corners — became targets of vice raids and surveillance, criminalizing Black leisure, economic activity, and political engagement. As Black communities sought to build autonomy and establish civic presence, policing functioned to limit visibility and suppress possibility.³²⁶ Black presence was not simply regulated; it was interpreted as a potential source of disorder.

By the mid-twentieth century, policing shifted from merely containing Black presence and regulating daily life to actively disrupting Black political power. The same logic that previously criminalized mobility and leisure was now employed against demands for equality and civil rights, thereby ushering in a new era characterized by proactive policing, political surveillance and, ultimately, the expansion of the carceral system in the late twentieth century. Civil rights activism, tenant organizing, labor activism, and school desegregation movements in Illinois all confronted police surveillance and interference. Key policing strategies included monitoring and infiltrating Black political organizations; arresting protestors and movement leaders; maintaining police presence at political meetings and churches; and targeting youth groups and community defense efforts.

Illinois policing treated Black civic mobilization not as democratic participation but as rebellion, with protection of White political authority as the underlying goal. Demands for equality were met with criminal suspicion. This period cemented a policing orientation where protecting “order” meant protecting racial hierarchy, an orientation still visible today.

Criminalization, Coercion, and Police Violence

Late-twentieth-century policing in Illinois continued this trajectory, with increasingly punitive and militarized enforcement aimed primarily at Black communities. The torture regime under Chicago Police Commander Jon Burge stands as the clearest example. Between 1972 and 1991, Burge and officers under his command tortured more than 100 Black men to coerce confessions, using electric shocks, suffocation, beatings, and mock executions.³²⁷

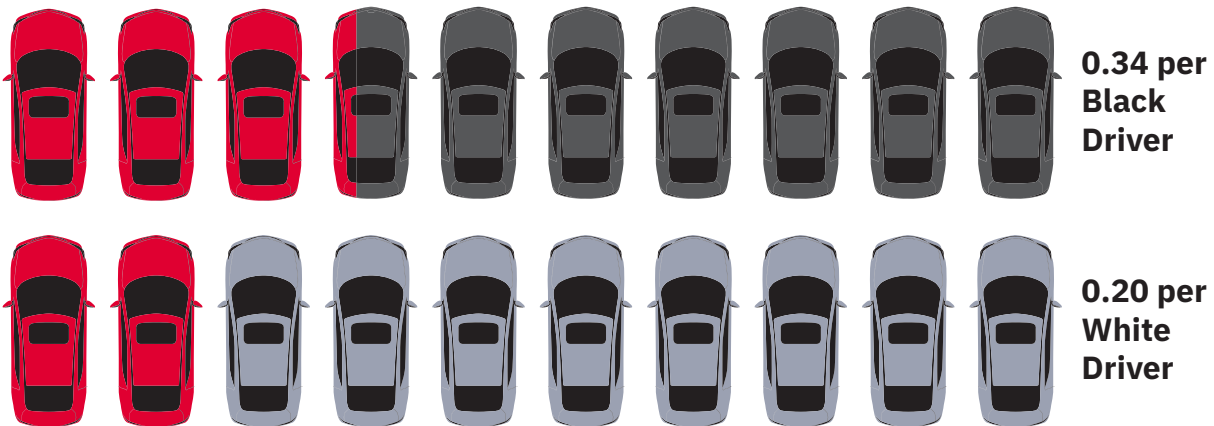
These practices produced wrongful convictions and decades-long incarcerations and removed wage-earners from families and neighborhoods. They also inflicted lasting physical and psychological trauma and created intergenerational harm through lost income, housing instability, and family fragmentation.

Chicago later acknowledged this torture through a landmark reparations ordinance, but accountability was limited and the broader systems that enabled such abuse remained intact. Importantly, the pattern of abusive policing did not end with Burge. Subsequent investigations into the Chicago Police Department uncovered the existence of a secretive facility known as Homan Square, located on the city’s West Side. Operating between at least 2004 and 2015, this off-the-books “black site” detained predominantly Black and Latine residents without access to lawyers or family, replicating extralegal detention practices rooted in earlier eras of racial policing.³²⁸

While torture cases reveal extreme abuse, everyday policing practices have inflicted broader, ongoing harm. In Illinois, traffic stops, pedestrian stops, and street-level enforcement disproportionately target Black residents. Statewide data show that Black drivers are stopped at far higher rates than White drivers and are searched more often, though contraband is found less often; this indicates disproportional targeting of Black motorists. In addition, Chicago’s stop-and-frisk patterns have overwhelmingly targeted Black pedestrians.³²⁹

These practices function as modern iterations of earlier mobility control systems. Where sheriffs once demanded freedom papers, police now demand drivers’ licenses, registration, or identification, often without legitimate suspicion. Camera networks, license-plate readers, predictive policing algorithms, and electronic monitoring bracelets continue the pattern: Black mobility is policed first, justified second. The cumulative effect is not only daily humiliation, fear, and intrusion, but it is structural

ILLINOIS TRAFFIC STOP RATE PER DRIVER, 2023



In 2023, there were 34 traffic stops for every 100 Black drivers in Illinois while there were 20 traffic stops for every 100 White drivers.

Source: Illinois Department of Transportation. Rate per driver derived from total number of stops divided by the number of drivers.

harm. Fines and fees drain wealth, while arrests and records limit employment and housing. Surveillance suppresses political engagement and constant police presence signals that neighborhoods are “zones of suspicion.”

Across generations, disproportionate policing in Illinois has separated families through incarceration and detention; criminalized poverty and survival; and extracted money through fines, fees, and supervision costs. It has also restricted Black residents’ mobility and neighborhood choice and undermined their educational access and employment pathways. And it has generated trauma and distrust that affect mental health, civic engagement, and safety.³³⁰

Black Illinoisans’ trust in law enforcement and courts has been systematically eroded by lived reality. Safety for many Black residents has meant not protection from crime, but protection from the state itself. This cumulative harm is material, psychological, and civic and it has produced conditions requiring repair, not reform alone.

Illinois has maintained a continuous system of policing and surveillance designed to manage, constrain, and punish Black life from Reconstruction to the present. The tools turned vagrancy warnings into traffic stops, slave catchers into data-driven patrols, Black Codes into “anti-loitering” and “public order” statutes, but the function remained constant: control over Black mobility, behavior, and community life. This legacy is not historical memory; it is a lived burden. It has shaped family trajectories, neighborhood stability, wealth accumulation, and political belonging across generations.

The Punitive Turn: Mandatory Minimums and Drug Enforcement

The 1980s and 1990s intensified these dynamics. State lawmakers adopted mandatory minimum sentences, “three-strikes” enhancements, and aggressive drug laws. Police flooded Black neighborhoods with drug enforcement operations, even as research showed equal or higher levels of drug use among White Illinoisans.³³¹ The result was predictable and devastating: Black residents were disproportionately arrested, charged, and subjected to mandatory prison terms that judges had no authority to mitigate. By the mid-1990s, Black men in Illinois were imprisoned at more than twelve times the rate of White men — one of the highest racial incarceration gaps in the nation. By the early 2000s, Black Illinoisans accounted for nearly 90 percent of people incarcerated for crack cocaine offenses, despite comparable usage rates across racial groups.³³² Mandatory sentencing laws intentionally removed judicial discretion, ensuring that the most punitive outcomes were concentrated in Black neighborhoods. Families lost wage-earners, caregivers, and community leaders for years, sometimes decades, over low-level drug offenses. Children grew up with parents behind bars, neighborhoods lost economic and social anchors and cycles of trauma, stigma, and poverty deepened.³³³

Judicial Discretion and Racialized Risk

Even when discretion remained, it worked against Black defendants. A 2017 US Sentencing Commission report found that Black male defendants received sentences nearly 20 percent longer than White defendants with comparable charges and criminal histories. Judges often justified these disparities by labeling Black defendants as “high-risk,” “hardened,” or “dangerous” — concepts rooted not in objective assessments, but in centuries-old racial ideology.³³⁴

Illinois-specific data confirm the same pattern. The Illinois Sentencing Policy Advisory Council found that between 2012 and 2016, 67 percent of Black defendants in felony drug cases were sentenced to prison versus 36 percent of White defendants with the same charges. For lower-level property offenses, Black defendants were incarcerated nearly twice as often as White defendants, even after accounting for prior criminal history.³³⁵

These numbers reflect not neutral decision-making, but a judicial culture shaped by a long legacy of racial criminalization, one that consistently punishes Black defendants more severely than White peers, regardless of circumstance.

Order maintenance policing, discretionary intervention, mandatory sentencing, and racially skewed judicial decision-making were not accidents. Together, they represent a coherent state project: the re-engineering of racial control for a post-

slavery, post–Jim Crow era. In Illinois, police and courts did not simply respond to crime; they produced criminality through heightened surveillance, discretionary enforcement, and sentencing policies that targeted Black people for harsher punishment. These choices entrenched generational harm, stripping wealth, destabilizing families, limiting opportunity, and embedding trauma in communities subjected to perpetual monitoring and punishment.

The Rise of Mass Incarceration in Illinois

By the late twentieth century, the cumulative effects of discriminatory policing and sentencing practices converged into the phenomenon now described as mass incarceration. Illinois did not simply mirror a national trend; it played an active role in expanding prison capacity, tightening sentencing laws, and disproportionately channeling Black residents into the state’s correctional system. The judiciary’s role in legitimizing harsher sentencing ensured that the policing disparities of earlier decades translated into unprecedented levels of incarceration. Between 1978 and 1998, Illinois’s prison population grew by more than 260 percent, outpacing the national average.³³⁶ Much of this growth was fueled by the War on Drugs and the proliferation of mandatory minimums, which disproportionately affected Black defendants. By 2000, Black Illinoisans made up more than 60 percent of the state’s prison population despite representing less than 15 percent of the overall population.³³⁷ In Illinois, racial disparities in incarceration rates were among the nation’s most extreme, with Human Rights Watch reporting that Black men were imprisoned at over fifteen times the rate of White men. Statewide estimates similarly show that Black people were incarcerated at roughly 7.5 to 7.9 times the rate of White people, demonstrating both the gender and population-level scope of the inequality.³³⁸

Drug legislation has played a crucial role in shaping these statistics. Prosecutions related to crack cocaine increased significantly during the 1980s and 1990s and, because enforcement primarily targeted Black neighborhoods, courts processed a disproportionately high number of Black defendants.³³⁹ Such selective enforcement and prosecution not only reinforced stereotypes about criminality but also concentrated incarceration within communities already facing marginalization. *The Vicious Circle*, a 2002 report by the Chicago Urban League, documents how felony convictions and reentry burdens disproportionately affected ZIP codes on Chicago’s South and West Sides, as well as urban centers such as East St. Louis, Rockford, and Peoria, creating environments where daily contact with the criminal justice system was commonplace.³⁴⁰

Similarly, the Urban Institute’s 2003 *Portrait of Prisoner Reentry in Illinois* found that in certain census tracts within these cities, “more than half of Black men 18 to 30 had been incarcerated at some point,” highlighting the extensive carceral

exposure experienced by these communities.³⁴¹ These alarming incarceration rates destabilized families, removed primary wage earners from households, and weakened local social structures. The repercussions were enduring, as criminal records hindered employment prospects, restricted access to housing, and disenfranchised thousands of Black residents of Illinois.

The growth of mass incarceration in Illinois was not merely an incidental outcome of increasing crime but rather a foreseeable consequence of policy decisions. Legislators expanded mandatory minimum sentences, adopted “truth-in-sentencing” policies requiring individuals to serve 85 percent of their sentences, and enacted habitual-offender statutes mandating life sentences for repeat offenders.³⁴² These

ILLINOIS PRISON INCARCERATION RATE PER 100K, 2022



Source: Vera Institute.

measures disproportionately targeted Black defendants, who were already more likely to be stopped, arrested, and prosecuted due to racially biased policing practices. Consequently, a system emerged that perpetuated racial disparities under the guise of impartial law enforcement. By the early twenty-first century, Illinois's incarceration crisis was undeniable. In 2011, the Illinois Department of Corrections reported operating at 143 percent of its designed capacity, with Black residents constituting the majority of those incarcerated.³⁴³ These conditions underscore the extent to which the state's criminal legal system, through policing, sentencing, and punitive legislation, has developed into a carceral framework that systematically criminalizes Black communities.

Prison Gerrymandering and the Distortion of Political Power in Illinois

One of the lesser known but deeply harmful consequences of mass incarceration in Illinois is how it distorts political representation, a process often called “prison gerrymandering.”³⁴⁴ As discussed earlier in this report, when people who are incarcerated are counted in the population of the prison's location rather than in their home communities, it changes how political districts are drawn. This practice has wide-reaching effects, especially for Black communities across the state. Illinois's prison population is disproportionately Black, while most prisons are located in rural, predominantly White areas. This means that thousands of incarcerated Black residents from Chicago, East St. Louis, Rockford, and other urban centers are being counted as residents of rural counties where they are imprisoned, even though they cannot vote, work, or participate in civic life there.³⁴⁵ In other words, their bodies are being used to increase the political power of those rural districts without any benefit to the incarcerated people or their home neighborhoods.

At the same time, this practice dilutes the voting power of the urban Black communities from which most incarcerated individuals come — the same communities that have been heavily policed, over-incarcerated, and systematically disinvested. With the removal of large numbers of people from the population count, these neighborhoods lose representation, resources, and political influence, reinforcing a cycle of marginalization.³⁴⁶ For example, in Illinois legislative mapping, a district with a large prison population can appear to have more residents than it truly does. Lawmakers from those areas then gain disproportionate representation in the legislature, even though much of their population cannot vote or engage politically. This effectively transfers political power away from majority-Black districts to rural White areas that host prisons. It turns incarceration into a political tool that benefits one group at the expense of another.

The impact on Black communities is long-term and structural. Political representation determines how public resources are distributed, from schools and health care funding to infrastructure and community development programs. When incarcerated Black residents are counted in distant, predominantly White towns instead of their home neighborhoods, those communities lose critical resources that could support violence prevention programs, housing stability, and reentry services. This practice compounds existing economic and social harm already shaped by over-policing, limited employment opportunities, and residential segregation. In short, prison gerrymandering transforms mass incarceration into a form of political disenfranchisement. It extends the harm of imprisonment beyond the walls of the prison and into the civic life of entire Black communities. As such, although Illinois passed legislation in 2021 to end prison gerrymandering by counting incarcerated people at their last known address starting with the 2030 redistricting cycle, the effects of decades of distorted representation are still being felt today in underfunded neighborhoods, limited political voice, and the continuing racial inequities that shape life in Illinois.³⁴⁷

Reform Efforts and the Chicago Consent Decree

By the late 2010s, decades of police violence, civil rights litigation, community demands, and documented racial disparities had forced Illinois to confront systemic failures in its policing institutions. Rather than emerging voluntarily from within law enforcement, this reform era was driven by public pressure, legal findings, and federal scrutiny. Chicago, the state's largest and most heavily policed city, became the focal point of reform not because it solved the problem, but because the scale of the harm made inaction untenable. A watershed moment came in 2017, when the US Department of Justice (DOJ) issued a report concluding that the Chicago Police Department (CPD) engaged in a “pattern or practice” of excessive force, unconstitutional stops, and discriminatory policing.³⁴⁸ The report affirmed long-standing community claims: Excessive force was routine, accountability systems were broken, and Black and Latine residents bore the brunt of police misconduct. This federal finding laid the legal foundation for intervention, creating the conditions for a consent decree, a court-enforced agreement requiring structural reform and ongoing oversight.

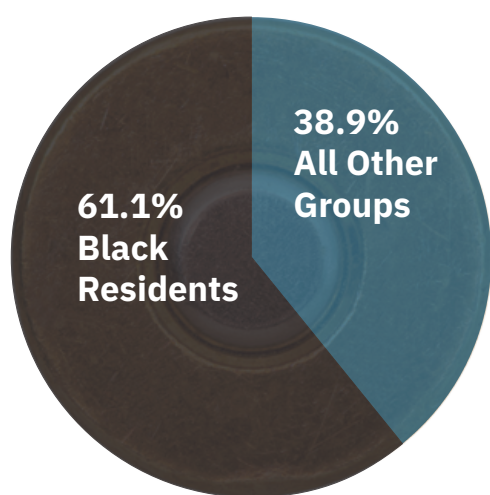
Chicago's 2019 consent decree was unique among national police reform agreements. While many decrees are negotiated solely between government entities, this one included the participation and input of directly impacted residents and civil rights organizations, including the NAACP Westside Branch and community-based coalitions.³⁴⁹ Their involvement reflected years of organizing that insisted police reform could not occur behind closed doors. Community voices demanded a seat at the table,

shifting reform from a top-down bureaucratic exercise to a partially community-guided accountability process.

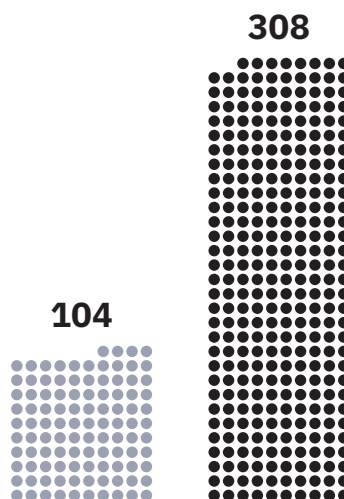
The decree committed the city to hundreds of changes, including improved training on the use of force, de-escalation, and crisis intervention. It mandated stronger supervision and disciplinary systems, transparency mechanisms, and compliance audits. And it contained requirements for community engagement and commitments to reduce discriminatory practices and rebuild public trust.

In theory, the consent decree represented a formal acknowledgement that policing in Chicago required fundamental restructuring to meet constitutional and ethical standards. Progress under the decree, however, has been slow and uneven. Court-appointed monitors have repeatedly documented missed timelines, partial compliance, and resistance at various levels of CPD. Despite increased oversight, systemic issues persist: Patterns of excessive force, racialized stops, and strained community relations remain visible. Chicago now maintains one of the most extensive civilian oversight frameworks in the country, including multiple layers of board-level

ILLINOIS POLICE USE OF LETHAL FORCE, 2014 - 2021



Per the 2020 census, the Black population in Illinois is estimated to be 14%, yet Black residents account for over 60% of the cases of police use of lethal force in Illinois.



There were 308 counts of lethal use of force against Black people in Illinois and 104 against White people between 2014 and 2021.

Source: University of Illinois Cline Center. Note, cases without race identification are omitted.

review, illustrating both sustained public demand for accountability and the difficulty of transforming entrenched police culture through procedural reforms alone.³⁵⁰ The presence of so many oversight bodies does not indicate strength, but institutional failure. Where a single, trusted accountability system might suffice in a functioning public safety ecosystem, Chicago has required multiple layers of supervision to force compliance, a sign that trust between policing institutions and Black communities has been deeply eroded.

While the consent decree represents a landmark legal mechanism for monitoring CPD and requires measurable benchmarks for progress, its approach remains rooted in reform rather than structural transformation. Monitoring reports consistently reflect this tension: incremental change on paper versus slow, contested, and incomplete implementation in practice. As a result, the consent decree stands as both a testament to community power forcing the state to acknowledge and respond to systemic harm and as a reminder of the limitations of reform frameworks when more profound structural inequities remain unaddressed. Ultimately, the consent decree era underscores a central truth: oversight is necessary, but not sufficient. The persistence of racialized harm under state supervision demonstrates that Illinois's obligation extends beyond reforming institutions. The state must repair the communities that policing has harmed and recognize that justice requires more than compliance—it requires transformation and redress.

The SAFE-T Act and Racialized Harm in Illinois

The Safety, Accountability, Fairness, and Equity-Today (SAFE-T) Act represents one of the most significant criminal justice reforms in Illinois history. Passed in 2021 and fully implemented by 2023, the act restructured pretrial processes, strengthened police accountability measures, and expanded transparency requirements across law-enforcement agencies. Although accelerated by national demands for justice following the murder of George Floyd, the SAFE-T Act emerged from decades of advocacy by community coalitions, civil rights organizations, and the Illinois Legislative Black Caucus. Its core reforms directly confront two long-standing mechanisms of racialized harm in the state: wealth-based detention and weak, opaque police oversight systems that historically failed to protect Black communities.³⁵¹

Ending Wealth-Based Detention: Pretrial Reform as Harm Reduction

For generations, Illinois relied on money bail, allowing wealth — not public safety — to determine pretrial freedom. Research shows that cash bail functions as a “poverty penalty,” contributing to job loss, housing instability, family separation, and coercive

plea bargaining.³⁵² Because Black Illinoisans have been disproportionately subjected to arrest and charging patterns, they experienced these harms most acutely. The SAFE-T Act eliminated cash bail and replaced it with an individualized, risk-based pretrial system. Judges must now determine whether detention is necessary based on credible evidence of a threat or a willful flight risk, not on financial capacity. When the Illinois Supreme Court upheld this framework in July 2023 (*Rowe v. Raoul*), Illinois became the first state to abolish money bail entirely.³⁵³ This reform interrupts a historical pathway by which racially biased policing translated into disproportionate pretrial incarceration for Black residents.

Accountability and Transparency

The SAFE-T Act also responds to documented failures in police accountability systems. The US Department of Justice's 2017 investigation into the Chicago Police Department found "unconstitutional patterns of force," inadequate training, and "deficient accountability systems."³⁵⁴ In response, the SAFE-T Act mandated the statewide adoption of body-worn cameras, clarified use-of-force standards, created duties to intervene and render medical aid, expanded reporting obligations (including for deaths in custody), and strengthened the Illinois Law Enforcement Training and Standards Board's authority to certify and decertify officers. By creating statewide accountability standards, the Act addressed long-standing gaps that allowed misconduct to persist and, in some cases, enabled officers with substantiated abuse histories to move between departments without consequence.

Racially Disparate Stops

The SAFE-T Act was adopted in the context of persistent racial disparities in everyday policing. Illinois's Traffic and Pedestrian Stop Study shows that Black drivers are stopped at roughly 1.7 times the rate of White drivers statewide and in Chicago at 3.75 times the rate of White drivers.³⁵⁵ These disparities funnel Black residents into the legal system at higher rates, increasing their exposure to arrest, detention, and downstream sentencing consequences. By eliminating cash bail and improving transparency in police practices, the SAFE-T Act seeks to disrupt this entry-point pipeline and shed light on enforcement patterns that disproportionately burden Black communities.

The SAFE-T Act does not repair centuries of racialized policing or reverse the economic and social harms caused by disproportionate surveillance. It cannot alone restore the stability lost to pretrial detention, rebuild wealth stripped through fines and fees, or undo generations of mistrust. However, the act represents a pivotal policy shift from a system that routinely punished poverty and shielded misconduct to one that prioritizes fairness, transparency, and judicial accountability. Early data show no

statewide crime spike following implementation, contradicting claims that eliminating bail would compromise public safety.³⁵⁶ At the same time, racial disparities in police stops persist, underscoring the need for complementary reforms in enforcement, prosecution, and judicial decision-making. In this sense, the SAFE-T Act is both remedial, removing harmful practices, and diagnostic, revealing the structural drivers of remaining inequity. It reflects acknowledgement at the statewide level that racialized harm in Illinois's criminal legal system is not incidental but systemic and requires an equally systemic legislative response.

Conclusion

For more than two centuries, Illinois's criminal justice system has historically marginalized Black individuals and inflicted enduring harm. From the era of the Black Codes, which restricted the rights of free Black citizens, to contemporary policing practices, prosecutorial procedures, and sentencing laws, the system has frequently operated in ways that penalize and control Black residents rather than safeguard them. These adverse effects are evident in various interconnected ways. Black communities have suffered financial instability due to burdensome fines, court fees, and other costly enforcement measures. The system has fractured families by removing parents, partners, and income-earners through arrests and incarceration. And many individuals involved in the criminal justice system encounter significant barriers to securing housing, employment, and civic participation, even after completing their sentences.

Over time, these harms accumulate. The effects extend beyond one person or one generation; they spread through families and neighborhoods, creating long-term struggles for stability, opportunity, and well-being. This ongoing pattern demonstrates that Black people in Illinois continue to bear the weight of an unjust system. The criminal legal system has caused harm not only in the past but also continues to play a significant role in maintaining racial inequality today. Its effects go beyond courtrooms and prison walls, impacting everyday life. It influences whether families can stay together, whether communities can prosper, and whether people have equal access to basic rights and opportunities.

The consequences are visible in the disproportionate incarceration of Black Illinoisans, the economic disenfranchisement created by fines, fees, and imprisonment, and the political marginalization that results from systematic exclusion. Illinois's laws and institutions reveal a continuum of racialized legal control that has consistently undermined the safety, dignity, and freedom of Black residents. Viewed within their historical context, present disparities reflect a system designed not to protect but to regulate Black life, producing harms that extend across families, communities, and generations of Black residents.

“WE CHARGE GENOCIDE”: BLACK CRITIQUES OF RACIST POLICING IN CHICAGO

Andy Clarno

In September 2014, a grassroots coalition led by young Black people in Chicago submitted a report to the United Nations documenting the Chicago Police Department’s (CPD) pervasive violations of the UN Convention Against Torture through harassment, abuse, sexual assault, mass arrests, and the use of excessive and deadly force.³⁵⁷ To remind world leaders of the long history of deadly racist policing in the United States, the group reclaimed the name of a 1951 report on police violence against Black Americans: *We Charge Genocide*. Grounded in statistical analysis as well as stories of police encounters shared by young people in Chicago, the *We Charge Genocide* (WCG) report provided powerful evidence of pervasive racist and sexist violence by the CPD.

One young person shared testimony about the police murder of a young Black man named Dominique Franklin, better known as Damo:

He was tased about three months ago. And then after a couple days in the hospital he passed away. He was killed for stealing a bottle of liquor from a Walgreens or something. [...]. And then just a couple days ago [...] a couple of my friends were arrested by police. And in the process some of the cops pulled their guns on us. And I thought if one of us was killed right there, the same process would just keep happening. And I really got the sense of like, disempowerment. The same sense I got when I saw Damo in the hospital bed, or saw him in the casket. And I knew there was nothing we could do.³⁵⁸

But Damo’s friends decided that they could do something. His murder sparked the formation of WCG. As the WCG report documented, from 2009 to 2011, 92 percent of CPD taser uses involved Black or Latine targets. And in the first six months of 2014, Chicago police shot twenty-seven people, twenty-three of whom were Black. In their testimony before the UN, WCG organizers explained, “We are in a perpetual state of crisis that cannot be fixed from within the system. We need a rethinking of how safety can be achieved. We need power to be shifted from y’all’s police to our people.”³⁵⁹

Black residents of Illinois have long resisted racist state violence by local, state, and federal law enforcement agencies, including their role enforcing slavery, Black Codes, lynching, segregation, and Sundown Towns.³⁶⁰ In 1917, Ida B. Wells collected

testimony from the survivors of that year's East St. Louis riot, when mobs of White workers supported by police attacked and killed dozens of Black men. "Horrible stories were given," she wrote, "the saddest part of them all being, that in every instance, as the mob set upon men coming from their work [...] the soldiers or the police held up the Black men, searched them and even took their pocket knives, then left them at the mercy of the mob."³⁶¹

For more than one hundred years, the CPD has maintained a consistent pattern of engagement with Black residents that historian Simon Balto describes as being "overpatrolled and underprotected."³⁶² During the Great Migration, Chicago police worked with the Mafia to concentrate crime in Black neighborhoods and disrupt spaces of interracial leisure.³⁶³ The systemic anti-Blackness of the CPD became undeniable after the 1919 race riots, when Chicago police refused to arrest the White man who killed 17-year-old Eugene Williams at the 29th Street Beach, failed to protect Black neighborhoods from White mobs, and arrested twice as many Black people as White people even though twice as many Black people were injured and killed.³⁶⁴

Fifty years later, racist state violence became even more explicit when Black Chicagoans rebelled after the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. During the West Side rebellion, Mayor Richard J. Daley ordered the Chicago police to shoot to kill anyone suspected of starting fires and shoot to maim anyone suspected of looting.³⁶⁵ The Illinois chapter of the Black Panther Party became a primary target of police repression in the late 1960s and early 1970s because they mobilized Black residents through free breakfast programs, health clinics, and educational initiatives; built a revolutionary Rainbow Coalition with Puerto Rican and White youth; deepened ties with street organizations such as the Blackstone Rangers in the hope of politicizing marginalized Black youth; and embraced an internationalist critique of imperialism and racial capitalism.³⁶⁶ This repression culminated in a conspiracy between the FBI, the CPD, and the Cook County state's attorney to assassinate Fred Hampton, deputy chairman of the Illinois chapter.

Since the 1980s, Chicago's embrace of corporate-friendly neoliberal policies that combine subsidies for elites with austerity for the poor has generated deep crises for Black and Brown working class and diasporic communities. Marked by shifts from unionized industrial employment to contingent service work, the systematic elimination of public housing, and deep cuts to public education, these crises are consistently met with mobilizations demanding justice.³⁶⁷ Like other neoliberal cities, Chicago invests heavily in policing to contain these crises and suppress struggles for

social justice. With an annual budget of roughly \$2 billion, 40 percent of Chicago's overall budget, the CPD deploys thirteen thousand officers along with the latest surveillance technology, and works closely with state and federal agencies, private companies, and non-profit organizations to protect the powerful by policing the racialized poor.³⁶⁸

The War on Crime, better known in Chicago as the War on Gangs, is the primary front in the effort to criminalize and contain the Black poor who live in neighborhoods marked by decades of disinvestment and who confront the probability of lifelong unemployment, economic insecurity, and rampant dehumanization. In Chicago, the War on Gangs provides the police with leeway to deploy a wide range of racially discriminatory and violent tactics, including stop-and-frisk, electronic surveillance, beatings, false confessions, torture, and murder.

The WCG report and other movement-led research has demonstrated time and time again that Black communities in Chicago face disproportionate stops, arrests, surveillance, and violence from the Chicago police. Responding to pressure from movement organizers, for instance, Chicago's Inspector General revealed that 70 percent of the 134,000 people in the CPD gang database are Black.³⁶⁹ The ACLU reported that, during the summer of 2014, Chicago police stopped, frisked, and questioned more than 250,000 people; 72 percent of the people they stopped were Black.³⁷⁰ After CPD officers murdered Rekia Boyd in 2012 and Laquan McDonald in 2014, movements demanding justice led to a US Department of Justice investigation that documented the unconstitutional use of excessive force by CPD. The report includes a revealing note about everyday racialized dehumanization by Chicago police. Black youth reported that police regularly call them "n____," "monkey," "animal," "savage," and "piece of shit." Police confirmed that they had personally and routinely heard other officers and supervisors use these terms and other dehumanizing language.³⁷¹

Struggles against racist policing in Chicago today are grounded in the long and powerful history of the Black freedom movement. From the 1970s through the 1990s, Chicago organizers mobilized to hold the FBI and the state's attorney responsible for the murder of Fred Hampton, to end the CPD's systematic torture of Black residents, and to expose the unconstitutional surveillance of civil rights organizations, labor unions, and other social justice movements. Organizers achieved major victories in 2003, when Governor George Ryan declared a statewide moratorium on the death penalty, and in 2015, when the Chicago City Council passed the Chicago Torture Justice Memorial and Reparations Ordinances. Building on these victories,

the movement demanding #JusticeForLaquan brought about the firing of the CPD superintendent, the electoral defeat of the state's attorney, the conviction of the officer who killed Laquan, and the end of Rahm Emanuel's reign as an elitist, tough-on-crime Democratic mayor who consistently prioritized the interests of real estate capitalists and wealthy residents over Chicago's multiracial working class.

In the 2010s, a network of Black feminist abolitionist movements expanded across Chicago, grounded in struggles against the criminalization, torture, and murder of Black youth. Working in coalition with one another and with immigrant justice movements, groups like WCG, Black Youth Project 100, Assata's Daughters, Black Lives Matter Chicago, Ujimaa Medics, and the #LetUsBreathe Collective built powerful and often successful campaigns to stop the construction of a new police academy, abolish gang databases, end contracts with high-tech surveillance companies, keep police out of public schools, remove police from mental health crisis response teams, and defund the CPD. At the same time, the Chicago Alliance Against Racist and Political Repression carried forward the decades-long struggle for community control of the police, ultimately achieving the 2021 creation of a Community Commission for Public Safety and Accountability.

A core feature of abolitionist struggles is the demand for reparations for the harms caused by policing. This includes individual restitution for people directly impacted as well as broader efforts to redirect investments from police and carceral systems to educational, economic, infrastructural, and transformative justice projects in the communities most harmed by racist policing. Black mothers whose children have been murdered or tortured by Chicago police have long played a central role in struggles against police violence. In May 2024, the United Nations Special Rapporteur on Racial Discrimination responded to a petition filed by the Mamas Activating Movements for Abolition and Solidarity (MAMAS) collective by calling for action to remedy the long history of racialized police violence in Chicago.³⁷²

In the words of We Charge Genocide organizers Asha Rosa, Monica Trinidad, and Page May, "Our struggle for justice demands much more than any single indictment. It cannot be litigated, legislated, or brought into existence. And there is no amount of money that could make up for the lives and human dignity lost to police and state violence against our communities. Instead, if we are to truly honor the magnitude of the injustice, we must commit ourselves to nothing less than the complete transformation of society."³⁷³

PUBLIC HOUSING DISCRIMINATION IN ILLINOIS

D. Bradford Hunt

Illinois municipalities have a long history of using the federal public housing program to discriminate against Black Americans. Racism at the federal and local levels — especially in Illinois — meant that the post–World War II public housing program was used to reinforce racial residential segregation rather than to promote integration. Indeed, seminal lawsuits filed in Illinois in the 1960s and 1970s proved intentional discrimination in Chicago’s public housing program by White elected officials. Yet the long history of these cases shows the limitations of using courts to redress and compensate for past discriminatory wrongs.

The US public housing program emerged as a federal-local partnership during the New Deal, initially designed with good intentions to improve housing conditions of low-income citizens. But in the early postwar years, real estate interests and White elected officials, responding to their White constituents, hijacked the program throughout the country and used it to reinforce residential segregation. These actors subscribed to the racist and pervasive idea that racial discrimination was essential for preserving real estate values.³⁷⁴ Put simply, the vast majority of White people in the past did not want to live in neighborhoods with significant numbers of Black neighbors, regardless of class — an attitude that remains highly prevalent today.³⁷⁵

Nowhere was this reality more stark than in Chicago’s public housing program. The Chicago Housing Authority’s (CHA) early leadership initially sought to locate public housing projects across the city and racially integrate their residents. But after World War II, the CHA’s non-discrimination policies were criticized by Whites, and by 1953, White elected officials had ousted progressives in the CHA’s leadership. A more compliant CHA board imposed discriminatory tenant-selection policies and cooperated with the City Council on selecting sites for future public housing in the 1950s and 1960s firmly within the city’s existing Black neighborhoods.³⁷⁶

This obvious racial discrimination in site selection and tenant selection was confirmed in court cases, namely the groundbreaking lawsuit *Gautreaux v. Chicago Housing Authority*, filed in 1966 and named after Dorothy Gautreaux, a Black housing applicant. A federal judge found the CHA guilty of racial discrimination in selecting sites for public housing projects only in Black neighborhoods and in selecting tenants to perpetuate segregation. The judge ordered the CHA to take “remedial action” to undo these wrongs but did not specify what actions were required. Similarly, in a

1974 companion case, *Hills v. Gautreaux*, the US Supreme Court also found the US Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) complicit in the CHA's racial discrimination. The Supreme Court allowed for a "metropolitan-wide" remedy for past wrongs that included building new public housing in the suburbs. But suburban municipalities simply refused to participate in public housing construction, and the Nixon administration and Congress soured on the program. Instead, Congress pivoted in 1974 to housing vouchers, a program that subsidized low-income families to rent housing in the private market.³⁷⁷

Initially, housing vouchers offered a path to redress discrimination. In Illinois, vouchers were at the heart of a major experiment in residential integration, known as the Gautreaux Assisted Housing Program. Launched in 1976 under federal court supervision as a remedy for past discrimination, the program sought to use housing vouchers to relocate Chicago public housing residents to suburban areas. Families received counseling and home referral services to "areas of opportunity" in the suburbs. Eventually, more than seven thousand Black families moved, with roughly half moving to White-majority suburbs. Scholarly research over decades showed substantial gains for those who moved to mostly White communities, especially among children.³⁷⁸

The Gautreaux Assisted Housing Program inspired a similar federal experiment in Baltimore, Boston, New York, Los Angeles, and Chicago. The Moving to Opportunity (MTO) program, enacted by Congress in 1992 and managed by HUD, moved 4,600 families, with researchers again finding generally improved social conditions. But White residents and elected officials, especially in Baltimore, quickly soured on using housing vouchers to intentionally racially integrate, and Congress ended MTO in 1998. Similarly, the Gautreaux demonstration program was not extended in Chicago in 1998.³⁷⁹

Meanwhile, existing public housing developments built between 1938 and 1970 across Illinois and across the country increasingly fell into disrepair by the 1980s and 1990s. In a formula that flew in the face of the realities of property management, the federal government expected local housing authorities like the CHA to maintain properties using income from tenant rents. Yet the federal government also limited rent charges to 25 percent of a tenant's income (later rising to 30 percent in 1982). These policies created direct incentives for families with rising incomes to move out and for very poor families to stay. Declining rental income inevitably followed, and housing authorities had little choice but to defer maintenance. Congress belatedly recognized the problem and appropriated funds for public housing maintenance

beginning in 1975, but funding never matched need, and public housing entered a downward spiral, especially in Chicago.³⁸⁰

Without an adequate funding formula from Congress, housing authorities across Illinois effectively operated as slumlords by the 1990s and early 2000s. A lengthy list of public housing projects built in the New Deal and the 1950s, mostly occupied by African Americans, became notorious for neglected and unsafe housing conditions, including the John Hay Homes in Springfield, the Taft Homes in Peoria, and the Elmwood and McBride Homes in Cairo.³⁸¹ In Chicago, the federal government threw in the towel and supported the wholesale demolition of public housing as the only “viable” response to neglect and decay. Most high-rise buildings for families were eventually torn down per the CHA’s 2000 Plan for Transformation, with the long-term goal of building “mixed-income” housing in its place. But while demolition proceeded swiftly, the new mixed-income housing has been far slower in coming.³⁸²

Beyond the federal public housing program, resistance to affordable housing in general remains stiff in Illinois. In 2003, the state passed a law requiring municipalities with less than 10 percent of their housing stock affordable to families with median incomes to produce a plan to address the shortage. By 2020, only fifteen of forty-six communities affected had even submitted a plan, let alone reached the 10 percent requirement. Reporting makes it clear that resistance to requirements occurs more often along racial lines than class lines.³⁸³

The federal public housing program never reached its goal of becoming a non-discriminatory provider of good housing for low-income families. Instead, racism infected the program’s implementation, management, and political support, fatally undermining its sustainability. Findings of obvious discrimination could not produce relief, as courts were too weak to enforce substantial remedies against strong resistance from communities and ambivalence from the federal government. This sad history suggests the need for stronger state intervention to right the wrongs of the past and ensure that all Americans — and especially African Americans, who faced the worst discrimination — have the human right to decent, safe, and affordable homes.

HOUSING

In Illinois, housing has long served as a mechanism of racialized control designed not simply to exclude Black communities, but to contain and exploit them strategically. From the early twentieth century through the present day, a convergence of federal, state, and local policies, working hand in hand with private actors, systematically deprived Black residents of the benefits of homeownership while concentrating harm in their neighborhoods. This was not a matter of private bias alone, but a state-sanctioned architecture of segregation, cemented through practices like redlining, racially restrictive covenants, exclusionary zoning, displacement due to urban renewal, increased exposure to environmental hazards, and predatory lending.

These tools were deployed as part of a coordinated system of dispossession that locked Black Illinoisans out of wealth-building opportunities and confined them to environments stripped of investment and protections. Unlike their White counterparts, who built wealth, stability, and upward mobility through federally backed mortgages and suburban expansion, Black residents encountered housing obstacles at every juncture — obstacles reinforced by law, policy, and policing.

The cumulative effect of this systemic dispossession is that the present geography of Illinois is marked by racially divided urban, suburban, and rural areas, in a direct reflection of decades of government-backed segregation and exclusion. These patterns were deliberately constructed through policies and practices that dictated where Black people could live, limited their housing choices, confined them to disinvested areas and extracted resources from Black communities. Simultaneously, policies and practices enabled White residents to accumulate wealth in growing, well-resourced communities. As a result, the consequences that persist today are both tangible and generational: Economic insecurity, housing instability, underfunded schools, environmental health risks, and restricted access to public services are overwhelmingly concentrated in Black neighborhoods. These outcomes are not the product of market forces or race-neutral planning decisions; they stem from a sustained effort to stratify access to land, opportunity, and safety along racial lines.

This legacy of exclusion continues to shape daily life for Black residents in Illinois. Today, policies such as zoning that blocks affordable housing, property tax systems that consistently underfund predominantly Black schools, and discriminatory code enforcement, where Black homeowners are more likely to be fined or cited for minor property issues than their White counterparts, reinforce these inequalities. As a result,

Black residents face a burdensome and destabilizing path to homeownership, often encountering punitive oversight instead of support. Routine upkeep, like lawn care, small exterior repairs, or occupancy requirements become grounds for heightened surveillance and penalties, making it harder for Black homeowners to maintain stability, build wealth, and pass down their homes to future generations.

These practices work alongside gentrification, which displaces long-standing Black residents, breaks apart community networks, and erases cultural and historical presence under the guise of “revitalization.” The harm is not only economic; it also produces ongoing feelings of displacement, insecurity, and erasure. In this way, housing in Illinois has not simply mirrored broader inequalities. It has actively created, reinforced, and deepened them over generations.

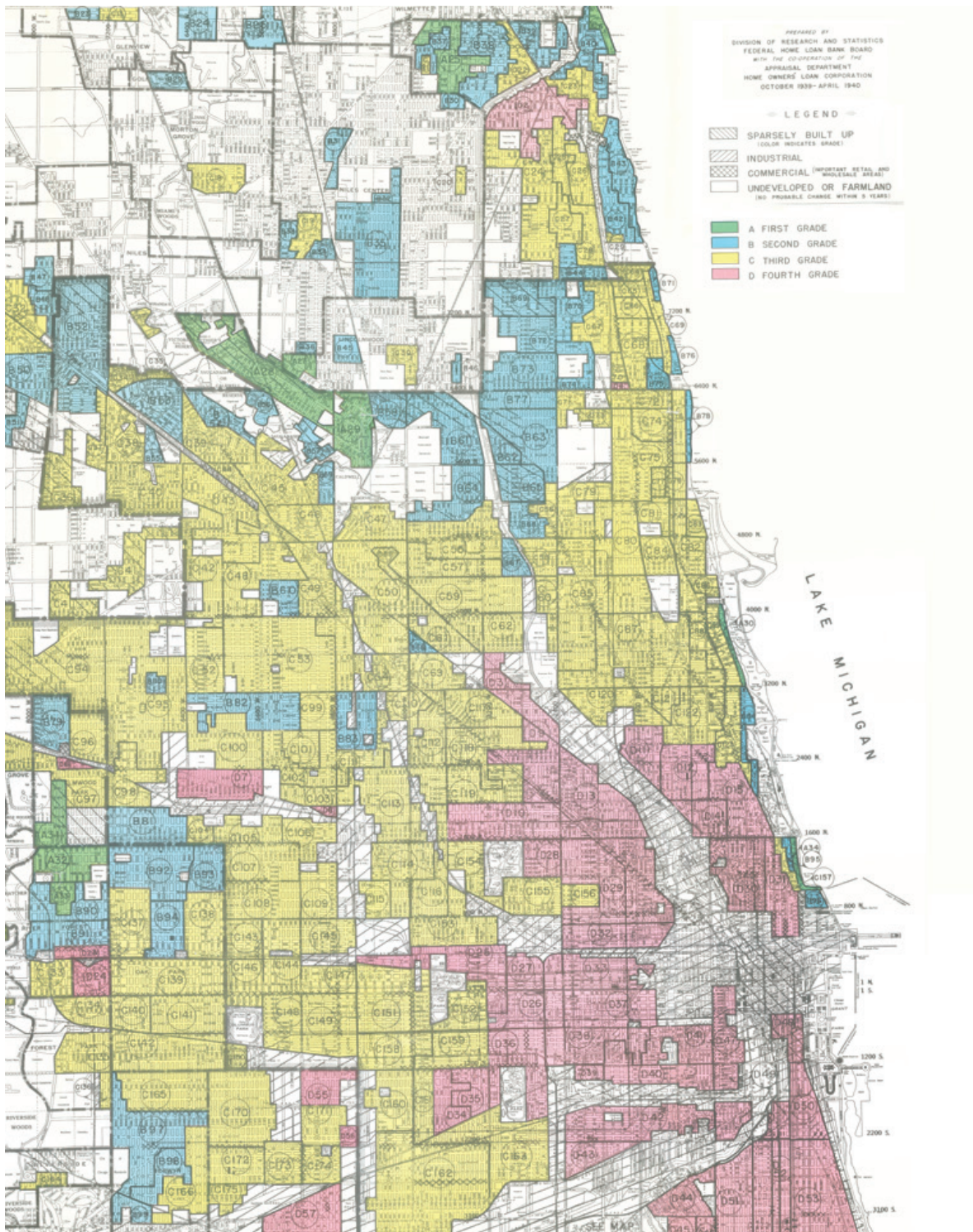
Redlining and the Federal Endorsement of Inequality

Beginning in the 1930s, the federal government played a central role in codifying residential segregation through housing programs that systematically excluded Black communities from access to wealth-building through homeownership. The Home Owners’ Loan Corporation (HOLC) and the newly established Federal Housing Administration (FHA) drew “residential security maps” that assigned risk grades to neighborhoods nationwide.³⁸⁴ These maps — commonly referred to as redlining maps — classified areas with Black residents as “hazardous,” regardless of the income levels, property conditions, or other economic indicators in those areas. Entire neighborhoods were marked in red, signaling to banks and insurers that they should not lend or invest there.³⁸⁵ These ratings shaped decades of federal and private lending decisions, directing capital into White communities while locking Black residents out of the mainstream housing market.

In Illinois, redlining had devastating and far-reaching consequences. Across the state, Black neighborhoods were routinely excluded from mortgage insurance, refinancing, and home improvement programs. In Chicago, the 1940 HOLC map labeled large portions of the South and West Sides as high-risk zones, often explicitly citing the “infiltration of Negroes” as justification.³⁸⁶ Similar patterns emerged in cities like Peoria, Rockford, Springfield, and East St. Louis.

Meanwhile, the FHA backed loans for new developments that explicitly excluded Black families through racially restrictive covenants. Unable to access traditional mortgage financing, many Black families in redlined areas were forced into predatory and exploitative home purchase arrangements through contract sales, especially in areas like Chicago’s West and South Sides and in other cities like East St. Louis.³⁸⁷

CHICAGO, ILLINOIS REDLINING MAP, 1939



Source: Robert K. Nelson, LaDale Winling, Richard Marciano, Nathan Connolly, et al. "Mapping Inequality." *American Panorama*, ed. Robert K. Nelson and Edward L. Ayers. See <https://dsl.richmond.edu/panorama/redlining/map>

Under these exploitative arrangements, Black families paid inflated prices in monthly installments without gaining legal ownership until the contract was fully paid, often over many years. A single missed or late payment or other violations of the terms could lead to immediate eviction, with no legal protections or the benefit of any accrued equity.³⁸⁸ As detailed by historian Beryl Satter in *Family Properties*, this system allowed White speculators to extract wealth from Black buyers while shielding themselves from legal accountability.³⁸⁹ A recent report by the Nathalie Voorhees Center and Samuel DuBois Cook Center estimated that the amount of wealth extracted from Chicago's Black communities by predatory lending in the decade between 1950 and 1960 alone was between \$3.2 billion and \$4 billion.³⁹⁰ Rather than offering a pathway to stability, housing became an area of financial exploitation and systemic exclusion for Black Illinoisans.

Scholars estimate that from 1950 to 1970, between 75 and 85 percent of Black residents' home purchases in Chicago took place through contract sales.³⁹¹ In North Lawndale, approximately three thousand buildings were sold during the postwar decades using contracts rather than standard mortgages.³⁹² As noted, this predatory lending model left buyers vulnerable to inflated prices, harsh terms, and the constant threat of eviction without realizing any financial gain from homeownership. The effects of this are visible today in Black communities throughout Illinois. In East St. Louis, for example, contract sales were common due to systemic barriers to credit access and fair housing. According to 2020 US Census data, nearly 95 percent of East St. Louis residents are Black, yet only 54 percent of the city's homes are owner-occupied, well below the state's average of 68.5 percent.³⁹³

The damage inflicted by redlining extended beyond individual homebuyers. A 2018 report by the National Community Reinvestment Coalition (NCRC) indicated that more than 80 percent of neighborhoods redlined in the 1930s remain low- to moderate-income areas, where the majority of residents continue to be people of color.³⁹⁴ This extensive disinvestment resulted in a decline in the quality of housing stock within Black neighborhoods, consequently causing decreases in property values. Financial institutions, insurers, and developers withdrew their involvement from these areas, while public services failed to address even fundamental infrastructure needs. Conversely, White communities benefited from stable financing, increasing property values, and access to wealth that could be transferred across generations.

As Richard Rothstein makes clear in *The Color of Law*, segregation was neither accidental nor a natural occurrence; it was intentionally established through government policies at all levels.³⁹⁵ In Illinois, this racially stratified landscape persists in determining where opportunities are available and who can access them, entrenching racial segregation as an economically supported federal system.

Racial Covenants and Blockbusting in Illinois

While redlining policies cemented racial segregation throughout the nation, the persistence of segregation in Illinois can also be directly linked to racially restrictive covenants, which are private legal tools that formalized racial exclusion in largely White communities. These covenant clauses, embedded in property deeds or subdivision agreements, explicitly banned the sale, lease, or occupation of homes by Black residents and other people of color.³⁹⁶

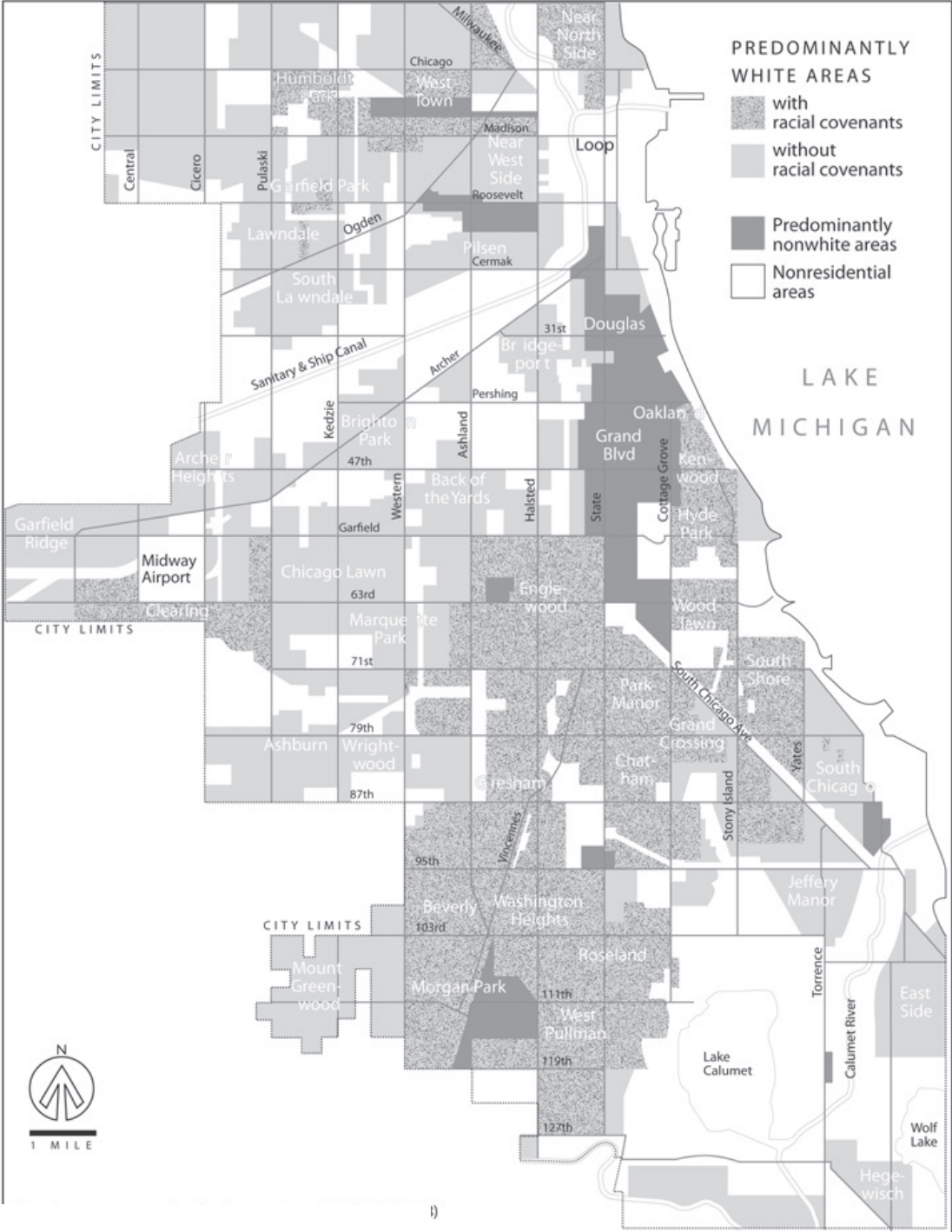
While redlining used institutional methods to prevent loans in predominantly Black neighborhoods, racially restrictive covenants used private contracts to control who could live on specific blocks, streets, or neighborhoods. Their use skyrocketed from the 1920s to the 1950s, during Illinois's suburban expansion in areas like Cook County, Lake County, Madison County, St. Clair County, and Champaign-Urbana.³⁹⁷ Developers, homeowners' associations, and real estate agents across Illinois employed these covenants to formalize racial exclusion and protect White property values. In effect, these covenants blocked Black people from the social mobility and wealth-building opportunities associated with suburban homeownership, preventing them from accessing communities with quality schools, public infrastructure, and political influence.

Although the US Supreme Court's 1948 *Shelley v. Kraemer* decision ruled that racially restrictive covenants could no longer be enforced in court, it did not prohibit the continued use or recording of such language.³⁹⁸ As a result, explicit language of racial exclusion, such as "no person of Negro blood or descent shall occupy any part of said premises," remained in thousands of property deeds across Illinois. In many counties, including Cook, Champaign, and St. Clair, officials have publicly acknowledged that these clauses still appear in official land records.³⁹⁹ While unenforceable today, their presence is far from benign. They serve as enduring legal artifacts of racial subordination, bearing witness to how public and private institutions in Illinois worked in tandem to codify segregation. Their continued visibility in legal documents symbolizes the failure of local and state authorities to reckon fully with the legacies of structural racism in property law, providing evidence of systematic exclusion that has shaped generations of racial inequity in homeownership, neighborhood investment, and intergenerational wealth.

The effects of these covenants were felt immediately and continued over time. Black residents denied access to restricted neighborhoods by racial covenants were corralled by redlining into overcrowded, underfunded communities that lacked adequate public services, quality education, or reliable infrastructure. Meanwhile, White residents in covenant-protected neighborhoods with favorable HOLC designations built wealth through property, enjoyed housing stability, and gained political influence.

RACIALLY RESTRICTIVE COVENANTS ON CHICAGO'S SOUTH SIDE, 1947

Racial Restrictive Covenants on Chicago's South Side in 1947



© 2004 The Newberry Library

Source: Newberry Library Digital Collection. Map created by Newberry based on a map compiled for Tovey v. Levy, 401 Ill. 393 (1948). Copyright 2004.

This sharp contrast established a racial wealth gap that remains today throughout the state, whether in Chicago, its suburbs, or downstate cities.

Even after racial covenants lost legal enforceability, informal mechanisms continued to regulate racial boundaries. Racial steering, for instance, became a prevalent tactic among real estate agents, who would direct White buyers toward predominantly White neighborhoods and discourage Black buyers or refuse to show them homes in those areas. In oral histories documenting people's experiences moving to Illinois during the Great Migration between 1916 and 1970, one woman who moved to Chicago remembered that her family was told some homes were "no longer available" after it was known they were Black buyers, even though these properties were still on the market for White buyers.⁴⁰⁰ Another interviewee recounted how a real estate broker openly said, "my clients didn't want to sell to Negroes," revealing the blatant racial steering that limited Black homeownership.⁴⁰¹

These personal testimonies illustrate that discrimination extended significantly beyond formal policies, manifesting in everyday practices that dictated the residential locations of Black people. The systematic exclusion of Black residents from housing in White neighborhoods compelled numerous Black residents to reside in overcrowded, underresourced urban neighborhoods.

Blockbusting, another widespread tactic used by real estate agents and housing speculators, involved inciting racial fear: Agents would persuade White homeowners to sell their homes at reduced prices by warning them that Black individuals were moving in, then resell those same properties to Black buyers at inflated prices.⁴⁰² These practices occurred in cities such as Peoria, Springfield, Rockford, and Evanston. While the racial composition of communities changed, blockbusting ensured the racial segregation of neighborhoods remained even as laws against racial discrimination in housing evolved.⁴⁰³

Real estate practices such as racial steering and blockbusting, and the dehumanizing language of racial covenants, many of which remain in Illinois property deeds today, communicated a societal judgment: that Black people were unfit for inclusion. For many Black Illinoisans, racial covenants represented more than exclusion from a neighborhood; they represented exclusion from dignity, citizenship, and the full benefits of American life. The emotional and psychological harms caused by being told by real estate agents and seeing in writing that one's very presence is a threat to property values or neighborhood integrity are profound and lasting.

White Flight, Exclusionary Zoning, and Suburban Segregation

White flight, the movement of White residents from city centers to suburbs, also played a key role in shaping the racial and economic makeup of Illinois in the mid-twentieth

CHICAGO DAILY TRIBUNE, 1904

NORTH SHORE TOWNS AROUSED.

Influx of Negroes Alarms the Residents of Evanston, Wilmette, Winnetka, and Glencoe.

The negro population of north shore towns steadily is increasing, and in Evanston the newcomers are deemed especially objectionable by the authorities, as there are four times as many cases of assault and larceny, according to police figures.

In Evanston, Wilmette, and Winnetka the negroes are occupying in some sections entire blocks. Glencoe residents are aroused over the influx of negroes. Out of a population of 1,200 it is estimated that more than 200 are colored.

As a solution of the problem suddenly presented, Evanston citizens are reviving the old scheme of a town for negroes, to be located near Niles Center. To this it is proposed to deport objectionable characters.

Source: Chicago Daily Tribune, January 22, 1904

consequences of White flight profoundly shaped where Black residents could live and the quality of life available to them.

As overcrowding and disinvestment intensified in urban neighborhoods, many Black residents in Illinois sought to follow White residents to the suburbs in search of safer housing, improved educational opportunities, and economic stability. However, in addition to the impacts of restrictive covenants, working-class and low-income Black families looking to relocate to the suburbs encountered another intentional obstacle that served to ensure that the benefits of the suburbs remained largely inaccessible: exclusionary zoning laws. Throughout Illinois, suburban municipalities enacted zoning ordinances that appeared to be race-neutral but functioned as notable instruments of segregation. Zoning laws prohibiting multi-family housing, requiring large minimum lot sizes, and reserving most land for single-family residences, effectively excluded housing for working-class and low-income families (predominantly Black), while maintaining suburban enclaves for affluent, mainly White residents.⁴⁰⁶

In an echo of restrictive covenant language, officials in communities such as Oak Park, Naperville, and Evanston justified these restrictions as efforts to preserve “community character” or to safeguard property values. In practice, they established a closed housing market accessible only to individuals with high incomes.⁴⁰⁷ Large-lot zoning necessitated substantial land and capital for new developments, eliminating affordable building options. Concurrently, strict restrictions on multi-family housing

century. As thousands of Black residents arrived in cities like Chicago during the Great Migration (1916–1970) seeking opportunities and safety, White residents responded by abandoning neighborhoods they had previously inhabited.⁴⁰⁴ Blockbusting practices in urban neighborhoods where Black residents were moving, and the resulting White flight to growing suburban communities, accelerated existing segregation and disinvestment patterns and gave rise to new ones. Research by economist Leah Bousta indicates that, from 1940 to 1970, for every Black family moving into a city, two White families moved out.⁴⁰⁵ In Illinois, the

removed one of the few avenues for affordable suburban residences. Given the historical barriers to wealth-building and the middle class for Black families, this system effectively maintained the racial exclusivity of suburbs, even as urban centers in Illinois became increasingly diverse.⁴⁰⁸

Exclusionary zoning not only prevented access to housing, it also isolated Black residents from the wider opportunities associated with suburban areas, such as high-quality schools, cleaner surroundings, safer streets, and increased municipal investments in infrastructure and services.⁴⁰⁹ By excluding Black people from these communities, this zoning practice further restricted their capacity to build intergenerational wealth, worsened economic disparities, and deepened residential segregation across the state. Today, many Illinois suburbs still maintain zoning codes that favor low-density, single-family development, perpetuating these inequities. The enduring effect is a state where the location of one's home continues to dictate access to essential public goods and life outcomes.

Public Housing as a Tool of Racial Containment

Racial segregation and barriers to homeownership for working-class and low-income Black Illinoisans increasingly meant that public housing was the only available, affordable housing option in urban areas. Public housing in Illinois, as in other regions nationwide, was initially envisioned during the New Deal period as a governmental initiative to address the housing crisis precipitated by the Great Depression. Its purpose was to offer respectable, affordable accommodation for low-income families, particularly returning veterans and working-class people, and it was initially inhabited predominantly by White residents.⁴¹⁰ Public housing symbolized a federal commitment to economic enhancement and housing security. Nevertheless, as federal and state priorities evolved and demographic shifts altered the racial composition of urban populations, public housing in Illinois increasingly served as a mechanism for racial control rather than a means to promote equity or upward mobility.

By the mid-twentieth century, public housing development in Illinois was systematically repurposed to contain and isolate Black residents. Across the state, housing authorities worked closely with local governments to site public housing in areas that were already segregated and disinvested, reinforcing the racial boundaries that redlining and restrictive covenants had drawn.⁴¹¹ Instead of challenging the inequalities embedded in the private housing market, Illinois officials used public housing to entrench them. While White families increasingly fled to the suburbs, often aided by federal mortgage support, Black Illinoisans were disproportionately funneled into public housing projects that were underfunded, stigmatized, and structurally neglected.

The physical design and placement of public housing developments played a critical role in deepening the harm inflicted on Black residents in Illinois. Whether in the form of Chicago's towering high-rises or the low-rise "row houses" that dominated smaller cities and towns, these structures reflected spatial strategies of control. Built with inferior materials, often isolated from job centers, quality schools, and reliable transportation, these developments were set up to fail. In Chicago, the vertical sprawl of the Robert Taylor Homes and Cabrini-Green became iconic symbols of neglect, but similar patterns unfolded across cities like Rockford, Peoria, and East St. Louis.⁴¹² For Black Illinoisans, these environments shaped daily life in profound ways. Residents were forced to navigate unsafe buildings, collapsing infrastructure, and persistent health hazards, while being cut off from opportunities for economic and social mobility.

Public housing evolved into a locus of surveillance and social regulation, especially for Black women and families. Regulations such as the "man-in-the-house" rule, implemented by the Chicago Housing Authority and other agencies, penalized households with an adult male presence, thus discouraging two-parent families and subjecting Black domestic life to persistent examination.⁴¹³ Regular inspections, strict eligibility requirements, and intrusive oversight normalized governmental intrusion into everyday life and perpetuated damaging stereotypes around Black dependency and dysfunction.

The cumulative impact was devastating. Generations of Black children came of age in environments shaped by neglect, instability, and structural violence. Public housing residents were disproportionately criminalized and policed, while receiving few of the public protections or investments granted to other communities.⁴¹⁴ In addition, until recently, public housing policies and discriminatory practices in Illinois often limited Black individuals returning home from incarceration from living in public housing, leading to increased recidivism and homelessness as a result.⁴¹⁵ Instead of addressing racial inequality, the public housing system in Illinois institutionalized it, turning what was initially a federal promise of inclusion into a localized strategy of containment.

The federal HOPE VI program, launched in the 1990s, was introduced as a remedy to the failures of public housing, with the goal of replacing distressed developments with mixed-income communities.⁴¹⁶ Yet, in practice, HOPE VI fueled mass displacement across Illinois. Thousands of Black families were evicted or relocated as public housing units were demolished and most were never able to return to the new developments due to restrictive eligibility requirements, background checks, and long wait lists.⁴¹⁷ The program dismantled existing social networks, deepened housing instability, and accelerated gentrification, leaving displaced residents with few options other than overcrowded rentals or unstable shelter situations. HOPE VI did not resolve

the inequalities rooted in public housing, it redistributed them, often invisibly, and with lasting harm to Black communities across the state.

Taking its cues from HOPE VI, the Chicago Housing Authority launched its Plan for Transformation in 2000. This led to the destruction of many of the city's public housing buildings, displacing thousands of Black families in the process. In the Near North Side, for example, the destruction of Cabrini Green contributed to a loss of more than 7,000 Black residents from that neighborhood between 1990 and 2016 while the destruction of the Robert Taylor Homes on the South Side in Grand Boulevard helps explain why more than 14,500 Black families no longer called that neighborhood home by 2016.⁴¹⁸ Despite the Plan For Transformation's promise of new public housing in mixed-income communities, a 2025 report notes that Chicago has experienced a net loss of 19,000 public housing units since 2000 while the need for affordable housing has only continued to increase.⁴¹⁹

Sundown Towns in Illinois

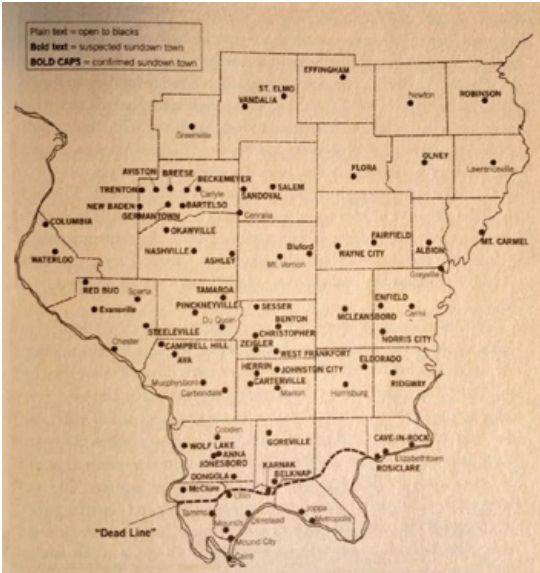
While redlining, racial covenants, and suburban segregation restricted Black Illinoisans' access to buying or renting homes in many communities, Sundown Towns embodied another brutal and calculated form of racial exclusion. These all-White communities made it illegal — or violently unsafe — for Black people to remain in their city limits after sunset, a rule often enforced through local ordinances, signage, harassment, and violence.⁴²⁰ Historian James W. Loewen identified more than five hundred Sundown Towns in Illinois alone, one of the highest concentrations in any state.⁴²¹

The history of Sundown Towns in Illinois is not confined to remote sites in the state or to the distant past. Indeed, one of the communities that Loewen discusses as an example of a Sundown Town is Cicero, just west of Chicago, where, as historian Isabel Wilkerson recounted, a White mob gathered in 1951 to stop Harvey Clark Jr. and his family from moving into an apartment by gathering all of their belongings, throwing them out a window, and setting the building and their possessions on fire. It took local police and the National Guard three days to quell the ensuing race riot that was violently enforcing the color line in what was then a predominantly White community.⁴²²

Sundown towns did not simply limit mobility; they erased the possibility of Black belonging, reinforcing a statewide racial order that confined Black life to segregated urban centers. Unlike suburban racial segregation, which developed through a complex combination of White flight, economic stratification, and federally subsidized housing policies, Sundown Towns were structured environments with explicit racial exclusion.⁴²³

Sundown Towns sent a clear and consistent message: Black people were not safe, not accepted, and not entitled to the same rights as their White counterparts.

SOUTHERN ILLINOIS SUSPECTED SUNDOWN TOWNS, 1952



In 1952, Charles Colby mapped 80 communities in southern Illinois that were home to factories. Fifty-five of them, or sixty-nine percent, were suspected sundown towns. The dotted line at the bottom of the map is the “dead line,” north of which Black individuals were not allowed to live, except in the towns whose names do not appear in bold type.

Source: “Sundown Town Illustrations,” History and Social Justice. See <https://justice.tougaloo.edu>

The threat of violence, arrest, or intimidation in Sundown Towns was another factor discouraging Black Illinoisans from traveling, seeking work, or exploring housing opportunities beyond the confines of segregated urban neighborhoods.⁴²⁴

By denying Black Illinoisans the right to settle freely across the state, Sundown Towns reinforced a segregated housing system that filtered access to opportunity, infrastructure, and political representation through the lens of race. This exclusion created ripple effects that further undermined the stability of Black households and helped preserve the racial wealth gap under the guise of local autonomy and “community character.”⁴²⁵

Many predominantly White towns across Illinois remain homogeneous, shaped by the legacy of exclusion that Sundown Towns deliberately imposed. These communities continue to benefit from the wealth, infrastructure, and educational advantages built during their years of racial exclusion. Meanwhile, Black neighborhoods, intentionally left out, struggle with underfunding, disinvestment, and persistent inequality.⁴²⁶

Home Ownership and the Creation of the Racial Wealth Gap

Owning a home has historically served as a fundamental pillar of stability for the middle class in the United States, constituting a primary means of building intergenerational wealth. However, as federal mortgage assistance initiatives expanded, primarily through the Federal Housing Administration (FHA) and the Veterans Administration

(VA), Black residents were systematically excluded. In response to World War II, for example, the signing of the GI Bill in 1944 provided low-interest loans with no down payment to veterans along with tuition benefits for their education. While the GI Bill is credited as an important factor in the rise of the suburbs, Black veterans were often denied VA loans and tuition benefits, preventing Black veterans from leveraging their service into wealth-building opportunities through home ownership or education.⁴²⁷

FHA and VA agencies offered subsidized, low-interest, long-term mortgage options that enabled millions of White Americans to acquire homes and amass wealth. Conversely, Black applicants, even those with stable employment and sound credit histories, were consistently denied such opportunities. FHA underwriting manuals explicitly categorized Black neighborhoods as “high-risk,” thereby deterring lenders from approving loans in or near these areas.⁴²⁸ In effect, Black people were barred from accessing traditional financing, which impeded their participation in burgeoning suburban communities and led them to rely on predatory lending through contract sales. Furthermore, beyond housing contracts, Black Illinoisans faced systemic financial exploitation through predatory insurance (whether for home, life, or burial), small business credit denials, and discriminatory consumer lending. These practices stripped wealth from both working- and middle-class Black households.⁴²⁹

Systemic barriers to homeownership locked out many Black families from the most reliable route to building generational wealth in America. However, significant barriers to generational wealth also existed for Black families who were able to purchase homes. Black homeowners in Chicago and other Illinois municipalities have been systematically over-assessed on property taxes, inflating their tax burdens and depressing resale values on their homes.⁴³⁰ Moreover, home values in predominantly Black neighborhoods increase in value more slowly and peak at lower levels than homes in predominantly White neighborhoods.⁴³¹

Another factor depressing home values in Black communities is environmental racism. Black communities in Illinois have long faced disproportionate exposure to environmental hazards. Altgeld Gardens in Chicago, for example, is known as the “toxic donut” because it was surrounded by landfills and polluting industries. Black families in East St. Louis, Cairo, and Peoria have endured chronic flooding, contaminated water, and industrial waste. In addition to decreased home values, disproportionate exposure to environmental hazards has led to higher asthma, cancer, and lead poisoning rates among Black Illinoisans than other groups.⁴³²

Black Illinoisans have also faced housing displacement and the destruction of vibrant neighborhoods due to highway construction and other urban renewal projects from the 1950s to the 1970s. Highway construction projects like the Dan Ryan and Eisenhower Expressways displaced thousands of families from Black neighborhoods

in Chicago's Bronzeville, Lawndale, and Garfield Park communities, erasing wealth there while subsidizing the wealth of White suburban enclaves from which Black families were largely excluded.⁴³³

In Illinois, the consequences of racial exclusion from wealth through homeownership are visible in the persistent racial wealth gap, the concentration of poverty in formerly redlined neighborhoods, and, given how we fund public education largely through local property taxes, the underresourced school systems that continue to fail children of color.⁴³⁴

Conclusion

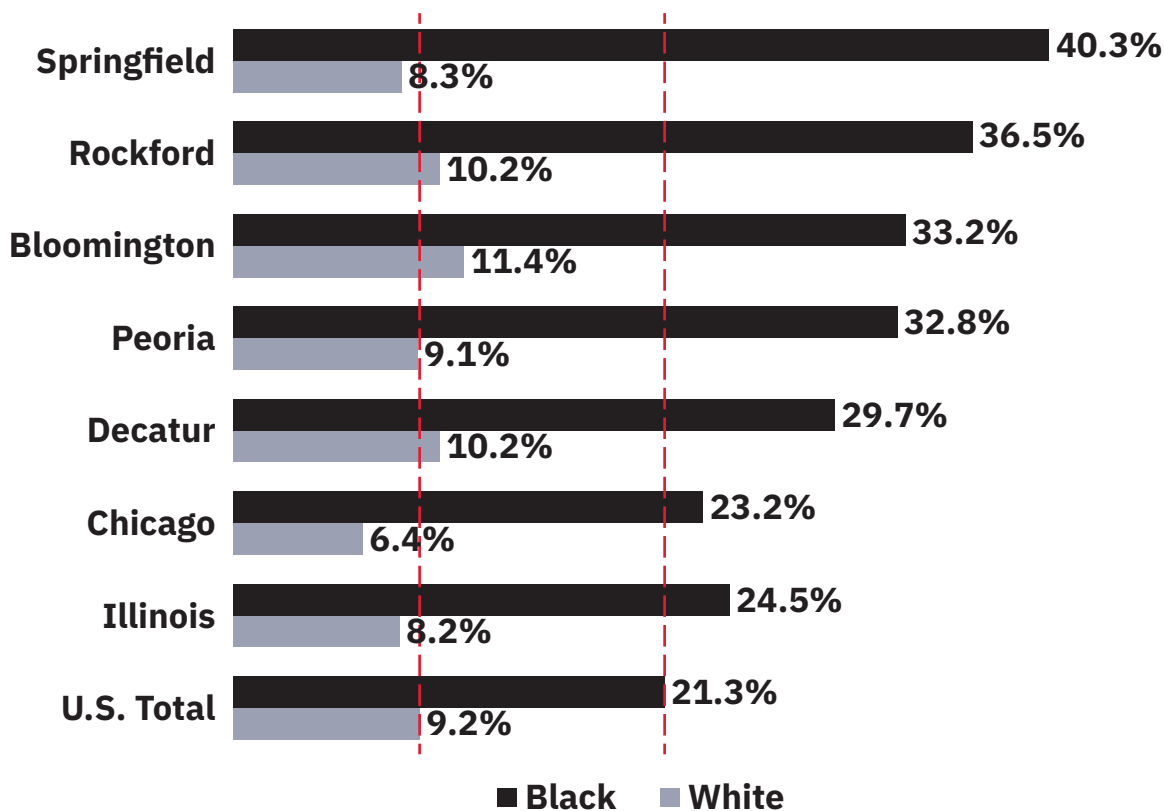
Housing segregation in Illinois emerged from a coordinated system of racial exclusion, deliberately constructed through public policy, private sector practices, and institutional structures that controlled where Black residents could live, invest, and build wealth. Beyond questions of shelter, this system determined who had access to opportunity, stability, wealth, and full citizenship.

Throughout the history of Illinois, housing discrimination became a means to establish racial hierarchies, embedding inequality into the physical and economic landscape. The effects of housing discrimination have persisted for generations, perpetuating cycles of poverty and marginalization for Black communities. The ongoing harms of this history of racial discrimination in housing help explain why almost 55 percent of Black renters are rent-burdened, spending more than 30 percent of their monthly income on housing.

The legacy of racially discriminatory housing policies in Illinois explains why rates of Black homeownership in Illinois are significantly lower than those of White residents. And it explains why the median value of White homes in 2023 was 30 percent more than the median value of Black homes. Despite the passage of the Fair Housing Act in 1968, echoes of the history of contract sales and persistent housing discrimination can be seen today: While 84 percent of White applicants received conventional home loans in 2024, only 56 percent of Black applicants received similar loans — and more than 20 percent of Black applicants were denied home loans altogether in comparison to 8 percent of White applicants.

Racial discrimination in housing has shaped a foundation of inequality upon which predominantly Black neighborhoods continue to report higher rates of poverty, economic displacement, and underfunded schools long after official redlining policies were outlawed. The racial wealth gap, educational disparities, and health inequalities that define life for many Black Illinoisans today are the direct result of nearly a century of intentional housing discrimination policies. Housing segregation in Illinois still persists,

DISPARITIES IN POVERTY RATES IN ILLINOIS COMPARED TO U.S., 2023



Disparities in poverty rates between Black and White residents are higher in many cities in Illinois and in the state as a whole than the national disparity rate.

Source: 2023 ACS Five-Year Estimates. Data from Illinois Times.

See <https://www.illinoistimes.com/news-opinion/economic-gaps-persist-for-blacks-20142512/>

clearly visible in continued racial divides, unequal public investment, and ongoing lack of housing access for Black residents.

Until the power to define space and opportunity is fundamentally redistributed and the legacy of these harms is addressed, the structure of racial inequality will remain firmly in place. These outcomes are not historical artifacts — they are present-day realities produced by over a century of racially discriminatory housing policy. These practices collectively institutionalized residential segregation as a system of racial harm. Discriminatory housing policies have shaped every aspect of life and opportunity tied to place: access to education, job markets, health care, environmental safety, transportation, and political power. By creating barriers to opportunity, these policies ensured that Black residents remained economically and socially marginalized, creating generational disparities in wealth, mobility, and stability.

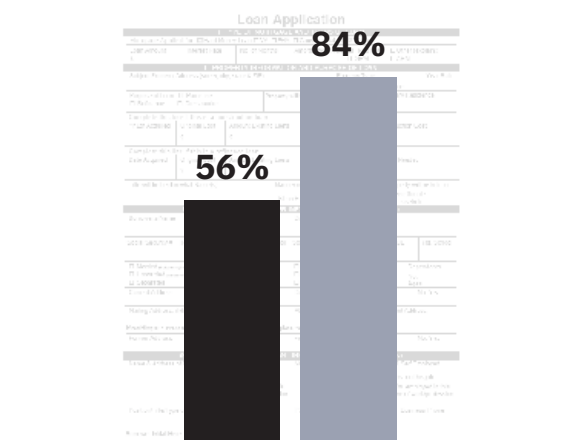
ILLINOIS HOUSING INDICATOR COMPARISON, 2023 & 2024



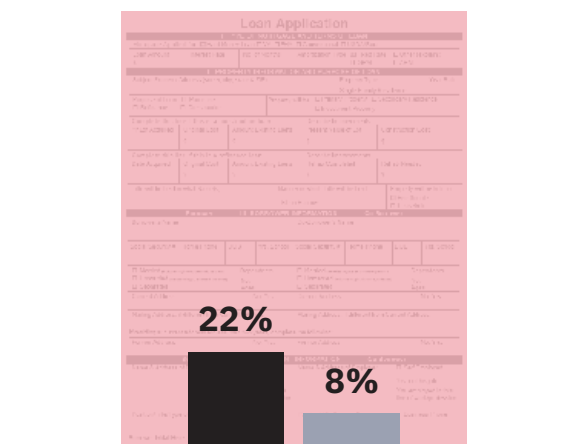
The median home value for Black families in owner-occupied homes is over 25% less than that of White families in Illinois.*



Over half of Black renters in Illinois are rent-burdened, spending more than 30% of their household income on rent. Over a third of white families are similarly rent-burdened.*



A little more than one in two Black individuals in Illinois who applied for a conventional principal home loan were approved for one.†



A little less than one out of four Black individuals in Illinois who applied for a conventional principal home loan were denied one.‡

Sources: *2023 ACS, Five-Year Sample. Reported in 2023 dollars. †2024 Home Mortgage Disclosure Act. ‡2024 Home Mortgage Disclosure Act. The sample is limited to principal home loan applications, excluding cases where applications were withdrawn, the file was closed for incompleteness, if institutions did not originate the loan itself, and preapproval requests.

CHICAGO: THE HOME OF RACIALIZED REAL ESTATE

LaDale Winling

Throughout the twentieth century, racial segregation was fundamental to real estate practice, and real estate was a key mechanism for racial segregation.

At the beginning of the century, the newly formed, Chicago-based National Association of Real Estate Exchanges (later the National Association of Real Estate Boards, or NAREB) worked to create and promote a unified real estate profession.⁴³⁵ That profession was shaped by a vision to implement a common set of practices, to define the fundamentals of real estate value, and to enforce those principles to maintain and increase real estate values.

A bedrock principle of real estate value was the segregation of Black residents from White residents. This took a variety of forms, including a code of ethics which emphasized that a realtor “should never be instrumental in introducing into a neighborhood a character of property or occupancy, members of any race or nationality, or any individuals whose presence clearly will be detrimental to property values in that neighborhood.”⁴³⁶ It also included the promotion and publication of the work and ideas of J.C. Nichols, a developer who developed and popularized the use of racially restrictive covenants in metropolitan Kansas City. These private contracts bound homeowners not to sell to, lease to, or allow non-Whites to reside in White neighborhoods, except as servants.

NAREB, along with its local chapter, the Chicago Real Estate Board (CREB), and individual members, lobbied Congress, Illinois lawmakers, and the Chicago Board of Aldermen on segregationist housing policy throughout the middle decades of the twentieth century. They promoted the use of racially restrictive covenants and the development of exclusionary land-use zoning as bloodless means of maintaining segregation after the 1919 Chicago Race Riot. Leaders of the real estate sector and civic leaders had a seamless relationship: Private businessmen shaped public policy, and political leaders were aligned with private enterprise.

NAREB also allied with economist Richard T. Ely, one of the founders of the American Economics Association, hiring Ely’s Institute for Research in Land Economics and Real Estate as NAREB’s research arm. Ely moved his institute from the University of Wisconsin to Northwestern University’s business school in Chicago in order to collaborate more easily with NAREB. With additional support from the Carnegie Foundation and trade groups like the National Light and Gas Association, Ely expanded

a team of researchers and faculty that detailed a vision for real estate theory and practice that was widely adopted in the 1930s. Their work included college curricula for real estate education, guides for adult education classes in real estate, and a line of textbooks published by Macmillan for use in newly created real estate programs.⁴³⁷

Institute members such as assessors Frederick Babcock and Herman Walther worked out their ideas for excluding people of “inharmonious races” from White neighborhoods; faculty member H. Morton Bodfish, who led the United States Building and Loan League, shared those ideas with the league.⁴³⁸ Walther worked as chief assessor for Cook County, establishing a clear connection between the research work of the institute and the practice of government and land valuation. And affiliated researchers such as Helen Monchow and Homer Hoyt published work that advised on the use of racially restrictive covenants and reprinted hierarchies of races based on realtors’ generalization of how beneficial or detrimental German American, Black American, or Mexican American residents would be to property values.⁴³⁹

Many of these real estate leaders were eugenicists who embedded their prejudices in new areas of academic theory and public policy. Chicago attorney Nathan MacChesney, for example, who was general counsel of CREB and NAREB and an affiliate of the Institute, drew up a standard form for racially restrictive covenants, helping improvement and restriction associations across the city blanket their neighborhoods with racial covenants. With John Wigmore, Northwestern University’s law school dean, MacChesney also helped found the American Institute of Criminal Law and Criminology, drawing on nineteenth-century racial and eugenicist pseudo-science and anxious theories of demographic replacement to create and shape the field of criminology.⁴⁴⁰

At the onset of the financial and economic crisis of the 1930s, the Hoover administration called Chicago realtors and academics to Washington as part of the national White House Conference on Home Building and Home Ownership. There, they brainstormed public policy solutions that would reformulate housing designs and residential urban planning, and would embed prejudicial ideas about real estate into federally backed policy and practice. One direct outcome of the conference was the creation of the Federal Home Loan Bank, a Federal Reserve–type system for the savings and loan industry.

After Franklin Roosevelt took office, Congress kept the same template and expertise in place and passed the Home Owners’ Loan Act of 1933, creating the Home Owners’ Loan Corporation (HOLC) to refinance home mortgages across the country and extend mortgage terms to 15 years. A year later came the creation of the Federal Housing

Administration (FHA), which provided loan guarantees for individual mortgages and for larger residential housing developments. With billions of public dollars at risk, Federal Home Loan Banks (FHLBs), the HOLC, and the FHA adopted systems codifying exclusion of African Americans and other minorities in a practice known as redlining.

Federal redlining, which filtered down to regional and state offices, denied mortgage funds to minority communities and institutionalized racial discrimination because of the belief, often discussed but never empirically demonstrated, that racial mixing reduced real estate values and left investors at risk. The HOLC vigorously maintained that its ideas were based on market fundamentals and drew on surveys of local lenders, appraisers, and realtors for neighborhood data to create a national database of lending information. In metro Chicago and other Illinois cities, realtors such as Warner Baird (of Baird & Warner) and William Orth noted the “infiltration” of immigrants and minorities into residential neighborhoods and detailed the protection of neighborhoods with racial restrictions.⁴⁴¹

During the Great Depression, Chicagoans like Walther went to work for the Illinois HOLC and imposed discriminatory practices under the guise of rescuing and restructuring the real estate sector. Bodfish created the Society for Residential Appraisers, which helped establish real estate appraisal as a profession. The principles of real estate value were based on new federal FHA and HOLC standards for lending. The FHA Underwriting Manual, for example, written by Babcock, stated that “inharmonious racial groups” should not attend the same schools in significant numbers, and that if these groups populated the same neighborhoods, the value of houses in the district would decline, leading to loss of FHA support.⁴⁴² Residents or neighborhoods were encouraged to assure the exclusion of “inharmonious” groups by using racial restrictions to promote demographic stability.

Thus, while private lending retrenched during the Great Depression, federal agencies stepped into the breach to refinance and guarantee mortgage funds, institutionalizing discriminatory principles and practices and backing them with billions of dollars. With their private sector collaborators, federal officials dramatically restructured the home finance sector and real estate, appraisal, and home finance practices for the rest of the twentieth century — a process led by Illinoisans that resulted in the widespread exclusion of African Americans and other minorities from home ownership and conventional financing from the 1940s through the 1960s.

Mid-century studies of more than two hundred Chicago lenders indicated that they would never make loans to Black borrowers for homes in White neighborhoods. This

helped create shortages of nearly two thousand housing units for African Americans, leading to families doubling up in single-family units, taking in boarders, or occupying “kitchenette” apartments without private bathrooms or adequate space.⁴⁴³ Such exclusion, which continues in multiple forms, has forced many minority home-seekers to take on contract financing and other exploitative finance schemes such as subprime mortgages.⁴⁴⁴

PAINTING THE WEALTH GAP

Amber S. Hendley

At the tail end of the Civil War, twenty Black Georgian leaders convened to produce a policy of reparations for their enslavement.⁴⁴⁵ However, America did not protect this policy. Anti-Black legal systems endured, compounding the trauma of slavery and its deleterious effects on African descendants of slavery.⁴⁴⁶ This started each average African American generation at a financial deficit.

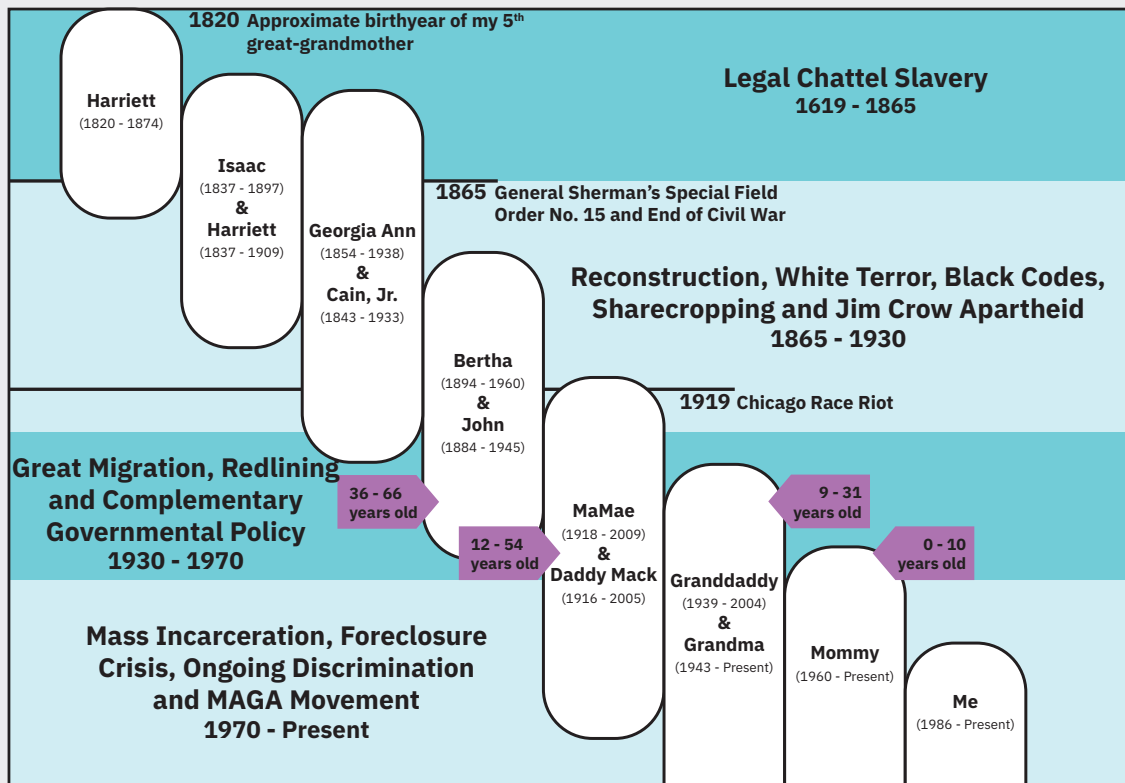
In 2024, The New School found that in Chicago, White families had the highest median net worth (\$210,000), while Black families reported virtually no wealth (\$0).⁴⁴⁷ Historic policies, including those carried out during the latter portion of The Great Migration, begat today's wealth gap.⁴⁴⁸

In the summer of 2018, I could be found either in the basement of the Cook County Recorder of the Deeds office in Chicago poring over land titles or tucked away in a small room on 74th and Pulaski, digging through boxes of archived federal court records. It was in these spaces that I met Jack Macnamara, a fiery Irish-Chicagoan octogenarian, and we became quick friends. As a young Jesuit seminarian working in North Lawndale in 1968, Jack was the lead organizer of the legendary Contract Buyers League, a group of Black homebuyers who joined together to fight exploitive real estate contract sales (and who were the subject of Ta-Nehisi Coates's 2014 article in *The Atlantic*, "The Case for Reparations").⁴⁴⁹

That summer, we worked relentlessly to uncover the broadest possible set of land sale contracts signed by aspiring Black homebuyers on Chicago's South and West Sides during the Second Great Migration. Our report became part of the national conversation over reparations for African Americans. We worked side by side, dreaming and planning, right up until the day Jack took his final breath in 2020. As this summer marks five years since his passing, I honor his memory by weaving his voice and vision into this essay.⁴⁵⁰

Jack and I spoke endlessly about the damaging legacy of redlining and the deeply flawed real estate appraisal and evaluation system. Given the significant attention these issues have received in recent years, I've chosen to set them aside to make room for a discussion of more contemporary, equally extractive, and complementary forms of governmental and societal absurdity. I will lean on the five generations of my Riggs-Parrish family alive between 1930 and 1970. The best way I know to paint a picture with words is to humanize it so one can understand the intergenerational impacts of these policies on the average Black household.

EIGHT GENERATIONS OF THE RIGGS-PARRISH FAMILY ACROSS AMERICAN HISTORY



This chart shows multiple generations of the Riggs-Parrish family relative to the American historical timeline. The ages of members of each branch alive between 1930 and 1970 are noted.

Source: Family chart information provided courtesy of the author.

Government policies systematically ensured that we Black Americans remained in a lower socioeconomic position than our White counterparts.⁴⁵¹ As Black workers, my second great-grandparents, their families, and their neighbors were often excluded from labor unions and their successful campaigns for higher wages and safer working conditions, benefits routinely extended solely to White workers.⁴⁵² This exclusion forced them into the most hazardous or menial jobs, with lower pay and greater risk to their health.

When our Black forefathers served in the military, the benefits they earned as veterans were often withheld from them — and, by extension, from us, the future

generations that should have had the opportunity to build on that advantage as our White peers have. Access to education and training programs that paved the way to upwardly mobile careers was largely reserved for White veterans.⁴⁵³

If our Black ancestors were fortunate enough to afford enrollment in historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs), the cost of attendance was often disproportionately high relative to their incomes.⁴⁵⁴ That financial burden discouraged many qualified Black students from pursuing higher education as a pathway to better-paying jobs. This explains why so many of us became first-generation college graduates in later generations than our White contemporaries. It also put a higher premium on education for the descendants of those who were denied this earned privilege and underscores the fact of higher student loan balances today.

Meanwhile, my grandparents, the next generation of Black workers, were routinely denied access to the comprehensive, well-rounded education that would make them competitive upon their eventual entry into the American workforce.⁴⁵⁵ Five of my ancestors who appear in my family chart were schoolteachers. I myself taught high school math for years. Though a profession I deeply respect and the legacy trade of my family, teaching is not a high-paying job. If you examine industries with large Black representation in each generation since Reconstruction, you'll see the trends in who has been left behind by racial discrimination in the labor market. Black workers are often in professions that have not offered relative economic upward mobility.⁴⁵⁶

After the government deliberately imposed an income ceiling on the average Black household, our Black families were forced to stretch their limited incomes further, often paying more than their White counterparts in taxes and housing costs.⁴⁵⁷ Those housing payments typically went to White landlords, who had access to the financing or wages necessary to purchase property and build wealth. Debt-to-income (DTI) ratios — a key factor in today's financial underwriting — were consistently higher for Black households, reinforcing cycles of exclusion and economic instability.

Those in power ensured that our Black families were forced to struggle just to survive, with little recognition of, or concern for, our full humanity. Like all people, we love our families and want to care for them well. Across entire communities, Black men and women worked tirelessly, often around the clock, just to meet the basic needs of our households. But with limited incomes and disproportionate debt, the food our ancestors could afford was often far from nourishing. All people need rest and nourishment. All children deserve quality time and attention from their parents. Yet, unlike many White families, our Black families were rarely afforded the luxury of stay-at-home caregivers.

Under these conditions, it was nearly impossible to meet even the most basic needs, let alone invest in physical, mental, or emotional well-being. The trauma from this systemic neglect hasn't disappeared; it continues to echo across generations with financially diminishing effects.

We as Black people are extraordinary, always finding ways to persevere in the face of relentless adversity. Struggle has a way of binding us together. Out of necessity, villages form; we lean on one another, filling in the gaps to meet collective needs. But just as our communities began to gain their footing and cross the metaphorical highways, the government intervened again by laying physical highways through our neighborhoods to make city centers more accessible to the White families who had already benefited from decades of policy designed to build the middle class.⁴⁵⁸ In many of these cases, White landowners were compensated for their demolished properties while Black renters were simply displaced.⁴⁵⁹ Even when Black homeowners received compensation, the payouts rarely reflected the true cost of what was lost. Urban renewal became yet another method of resetting Black progress, erasing our gains just as they began to take root.

For African Americans, this tale is, unfortunately, as old as time and as common as wind in Chicago. My second great-grandparents, Bertha and John, spent their first three decades in a system of racial apartheid and White terror. Carrying the financial burden from the years leading up to their fourth, fifth, and sixth decades, they were restricted to jobs that would never fully cover their living costs or provide their only daughter with a financial advantage.

MaMae, Daddy Mack, and Granddaddy assumed the financial burden to attend HBCUs and became educators. While Granddaddy taught, Grandma nursed patients. The hours they both worked left Mommy at home to care for her three little brothers, while the family struggled to keep themselves clothed, the lights on, and food on the table. She is forever bonded with her childhood neighbors because they endured these same circumstances together. Mommy was a little girl when her school integrated. The stories she shares about these experiences, while heartbreaking, honor our family's strength and resilience.

We all attended public schools that would meet today's Title I criteria for high percentages of children from low-income families.⁴⁶⁰ At different points in our lives, Mommy and I both became reliant on payday loans to cover our expenses. She purchased her first home in her fifties, because it took that long for her to pay down debts and increase her income enough to save for her earnest money, down payment, and closing costs. Had she purchased in her thirties with her inherited credit profile,

she would likely have been caught, like so many other Black families, in the subprime mortgage foreclosure crisis.

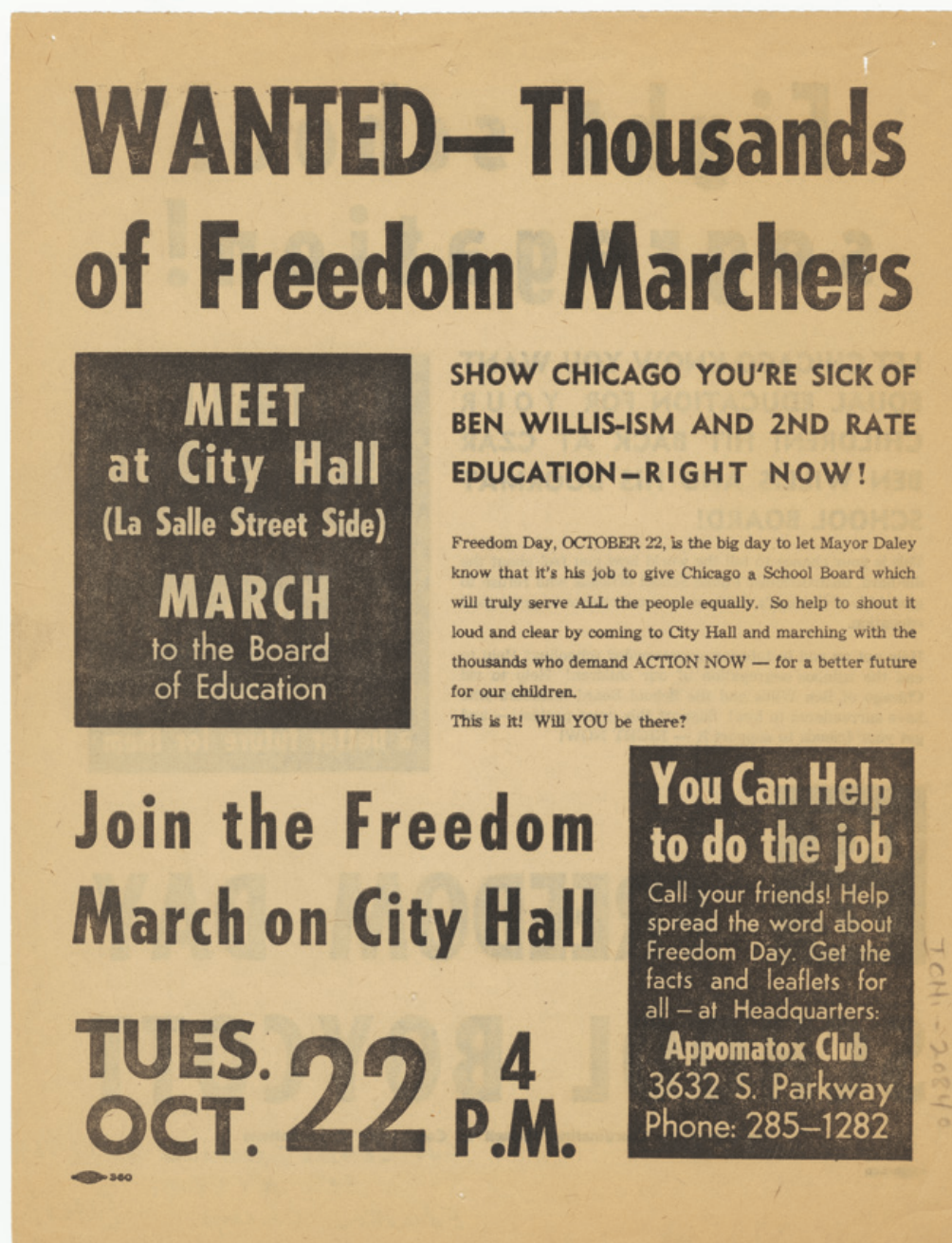
My family has been in America for at least eight generations. Those who came before me undoubtedly started with negative wealth. An optimistic view is that I, the eighth generation, was “fortunate” enough to start from zero. While I inherited so much love and wisdom from my family, no wealth was transferred, nor were advantages in the job market. My family members were not able to share investment or career strategies learned or passed down to them from former generations because they had been excluded from those systems and stretched too thin to pursue aspirational developments.

A range of factors have been identified as contributing to the racial wealth divide: credit card and medical debt, payday loans, limited access to mainstream financial services, disparities in investment and retirement income, home equity, and liquid assets.⁴⁶¹ Without access to professional jobs that include benefits as well as adequate pay, you cannot invest in high-earning investment or retirement accounts. Treating the manifestations of neglected physical, mental, or emotional well-being is costly; if you are not properly insured by your employer, you have to cover your own medical costs.

When you have to constantly rebuild a community, home equity values will remain lower. The financial industry’s capitalistic perspective is that your community is not a good investment. Banks do not build brick-and-mortar locations near you. If you make the trip to a mainstream financial institution, their underwriting standards require them to charge more to applicants with high DTI ratios. Credit card reliance, unfortunately, is an American norm; thanks to credit scores that incorporate your DTI ratio, credit cards carry higher costs for Black cardholders. When the DTI ratio is too high to be approved for traditional loans and/or credit cards and you still need to make ends meet with your lower income, you turn to payday lenders who happily service your neighborhood at even higher costs than the banks.

When you’re continually making less and paying more, there are no liquid assets left. Richard Rothstein wrote, “The advantage that FHA and VA loans gave the White lower-middle class in the 1940s and ‘50s has become permanent.”⁴⁶² It’s clear that the disadvantages imposed on Black families during that era continue to ripple across time. Jack would insist that we ensure those disadvantages do not become permanent too.

1963 FREEDOM MARCHERS POSTER



Parents and community members organized a boycott of Chicago Public Schools in 1963 to protest the lack of adequate educational opportunities for Black children. Approximately 224,770 students, or about half of the CPS student body stayed home in what became known as Freedom Day.

Source: Chicago Historical Society, ICHi-020840.

EDUCATION

Our nation's schools have always been deeply shaped by the color line.⁴⁶³ During slavery, Black children were subjected to a “system of compulsory ignorance” in which White interests in maintaining a subordinate class of Black slaves and laborers led to a systematic denial of access to education, including laws making it illegal to teach enslaved people to read or write.⁴⁶⁴ Access to literacy was a threat to the ability to control Black labor, so controlling access to education was understood as a critical mechanism for maintaining racial hierarchy. If one of slavery's persistent legacies is the systematic denial of Black humanity, one of its clearest modern forms is the denial of fully resourced, equitable education throughout the United States and in Illinois.

Like many states, Illinois made little provision for the public and formal education of Black residents during the early to mid-nineteenth century. The state's Black Laws, vigilante racial terror, political disenfranchisement, and stolen economic opportunities made residency itself unsafe. Additionally, the segregation of Black students into unequal and underresourced schools and school districts was yet another structural means of denying Black Illinoisans opportunities and access to the full rights of citizenship.

Illinois's public education infrastructure and education policy has also placed undue and compounding burden on Black residents, especially children.⁴⁶⁵ For generations, Black residents paid taxes into school districts from which they were excluded. Neighborhood planning and zoning rules were regularly amended to segregate Black residents and keep Black children out of otherwise exclusively White schools, which forced Black residents to establish their own schools without resources from state or local school boards.

As has been true for Black people throughout the country, Black Illinoisans fought for access to high-quality schooling at every turn. They fought for access to public schools, organized independent schools for Black children when they were excluded from public schools, and engaged in protracted legal battles to get their tax payments refunded when they were excluded from the schools their tax dollars were paying for.

Into the twenty-first century, Black Illinoisans have continued to organize to fight de facto segregation and to demand fully funded schools. Communities have organized to contest “zero-tolerance” and other discipline policies that refer students to local authorities even for minor infractions. These policies disproportionately impact Black students, pushing them into the criminal legal system.⁴⁶⁶ And while the 2013 closing of

predominantly Black public K–12 schools in Chicago made headlines, such closures are a practice of racial discrimination in education that stretches back across centuries in Illinois. Communities across the state have continued to push for equitable funding of public schools and to have the full history of Black people included in curriculum. While the history of education of Black Illinoisans echoes the patterns of exclusion true across the country, Black Illinoisans have also, across their full history in the state, persistently pursued education within and beyond formal schooling.

Historical Foundations of Racial Inequality in Illinois Education (1818–1870)

In 1825, the Illinois General Assembly passed the Free School Law to establish a public education system in which “a common school or schools open to all *white citizens* between the age five and 21 shall be established and shall be free to all classes of such citizens [emphasis added].”⁴⁶⁷ The law permitted counties to establish school districts and collect property taxes for funding, and additionally earmarked 2 percent of the state treasury to be distributed to those districts.⁴⁶⁸ After ratifying amendments to the Free School Law in 1827 and 1829, the state instituted a state tax to fund schools in 1848. And in 1855, the General Assembly passed the “Act to Establish and Maintain a System of Free Schools,” officially mandating a free public education system for the state. The convergence of these acts set an explicit foundation for Illinois’s public education ecosystem to fund, privilege, and prioritize the educational needs and interests of White residents. Some local school boards and communities eventually established separate public schools for Black students but did so with far fewer resources than were allocated to White schools.

During these early decades of public schooling in the state, Black Illinoisans were also legally barred from voting. Thus, the general assembly that passed early school laws focused on White citizens did so without Black representation. When the general assembly later established the position of state superintendent of public instruction in 1854, Ninian Wirt Edwards was elected to serve in the position, still without Black participation.⁴⁶⁹ Without the franchise, Black Illinoisans could neither elect political officials who would admit Black residents to public schools nor vote out politicians who supported segregated schools.⁴⁷⁰ In his first report to the General Assembly, State Superintendent Edwards proposed allowing local school boards to allocate funds for schools for people of color funded by the taxes paid by Black property owners: “Schools of Persons of Color. In townships in which there shall be persons of color, the board of education shall allow such persons a portion of the school fund, equal to the amount of taxes collected for school purposes from such persons of color in their respective townships.”⁴⁷¹

This proposal allowed for refunds to Black taxpayers in cities where Black children were not allowed into the public schools. This was less a compromise than an early iteration of providing inequitable school resources, as it would “return to [Black taxpayers] only the amount of school taxes they paid in and not, as the rule was for Whites, in proportion to the number of their children of school age.” Providing no funds from the general treasury, it “did not allot them money from the part of the school fund derived from sources other than taxes or grant them funds for schoolhouses, school management, and anything else necessary for schooling.” In short, the provision both excluded Black residents from public school systems and restricted the use of general public funds for their needs.⁴⁷²

Furthermore, Black school-age children (defined as those over age five and under twenty-one) were not counted in the formula for distributing funds. Districts with Black school-age residents would need to fund schools to serve these students themselves, which in many cases meant they did not fund them at all. School districts lobbied for special dispensations to segregate Black residents from public school zones so that Black children living outside the “colored districts” had to walk long distances to their assigned schools. As a result, it was common for families to keep their children home or send them to work rather than send them to school.

Where geographical or political obstacles failed to keep Black students out of school, violence and threats against Black students and their families often worked. The third Illinois State Convention of Colored Men convened in 1866 and confirmed that “The colored citizens of this great state, that prides itself on its system of free schools must submit to see their children driven from the well organized and ably conducted schools in the districts where they reside, for no other delinquency than the crime of being created with a darker skin than their neighbors.”⁴⁷³ One of the convention committees estimated that fewer than one hundred of the state’s eight thousand Black school-age children were enrolled in school.⁴⁷⁴ While the exact number is debated and likely somewhat larger, historians agree on the fact that many Black residents were not enrolled in the state’s separate and unequal Black schools.

In the antebellum and Civil War years, most schools in Illinois were one-room buildings; most schools serving Black students met in church spaces. Students were often not separated by age or ability; rather, children and adults were educated together. For example, African Americans in Galesburg petitioned the school board to establish a school for Black students. The school board agreed and set a rule that “the colored children in the district are expected to attend the school provided for them, and no other.” A room was set aside in the Black church for the school and Mary Allen West, a White woman and graduate of Knox Seminary, volunteered to be the teacher.⁴⁷⁵ The school opened in September 1863, where children were educated

in the morning and adults in the afternoon.⁴⁷⁶ Similar arrangements in other cities were not always a victory, as “even where racially mixed or racially separate schools were established [...] their life was precarious and the blacks might find that a school to which they were admitted today might be closed against them tomorrow or have vanished altogether.” Schools educating Black students remained open only with the approval of White school boards and local officials.⁴⁷⁷

Chicago’s public school system, established in 1837, was a relative outlier among school districts, as it did not formally enforce racial segregation except for a brief time between June of 1863 and April of 1865.⁴⁷⁸ During that period, White children went to the schools in their neighborhoods, while Black students were obligated to attend the city’s Colored School (regardless of where they lived) and forbidden to enroll in any school in which White children were enrolled.⁴⁷⁹ Black Chicagoans and their political allies protested that segregation enforced feelings of inferiority in Black children and “unshakable prejudice” in White children, to the serious detriment of individuals and communities. Again, Black residents paid property taxes to fund schools that their children were prohibited from attending.

Even as the Illinois public education system was designed to provide Black residents only the most minimal educational opportunities, education remained a top priority for Black Illinoisans across the state as they sought to create and retain educational spaces and resources within their communities.⁴⁸⁰

A New Constitution (1870–1900)

The 1870 Illinois Constitution established a state board of education, set aside land in every township for schools, and prohibited the use of public funds for sectarian or church-run schools.⁴⁸¹ This served to affirm that education for *all* Illinois residents was viewed as essential to ensuring the future prosperity of the state and the preservation of the republic. The new constitution also removed the racial exclusion upheld by the previous generation of common and free school laws. Removing the language explicitly prioritizing White residents’ access to public education infrastructure set an important legal precedent, although it did not protect Black residents’ rights to enroll in, attend, or be hired by schools, or to vote for or be elected to serve on school boards.

This legislative change also did not prevent racial segregation in schooling, as it did not entitle Black students to attend schools with White students nor did it mandate school districts to improve the poor conditions and lack of resources devoted to “colored” schools. When a few Black parents pursued legal action to keep their children in neighborhood schools and to prevent school districts from disenrolling Black students, White officials and community members opposed them, fearing they would “encourage” racial integration.

In 1872, the General Assembly passed “An Act Concerning Education,” which gave school districts the right to decide whether Black students in their districts were to be educated in separate or integrated schools. This was “essentially the ‘Illinois version of “separate but equal,”’ and remained in effect until the 1950s.”⁴⁸² School districts found myriad ways to comply with the law while prohibiting Black students from continuing to attend or being admitted to schools with White children. In many cities around the state, White residents were apt to disenroll their children from integrated schools and went as far as threatening, harassing, suing, or assaulting Black students and their families for asserting their access to schools or for supporting integration. When four Black children, residents of McLean County, registered for school in December 1871, they were “forcibly resisted and threatened with violence by the teacher who, the complaint alleged, had been hired because of his known antagonism toward blacks.”⁴⁸³

Individual school districts considered whether they should fund schools for Black students the same way they funded schools for White students: through property taxes. Would the funding come from the common fund, or specifically from Black taxpayers? Would the district “assist” local Black community leaders in creating and funding their own schools? At the time, many such schools existed outside the official public school system and were therefore not entitled to public funding; however, local school boards still maintained control over hiring, firing, and compensation for teachers and staff.

Black parents seeking education for themselves and their children navigated their disenfranchisement in various ways, including moving or even suing to be able to attend school.⁴⁸⁴ *The People ex rel. John Longress v. The Board of Education of Quincy* (1882) was one such example. John Longress, a working blacksmith in Quincy, filed an affidavit in Adams County circuit court in September 1879, asserting that because he and his five children (ages six to twenty-one) lived in the Franklin school district, they should be entitled to attend the district school five blocks from their home. Instead, under the racial segregation policies of the Quincy board of education, the Longress children were only permitted to attend Lincoln School, about twenty blocks, or one and one-half miles, away from their home.

The Longress children were not alone in being forced to attend district “colored schools.”⁴⁸⁵ Dennis Williams was born enslaved in Mississippi and his earliest memories were of picking cotton with his mother. When the Union army arrived in 1863, the Williams family escaped to Vicksburg. When Williams’s mother decided her son needed to receive formal schooling, the family moved to Springfield, Illinois, where Dennis attended the local “colored school.”⁴⁸⁶ While fleeing the explicit violence of the South and seeking opportunity in Illinois, the Williams family’s arrival in Illinois brought access to a different kind of second-class status.

James Henry Magee, the son of a free Black man who purchased the freedom of his eventual wife, moved with his family from Kentucky to Illinois. In his memoir, *The Night of Affliction and Morning of Recovery: An Autobiography*, he recalled attending both an integrated and segregated school while growing up in Madison County. He then moved to St. Clair County, where he enrolled in an integrated school. When White parents objected to his enrollment, he moved to Wisconsin to continue high school and eventually became a teacher. After several years of teaching, he returned to Illinois, moving to Alton, where the city board of education appointed him the teacher at the “colored” public school. Despite the damp, crowded, and poorly built schoolroom “he was praised for his teaching and he himself felt he had accomplished much under such conditions.”⁴⁸⁷ While it is easy to focus on the persistence of those like Magee, under those same conditions, it was not uncommon for students to lose their ambition and energy for education.⁴⁸⁸

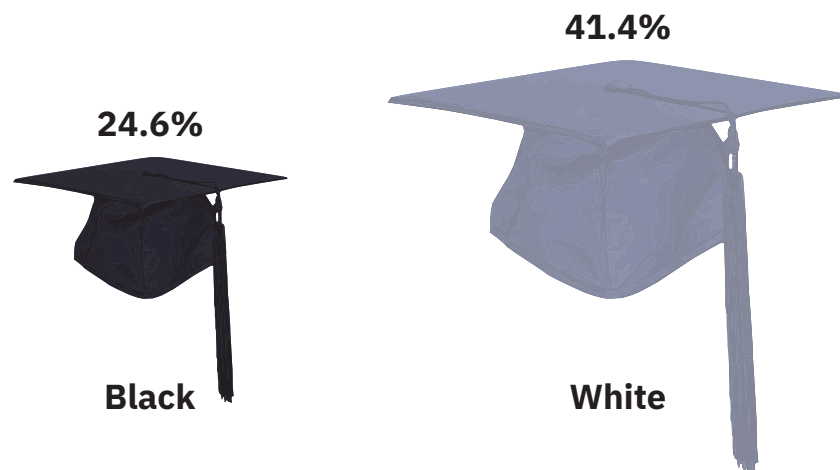
Throughout the rest of the nineteenth century, racial discrimination and segregation in Illinois public schools continued, with many school districts remaining segregated for decades into the twentieth century. Black students were not only educated in underresourced schools, but the content of their education was also circumscribed. Racial discrimination in education occurred both in barriers to school access and in the design of curriculum and counseling about post-secondary options. For example, Black students were not typically encouraged to take college preparatory or advanced classes and were instead encouraged to expect to have housekeeping, secretarial, or manual labor jobs.⁴⁸⁹

While the late 1800s brought new opportunities for Black Illinoisans to pursue college education, racial barriers continued to put artificial limits on higher education for generations of Black Illinoisans. For example, The Illinois State Normal University (now Illinois State University) was the first college in the state to admit Black students, enrolling its first Black student only one year after its founding in 1868. The state’s first public university, it was created to train high-quality teachers to be employed in school districts across the state.⁴⁹⁰ The first Black students at the University of Illinois were admitted in 1887 and the first to graduate was in 1900, thirty-two years after the college’s founding.⁴⁹¹ The Illinois Industrial University, later renamed the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign, opened with an all-White, all male student population in 1868 as the state’s second public university. It was not until 1900 that a Black student, William Walter Smith, graduated and it was six more years before Maudelle T. Brown Bousfield, the first Black woman graduate, was awarded her diploma.⁴⁹² Black students were prohibited from living on campus until 1945.⁴⁹³

The oral history project *Our Journey: Stories of School Desegregation and Community in Champaign-Urbana*, produced in 2024 by students from Franklin Middle

School and public radio station WILL, offers recollections of “African Americans [who lived] outside of the educational system while living within it.”⁴⁹⁴ One interviewee, Erma Scott Bridgewater, age 91 at the time of her interview, searched for work after graduating from the University of Illinois in 1937 with a degree in sociology. The only employment she was able to find was as a maid at the same university, working in the same student residence as her mother, for \$1.50 per hour.⁴⁹⁵ Even when she eventually became the first program director of the Douglass Community Center in Champaign, Bridgewater was treated like an outsider. “I had to swallow that degree and forget I ever had it. I swallowed my degree and got along with everybody after that.”⁴⁹⁶

PERCENT WITH A COLLEGE DEGREE IN ILLINOIS, 2023



Source: 2023 ACS Five-Year Estimates, Population = Aged 25 years or older.

Twentieth-Century Transformations (1900–2000)

The Great Migration brought millions of Black Americans to Illinois between 1910 and 1970, expanding the need for public education infrastructure.⁴⁹⁷ In Chicago, thousands of new school-age children flooded into the segregated Black Belt on the South Side. Black families fleeing the South pursued educational opportunity in their new homes. Facing vigorous criticism from the growing Black community for the poor quality and overcrowding of available schools, Chicago Public Schools eventually responded by building new schools such as DuSable High School, the first high school in Chicago built to serve an exclusively African American student population. DuSable “came to be seen as a physical manifestation of the migrants’ efforts to improve conditions for their own and future generations.”⁴⁹⁸

Throughout the state, a growing Black population entered into existing mostly *de facto* segregated school systems. The *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* decision reverberated in significant ways across Illinois, bringing to light how entrenched racial discrimination continued to limit and compartmentalize the educational opportunities of Black Illinoisans. In the several decades that followed, efforts to redress racial oppression through school integration and/or desegregation were unevenly attempted and executed in Illinois's greater public education infrastructure and in local school districts.

After the *Brown* decision, school districts across Illinois instituted programs (some by choice, some by court mandate) to bus Black students to predominantly White schools to adhere to the federal anti-discrimination law. Peoria offers a valuable case study, as planning for desegregation there began in 1966 when Black students were enrolled in only nine of the district's thirty-nine schools. In 1968, the Peoria school board implemented a two-part program to address this disparity: first, busing some Black students into White schools to compare their achievements with those who would not be bused and, second, conducting surveys to gauge the impact of desegregation on academic achievement.

In 1972, the Illinois Department of Public Instruction issued "Rules Establishing Requirements and Procedures for the Elimination and Prevention of Racial Segregation in Schools," defining a segregated school as "one which fails to reflect, within 15 percentage points, the actual proportion of minority students and/or minority personnel within the system."⁴⁹⁹ Despite these new state rules, progress had stalled on Peoria's desegregation plan by 1976. The Illinois Office of Education assigned a consultant to review the school district's plan and, while he recommended closing the remaining predominantly Black schools to enroll those students in White schools in the district, the public's response was reportedly "overwhelmingly negative."⁵⁰⁰ That idea was scrapped as representatives from the Peoria school district and state office agreed to add another year for the district to become compliant.⁵⁰¹

In her historical account of desegregation in Illinois, scholar Thandeka K. Chapman found that, during periods of White flight following desegregation efforts in the 1970s and 1980s, "large districts in Illinois tried to retain their dwindling White middle-class populations by doing the minimum to meet state and federal demands for desegregation. Although school boards were threatened by the state a number of times [...] the voting power of these large districts made politicians avoid pushing the districts into compliance."⁵⁰² This was the case in Peoria. Changes in elected and appointed education officials and major shifts in public opinion, as busing dominated public discourse, contributed to slow and sometimes reverse desegregation or integration efforts.⁵⁰³

In Peoria, as across the country, desegregation was seen as the primary (though highly contested) means to address significant and ongoing inequities in the quality of education that districts were providing to Black students. Black communities were themselves ambivalent about busing, because while desegregation addressed some inequities, it created others. As W.E.B. DuBois put it in “Does the Negro need Separate Schools?”, an essay published in 1935, “Theoretically, the Negro needs neither segregated schools nor mixed schools. What he needs is Education.”

As DuBois had recognized decades earlier, there were complex trade-offs for Black Americans navigating the educational system. Du Bois argued that “a mixed school with poor and unsympathetic teachers, with hostile public opinion, and no teaching of truth concerning black folk, is bad. A segregated school with ignorant placeholders, inadequate wretched housing, is equally bad.”⁵⁰⁴ In the case of Peoria, Black students who experienced busing were removed from culturally relevant learning environments and moved into better facilities where they faced potential racial hostilities from other students, faculty, and staff.⁵⁰⁵ Ultimately, the Peoria school district remained segregated as White families moved or changed schools, while public and elected officials promoted neighborhood schools as an equitable solution over busing — an approach that relied on residential segregation to maintain school segregation.⁵⁰⁶ The story is similar in other Illinois locations with large Black populations.

In Rockford, sixty-three families and five organizations sued the school district in 1968 to force it to make structural changes to reduce racial discrimination. The school district’s solution was to implement a “voluntary” busing program in which Black students without neighborhood schools or in neighborhoods with overcrowded schools would be bused to White schools. This policy disregarded the consequences of forcing Black families to send their children to schools across the city, given Rockford’s historical residential segregation: Black residents lived primarily on the West Side and White residents on the East Side.

By 1989, little progress had been made. Black and Latine parents and advocates formed a coalition, People Who Care, to file a lawsuit against the school district alleging that “their constitutional rights had been violated by racial discrimination in the assignment of schools and classes to students in their school district.”⁵⁰⁷ After years of motions and appeals, an order was granted in 1996 to institute changes to hiring and tracking practices, but the order was found to be unconstitutional and repealed the following year. In 2001, the Seventh Circuit declared that “the consequences of segregation had been eliminated,” and the case was finally dismissed with prejudice in 2002. The school district remains racially segregated.

In cities across the state, many White busing opponents relied on the belief that an open job market and open housing opportunities would result in the “natural integration” of Illinois schools.⁵⁰⁸ This notion disregards the serious structural barriers

and power imbalances in wealth and political enfranchisement that intersect to maintain racial disparities in education for Black Illinoisans. Black parents, educators, and students also remained ambivalent about or hostile to busing. One Black mother put it this way: “My children were bused purely for desegregation, *not* for education.”⁵⁰⁹ As was true throughout the history of the state, Black families were seeking high-quality education for their children and regularly facing barriers in getting access.

Resegregation (2000–2022)

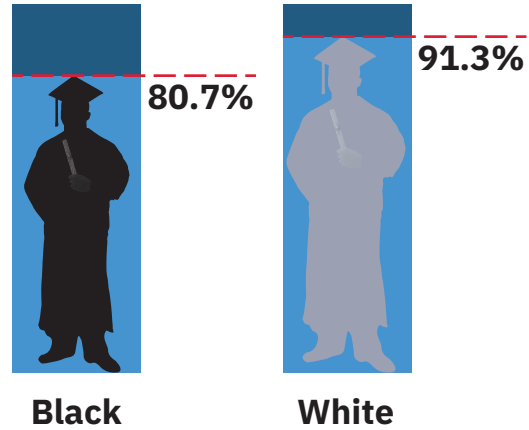
Despite the judicial and legislative victories of the twentieth century, Illinois’s public schools — like many school systems nationwide — are re-segregating in the modern era. Shifting political interests, shrinking resource allocation, White flight, and a growing movement toward privatizing education through “school choice,” have all contributed to this regressive trend.⁵¹⁰ While contemporary calls for school choice seem like common-sense thinking for families to have agency over education choices, these policies in fact concentrate resources away from Black schools and communities and put the responsibility of desegregation on individual family units. Recent research in large districts also has found that “school choice” programs have not actually provided Black families access to the schools they would like their children to attend.⁵¹¹

There are many ways to measure segregation in schools, but on most indices Illinois ranks near the top nationally for its segregation of Black students. A 2024 report by the Civil Rights Project ranked Illinois fourth nationally in “lowest exposure of Black students to Whites.”⁵¹² As the report states, segregation is a concern not only because of the effect of isolation on young people’s racial attitudes, but because segregation in schooling produces inequality. “When you build a barrier separating the more powerful and resource-rich part of society from groups with far less, the schools reflect those differences.”⁵¹³

In addition to patterns of resegregation, Illinois also mirrors national trends in terms of the ways that schools’ punitive and exclusionary discipline policies are disproportionately likely to impact Black students, students living in poverty, and students with disabilities. In 2015, the Illinois General Assembly passed Senate Bill 100 to reduce punitive and exclusionary school discipline practices. Originally drafted by Chicago high school students involved in Voices of Youth in Chicago Education, the law responded in part to Illinois having one of the widest disparities in suspensions between White and Black students in the country. S.B. 100 has successfully reduced overall out-of-school suspensions and expulsion rates, but racial disparities persist. According to the Illinois Attorney General’s Office, during the 2019–20 school year, 45 percent of students expelled from Illinois public schools were Black, despite African Americans comprising less than 17 percent of the Illinois student population.⁵¹⁴

RACIAL DISPARITIES IN ILLINOIS PUBLIC EDUCATION

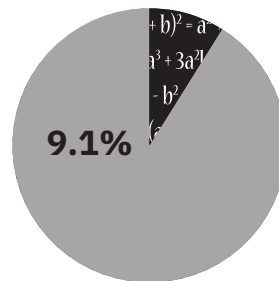
**4-Year High School Graduation Rate
(Students entering high school in
2020 - 2021 academic year)**



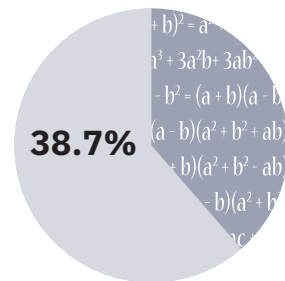
**Illinois Assessment of Readiness
Tests, (Grades 3 - 8, 2024)**

**Percent Meeting
or Exceeding
Expectations: Math**

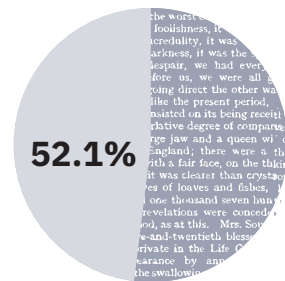
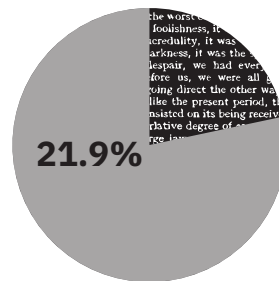
Black



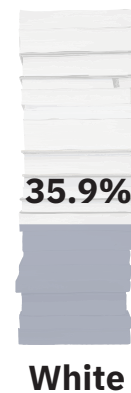
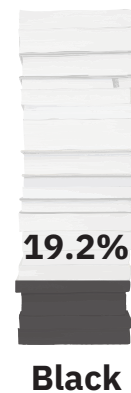
White



**Percent Meeting
or Exceeding
Expectations: English
and Language Arts**



**Percent of Grade 12
Students in Advanced
Placement Courses (2024)**



Source: Illinois Report Card.

School Closures and Modern Resegregation

Closing public schools that serve majority-Black student populations is a historical practice of racial injustice and inequality in Illinois. Even when other desegregation measures were taken during the 1970s and 1980s at the height of busing, school districts in Champaign-Urbana, Rockford, Peoria, and Chicago shuttered and demolished schools in predominantly Black communities, leaving students and families without many choices and scrambling for solutions. School districts would then build schools outside Black neighborhoods and bus Black students out rather than bus White students into schools in Black communities.⁵¹⁵

Educational infrastructure for Black students is perpetually viewed as fungible, disregarding the long fight it took for Black families to simply be accounted for in the public school system. A common sentiment that echoes across the decades comes from a participant in the *Our Journey* oral history project centered on Champaign-Urbana: “[T]he black schools had, although they didn’t have a lot of resources, had teachers who knew and cared about the students they were teaching and once those schools were closed the best of those teachers were sent across town and the students who formed part of that community dispersed throughout the rest of Champaign as well. And we really haven’t recovered from that, yet.”⁵¹⁶

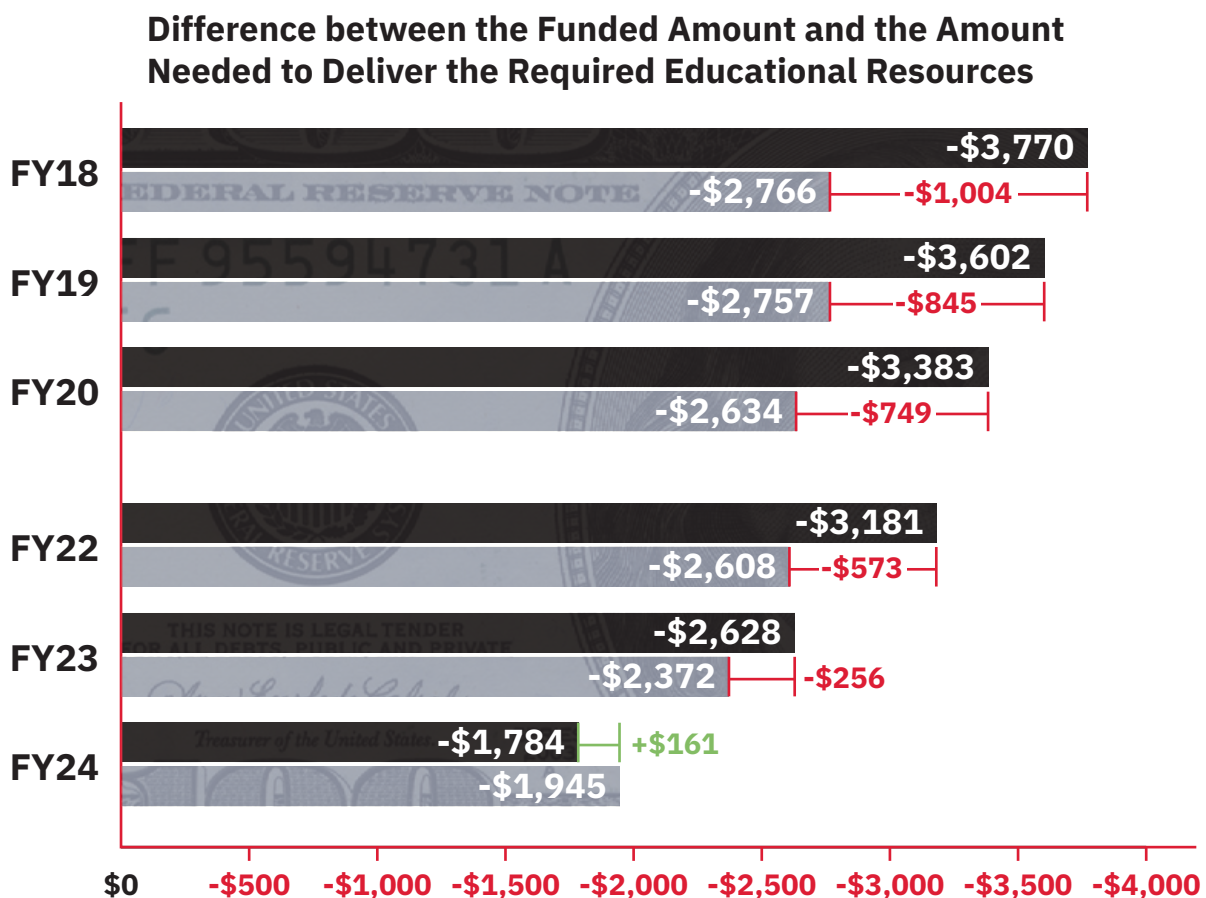
In 2013, Chicago Public Schools closed fifty schools, the overwhelming majority of them in Black neighborhoods. Policymakers and education officials justified the closings as necessary by developing a rhetoric that cast them as “failing schools.” But, as scholar Eve Ewing highlights in her book *Ghosts in the Schoolyard*, protests revealed how community members understood their schools as essential to the health of their communities. The prioritization of quantitative data over other forms of knowledge and insight propelled officials and public media to place blame on the loss of their schools on the individual students, families, faculty, and staff comprising them. The schools were not “failing,” but rather experiencing the culmination of historical processes by which people in power sought to transform Black communities at the expense of the people who live there.⁵¹⁷

By disregarding community members and grassroots efforts to save schools, Illinois continues a generations-long practice in devaluing the perspectives, needs, and histories of Black residents in its policymaking. While *Ghosts in the Schoolyard* is specific to the largest mass school closure in the nation’s history by Chicago Public Schools in 2013, Ewing’s words ring true in the broad scope of Black residents’ experience with Illinois’s public education infrastructure: “Even within its very recent history, the [Chicago] school district was designed to actively maintain segregated schools. Aside from the fact of segregation itself, this mode of functioning indicates something more nefarious: the belief that Black children do not deserve a high-quality education.”⁵¹⁸

While segregation and inequity in school funding were explicit policies of the state for many decades, they persist now as an outcome of implicit policy through the joint mechanisms of segregation and the funding of schools through local property taxes. As Illinois’s Center for Tax and Budget Accountability put it, “Illinois’ historic overreliance on local property taxes to fund education had a disproportionately negative impact on school districts that have high concentrations of minority students.”⁵¹⁹ Illinois has had, over the last decades, deeply inequitable funding across districts. During the early 2000s the state had the second-highest funding gaps in the nation, behind only New York. As of 2015, Illinois became No. 1 on this measure, with multiple research centers and national think tanks naming Illinois as having the most regressive funding formula in the country.⁵²⁰

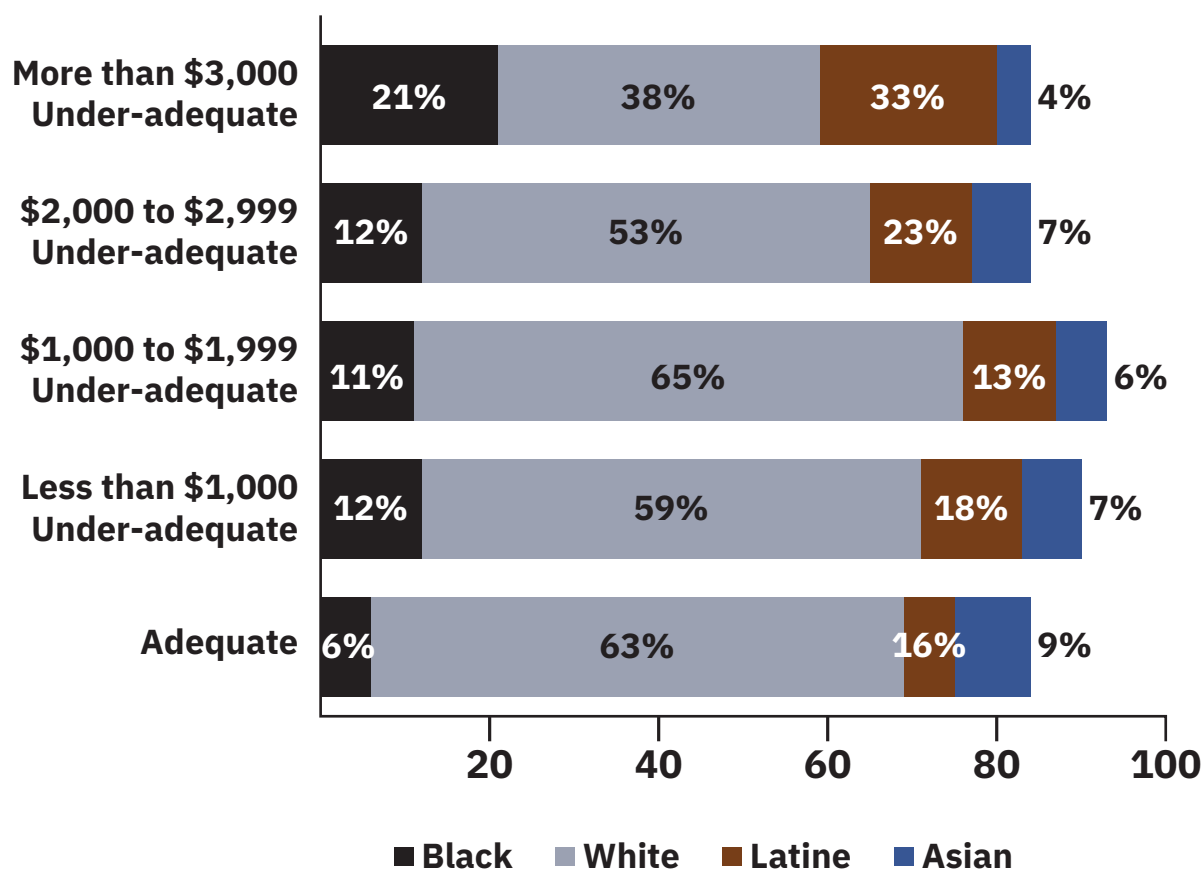
Spurred in part by a lawsuit filed by the Chicago Urban League, this began to change with the 2017 passage of the Evidence-Based Funding (EBF) formula for

PER PUPIL FUNDING GAP, 2018 - 2024



Source: Illinois Center for Tax and Budget Accountability, 2024. Please note that 2021 is omitted due to COVID-19.

PER PUPIL ADEQUACY FUNDING GAP BY RACE AND AMOUNT, 2023 - 2024



Source: Partnership for Equity and Education Rights Illinois. <https://www.peerillinois.org/district-funding-data>

ensuring that every district provided an “adequate” education. Analyses done just before its passage showed that the “adequacy gap” for Black students in Illinois was more than twice that for White students.⁵²¹ While still underfunded, the EBF formula has made headway in closing school funding disparities, helping to ensure districts across the state are meeting basic educational needs and “helping make up for the state’s historic underfunding of schools attended by Black and Latinx students, and effectively countering the structural racism inherent in the state’s former approach to school funding.”⁵²² On the other hand, while there has been real progress in shrinking the overall adequacy gap for Black students, other significant gaps remain. For example, Black students are much less likely to attend schools in districts that are funded at rates above the adequacy rate. If we consider the adequacy figure as the minimum adequate funding level for schools, White students are much more likely to attend schools in districts that are not only adequate but that exceed 100 percent adequacy.

RACIAL DISPARITIES IN SCHOOL DISTRICT PROPERTY TAX RATES AND REVENUE IN ILLINOIS, THE CHICAGOLAND AREA, AND THE COOK COUNTY SUBURBS, SCHOOL YEAR 2025

Region and Variable	Majority Black	Majority White	Difference (Black - White)	Percent Difference (Black - White)
Illinois Average Property Tax Rate	6.90%	3.85%	3.05%	79.31%
Illinois Average Equalized Assessed Value per Student	\$173,125.81	\$344,057.23	\$(170,931.42)	-49.68%
Illinois Average Property Tax Revenue per Student	\$10,154.94	\$11,574.92	\$(1,419.97)	-12.27%
Chicago MSA Average Property Tax Rate	7.56%	3.52%	4.03%	114.56%
Chicago MSA Average Equalized Assessed Value per Student	\$178,245.74	\$602,157.55	\$(423,911.81)	-70.40%
Chicago MSA Average Property Tax Revenue per Student	\$11,542.20	\$17,461.78	\$(5,919.59)	-33.90%
Chicago MSA no CPS Average Property Tax Rate	7.56%	3.52%	4.03%	114.56%
Chicago MSA no CPS Average Equalized Assessed Value per Student	\$178,245.74	\$602,157.55	\$(423,911.81)	-70.40%
Chicago MSA no CPS Average Property Tax Revenue per Student	\$11,542.20	\$17,461.78	\$(5,919.59)	-33.90%
Cook Suburbs Average Property Tax Rate	7.56%	3.22%	4.34%	134.74%
Cook Suburbs Average Equalized Assessed Value per Student	\$177,575.74	\$777,984.94	\$(600,409.21)	-77.17%
Cook Suburbs Average Property Tax Revenue per Student	\$11,462.05	\$21,286.72	\$(9,824.67)	-46.15%

Source: Illinois State Board of Education, Illinois Report Card, SY2025

Conclusion

Throughout the history of the state, racial discrimination in Illinois's education policy and infrastructure has created structural barriers to Black residents' ability to access quality education for generations. The earliest Illinois public school laws were established to restrict the right to an education to White residents. Black families protested, sued, lobbied, and otherwise advocated for the right of their children to attend the schools that their taxes supported, that were in their neighborhoods, and that provided the resources to encourage the academic, mental, and emotional development of Black students of all ages.

Ongoing challenges to equitable resource allocation continue to define the Black educational experience in Illinois. Across the state, property tax rates in majority-Black school districts are approximately 80% (or 3.05 percentage points) higher than those in majority-White school districts. Despite this higher tax rate, property tax revenue in majority-Black school districts is approximately \$1,420 lower per pupil compared to majority-White school districts. This means that, on average, Black Illinoisans are paying much more in property taxes but receiving less in terms of resources available for schooling. These disparities increase in the Chicagoland area, and even more so in the Cook County suburbs, which contain about two-thirds of majority Black school districts.

The uneven implementation of school integration and desegregation efforts, along with minimal compliance, undermines the efficacy and public perception of these processes. In the five decades since the landmark *Brown v. Board of Education* ruling, Illinois remains one of the most segregated states for education. In addition to the inequities in access to high-quality schools, Black students continue to experience differential treatment within schools. Spurred on by lawsuits and community organizing, Illinois legislators have passed important laws in the last decade to address structural inequities — but room for progress remains.

BLACK STRUGGLES FOR EDUCATION IN ILLINOIS

Elizabeth Todd-Breland

Black Illinoisans have struggled — and continue to struggle — against inequities, injustices, and racial discrimination in education. Early Black residents of Illinois, who had varying degrees of freedom, sought education for their children despite state laws that restricted education to White students. The 1825 act that established public schools in Illinois explicitly stated that public schools should be “free and open to every class of white children.”⁵²³

Built in 1835, Hamilton Primary School in Otterville is often recognized as the first free, integrated school in the state.⁵²⁴ However, many Black children in Illinois were systemically excluded from public schools. Black churches and community organizations created independent schools to serve Black children when local municipalities and the state of Illinois refused to do so. In the 1840s and 1850s, Black communities, individual churches, and the Wood River Baptist Association founded schools for Black children in Springfield, Jacksonville, Alton, and other locations across the state.⁵²⁵ However, without state funds, many independent Black schools struggled financially.⁵²⁶

Despite disfranchisement by Black Laws that severely limited Black Illinoisans’ political freedoms, African Americans held conventions, authored appeals and commentaries in the press, and filed petitions to the state legislature. In the 1850s, groups of Black Illinoisans filed petitions protesting the state’s school tax. African Americans had to pay into the school tax fund, even though the taxes were explicitly directed to White children’s education. In response, rather than provide public education on an equal basis for Black children, the Illinois state legislature passed an 1855 law that allowed for school tax refunds to Black residents to create their own segregated independent schools. The refunded dollars were far less than the funds afforded to White children, not adequate to fund a separate system of independent Black schools, and still allowed Black children to be excluded from public schools.⁵²⁷

Even after state law required the provision of free public education for Black children, many public schools remained separate and unequal by policy and practice. In 1874, the state legislature passed “An Act to Protect Colored Children in Their Rights to Attend Public Schools,” which required Black children’s admission into public schools and prohibited exclusion “on account of the color” of the child.⁵²⁸ Communities across the state responded by creating inferiorly resourced, all-Black public schools. In the 1880s and 1890s, Black parents in Quincy and Alton sued the school board and local

government for prohibiting their children from attending nearby White schools. The Illinois Supreme Court eventually ruled in favor of the Black parents from Alton but limited the scope of the decision to the individual children in the suit.⁵²⁹

In 1883, more than 125 Black students and parents staged a week-long sit-in at White schools in Cairo to highlight the inferior facilities at the all-Black Greeley Grammar School. Local political leaders eventually agreed to make repairs at Greeley and open a new all-Black high school, but these all-Black schools remained inequitably resourced.⁵³⁰ Rather than create a Black high school or integrate existing schools in Edwardsville and Collinsville, school board leaders maintained inequality by paying for Black students to attend all-Black schools in East St. Louis or leave the state to attend high schools in Jefferson City or St. Louis, Missouri.⁵³¹ In this context, many of the education struggles waged by Black Illinoisans through the first half of the twentieth century prioritized the fight for equal resources and facilities for Black public schools.⁵³²

The African American population in Illinois increased significantly during the Great Migration as hundreds of thousands of southern Black migrants settled in Illinois — particularly in Chicago, which was the destination for more than five hundred thousand migrants.⁵³³ In the 1850s, Chicago diverged from state law and passed local ordinances that allowed students of all races to attend public schools. The relatively small number of Black children in the city attended public schools alongside White children.⁵³⁴ Between 1915 and 1940, as the Black population grew rapidly, Black students increasingly attended segregated, overcrowded, underresourced schools in dilapidated facilities. Residential segregation through restrictive covenants, redlining, exploitative real estate practices, discriminatory public housing policies, and vigilante violence confined Black Chicagoans to overcrowded neighborhoods on the South Side, and later on the West Side.

Local education policies made segregation in schooling even more severe than segregation in housing by limiting Black students' ability to transfer, gerrymandering attendance areas, and using double-shift schedules and portable "Willis Wagon" trailers to address overcrowding rather than allowing Black students to attend nearby White schools. By the 1960s, per-pupil spending on Black children in Chicago was only two-thirds of that spent on children in predominantly White schools.⁵³⁵

At the same time, federal subsidies and state policies incentivized White flight from city schools in metropolitan areas across Illinois and supported inequality and racial exclusion in suburbs. Whiter and wealthier communities engaged in opportunity hoarding to enrich their local schools using seemingly color-blind tools

like zoning, tax and regulatory policies, and other mechanisms of state government. For example, Deerfield used zoning to maintain racial exclusion; New Trier fought state education funding equalization formulas; Aurora sued the Illinois Board of Education over directives to desegregate; and predominantly Black suburbs like Ford Heights struggled to fund their schools due to fiscal inequities caused by racism, deindustrialization, and White flight. Public policy produced more inequitable schools that disproportionately disadvantaged Black students.⁵³⁶

From Rockford to Chicago to Champaign to Peoria, districts that did eventually achieve some integration — through assignment policies, magnet schools, or other school choice programs — also implemented tracking systems that limited students' future educational paths in racially discriminatory ways as early as kindergarten. In 1993, a federal judge described Rockford schools as “[...] the story of a school district that, at times, has committed such open acts of discrimination as to be cruel and committed others with such subtlety as to raise discrimination to an art form.”⁵³⁷ In June 2024, another federal complaint was filed against Rockford Public Schools for discriminatory discipline, police referrals, and ticketing of Black students. An attorney with the National Center for Youth Law stated, “Black students in Rockford Public Schools have been made to feel unwelcome and their experiences have been starkly different from those of their White peers.”⁵³⁸ This is not just a Rockford problem. Unfortunately, Black students across the state share similar negative experiences.

A *Governing* analysis using 2015–16 school year data found that “8 of 10 Illinois metro areas ranked among the highest third of all metropolitan areas nationally for black and white student school segregation,” including the metropolitan areas of Decatur, Champaign-Urbana, Rockford, Springfield, Kankakee, Danville, Chicago, and Peoria — which the study found to be the most segregated in the country.⁵³⁹ There is nothing inherently inferior about Black students attending predominantly Black schools, but the historic and ongoing systemically inequitable resourcing of predominantly Black schools is a consistently racist feature of public education in Illinois.

While school governance is often thought of as supremely local, it is the state legislature that is ultimately constitutionally responsible for public schools in Illinois. Since 2017, public schools have been funded through an evidence-based funding formula. While more equitable than previous funding attempts, the formula is color-blind and has yet to be fully funded. Since statehood, the Illinois state legislature has actively facilitated education funding, taxation, and regulatory policies that have increased inequities.⁵⁴⁰

Today, across the state — from rural enclaves to small towns, in suburbs, and in Chicago — Black students, parents, educators, and community members continue to contend with the legacies and ongoing impact of racial discrimination, disinvestment, and inequality. Eminent education scholar Gloria Ladson-Billings reminds us that focusing “on the [achievement] gap is misplaced. Instead, we need to look at the ‘education debt’ that has accumulated over time [...] the historical, economic, sociopolitical, and moral decisions and policies that characterize our society have created an education debt.”⁵⁴¹ We must address this debt to repair the harms that Black students in Illinois have experienced since the state’s founding and to achieve a fully resourced, culturally responsive, equitable public education for Black Illinoisans.

REPARATIONS AS REDRESS FOR EDUCATIONAL DEBT: SCHOOLS, COMMUNITY DETERMINATION AND JUSTICE IN ILLINOIS

David Stovall

In her 2006 presidential address to the American Educational Research Association, Dr. Gloria Ladson-Billings challenged conventional wisdom on the concept of the “achievement gap.” Given the concept’s roots in deficit ideology and an inherent assumption of the inability of Black students to match the educational attainment of their White counterparts, Ladson-Billings made note of a skewed system of inequality. To push back on the concept of an “achievement gap,” she reconfigured the idea and challenged us to consider an “education debt.”

The reconfiguration of debt allows those concerned with education to speak specifically to what Black children are owed, given the state’s historical refusal to provide quality education.⁵⁴² Because there is nothing inherently deficient about the capacity of Black children to learn, Ladson-Billings’s reversal is an important one. If debt is understood as a budget shortfall that is the result of unpaid costs, then Black children, as members of a group that have never been provided adequate education in the state of Illinois, are deserving of redress.

A debt is owed to them because as a group they have not received what should be guaranteed to them by the state (in this case, a quality education). When substandard educational options are paired with poor housing, poor health care, and poor government services, reparations press us to consider what Black children are owed. As “repair” for resources that have rarely been received but have been structurally denied, reparations represent redress for the educational debt incurred by the state of Illinois with regard to Black children. Most important, reparations are not an individual claim, but a structural declaration speaking to the entirety of loss incurred by Black families and communities.

Reparations as Redress for Structural Inequality in Education

It is important to make a distinction between individual/small group educational gains and structural conditions in education. The point is not to discount the educational advances that Black people and their allies fought for diligently in seeking to create viable spaces for learning. Instead, reparations in education should take those efforts as the exception and not the rule governing Black families’ access to education in Illinois. Any gains made pale in comparison to the structural barriers that have prevented Black families from having full educational access.

To envision what is to be replenished, any broad-based effort to address reparations for education must first consider what has been denied. From permissive transfers in Chicago to the creation of segregated, disinvested, and defunded schools in East St. Louis, Carbondale, Peoria, and Cairo, there has never been a moment where Black families in Illinois have not been actively engaged in efforts to attain educational justice.⁵⁴³

Reparations in the form of educational access are central to developing redress in the attempt to address structural inequality. If reparations are considered repair for the vestiges of injuries incurred as the result of unchecked White Supremacy in policy and practice, education must be central in developing restitution. For Black residents of Illinois, education has always been a site of struggle. While challenges to Black education look different throughout the state, ideologically the processes that local and state governments use are the same: isolating Black residents politically, socially, and economically while denying them access to certain schools and refusing to care for the physical infrastructure of school buildings that Black children attend.

These processes occur throughout the state regarding the education of Black children — and they can also provide potential pathways to consider redress.

Reparations and the Connective Tissue Between Education and Housing in Illinois

Educational options are a determining factor in where families decide to live, so schools are critical as Black families seek housing. The current dynamic between housing and education provides an important example of structural inequality in the state.

Historically, the Illinois cities with the largest Black populations have been Chicago, Rockford, Aurora, and Joliet.⁵⁴⁴ Beginning in the late 1980s, the state began to lose significant numbers of Black residents, and many of those who remained were dispersed throughout the region due to shifts in housing. Policies like the Plan for Transformation of the Chicago Housing Authority and the lack of affordable housing in Chicago pushed many families to relocate to other regions in the state, primarily along the I-74 corridor to the municipalities of Rantoul, Champaign-Urbana, Peoria, Decatur, Bloomington-Normal, and Danville.

Although these cities all have historical Black populations, the arrival of Black residents from Chicago deeply impacted education in each. Black families who were dispersed to these smaller towns saw no educational gains for K–12 students in their new residences.⁵⁴⁵ Instead, in many of these areas, disciplinary infractions for

Black students increased as educational attainment for the same set of students decreased. Many Black families did not find their new schools to be welcoming or supportive.

While this is a well-known story in suburban schools in Cook, Will, DuPage, McHenry, Lake, and Kane counties, it is not popularly discussed in central and southern Illinois. If we are to consider reparations for Black residents, this dynamic must be considered in developing structural redress for Black families experiencing instability in housing and education. The dearth of research on recent trends in housing and education in the central and southern regions of the state will be critical to any discussion of reparations in Illinois.

Looking Forward While Listening to History

Reparations push us to consider structural redress for an unpaid debt to Black families. Where the task may appear daunting at first, an important component to remember is that there are existing building blocks that the state can use to build out its plan. Some may not think of Illinois Statutes Chapter 105, § 5/27-20.4, a portion of the Illinois Grant Recovery Act, as reparations-forward legislation — but its requirement that every child in Illinois public schools receive a unit of Black history, including the contributions of Black people to the state, is an important step.⁵⁴⁶ As an omnibus bill, it provides an example of a structural component that is broad-reaching while also providing specifics as to what redress could look like. Although only a start, it provides an example of what is possible in a state that has not paid its debt.

FAMILY

As this report details, structural racism — systemic discrimination embedded in the laws, policies, and institutions that govern daily life — has shaped nearly every dimension of Black life in Illinois. One of its most enduring and devastating impacts has been the destabilization of Black family life, a process not passive or incidental but organized and sustained through institutions that were never designed to serve Black residents equally.

For example, the heteronormative family structure embedded at the foundation of Illinois’s public policies and institutions is reinforced throughout the histories discussed below. Welfare systems built around the notion of a “family wage” presume gendered divisions of labor that do not reflect the realities of most low-income and working-class households.⁵⁴⁷ Moreover, the same structures that disadvantage and discriminate against racial minorities also marginalize families that do not conform to the two-parent, male-headed household model, including LGBTQ+ families and alternative family structures. Extended and multigenerational family networks, which have long played central roles in many Black communities, are similarly excluded from the design and scope of Illinois’s family- and child-related policies.

The experience of Black families in Illinois has been shaped by every system of structural racism examined in this report: enslavement, racial terror, an unjust legal system, housing segregation, educational opportunity gaps, political disenfranchisement, health care infrastructure disparities, and stolen labor. From nineteenth-century enslavement and state-sanctioned family separation to today’s frayed social safety net, Black families have continually been targeted by systems that undermine family security, impose economic hardship, and devastate individuals and communities.

Historical Foundations of Black Family Life (1818–1915)

During the active enforcement of Illinois’s Black Laws, Black families lived under intense state surveillance and control. Government officials, their deputized subordinates, and White vigilante groups regularly detained, questioned, arrested, kidnapped, and assaulted Black residents to prevent settlement and enforce racial subordination.

Families, especially those living near Illinois’s southern border, were uniquely vulnerable to kidnapping under the Fugitive Slave Law and the predations of those profiting from the slave trade. As we have documented in this report, although Illinois was ostensibly a “free” state, Black children, parents, siblings, and spouses could

still be sold away through legal indentures, while even those able to prove their emancipation risked being kidnapped back into slavery. Beyond physical separation, Black families lived under constant legal precarity — every relationship was rendered contestable, surveilled, and violable by both the state and private actors.

In the immediate post-Emancipation period, many Black families split themselves by necessity, sending one member ahead to Illinois from the South to secure housing and employment before reuniting the household. This was not migration driven by opportunity, but a survival strategy in response to hostile and uncertain conditions. Traveling hundreds of miles through unfamiliar and often openly violent territory exposed families to renewed danger and exploitation. Once in Illinois, segregation and exclusion in local health and education institutions forced Black families to rise above legal and social challenges merely to access public services afforded to others as a right. These struggles illustrate the additional, racialized burdens imposed on Black families to obtain even the most basic forms of care, schooling, and protection.

After the Civil War, Black Americans sought to restore both old and newly formed family connections as they worked to reunite families fractured by slavery.⁵⁴⁸ One study of Pulaski County census records from 1870 to 1900 found that “most Black migrants arrived in family groups, sometimes settling within close proximity to still other relatives,”⁵⁴⁹ although the study acknowledged that few surviving sources “provide information about the function of the black family in the county.”⁵⁵⁰ The lack of records itself underscores how Black family life was rendered invisible or devalued by the very institutions that produced and preserved official knowledge — an enduring form of structural harm that shaped how policymakers, courts, and social service agencies perceived, defined, and often disregarded Black families.

Throughout this period, pursuing economic and educational opportunities often forced Black families to relocate repeatedly to avoid restrictive housing covenants, racial terror, and labor exploitation. The constant threat of displacement, exclusion from adequate wages and schools, and the absence (or open hostility) of state protections meant that family formation and stability were persistently undermined not by cultural deficiency, but by structural racism embedded in Illinois’s legal, economic, and social systems.

The rise of Black churches, fraternal organizations, and social clubs in this period is often cited as evidence of community strength and resilience. However, these organizations developed primarily in response to exclusion from public resources and social safety nets. The need to self-organize for education, health care, and mutual aid exposes the state’s ongoing failure to recognize and support Black residents as equal citizens.

The Great Migration (1915–1970)

The Great Migration — during which more than six million Black Americans left the South for the North and West between 1915 and 1970 — was a transformative yet perilous era for Black families in Illinois.⁵⁵¹ While this northward migration is often framed as pursuit of opportunity, for many families it was not a choice but a necessity in response to racial terror, disenfranchisement, exploitative labor, and legally sanctioned segregation. Upon arriving in Illinois, however, Black families confronted new forms of discrimination and systematic exclusion.

Between 1890 and 1920, the Black population of Illinois tripled, with most migrants settling in urban centers where, as we have documented, racial housing covenants, low wages, and limited educational opportunities perpetuated poverty, overcrowding, and higher mortality rates.⁵⁵² Black residents of Illinois were also vulnerable to racial violence, including the massacres in Springfield (1908), East St. Louis (1917), and Chicago (1919), where White mobs targeted Black homes, businesses, and lives to enforce a racial order designed to keep Black families socially and economically subordinate.

Although many Black households during this period were two-parent households with dependent children, single-parent households and those that included non-related members were also common (boarders, often taken in to supplement household income, were included in census counts).⁵⁵³ The analysis of Pulaski County Black resident census data found that “10% to 50% of Black families were extended or expanded” in the region and that most migrants arrived as family groups who frequently settled with or near relatives or other close relations.⁵⁵⁴ Overcrowded living arrangements were thus the product of economic necessity and systematic exclusion, reinforced by restrictive covenants and redlining practices that confined Black residents to underresourced and segregated neighborhoods.

Black families’ homes often functioned as sites of economic production, supporting agricultural, manual, and domestic labor. Widespread hiring discrimination, exclusion from unions, and segregated labor markets limited access to stable, well-paying jobs, forcing many Black families to pool resources and even rely on child labor to survive. Because educational opportunities were limited by racial discrimination, Black children were often unable to attend school consistently and their labor became essential to maintaining household stability. Many children followed their parents into manual trades or contributed to family-run businesses such as dry-goods stores and small service businesses.

The responsibility of protecting Black families from racial harm fell as heavily on women as it did on men. In Illinois, Black women were especially active as clubwomen,

organizers, and social reformers who sought to counter the harmful impact of systemic discrimination and urbanization on the family unit.⁵⁵⁵ The *Chicago Defender* served as a crucial platform for reformers and advocates to call attention to the specific needs of Black girls which often otherwise were ignored, though Black boys were similarly denied equal access to the state's child welfare and protective services. In a 1913 editorial in the *Chicago Defender*, the author protests, "That is a most unjust condition of public affairs which gives to a white orphan girl care, education, and training in a school, and then instead of caring for an [African American] orphan girl either farms her out in private homes or sends her to prison."⁵⁵⁶

Another editorial, "Negro Children Sold to Slavery," published in the *Chicago Inter-Ocean*, prompted a formal investigation into the treatment of Black orphans by the Children's Home and Aid Society of Illinois. The editorial accused the organization of "furnishing Negro children to be sold to bondage ... on cotton plantations in Southern homes."⁵⁵⁷ Founded in 1883 as a private charitable organization, the society partnered with state and city governments to provide foster care and adoption services for Illinois children.⁵⁵⁸ The investigators found that the organization, responsible for finding homes for "abandoned and neglected children," had instead sent Black children to at least twenty-six different states instead of finding homes for them locally.⁵⁵⁹

Black women engaged in a broad range of political activism, from lobbying for anti-lynching legislation to organizing and participating in women's suffrage campaigns across both rural and urban Illinois.⁵⁶⁰ They also stepped in to protect and care for Black families by performing, as private citizens, many of the public functions the state neglected — bearing the social and economic costs of care that government institutions failed to recognize as necessary.⁵⁶¹

The Black women who founded the Illinois Federation of Colored Women's Clubs in 1900 organized and fundraised to improve the family and social life of Black residents across the state. They established kindergartens, nurseries, orphanages, settlement houses, homes for the elderly, recreation centers, and medical care facilities to provide essential social welfare services from which Black residents were systematically excluded by the state.⁵⁶² Their chapters addressed local needs in communities including Chicago, Peoria, Moline, Bloomington, Rock Island, and other areas of the state.⁵⁶³ In Decatur, for instance, the Big Sister's Club aided many families with "clothes, groceries and coal. In several instances house-rent has been paid. Homes have been secured for friendless children, and several young girls have been rescued from the city jails and their fare paid to their homes."⁵⁶⁴ Black churches, women's clubs, and other community organizations collectively filled the void left by the state's failure to extend to Black families the protections and services that were routinely afforded to White families.

Family Norms and Contemporary Systems of Inequality (1965–Present)

Despite the passage of civil rights legislation, state and federal institutions perpetuated structural racism by encoding the White, middle-class, two-parent household with male breadwinners as the normative ideal for family policy. Black families, by contrast, were cast as deviant, deficient, and in need of reform. The male breadwinner model relied on access to a “family wage,” which allowed previous generations of men to earn enough to support economically dependent wives and children. However, Black men and women were systemically denied access to the well-paying industrial, corporate, and professional jobs that made this standard attainable.

One of the most influential — and most damaging — policy frameworks of the twentieth century emerged from the 1965 report by Assistant Secretary of Labor Daniel Patrick Moynihan. *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action*, commonly known as the Moynihan Report, falsely attributed disparities in income, education, and poverty between Black Americans and other racial and ethnic groups to what it described as a “matriarchal structure,” saying that “the Negro community has been forced into a matriarchal structure which, because it is too out of line with the rest of the American society, seriously retards the progress of the group as a whole.”⁵⁶⁵ While the report acknowledged the harmful history and legacies of chattel slavery and noted that the Civil Rights Act opened economic, political, and social opportunities for Black Americans, it also pathologized the structure of Black families rather than confronting the systematic racism that constrained them.

According to Moynihan, the so-called “matriarchal structure” created by the prevalence of single motherhood in Black communities deprived Black men of what he viewed as their prescribed role as the economic and physical heads of the household and Black women of their prescribed roles as caregivers and home-runners. In this framing, women’s economic and familial independence was blamed for male unemployment, out-of-wedlock births, high crime rates, and a range of other social problems.

Pervasive Policy Failures: Public Benefits and Welfare

The Moynihan Report’s analysis of Black single motherhood was popular among antipoverty politicians, activists, and antiwelfare leaders.⁵⁶⁶ It helped to frame Black family structure as culturally deficient rather than recognizing the material harms imposed by systemic racism, including segregation, job discrimination, and exclusion from New Deal–era safety nets. The report became embedded in the collective political, social, and cultural mindset⁵⁶⁷ and helped shape decades of punitive welfare reforms that treated poverty as a moral failure rather than a policy failure.

The report's racialized rhetoric of "family breakdown" and "dependency" provided justification for federal and state governments, including Illinois, to restrict access to public programs such as Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC), a part of the Social Security Act of 1935.⁵⁶⁸ A later expansion of Social Security provided benefits to the widows and children of deceased beneficiaries; however, because agricultural and domestic workers were excluded from eligibility, many Black families whose primary wage earners worked in these sectors were denied survivors' benefits. Despite these efforts to restrict access to government benefits, AFDC was still the most viable support available for non-White mothers.⁵⁶⁹ As such, AFDC became a central focus of public and political discourse surrounding state aid and the Black family. As scholar Marisa Chapell observes, "state and local governments retained control over these programs leaving potential recipients subject to local racial, gender, and moral prejudices, labor market demands, and fiscal pressures."⁵⁷⁰

State legislators, local officials, and business lobbyists saw little justification for Black mothers to remain at home with their children — a significant difference from the rationale for the 1911 establishment of state mothers' pension funds, which enabled mothers (namely White widows) to care for their children in the absence of a male breadwinner. Policy makers pushed for work requirements as a condition of public benefits. These requirements rely on the racialized assumption that Black mothers should engage with waged labor rather than tend to their own children and households — rendering them, in the eyes of the state, "unworthy" of public support.⁵⁷¹ Policy research has since demonstrated that work requirements for welfare programs and other public benefit programs have structurally and systemically racist foundations.⁵⁷²

Seeking to cut the state's welfare budget, Illinois policymakers encouraged poor, single mothers to enter the workforce despite low wages, a lack of childcare and health care, and limited prospects for upward mobility.⁵⁷³ In Illinois, moreover, the notion that women not employed and staying home to care for children while receiving benefits were "unworthy" of public support took on legal force when legislators reclassified welfare fraud as a criminal rather than administrative offense.⁵⁷⁴

Enforcement of these laws disproportionately targeted Black women, who were publicly demonized as "welfare queens" — a racist stereotype popularized by Ronald Reagan that depicted welfare recipients in urban public housing as single Black mothers using public aid grants to purchase Cadillacs and fur coats.⁵⁷⁵ The myth drew from the highly publicized case of Linda Taylor, a Black woman living in Chicago⁵⁷⁶ who was found to have used multiple aliases, addresses, phone numbers, and Social Security cards to claim various public and private benefits.⁵⁷⁷

Public statements by officials within the Illinois Department of Public Aid (IDPA), along with crusading state legislators like Don Moore, reinforced by sensationalized

media coverage of alleged welfare fraud, helped cement the “common-sense” belief that fraud was rampant and that the appropriate response was to criminalize fraud investigations and reduce public aid spending.⁵⁷⁸ The consequences of these narratives persist: Black families receiving public assistance in Illinois are 111 percent more likely to be sanctioned than White recipients, placing them at significantly greater risk of losing benefits altogether.⁵⁷⁹

Historian Julilly Kohler-Hausmann argues that the public spectacle of welfare fraud prosecutions heightened stigma toward welfare programs, recipients, and Black families alike. The widespread belief that welfare recipients were deceitful or undeserving became a central factor in eroding support for welfare itself. Mainstream news media played a major role in amplifying these perceptions.⁵⁸⁰ For example, the *Chicago Tribune* published the names, addresses, and workplaces of those charged with welfare fraud — even as IDPA investigators found that many cases of so-called “fraud” simply involved recipients who failed to report new employment out of fear that their already meager grants would be reduced.⁵⁸¹

Historian Martin Gilen further argues that the portrayal of welfare recipients as dishonest and freeloading lies “at the core of American’s conviction that welfare spending should be cut.”⁵⁸² The “culture of poverty” thesis, coined by anthropologist Oscar Lewis and popularized by political scientist Charles Murray, erroneously attributes poverty to the so-called “deviant values” of low-income people.⁵⁸³ This framework particularly targeted poor Black women, claiming they had babies to increase welfare benefits and as a way to avoid engaging in paid labor.

As sociologist Jennifer Hamer demonstrates in her study of Black family life in East St. Louis, such stereotypes obscure the lived realities of Black women striving to support their families amid generations of economic, political, and educational disenfranchisement.⁵⁸⁴ Poverty reproduces itself across family lines, compounding stress and instability for both households and individual family members.

The patterns observed in the family narratives of Hamer’s study provide invaluable insight into the long-term effects of generational racial poverty and exemplify family conditions across much of the state. The twenty-first-century job market in East St. Louis is dominated by low-wage and lateral employment. Family life remains deeply shaped by rising costs of living, accumulated debt, and the suppression of economic and educational opportunity. For low-income Black parents and families, employment must constantly be weighed against the costs of childcare; a single injury or disability can eliminate both income and health insurance; and whatever economic stability earlier generations may have achieved is difficult to maintain, let alone pass down across generations.⁵⁸⁵

East St. Louis residents like Samuel Martin exemplify the common experience of instability in Black families created by interrelated structural inequities: After developing a degenerative muscle disease that left him unable to work, Martin lost both his job and health insurance. To cover mortgage and household expenses, his family relied on credit cards, eventually accruing unmanageable debt and being forced to move in with another family member.⁵⁸⁶

Another resident, Naomi, who also lost her job, expressed the despair that often accompanies economic insecurity: “When you can’t take care of your loved ones, you start to wonder what your purpose is ... what are you here for? It makes it hard to come home sometime.”⁵⁸⁷ Even older adults who have technically reached retirement age are often unable to stop working because they are responsible for the economic stability of an extended family network. One resident, Pearl, at age 82, continued working in housekeeping to support her ailing husband and mother, as well as her adult grandchildren and minor great-grandchildren. Hamer records Pearl’s simple, candid wish: to “make thirty-five thousand dollars a year and [have] some good insurance.”⁵⁸⁸

Many of the residents interviewed in Hamer’s study live precariously along the margin — earning too little through waged work to sustain their families, yet too much to qualify for public assistance. This constant negotiation between survival and ineligibility places tremendous emotional and mental strain on family members. Hamer notes that aging and older women are often the ones who provide shelter, food, and clothing for low-income adult children and grandchildren.⁵⁸⁹ One mother of three, Fredrica, raised her children in the same house where she herself had grown up while also caring for her aging mother. Though she spent years on and off public aid, she found that while the Social Security checks covered household bills, they could not compensate for the fatigue. As Hamer observes, leisure, in the broadest sense of the word, is a casualty of poverty.⁵⁹⁰ The daily stressors of low-wage labor are compounded by anti-welfare policies that ignore how Black families already face precarious and diminishing access to public aid while navigating labor markets and social service systems designed to exclude them.

In 1996, the public assistance social safety net was essentially dismantled by the federal Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Act, which replaced AFDC with Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF).⁵⁹¹ TANF built on the legacy of critique about Black families in the Moynihan Report and the notion of “welfare queens” popularized by Ronald Regan era politicians: its work requirements, time limits, and punitive sanctioning mechanisms have disproportionately harmed Black families, who are more likely to experience underemployment, job instability, inadequate transportation, and unaffordable childcare.

The Moynihan Report and theories such as the “culture of poverty” have profoundly shaped welfare policy in both Illinois and the broader United States. By emphasizing the supposed dysfunction of the “matriarchal structure” and portraying low-income Black women as sexually promiscuous, lazy, and criminal, these frameworks cast them as non-workers and moral failures rather than as participants of a constrained labor market. In reality, it is the inadequacy of the welfare system itself that compels many people to move between public assistance, low-wage employment, and informal or underground economies in order to feed, clothe, house, and educate themselves and their families.⁵⁹²

In her 2025 book, *Inherited Inequality*, sociologist Christina Cross uses longitudinal data to show unequivocally that family structure is not the cause of Black disadvantage, demonstrating that two-parent families are not the “solution” to inequality.⁵⁹³ Moreover, Cross unveils how this narrative has distracted us from the realities of persistent structural disadvantage and simultaneously perpetrated a harmful logic which blames Black families for their hardships and contributes to persistent policy failures.

Pervasive Policy Failures: Domestic Violence and Child Welfare

Policy failures that harm Black families extend well beyond the welfare system, shaping how Illinois responds to issues such as intimate partner violence, family separation, and child welfare. Black Illinoisans experiencing interpersonal or intimate partner violence face both reduced access to aid and heightened scrutiny from the very systems that discriminate against them.⁵⁹⁴ Nationally, Black women are less likely to seek aid from social service agencies, as generations of racial discrimination have shown many that they cannot expect equitable treatment.⁵⁹⁵ Black LGBTQ+ victims of intimate partner violence face additional structural and systemic barriers to accessing support due to homophobia and transphobia within public service institutions.⁵⁹⁶

The fear of being penalized, arrested, disbelieved, dismissed, or further harmed contributes significantly to survivors’ hesitance to report abuse.⁵⁹⁷ A University of Chicago investigation found that during the COVID-19 pandemic, an “increased reticence of Black communities to call the police, combined with a stark reduction of resources to get help,” led to widespread underreporting of domestic violence.⁵⁹⁸

In Illinois, Black children are more likely than White children to be removed from their homes and placed into substitute care — and they tend to remain in care for longer periods.⁵⁹⁹ Public policies in Illinois often conflate poverty with neglect, leading to punitive interventions instead of providing the economic and social supports that might prevent separation in the first place. According to the

report *Racial Disproportionality in the Illinois Child Welfare System*, Black children were overrepresented at “every investigation decision point including screened-in investigations, indicated investigations, protective custodies, court screening, safety plans, and entries into substitute care.”⁶⁰⁰

Across these domains — public assistance, domestic violence, and child welfare — the state continues to define Black family structures through a lens of deviance and deficiency. Legislators craft and enforce policies that criminalize need, surveil behavior, and punish deviation from the White, male-breadwinner family “ideal.” Structural racism does not merely influence individual outcomes; it is embedded within the very laws, institutions, and cultural narratives that determine who is considered deserving of support and who is cast as a social burden.

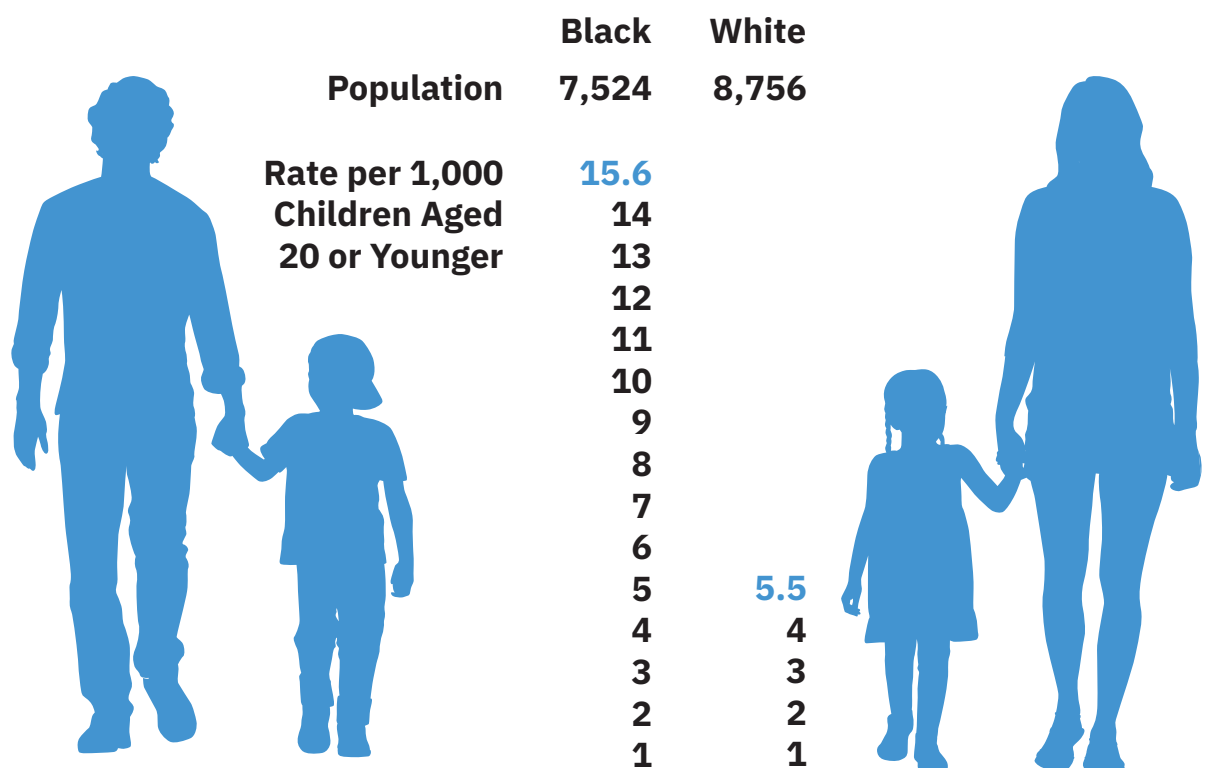
At every historical moment, Black families in Illinois have been forced to navigate systems that were not merely indifferent to their survival but often actively hostile to it. The harms began with enslavement and forced separation under the Fugitive Slave Act, continued through exclusionary housing and labor policies during the Great Migration, and deepened during the post–Civil Rights era as policymakers miscast cultural “deficiencies” rather than structural inequality as the root cause of Black poverty. Across this history, the state has repeatedly withheld critical supports — housing, income, education, childcare, and legal protection — while blaming Black families for the very harms those omissions produced.

Policymakers have consistently upheld the male-breadwinner, nuclear family model as the normative ideal, despite its economic and cultural inaccessibility to most working-class and Black families. This ideal became the foundation for policies that penalized single mothers, criminalized public assistance, and pathologized family structures that diverged from White, middle-class norms. These frameworks continue to shape welfare programs, child protective services, and domestic violence interventions today — producing disparities that are not isolated policy failures but the continuation of a long-standing pattern. Structural racism has never been accidental; it has been codified, enforced, and maintained through laws, funding priorities, public narratives, and policy decisions.

Conclusion

The destabilization of Black family life in Illinois emerged from a coordinated system of racial control, deliberately constructed through public policy, legal frameworks, and institutional practices that defined which families were protected, supported, or allowed to remain intact. Beyond questions of kinship, this system determined who had access to stability, caregiving resources, and full social belonging.

CHILDREN IN FOSTER CARE IN ILLINOIS, 2023

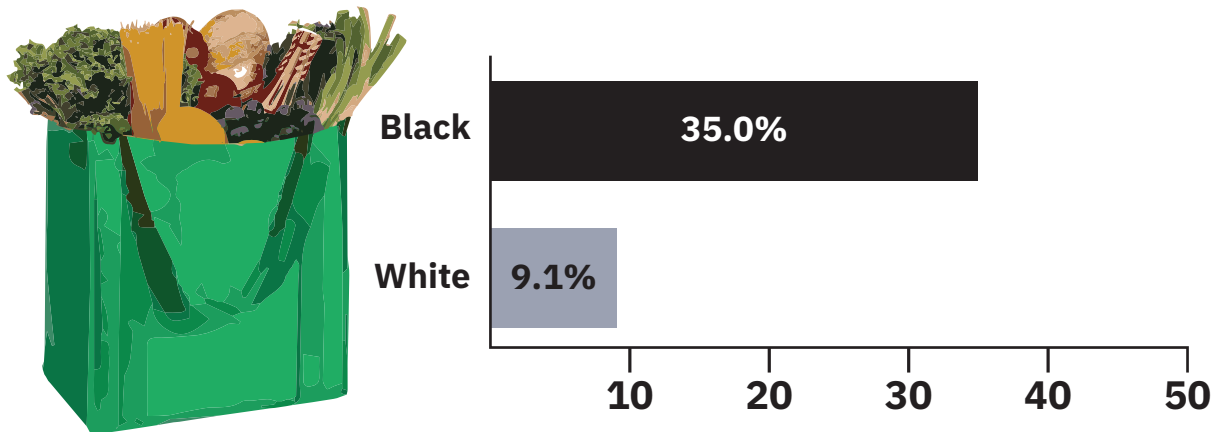


Source: Kids Count Data Center.

Throughout the history of Illinois, state intervention into Black family life became a mechanism to enforce racial hierarchy, embedding surveillance, removal, and economic hardship into the structure of social policy. The effects of these interventions have persisted for generations, perpetuating cycles of separation, financial precarity, and community disruption. The ongoing harms of this history help explain why, in 2023, Black children entered foster care at a rate of 15.6 per 1,000 — nearly three times the rate of White children (5.5 per 1,000) — and why Black youth remain in substitute care for longer durations. These disparities reflect the legacy of policies that define poverty as neglect, treat economic instability as parental unfitness, and invest in removal rather than support.

Similarly, the disproportionate reliance on the social safety net continues to mirror the economic discrimination imposed across generations. While 35 percent of Black residents in Illinois received SNAP benefits in 2023, only 9.1 percent of White residents did — revealing how wage suppression, discriminatory employment, and underinvestment in Black neighborhoods reproduce material deprivation. These

PERCENTAGE RECEIVING SNAP BENEFITS IN ILLINOIS, 2023



Source: 2023 ACS One -Year Sample.

outcomes are not the result of individual decisions but of systems designed to restrict economic mobility while criminalizing need.

Racial discrimination in family policy has shaped why Black parents experience heightened scrutiny from child welfare agencies, why Black survivors of interpersonal violence face diminished access to supportive services, and why families are penalized for relying on extended networks of caregiving. It is foundational to why Black households continue to face higher rates of state intervention and why the supports intended to strengthen families remain punitive, fragmented, and difficult to access.

The racial wealth gap, health disparities, and educational inequalities that define life for many Black Illinoisans today are the direct results of more than a century of policies that pathologized Black family structures while withholding the material conditions necessary for stability. Family destabilization still persists, clearly visible in disproportionate foster care placements, unequal access to public benefits, and ongoing narratives of “unworthiness” that shape eligibility, enforcement, and sanctioning.

Until the power to define, support, and resource family life is fundamentally redistributed, the structure of racial inequality will remain firmly in place. These outcomes are not historical artifacts — they are the present-day reality produced by decades of racially discriminatory family policy. These practices collectively institutionalized family separation as a system of racial harm. And discriminatory family policies have shaped every aspect of life tied to care: access to income, housing stability, health, safety, educational opportunity, and generational mobility. By destabilizing the foundation of family life, these policies ensured that Black residents remained economically and socially marginalized, creating generational disparities in security, autonomy, and belonging.

BLACK WOMEN AND VIOLENCE IN ILLINOIS: A REPARATIVE JUSTICE ISSUE

Terrion L. Williamson

On July 27, 2003, the body of Sabrina Payne, a thirty-six-year-old Black woman from Peoria, was found discarded at the edge of a cornfield in neighboring Tazewell County. She had been strangled to death. Over the course of the next fifteen months, the bodies of four additional Black women — Barbara Williams, Frederickia Brown, Linda Neal, and Brenda Erving — were found similarly discarded in rural areas surrounding Peoria. Another four Black women — Shaconda Thomas, Shirley Ann Trapp,⁶⁰¹ Tamara Walls, and Laura Lollar — were disappeared during this same stretch of time.

In the spring of 2006, a Peoria resident, a man many of the victims had known personally, was convicted and sentenced to life in prison after confessing to having killed eight of the nine missing and murdered women.⁶⁰² He revealed that he had disposed of the bodies of the four women who had never been recovered by burning them in a fire pit until there was nothing left except bone and ash. The fire pit was located near the one-room converted garage where the man lived behind his mother's home — the same location where most of the murdered women ultimately met their cruel fates. The house sits on the city's southern edge, at the boundary between what residents refer to as the "city side" and the "county side." It is less than a mile from where I grew up "down the hill," as we say it, in a working-class, predominantly Black community on Peoria's South Side. That house, the killing place, is just up the street and around the corner from where my parents have lived since the late 1980s and where my brother is now raising his own young children with his wife.

The deaths of the Peoria women were not, as some commentators might have us believe, the inevitable result of the women's own failures. Nor does the Peoria case represent the kind of crime that "just happens" in Black communities like mine that have been plagued for decades by poverty, deprivationist policymaking, racialized disinvestment, and environmental degradation — and that have the hollowed-out business corridors, high unemployment rates, poor health outcomes, underresourced schools, and dilapidating housing stock to show for it.

Years of research and community organizing have taught us that the mass incarceration of Black people that has been fortifying US prisons since the late twentieth century is neither happenstance nor the consequence of rampant Black criminality, but a result of the increased use of "surveillance, policing, and imprisonment as solutions to economic, social and political problems."⁶⁰³ Accordingly, we must understand that

the heinous levels of violence experienced by Black women is implicated in these same processes. In other words, the murders of the Peoria women should not be dismissed as an isolated series of acts by a single “evil” or “crazy” or “psychotic” individual whose violence was confined to one small community in central Illinois, but should instead be understood as a brutal outcome of the organized abandonment of poor and working-class Black communities that has been occasioned and replicated throughout Illinois and, indeed, the nation.⁶⁰⁴

According to a 2017 report published by the Institute for Women’s Policy Research, four in ten Black women in the United States have experienced physical intimate partner violence, which is higher than any other ethnic or racial group aside from Native women. Black women are also two-and-a-half times more likely to be murdered by men than White women, and the average age of Black female homicide victims is five years younger than the average for all women.⁶⁰⁵ The disparities Black women experience in violent crime are even more stark in Illinois, where in 2023, for example, they were more than nine times as likely as White women to be the victims of homicide and were fourteen times more likely to die from gun violence.⁶⁰⁶ Further, as the National Black Women’s Justice Institute, among other organizations, has found, in Illinois and across the nation gender-based violence creates an “abuse-to-incarceration pipeline” that leads to the increased policing, surveillance, and incarceration of Black women and girls who attempt to defend themselves and their loved ones against harm.⁶⁰⁷

In Chicago, where talk of crime is both persistent and persistently linked to Black bodies — and where the R. Kelly saga represented one of the most extensive and high-profile investigations of sexual violence against Black women and girls in this country’s history⁶⁰⁸ — the discussion of Black women as survivors and victims of crime has been, until recently, conspicuously muted at the governmental and policy levels.⁶⁰⁹ But according to an analysis of local crime data conducted by CBS Chicago, while Black women make up just 16 percent of Chicago’s population, they account for 25 percent of crime victims overall and are overrepresented as victims in most crime categories.

This overrepresentation is especially marked when it comes to physical violence. In 2022, Black women made up 40 percent of the reported sexual assault victims in Chicago and accounted for 35 percent of assault victims and 38 percent of battery victims. And, for every White girl under the age of eighteen who reported being battered in 2022, fourteen Black girls were battered.⁶¹⁰ Further analysis found that Black women accounted for 65 percent of all female victims of domestic violence in

2023.⁶¹¹ This is not a recent phenomenon. The data showing that Black women and girls experience disproportionate levels of crime in Chicago, including and especially violent crime, goes back more than twenty years.⁶¹²

In 2025, the Task Force on Missing and Murdered Chicago Women reported, in keeping with the earlier CBS Chicago report, that Black women in Chicago are disproportionately the victims of criminal sexual assault and homicide, and that Black women and girls also make up a disproportionate number of the city's missing person cases.⁶¹³ The task force specifically noted that high rates of poverty, crime, unemployment, and childhood abuse and victimization, as well as cultural beliefs that reinforce gender inequity and negative experiences with law enforcement, are among the structural and social factors that contribute to violence against girls and women and the rates at which they go missing.⁶¹⁴

This is all to say that accounting for and responding effectively to violence against Black women and girls, as well as Black people who are trans and gender expansive and therefore also at heightened risk of harm, cannot and should not rely on pathologizing or criminalizing the behavior of survivors or victims, including those who are poor, low-income, queer, mentally or physically disabled, drug dependent, or involved in the sex trades. Rather, justice and healing require an investment in developing community-powered mechanisms of safety and accountability that do not isolate acts of violence by individual or state actors from their larger social and historical contexts and attend to the need to redress the generations of harm and oppression that have enabled the persistence of racialized gender violence in all of its many forms.⁶¹⁵

While in Illinois the most readily available data comes from Chicago, violence against Black women clearly is not just a big-city problem. After Black women started turning up dead and going missing in Peoria, I began a still-ongoing research project meant to understand how, why, and to what extent Black women become the victims of serial murder — a crime I had never conceptualized as deeply affecting Black communities until it started happening in my own community. What I now know is that, since the 1970s, hundreds of Black women and girls have died at the hands of serial killers across this country in cities large and small, and because serial murder, like most crime, is typically intraracial, meaning that it occurs between members of the same racial group, Black men are most often the ones doing the killing.⁶¹⁶

In many ways, Illinois provides a state-level case study of serial murder cases involving Black women. The Peoria case is anomalous only in that the killer was found to be a White man, but otherwise the story of what happened in my hometown

is the story of what has happened in so many other places — marginalized Black women living in disinvested communities becoming prey to someone who is able to go under the radar for months and even years at a time, largely because of who he chooses as his victims.

This is how it has played out in southwestern Illinois, where four Black girls from East St. Louis and a six-year-old boy from Centreville (now Cahokia Heights) were killed by the same man between 1989 and 1993.⁶¹⁷ Several years later, the bodies of Black women began turning up in and around abandoned buildings and vacant lots in East St. Louis. Eventually, two men were linked to the murders of as many as twenty-one Black women who were killed in St. Louis and East St. Louis between 2000 and 2002. Within a few years, Black women started turning up dead in East St. Louis again — the bodies of another six women, most of whom had been strangled to death, turned up in the city between 2003 and 2006.⁶¹⁸ Then, in 2009, the deaths of two young Black girls, a Black woman, and a Black man who were killed between 1984 and 1988 in Decatur, a city about 115 miles north of East St. Louis in the central part of the state, were linked to a man who had died years earlier.⁶¹⁹ And in Chicago, at least nine men have been convicted in various cases involving the serial murders of more than fifty Black women who have been killed since the early 1990s.⁶²⁰

In 2002, the acclaimed historian Robin Kelley argued in his now-classic book *Freedom Dreams* that the reparations movement “ought to compel us to pay attention to the centrality of racism in the US political economy. [...] It should also make us look at gender, because men and women did not experience exploitation in the same manner.” Even while noting the movement’s transformative ability to help us understand how capitalism is shaped by slavery and racism, Kelley recognized that “unfortunately, most arguments in support of reparations scarcely mention gender.”⁶²¹

More than twenty years later, the reparations movement still has significant work to do in recognizing that, “paying attention to the working of gender oppression in this context is necessary for a full understanding of the harms at the center of the reparations debate.”⁶²² Serial murder is but one of the many forms of violence that cis and trans Black women, Black girls, and gender-expansive Black people experience. But whether it is physical, sexual, verbal, or psychological; whether it takes place in the home or in the street or in the church or at the school; and whether it is committed by a partner, a family member, a police officer, or a complete stranger — racialized gender violence is a reparative justice issue requiring a response that centers the needs and experiences of victims and survivors.⁶²³

HEALTH

The *Healthy Illinois 2028* report and plan, produced by the Illinois Department of Public Health (IDPH), lays out a plain truth: Racism is a public health crisis in Illinois.⁶²⁴ In its State Health Assessment, IDPH identifies four contributing factors for this crisis: “1) racialized health disparities, 2) discrimination and prejudice/implicit bias, 3) lack of diversity in the workforce, and 4) institutional and systemic racism.”⁶²⁵

From Illinois’s transition from territory to statehood — and throughout the 200 plus years that followed — Black residents have faced persistent barriers that impair their ability to achieve optimal health. These barriers include structural and systemic barriers to accessing health care education, providers, and institutions; qualitatively poorer treatment within clinical and medical settings; and the cumulative effects of racial disparities across the social determinants of health: the “circumstances in which people are born, grow, live, learn, work, and age, which are shaped by a set of forces beyond the control of the individual.”⁶²⁶

Together, these factors contribute to poorer health outcomes, higher health care costs, and premature death. The *Illinois State Health Assessment* and *State Health Improvement Plan* identify five priority areas for improving health outcomes and advancing health equity across the state: chronic disease; COVID-19 and emerging diseases; maternal and infant health; mental health and substance use disorder; and racism as a public health crisis.⁶²⁷ *Healthy Illinois 2028* further recognizes the intersecting issues within each of these priorities that demand deliberate and systemic intervention: access to health care and wraparound services; the physical and built environmental public health system infrastructure; racial equality; and social and structural determinants.⁶²⁸

The report highlights profound racial disparities impacting Black residents’ living conditions, health outcomes, and life expectancy. In Illinois, rates of diabetes, adult asthma, cancer, hypertension, high cholesterol, COVID-19 mortality, maternal and infant mortality, drug overdose deaths, and obesity are all higher among African Americans. Black women in Illinois are disproportionately diagnosed with breast cancer, and Black men face similarly elevated rates of prostate cancer.⁶²⁹ Barriers to prevention, early detection, and treatment make cancer survival outcomes profoundly inequitable for Black Illinoisans. These disparities reflect the cumulative impact of social determinants of health and the inequitable distribution of money, power, and resources discussed throughout this report.⁶³⁰

Additionally, Black Illinoisans living with mental illnesses or substance use disorders are more likely than the general public to experience incarceration and homelessness, underscoring the deep interconnection between health and structural disadvantage.

These disparities are further compounded by structural and interpersonal forms of misogyny, gender-based discrimination, homophobia, transphobia, and ableism, as well as by discrimination against people who are unhoused, formerly incarcerated, low-income, living in rural areas, women, LGBTQIA+, pregnant, living with disabilities, or exposed to community violence.⁶³¹ The COVID-19 pandemic further magnified these racial health disparities, worsening overall health outcomes for Black residents.

The material consequences of racial bias in health and health care are evident in both historical accounts and in the everyday experiences of Black Illinois residents. Poor health outcomes, limited access to health care, lower-quality treatment, and reduced life expectancy all trace back to the state's long history of racial exclusion, discrimination, segregation, and exploitation.

As earlier sections of the report have demonstrated, the history of racial exclusion begins even before Illinois was recognized as a state with slavery, an institution of labor and economic exploitation that represented the ultimate denial of bodily autonomy, binding Black life to systems of economic exploitation. Within this framework health care was not regarded as a human right but as an economic investment in maintaining one's property. Under slavery, Black bodies functioned as the engines of White wealth accumulation. Scholarship across the social sciences, humanities, and health sciences has documented the psychological, physiological, and material impacts of structural and interpersonal racism on Black Americans, both individually and collectively.

As this section of the report documents, in Illinois — as across the nation — long after the practice of slavery became outlawed, racism has continued to shape health, health care, and health policy.⁶³²

Historical Foundations of Health Disparities, 1818–1965

Racial bias is embedded in the very foundations of the health sciences in the United States. In Illinois, from its earliest days as a territory under the 1787 Northwest Ordinance through more than two centuries of statehood since 1818, Black residents have faced structural, ideological, and interpersonal forms of racial discrimination and violence in their pursuit of health and health care.

Although there is limited direct historical or anthropological documentation of Black residents' medical experiences during Illinois's early statehood period (1818–1848), scholars widely agree that the American slave system directly endangered the lives and health of both enslaved and free Black people in Illinois.⁶³³ Medical journals

that informed White physicians in emerging fields such as obstetrics and gynecology⁶³⁴ advanced theories that exceptionalized Black women for their “[...] bodies, their fecundity, and their supposed abnormal ability to endure pain in childbirth” — ideas that historians say can be “traced back several centuries to the writings of European natural historians and male travelers who visited Africa.”⁶³⁵ Contemporary scholars, researchers, and public health advocates link modern reproductive health disparities and malpractice in Illinois to these same racial and gender biases embedded in the history of American medicine.⁶³⁶

For Black residents living in Illinois after the Civil War, simply living and working in the state posed inherent risks to health and well-being. While the war era helped popularize new social and scientific understandings of public sanitation, hygiene, and disease prevention, access to quality medical, dental, or mental health care remained largely out of reach for most Black Illinoisans.⁶³⁷ In the burgeoning field of psychiatric care, for example, a historical review of Illinois State Asylum admission records reveals stark racial disparities: the state hospital in Jacksonville, which opened in 1851, admitted only two non-White patients out of 4,462 admissions between 1851 and 1872.⁶³⁸

After the Civil War, Black men who had served in the United States Colored Troops returned after being discharged in 1865 with a range of injuries, chronic illnesses, and psychological trauma. Many resumed their previous occupations or returned to their home regions, while many who had lived in the Deep South migrated north in search of greater safety and opportunity. Those who settled in Illinois gravitated toward urban centers such as Chicago, Peoria, Rockford, and Springfield.⁶³⁹ By 1890, Chicago alone was home to approximately fifteen thousand Black residents.⁶⁴⁰ Most were confined to substandard housing in the city’s “Black Belt,” where inadequate sewage systems and environmental neglect created conditions hazardous to health and largely devoid of the infrastructure necessary for safe, healthy living.⁶⁴¹

As Black individuals fleeing the South would come to find, Illinois’s health care infrastructure largely mirrored the segregationist patterns of the Jim Crow South, maintaining separate facilities or wards for Black patients. As in other Northern states, this segregation of public facilities was sustained less by formal law than by entrenched custom, institutional policy, and social convention.

As they did in other domains, Black residents came together to demand and work towards greater equality in healthcare. In 1889, aspiring nursing student Emma Reynolds was denied admission to the Illinois Training School for Nurses solely because of her race — a discriminatory policy that persisted at the institution well into the mid-twentieth century.⁶⁴² Outraged by this exclusion, Reynolds and her brother, a pastor and community leader, sought the counsel of Dr. Daniel Hale Williams. As one of only

three Black physicians practicing in Chicago at the time, Williams understood firsthand the urgent need to train Black health care professionals and to expand access to high-quality medical care for the city's underserved Black residents.

Together, the Reynolds siblings and Dr. Williams organized fundraisers, held community rallies, and secured the financial support to open a twelve-bed facility and, soon after, to establish Provident Hospital and Nursing Training School in 1891. Provident was celebrated as the first hospital in the United States to admit both Black and White patients, one of few institutions to educate, train, and employ Black nurses and physicians, and the first medical facility with an interracial staff.⁶⁴³ In contrast, most hospitals at the time barred Black nurses from employment and, when they did hire Black physicians or surgeons, often denied them full hospital privileges.⁶⁴⁴ While Provident Hospital represented a groundbreaking intervention in the state's racially unequal medical infrastructure, it could not, on its own, eliminate the broader structural disparities in access to care.

Hospital and Sanatorium Care in Early Twentieth-Century Illinois

Outside of Cook County, Black residents had very limited access to health care in the early twentieth century. For example, of the three hospitals operating in Bloomington in 1921, St. Joseph's (run by the Catholic Sisters of St. Francis) was the only one accepting Black patients.⁶⁴⁵

Finding a hospital that would see them was just the first obstacle Black patients in Illinois faced when seeking hospital care. The case of McLean County illustrates what Black patients faced. In her historical study of illness and disease in McLean County, historian Lucinda McCray Beier documents that the McLean County Medical Society, founded in 1854, admitted both Black and White men and women. As she writes, the society's responsibilities included regulating local medical practices, facilitating a communication network for sharing scientific innovations, supporting local public sanitation measures, and otherwise supporting its members facing professional or personal hardships.⁶⁴⁶

Income disparities meant that Black residents were often unable to pay the expected costs of care. In an oral history interview, Caribel Washington, a McLean County resident born in 1914, recalled,

Oh, yes. We had doctors all the time. We had Dr. Covington who was an African-American doctor. A very good doctor. I can recall my mother's doctor was Dr. Greenleaf. [...] Then there was always Dr. Brown and Dr. McNutt. Those were the two doctors for the most part who doctored the African American people. There might have been others. [...] I don't say there weren't others, but I do

know that those two seemed to be the main doctors back in the '20s and maybe the early '30s. Of course, with the Depression, we had another [Black] doctor, but he had no business during the Depression because we had no money.

Although Dr. Covington was granted full hospital privileges at Mennonite Hospital, as a Black doctor he was only allowed to perform his surgical duties under the supervision of a White doctor. His case was not the norm but rather the exception as he was one of very few Black doctors in Illinois granted any hospital privileges in White or ostensibly integrated hospitals before the 1940s.⁶⁴⁷

Black patients routinely faced segregation when they were admitted to hospitals. One account by a McLean County resident — who was the second Black employee of Brokaw Hospital in Bloomington — reveals some of these conditions:

At Brokaw, a black patient was put in a room wherever there was an empty bed, regardless of color. This was in the early 1940s. [...] At St. Joseph's Hospital, two black [patients] were always put into the same room or a room by yourself. If they couldn't do this, the response was "no beds." Regardless of how much moving around was necessary, a black [patient] never was in a room with a White person — until integration.⁶⁴⁸

As with hospitals, the scarcity of health care options for Black patients and practitioners was also evident in the establishment of local tuberculosis sanatoriums.⁶⁴⁹ In 1900, the tuberculosis mortality rate for Black Americans was more than three times that of White Americans.⁶⁵⁰ When the Fairview Sanatorium in Normal opened in 1919, funded by county taxes,⁶⁵¹ it refused to admit Black patients to the main facility.⁶⁵² Instead, it relegated them to an open-air shelter, effectively forcing their treatment outdoors.

One case of racial segregation illustrates the grave consequences of allowing prejudice to dictate access to medical care. In a letter to the editor of Bloomington's *Pantagraph* newspaper, two White doctors described how a Black man, exhibiting symptoms of illness, was denied admittance to the Fairview Sanatorium and instead instructed to consume a quart of milk a day. Under such conditions, "he will surely die, they wrote — and with proper care, such a case could be cured."⁶⁵³

Contemporary Systems of Inequity, 1965–Present

Contemporary health care inequities are directly rooted in the long history of racial discrimination embedded in health policy and infrastructure. As we have documented in other domains such as housing, education, employment and political disenfranchisement, persistent racial gaps in access to care, serious disparities

in reproductive health outcomes, unequal insurance and disability coverage, environmental racism, poverty, and mass incarceration all represent modern outgrowths of the explicit discrimination and exclusion practiced by previous generations.

Access to Care

Today, the location of health care institutions, their funding sources, staffing capabilities, and internal operations continue to reflect legacies of racial discrimination, including redlining and political disenfranchisement. In this way, health care infrastructure itself is a key mechanism through which racial health disparities are reproduced and sustained in Illinois.

For example, although Federally Qualified Health Centers (FQHCs) were established in 1965 to expand access to care for people without comprehensive health coverage and to serve Medicaid recipients,⁶⁵⁴ structural inequalities continue to limit their effectiveness. Increasingly restrictive eligibility standards, recurring cuts to services and funding, and the high cost of medical care continue to undermine Black Illinois residents' access to the state's health care infrastructure.⁶⁵⁵

Reports published by the Illinois Department of Public Health (IDPH) identify the lack of available care, poor quality of care, and the overall inaccessibility of the state's health care infrastructure as major contributors to racial health disparities. What was true in 1818 remains true today: Black residents, in particular, have significantly less access to hospitals and medical facilities than other populations.⁶⁵⁶

These IDPH reports state that "Disparities in health outcomes according to race/ethnicity are caused by the inequitable distribution of money, power, and other resources and have nothing to do with biology."⁶⁵⁷ IDPH concludes one report noting that health care inequities by race/ethnicity "persist across diverse morbidity and mortality statistics, across geographies and income levels, demonstrat[ing] that addressing these health outcomes at an individual or clinical level will be wholly insufficient at reversing, mitigating, or preventing the continuation or worsening of these inequities."⁶⁵⁸ Structural change is necessary.

Reproductive Health

While a lack of insurance and healthcare coverage presents a significant first barrier for care, the status of reproductive care for Black women demonstrates that addressing racial disparities in health will require more than increased insurance coverage for minorities. According to the March of Dimes Foundation's *2023 Maternity Care Deserts* report for Illinois, between 2021 and 2023, Medicaid coverage at time of birth was highest among Black women, at 67.8 percent.⁶⁵⁹ Despite the 2017 expansion of

postpartum Medicaid coverage and strengthened legal protections for reproductive health care rights, however, racial disparities in maternal, sexual, and reproductive health outcomes persist in Illinois.⁶⁶⁰

Illinois rates of maternal morbidity and mortality mirror national trends.⁶⁶¹ Black women are twice as likely to die from “any pregnancy related condition and three times as likely to die from pregnancy-related medical conditions as white women.”⁶⁶² Between 2012 and 2021, Black infants consistently faced infant mortality rates two to four times higher than those of all other reported racial or ethnic groups.⁶⁶³ Pregnant Black women also experience significant transportation barriers that hinder access to both prenatal and postnatal care.⁶⁶⁴

While Illinois law currently protects the rights of individuals seeking comprehensive reproductive health care, including abortion services, serious deficiencies in the state’s reproductive and women’s health infrastructure contribute to the high rates of postnatal and infant morbidity among Black residents.⁶⁶⁵ The *Maternity Care Deserts* report defines maternity care access based on the availability of birthing facilities, maternity care providers, and the percentage of uninsured women. It found that 34.3 percent of Illinois counties qualify as maternity care deserts,⁶⁶⁶ compared to 32.6 percent of counties nationwide.

Access to Medical Insurance and Disability Benefits

Public and private health insurance systems, along with medical disability benefits, significantly shape Black residents’ experiences within Illinois’s health care ecosystem. As it is with reproductive care, the fact of having insurance coverage is by itself not enough. Bureaucratic red tape and delays in care are exacerbated by a “lack of knowledge about health care coverage options and financial assistance and the burden we place on patients to access them,” according to a report published by the Illinois Coalition for Immigrant and Refugee Rights.⁶⁶⁷

Inadequate insurance infrastructure often leads to medical debt for many Black Illinoisans. For example, although tying insurance to employment and expanding the public safety net through programs like Supplemental Security Income (SSI), Medicare, and Medicaid improved overall access to health care, many of the state’s most precarious workers in industries with high Black workforce participation are left out: Agricultural and domestic workers, for example, were intentionally excluded from entitlement programs; workers in industries with high rates of temporary or part-time employment or irregular schedules such as those in the fast-food industry or working as contractors in sectors like delivery services are also often left out. Persistent racial disparities in access to both public and private networks of care result in many Black residents being especially vulnerable to medical debt.⁶⁶⁸

For Black residents and others on Medicaid, restrictions on provider choice often lead to significant delays in care, with some residents waiting weeks or even months for an initial physician appointment. Applying for benefits can also be an uphill battle, hindered by increasingly strict eligibility criteria, limited provider networks, application rejections, and claim denials. Instead of serving as a reliable mechanism for accessing health care, these benefits programs frequently function as additional barriers to it.⁶⁶⁹

Furthermore, Medicaid and Medicare remain under constant threat, as policymakers repeatedly attempt to reduce costs by cutting services and benefits. Despite technological advances and the expansion of non-hospital clinical spaces (e.g., telehealth programs, urgent care centers, and medical clinics in retail settings), deep inequalities persist. Ongoing insurance gaps and the prohibitive costs of medical care contribute to negative health impacts and outcomes for Black residents.⁶⁷⁰

Unhealthy Environmental Conditions

Environmental racism offers a useful framework to assess the health impact of racial discrimination. Environmental racism refers to the discriminatory policies and practices that have resulted in the disproportionate location of environmental hazards in proximity to communities of color and the detrimental effects that these hazards pose. In Illinois, as across the country, public policies, laws, and private practices have historically confined Black residents to environmentally degraded neighborhoods and workplaces, disproportionately exposing the state's Black residents to pollution and hazardous environmental conditions.⁶⁷¹

In addition to highlighting the detrimental effects of environmental hazards, environmental racism also puts a spotlight on the health effects of the lack of beneficial environments that communities of color are apt to live in. Predominantly Black communities tend to have less access to parks, recreational spaces, grocery stores, and other community assets that support healthy living — conditions that place Black residents at higher risk for respiratory disease, cardiovascular illness, and cancer.⁶⁷²

Through the legacy of redlining, poverty has been concentrated within Black neighborhoods that lack essential resources such as grocery stores, parks, and health care facilities — all foundational to maintaining good health. The information gap about public health initiatives in impoverished neighborhoods further contributes to lower levels of awareness about preventive care, healthy lifestyles, and available health resources, further entrenching health disparities.

Altgeld Gardens Homes, a Chicago Housing Authority development on the city's far South Side, stands as one of the nation's most prominent examples of environmental racism and environmental justice activism. Originally built to house Black industrial

laborers, southern migrants, and military servicemembers and their families after World War II, Altgeld Gardens was geographically isolated by highways and industrial plants and socially segregated Black from neighboring all-White communities.

Hazel Johnson was the first activist to draw public attention to the hazardous environmental conditions endangering the lives of Altgeld Gardens residents. After her husband died of lung cancer at age 41, Johnson began investigating the unusually high rates of cancer, asthma, miscarriages, birth defects, and other illnesses affecting her neighbors.⁶⁷³ She coined the term “toxic donut” to describe Altgeld’s geographic isolation — “surrounded by 50 documented old landfills as well as 382 polluting sources,”⁶⁷⁴ including “a chemical incinerator, a water and sewage treatment facility, steel mills, paint factories, scrap yards and abandoned industrial dump sites.”⁶⁷⁵ Among the polluters was the Pullman Palace Car Company, which for decades disposed of toxic waste from its facilities on the site.

Cheryl Johnson, Hazel’s daughter, reflected:

My mother took a big hit, I seen her cry many times, I used to tell her [it’s] not even worth it. When you go down to your state legislator and they tell you, “Well, the garbage got to go somewhere, why not your neighborhood,” or [get] called a big mouth, or “she don’t know what she talking about” because the perception of people in public housing [is that] we’re less educated and we’re dependent on government assistance. “You already live on government so why not let government dump on you,” that type of abuse.⁶⁷⁶

Systemic environmental racism affects Black communities throughout the state. In another example, Black residents in St. Clair County have long faced environmental injustices that endanger individual and community health. Industrial development in East St. Louis accelerated in the early twentieth century, incentivized by public officials because of the potential for economic growth.⁶⁷⁷ The nearby town of Sauget was incorporated by the Monsanto Company in 1926 and other companies followed. Chemical manufacturing, copper processing, zinc refining, and solvent reclamation produced “[...] noxious odors, smoke, and biological or hazardous wastes [...]”⁶⁷⁸ By 1929, 116 industries operating across St. Clair and Madison counties were dumping toxic waste in the area.⁶⁷⁹

Deindustrialization devastated East St. Louis as factories closed and workers left to find other economic opportunities. Black residents, long excluded from jobs and education, inherited the decades of government- and corporate-sanctioned environmental pollution. A 2012 report in *Environmental Health News* detailed the city’s ongoing infrastructure and environmental issues: “Raw sewage backs up into homes, businesses and schools whenever the volume overwhelms the city’s decaying

150-year-old pipes. Garbage collection, which halted completely from 1987 to 1992, now is only available to households that pay out-of-pocket for the service. Most trash is burned in back yards, adding to the polluted air, or dumped in vacant lots.”⁶⁸⁰ As a result, asthma rates among Black children in East St. Louis are now the highest in the region.⁶⁸¹

Another report, in the Black-owned news outlet *The Argus*, said that,

While air pollution has decreased over the past few decades, people are still dealing with the lasting effects on their health, namely respiratory illnesses. High asthma rates among children; exhaust from highways blanketing the area; backup of raw sewage into homes, schools and businesses whenever volume exceeds the capacity of infrastructure; and garbage collection available only to those who pay out of pocket are just a few of the characteristics of East St. Louis today. According to the IEPA [Illinois Environmental Protection Agency], many children have elevated lead levels in their blood stream that affects their ability to learn and develop. The IEPA noted that a large percentage of the housing stock has lead contamination and that most exposure comes from lead paint.⁶⁸²

Centreville (now Cahokia Heights) and Carbondale are additional examples of Illinois towns with majority-Black populations where residents live mostly below the poverty line and lack access to essential services and infrastructure.⁶⁸³ When it rains in Centreville/Cahokia Heights, raw sewage regularly backs up into homes and other structures.⁶⁸⁴ Researchers from Washington University and the University of Colorado, studying the relationship between resident health and the ongoing flooding and sewage crisis, found that more than 40 percent of adults tested positive for *Helicobacter pylori* (H. pylori) — a bacterium transmitted through contact with contaminated food, water, or human waste, which can cause ulcers and increase the risk of gastric cancer.⁶⁸⁵ Despite these alarming findings, neither the IDPH nor local health agencies have “investigated the possible health effects or fully informed residents of the risks.”⁶⁸⁶

To convey what it means to live in these conditions, oral history projects and local journalism have documented residents’ firsthand experiences. The *How Does the Water Affect Your Life?* project in Cahokia Heights includes accounts from residents describing how their homes and surrounding areas reek of sewage for days or even weeks at a time.⁶⁸⁷ Many report increased living expenses, such as the need to purchase bottled water for drinking, bathing, and laundry.⁶⁸⁸ Contaminated water prevents grass from growing; one resident says she won’t let her grandchildren play outside after rainstorms until the water drains, fearing that the standing water — and the pests it attracts — could make them sick.⁶⁸⁹

One resident whose family moved to Centreville in the 1960s recalled a time when conditions were markedly different. Reflecting on the environmental degradation now confronting Black residents, she remarked, “Who wants everybody to know that your house smells? That your room is caving in? Who wants to tell people you have bugs? You want to be like everyone else, to sit on your porch. You don’t want them to know that you want to vomit when you walk inside. [...] If all of those White people were still here, this wouldn’t happen.”⁶⁹⁰

Unhoused and Carceral Populations: Health Challenges for our Most Vulnerable

Incarceration, poverty, and homelessness are intrinsically linked to health care disparities, as people living under these conditions often lack access to affordable and adequate housing, public transportation, nutritious food, clean air and water, comprehensive health care, and medical insurance.⁶⁹¹

Black residents in Illinois are eight times more likely than White residents to experience homelessness.⁶⁹² Unhoused individuals face additional barriers to accessing and receiving medical and dental care compared to those with stable housing.⁶⁹³ In 2024, the Institute for Research on Race and Public Policy (IRRPP) at the University of Illinois Chicago published a report on Black homelessness in Illinois, finding through focus group interviews that unhoused participants often received lower-quality care once providers learned of their housing status.⁶⁹⁴ As one focus group participant recalled, “When I used to go to the hospital, I’d get fairly good service, But when I [...] went from the homeless center to the hospital, I sat there for hours before they got me.”⁶⁹⁵

The IRRPP study also highlights reported instances of provider bias rooted in the false belief that Black people feel less pain, as well as the widespread public assumptions that unhoused individuals are “seeking drugs rather than seeking care.”⁶⁹⁶ These biases are compounded by the scarcity of substance use treatment facilities and mental health infrastructure available to Black residents in Illinois. Because of public policies that criminalize recreational drug use while cutting or defunding community services, Black unhoused residents experiencing medical or mental health crises are funneled into shelters, jails, or prison at distressingly high rates.⁶⁹⁷

Medical emergencies often trigger a vicious cycle that leads to homelessness. One focus group participant explained how a stroke left them unable to use their hands, eliminating their ability to work despite a lifetime of experience. Another participant explained that, without a consistent schedule for daily dialysis treatments, maintaining steady employment became nearly impossible.⁶⁹⁸ When health care challenges restrict employment opportunities or cause job loss, sustaining stable housing becomes increasingly difficult.⁶⁹⁹

For Black residents incarcerated in Illinois jails and prisons, accessing adequate health care is especially difficult. Over the last two decades, the Illinois Department of Corrections (IDOC) has faced several class-action lawsuits for failing to provide constitutionally required medical care to people in custody.⁷⁰⁰ A 2010 suit filed by the ACLU of Illinois and the Uptown People's Law Center alleged "systemic problems in health care, problems that lead to serious disease, harm and even death for people under the care of IDOC."⁷⁰¹

Research consistently shows that incarcerated people are more likely to have physical or developmental disabilities and chronic health conditions at the time they enter the criminal justice system. This reality traps many in a recurring cycle of recidivism, poverty, and trauma bolstered by the absence of adequate social supports for mental and physical health care. These barriers to accessing care often persist long after release. Just as Black individuals in Illinois are disproportionately more likely than White individuals to be homeless, so too are Black individuals in Illinois also disproportionately likely to be incarcerated. Scholars have found that "because racial and ethnic minoritized individuals are disproportionately affected by incarceration, they are also disproportionately affected by gaps in health care coverage with release from prison."⁷⁰²

Racial Disparities in times of Health Crises: COVID-19 and HIV/AIDS

The policy decisions made during public health crises can have devastating impacts on the social and economic well-being of individuals, families, and communities already marginalized by an inequitable and hostile health care system. The COVID-19 pandemic serves as a case in point in that it exposed deep systemic and structural flaws within Illinois's contemporary health care ecosystem — and the disproportionate burden this crisis placed on Black residents. Federal, state, and local government policies failed to protect lower-income communities of color from the COVID-19 pandemic's most severe impacts.⁷⁰³ For example, Black Chicagoans comprised 30 percent of the city's population but accounted for 60 percent of COVID-19-related deaths in 2020.⁷⁰⁴

Despite local quarantine and lockdown orders, moreover, many residents were required to continue working in "essential" public-facing jobs such as childcare, transit operation, and retail — positions with high levels of Black workforce participation that often lacked employer-provided health insurance and adequate workplace safety protections.⁷⁰⁵ In addition to employment, the disproportionately high rates of COVID-19 infection and mortality among Black residents were also linked to limited access to healthy food, safe neighborhoods, uncrowded housing conditions, and recreational spaces.⁷⁰⁶

Since the pandemic, scholars, activists, advocacy groups, and public health departments have emphasized the devastating effects of COVID-19 on the Illinois public health care ecosystem and on the everyday lives of residents. The pandemic both reflected and deepened existing racial health disparities: working conditions, incarceration, residential segregation, and housing instability all contributed to the disproportionate infection and mortality rates among Black residents.⁷⁰⁷

When the COVID-19 pandemic began in March 2020, comparisons quickly emerged between this crisis and the HIV/AIDS epidemic, particularly in how the most vulnerable populations during public health crises are often blamed, stigmatized, or criminalized for their health status. Although it has largely faded from contemporary public narratives, AIDS Foundation Chicago has documented that the HIV/AIDS epidemic continues to disproportionately impact Black (and Latine) men who have sex with men, as well as Black cisgender and transgender women.⁷⁰⁸ Across Illinois, Black residents remain disproportionately impacted by HIV/AIDS compared to other racial/ethnic groups.⁷⁰⁹ IDPH reported that although HIV diagnosis rates declined for Black residents between 2000 and 2013, new diagnoses remained eight times higher than those for White Illinois residents.⁷¹⁰ As of 2018, Black Illinoisans made up just 15 percent of the state's population but accounted for more than 46 percent of people living with HIV and 51 percent of newly diagnosed infections.⁷¹¹

In 2021, Illinois officially repealed its laws that criminalized people with HIV for “engaging in sex without a condom without disclosing their status, donating blood, organs, or bodily fluids, and sharing non-sterile injection equipment with others.”⁷¹² A report published by the *Chicago Reader* and *Injustice Watch* revealed that between 1989 and 2016, 75 percent of people charged under these laws in Cook County were Black.⁷¹³

The compounded effect of historical racism can be seen in how the costs of housing and other basic necessities factor into Black residents' ability to afford regular medical care to prevent, diagnose, or treat HIV/AIDS.⁷¹⁴ The intersecting effects of racism, homophobia, and transphobia continue to endanger the health and lives of Black LGBTQ+ residents. Yet few state or private entities have collected comprehensive qualitative or quantitative data on LGBTQIA+ health disparities disaggregated by race. More targeted research is needed to fully capture the scope of racial health care disparities across sexuality, gender identity, and gender expression in Illinois.

Conclusion

The history of structural racism in Illinois makes clear that contemporary racial health disparities are rooted in structural and environmental conditions, not in race itself. In other words: “[P]eople are not at risk because they are Black; they are at risk because

being Black in the United States exposes them to a legacy of segregation, racism and stressors that negatively impacts their health and wellbeing.”⁷¹⁵ Given this history, Black residents have countless reasons to distrust municipal and state health care systems — particularly regarding their capacity to provide equitable, comprehensive, and culturally competent medical, dental, and mental health care. Subsequently, the fact that Black Illinoisans are disproportionately impacted by a range of challenging health conditions should not come as a surprise.

According to reports published by the Illinois Department of Human Services (IDHS) and IDPH, using data from 2001–2003 and 2009–2013, the proportion of people living with a disability remains highest among Black residents.⁷¹⁶ The infant mortality rate for Black residents is more than twice the overall state average.⁷¹⁷ Between 2016 and 2020, mortality from drug and opioid overdoses also increased, with the highest death rates recorded among Black residents.⁷¹⁸ In addition, Illinois continues to fall short in meeting residents’ mental health needs, leaving substantial gaps in access and quality of care across the state.

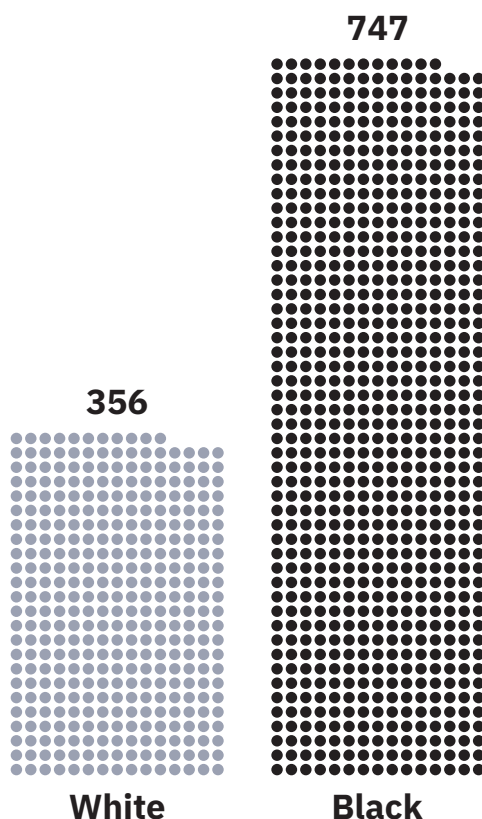
Racial discrimination in health care in Illinois emerged from a coordinated system of exclusion, enforced through medical practice, institutional policy, and public investment decisions that determined which communities received care, protection, and access to the conditions required for healthy lives. Beyond questions of illness and treatment, this system determined who could exercise bodily autonomy, who would face chronic exposure to disease and environmental hazards, and who would age — and die — prematurely.

Across the history of Illinois, racialized health policies have served as mechanisms to maintain social hierarchy, embedding inequality into hospitals, insurance systems, environmental regulation, public health infrastructure, and clinical decision-making. The effects have persisted for generations, producing sustained disparities in disease burden, life expectancy, and mortality among Black residents. These harms help explain why, between 2020 and 2022, the premature age-adjusted mortality rate for Black residents was 747 deaths per 100,000, more than double the rate for White residents (356 per 100,000). They are also reflected in the 2019 infant mortality rate, where Black infants experienced 11.4 deaths per 1,000 live births, compared to 4.4 among White infants. And in 2023, 23.72 percent of Black adults in Illinois self-reported their health as fair or poor, compared to 15 percent of White adults — evidence of cumulative physiological wear rooted in racism, not biology.

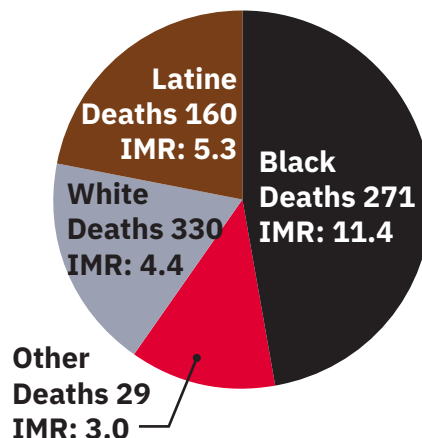
Access to health care remains deeply unequal, as shown by insurance participation patterns. In 2023, 39.1% of Black residents relied on Medicaid compared to 13.1% of White residents. This disparity reflects lower access to employer-sponsored

ILLINOIS RACIAL DISPARITIES IN HEALTH

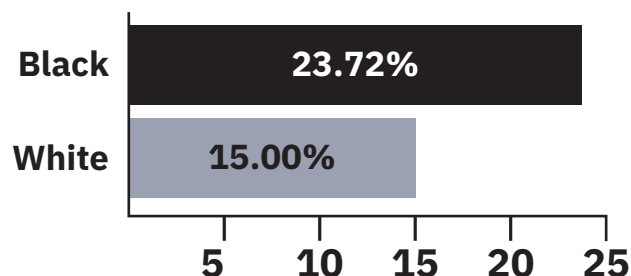
Premature Age-adjusted Mortality Rate (Deaths per 100,000, 2020 - 2022)*



Infant Deaths and Infant Mortality Rate (IMR, 2019)†



Percent Self-reporting their Health as Poor or Fair relative to Good, Very Good, or Excellent (2019)‡

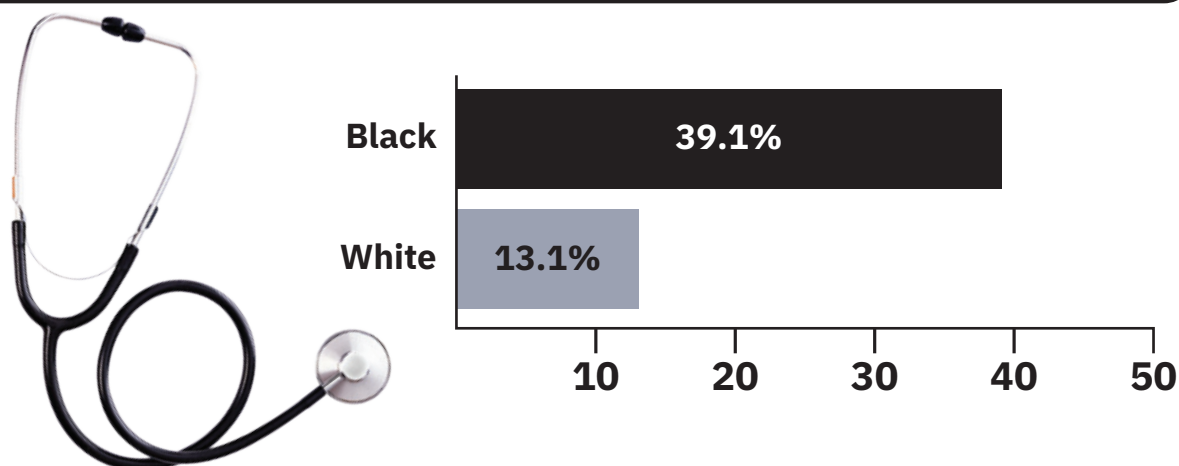


Sources: *HDPulse: An Ecosystem of Minority Health and Health Disparities Resources. National Institute on Minority Health and Health Disparities. See <https://hdpulse.nimhd.nih.gov> †Illinois Department of Public Health.

insurance, chronic underinvestment in Black communities, and racial wage gaps. It also exposes how public benefits programs — tightly policed, stigmatized, and prone to service reductions — function as the primary health access point for Black residents while remaining insufficiently resourced to meet their needs.

These inequities shape every stage of life. They determine which communities have maternity care providers, which neighborhoods are surrounded by toxic industries, and which patients experience delayed treatment or disbelief when they describe pain. They explain why medical debt is concentrated in Black households and why Medicaid restrictions limit provider choice, causing months-long delays for

ILLINOIS MEDICAID PARTICIPATION RATES, 2023



Source: 2023 ACS Five-Year Sample.

appointments. Disparities persist not because of genetic predisposition, but because of the unequal distribution of medical infrastructure, environmental risk, and economic stability.

The contemporary landscape of racial health inequality in Illinois is thus the predictable result of more than two centuries of structural harm. It is evident in segregated hospital access, persistent reproductive health disparities, environmental contamination concentrated in Black neighborhoods, and the chronic shortage of mental health and substance use treatment resources. These patterns intensified during the COVID-19 pandemic, which magnified the vulnerabilities created by discriminatory housing, employment, and transportation policies.

Until the power to determine who receives care, who bears environmental risk, and whose suffering is taken seriously is fundamentally redistributed, the structure of racialized health inequality will remain firmly intact. These outcomes are not historical artifacts — they are the present-day reality produced by generations of racially discriminatory health policy. These practices collectively institutionalized unequal access to health as a system of racial harm. And discriminatory health policies have shaped every aspect of life tied to bodily well-being: access to preventive care, disability supports, clean water and air, reproductive autonomy, and the right to live without fear of premature death.

By constraining the conditions necessary for health, these policies ensured that Black residents remained economically, socially, and physiologically marginalized, creating generational disparities in longevity, quality of life, and the fundamental right to thrive.

SEGREGATING RECREATION IN CHICAGOLAND

Lynn M. Hudson

When we think about the damage done to Black Illinoisans by segregation and discrimination, we often look to employment, housing, and education. This is as it should be. But the places where Illinois citizens spent their leisure time were also sites of racial injustice. The city of Chicago was the epicenter of recreational segregation and violence.

Chicago's Black children and adults had few choices for recreation during the years of the Great Migration. The shores of the lake, unclaimed vacant lots, and the Back of the Yards all played host to the city's recreators. These sites were not without significant risks, however. And even so-called supervised sites, like the city beaches, were segregated and unsafe. As the Great Migration exponentially increased the size of the city's Black population, the need for places to play similarly increased. The public park system, which included city playgrounds and public beaches, would provide an invaluable resource for city dwellers old and new.

In order to create safe spaces, African Americans in Chicago fought to desegregate parks, pools, beaches, and playgrounds. They used a range of tactics, legal and extralegal, in their efforts to fight recreational segregation — tactics that reflect the ways segregation shaped every aspect of their lives. Yet these struggles also reveal an understanding of citizenship, democracy, and modernity that shaped the city itself.⁷¹⁹ The segregation of neighborhoods and employment, the decisions of the Chicago Park District, and the vagaries of White Supremacy made the right to recreation, and swimming in particular, something African Americans in the Windy City had to work hard to obtain. Beginning with the murder of Eugene Williams in Lake Michigan in 1919 and the subsequent riot, it was clear to Black Chicagoans that recreation was dangerous business.

Williams, a seventeen-year-old, had accidentally floated from the 29th Street beach, where Black Chicagoans were “allowed” to swim, to the beach at 25th Street, which was considered a Whites-only beach. He was hit with a rock thrown by a White man, George Stauber, who was standing on the shore. Although witnesses could identify the man who threw the rock and killed Williams, the police refused to make any arrests on the beach that fateful day. The devastating seven-day riot that followed left twenty-three more African Americans and fifteen Whites dead.⁷²⁰ Nearly 540 Chicagoans were wounded and hundreds, perhaps thousands, of Black Chicagoans were left homeless.

That “Red Summer” would have lasting consequences for African Americans in Chicagoland: It destroyed their homes, it confirmed for many the dangers of the police, and it kept many away from the lake and the beaches. For other Black Chicagoans, however, the events of 1919 only intensified efforts to claim recreational spaces. As the *Chicago Defender* warned two years after the riot: “We are going to use every beach along the shores of Lake Michigan and if our white brothers and sisters fear that the waters we splash around in are contaminated we have not the slightest objection in the world to their continuing their use of their old reliable bathtub.”⁷²¹ Beaches had been, and would continue to be, a central site of racial conflict where color lines were drawn.

In the first decades of the twentieth century, opportunities for recreation for most Black Chicagoans consisted of inadequate and often dangerous beaches and a few public parks. Given the lack of public swimming pools, Lake Michigan was, for most, the *only* body of water Black people could access without paying an entrance fee. With twenty-two miles of coastline within city limits, it is not surprising that established Black residents and new arrivals would look to the lake as a free and available place for recreation. Already a site of protest and violence before Eugene Williams died, the beaches of Lake Michigan would be contested terrain for decades.

The Chicago Commission on Race Relations was tasked with studying the causes and conditions that precipitated the riot of 1919. Their report, *The Negro in Chicago*, was published in 1922 following an eleven-month investigation organized by sociologists of the University of Chicago, including the Black graduate student Charles S. Johnson. In many ways, Johnson shifted the national conversation about Black criminality. Blaming Black migrants for racial violence was a popular refrain, but Johnson systematically undermined this approach.

The commission confirmed what Black citizens knew: that the city’s beaches were segregated and that they continued to be sites of conflict. The report concluded that: “From Twenty-Six Street beach, which is patronized almost entirely by Negroes, down to Thirty-Six Street, Negroes and whites go into the water in separate groups.”⁷²² Johnson and his team also admitted that this segregation was often enforced: “Separate racial grouping is the rule at the beaches, though not always voluntary.”⁷²³ To prevent future riots, the city stationed a policeman at the beach where the riot of 1919 started, where gangs of White boys “from as far away as Halsted Street” continued to harass Black citizens and were “ready to fight at the slightest opportunity.”⁷²⁴ At the beaches outside the areas marked for African

Americans, park attendants informed the commission that there would be trouble if Black families came.

The beaches reserved for African Americans were woefully inadequate. Those near the oldest and poorest sections of the Black Belt were scarce, small, and poorly maintained. The condition of 31st Street Beach, adjacent to where Williams was killed, was a sore spot for Black Chicagoans, many of whom saw it as a disgrace. The *Defender* reported on the beach's many dangers, including deep water and nearby train tracks: "If the waves don't get you the railroad will; you'll be killed in either case."⁷²⁵ Fighting to improve the conditions at so-called Black beaches was a tricky undertaking and one that many felt only bolstered the system of segregation. On the one hand, Black Chicagoans deplored the Jim Crow beaches, and on the other they maintained the right to use any of the city's beaches.

The statistics on sites of recreation and their availability to the city's Black population in the years after 1919 were grim. There were 127 places of public recreation in the city, including parks, playgrounds, pools, and beaches. Only thirty-seven were in Black neighborhoods, and of the twenty-nine recreation centers with indoor swimming pools, none were in Black neighborhoods.⁷²⁶

Yet these numbers do not tell the whole story. As Charles Johnson and the authors of *The Negro in Chicago* determined, even the facilities in or near Black neighborhoods did not provide carefree sites where Black children played. Given the lack of swimming pools in or near Black neighborhoods, the lake provided the only option for African Americans hoping to dip into cool water on a scorching summer's day. Yet of the three beaches on the South Side, only 25th Street Beach was deemed useable by Black residents; Black citizens made up 95 percent of the attendees at that beach. At the other two beaches — 38th Street and 51st Street — only 1 percent of the attendees were African American, indicating that the facilities were unacceptable and possibly dangerous.⁷²⁷ The same White gangs that infiltrated the city attacking Black residents in the summer of 1919 policed public parks, playgrounds, and beaches, acting as an extralegal force to keep public spaces White-only. Just as housing segregation operated in and outside the law, so did recreational segregation.

Swimming pools could, theoretically, provide safer places to swim than the city's beaches. But they were few and far between. Aside from the pools in high schools or YMCAs, the recreation centers at public parks offered some of the only places to swim. Recreation centers also provided the rare place to exercise indoors, something that was prized during the harsh Chicago winters. Unfortunately, not one of the recreation centers was located in a Black neighborhood. As the Chicago

Commission on Race relations noted, “The recreation center is the most unusual and notable feature of Chicago’s recreation system but one from which the Negro gets little benefit [...]. Though the argument that wholesome recreation makes for better citizenship applies to Negroes as well as to Whites, no recreation center has been located within the Negro areas and only seven near them.”⁷²⁸ This means that the city’s Black population was virtually without indoor options for recreation and very few could access a swimming pool, a loss that was highlighted in the report as well as in the Black press. In 1921, a Black clubwoman reported in the *Daily News* that there were at least ten thousand Black girls in the city who did not have access to “a single swimming pool or gymnasium.”⁷²⁹

Beaches and pools would continue to be front and center in Black Chicagoans’ fight against Jim Crow. The years of the Great Migration witnessed innumerable fights over space and recreation throughout the city. Little had changed by World War II, as St. Clair Drake and Horace Cayton noted in *Black Metropolis*: “[B]athing beaches and swimming pools are among the primary tension points. The Race Riot of 1919 began with a bathing-beach incident, and during the subsequent quarter of a century the beach question has continued to plague Chicago authorities.”⁷³⁰ By the 1960s, Chicago, especially the city’s South Side, was, again, “ground zero for recreation riots.”⁷³¹ In Calumet Park, for example, a mob of thousands attacked an African American mothers’ club when they attempted to host a picnic. Police had to escort the women and children out of the park.⁷³²

Williams’s death forces us to consider recreational segregation as one of the causes of the 1919 riot. Moreover, it alerts us to the significance of recreational segregation for all Black Illinoisans. To underscore recreational segregation can help us locate the points of friction, tensions, and ideologies that undergird racial violence and other practices of Jim Crow across the state.

CONCLUSION: BLACK REPARATIONS, BLACK WORLDMAKING

By looking at the reparations campaign in the United States as a social movement, we discover that it was never entirely, or even primarily, about money. The demand for reparations was about social justice, reconciliation, reconstructing the internal life of Black America, and eliminating institutional racism.

— Robin D. G. Kelley, *Freedom Dreams*

Reparation, like the broader struggle for social justice, is concerned with building the just world to come.

— Olúfẹ̀mi O. Táíwò, *Reconsidering Reparations*

In this report, we have provided a broad overview of the harms Black Illinoisans have experienced because of slavery and the ensuing forms of racial oppression — from Jim Crow to the current carceral regime — that have emerged from the racialized social order that slavery helped to inaugurate in the United States. While it would be impossible in this or any report to catalog every possible harm Black people have experienced, we have endeavored to outline the key historical events, legislative enactments, judicial decisions, and state policies that have enabled the violence, premature death, disenfranchisement, toxic climates, poor health outcomes, underresourced schools and communities, wealth extraction, underemployment, racialized segregation, housing insecurity, mass incarceration, kinship rupture, reductive stereotypes, unsafety, and land dispossession Black Illinoisans have experienced since the earliest days of the state's formation.

What we ultimately show is that Black people and Black communities throughout Illinois are experiencing, as reparations scholar William Darity and his colleagues put it, “a present-day injustice that calls for a present-day remedy.”⁷³³ It is beyond the scope of this report to determine just what those remedies should be, but the many community members and practitioners and scholars who have been advancing the cause of reparations in Illinois and across the country have already proposed any number of mechanisms for redress that can help map out the next steps on the path toward liberation. We will leave it to ambitious thinkers such as these to determine, with and alongside Black community members from across the state, the best way forward.

After more than a year of doing the daunting, sometimes painful, and sometimes overwhelming, work of reading and researching and talking about the endurance of Black suffering in Illinois, what we want to end with is this: As important as it is to know and understand our past, and as critical as it is to understand how that past shapes the realities of our present situation, reparations are not just about the injustices of our past and present. Reparations are also about the making of our collective futures. Beyond all the discussion of economic calculations and compensation mechanisms and programmatic entitlements and eligibility standards, what reparations can give us is a way of imagining, and then building, a more just world for every single person, Black and non-Black. At their most transformative, reparations are not just about acknowledging and making amends for harm that has been done in the past. They are not just about the accumulation of funds or financial redress. While acknowledgment and financial redress are obviously critically important to any reparations framework, a reparative orientation that is forward-looking asks how we might distribute reparations toward our collective needs in a way that enables us to *reshape* a global world order that has enabled Black suffering, rather than simply manage the consequences of that unjust ordering.⁷³⁴

Historian Robin Kelley notes that during the period of Reconstruction, Black people spoke about the forty acres of land that had been promised to formerly enslaved men in General Sherman's Special Field Order 15 and ensuing Freedmen's Bureau bill not as a gift or a handout, but as back payment for an irresolvable debt. When calls for reparations picked up momentum more than one hundred years later during the Black radical movements of the 1960s and 1970s, Black people again posited reparations as compensation for "centuries of unpaid labor, violence, and exploitation," and developed reparations platforms that were aimed at radically transforming society.⁷³⁵

As Kelley and many other scholars, organizers, and community folks help us understand, the call for reparations is not now, and never has been, solely about money owed. Rather, the movement for reparations that has been ongoing since the period of enslavement exposes the structures of domination that have been shaped by slavery and enduring racism and provides us a mechanism for building toward a more just world yet to come.

TIMELINE OF KEY EVENTS

The timeline on the following pages chronicles key events, laws, policies, and acts of racialized violence that have shaped the lived experiences of Black people in Illinois from the early territorial period to the present. Although Illinois entered the Union as a “free” state, the formal prohibition of slavery did not prevent systemic discrimination against Black residents. Throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the state enacted and enforced measures such as Black Codes, restrictive covenants, and voter suppression laws that limited the civil, political, and economic rights of Black communities. The timeline highlights episodes of racial violence, including riots, lynchings, and police brutality, which contributed to the exclusion, displacement, and marginalization of Black people statewide. At the same time, it recognizes the responses and resistance by Black individuals and organizations through political engagement, legal challenges, and ongoing advocacy for civil rights and reparations.

By tracing these events chronologically, the timeline reveals how Illinois laws and policies produced and perpetuated racialized harm, creating persistent inequalities that continue to shape Black life today. It serves as a framework for understanding the state’s historical and ongoing struggles with racial justice and for contextualizing contemporary movements toward equity, reparations, and systemic reform.

TIMELINE OF RACIALIZED HARMS AFFECTING BLACK PEOPLE IN ILLINOIS

Year / Date	Event	Location	Description / Racialized Harm
1787	Northwest Ordinance adopted; Article Six abolishes slavery	Territory later Illinois	Formally prohibited slavery in the territory but did not prevent racial discrimination against free Black people
Dec. 3, 1818	Illinois admitted to the Union	Statewide	Admission allowed Black Codes and restrictive laws that limited rights of free Black residents
Nov. 7, 1837	Abolitionist Elijah Lovejoy killed	Alton	White mob attacks over anti-slavery press, showing early violent resistance to racial equality
Sep. 8, 1850	Fugitive Slave Act passed	Federal / Illinois impact	Forced free Black residents and escaped enslaved people to risk capture and enslavement
Feb. 12, 1853	Illinois Black Law goes into effect	Statewide	Prohibited Black emigration into Illinois, restricting civil rights and residency
Apr. 12, 1861	US Civil War begins	National / Illinois	Black men enlisted in Illinois regiments, facing discrimination despite service
Feb. 7, 1865	Illinois Black Laws repealed	Statewide	Partial legal relief, but racial discrimination persisted socially and economically
May 26, 1865	US Civil War ends	National / Illinois	Black veterans returned to Illinois facing housing, employment, and civic discrimination
Dec. 6, 1865	13th Amendment ratified	National	Formally abolished slavery, yet systemic exclusion and Black Codes had lasting effects in Illinois
July 9, 1868	14th Amendment ratified	National	Granted citizenship to Black people, though enforcement uneven in Illinois
Feb. 3, 1870	15th Amendment ratified	National	Prohibited denial of voting rights based on race; Black men still faced intimidation and voter suppression in Illinois
1871	John Jones elected to Cook County Board	Cook County	First Black elected official; political representation limited statewide
1885	Illinois Civil Rights Act passed	Statewide	Outlawed racial discrimination in public accommodations; enforcement weak
May 18, 1896	<i>Plessy v. Ferguson</i>	National	Legalized segregation; emboldened racial discrimination in Illinois schools and public life
Aug. 14 – 16, 1908	Springfield Race Riot	Springfield	White mob attacked Black residents, killing and displacing many; exposed racial tensions statewide
1913	Alpha Suffrage Club founded by Ida B. Wells	Chicago	Black women organized for political participation despite systemic disenfranchisement
July 1–3, 1917	East St. Louis Riot	East St. Louis	White mob killed dozens of Black residents, destroyed homes; systemic labor and racial tensions highlighted
July 27–Aug 3, 1919	Chicago Race Riot	Chicago	38+ Black residents killed; thousands displaced; reinforced segregation and policing bias

Year / Date	Event	Location	Description / Racialized Harm
1927	Racially restrictive covenants widely used	Chicago	Prevented Black residents from buying or renting homes in White neighborhoods; reinforced housing segregation
1949	Englewood Race Riot	Chicago	White mob violence against Black residents; Black families prevented from moving into neighborhoods
May 17, 1954	<i>Brown v. Board of Education</i>	National	Declared school segregation unconstitutional; Illinois schools remained largely segregated due to housing patterns
Aug. 28, 1955	Emmett Till lynched	Mississippi / Chicago	Shocked Black Chicago; spurred civil rights activism in Illinois
Aug. 5, 1966	Rev. M. L. King Jr. struck with rock during fair housing march	Chicago (Marquette Park)	Highlighted violent resistance to Black housing equality in Illinois
Aug. 9, 1966	<i>Gautreaux v. Chicago Housing Authority</i> filed	Chicago	Legal challenge to racial discrimination in public housing
Dec. 4, 1969	Fred Hampton and Mark Clark killed	Chicago	Police raid targeted Black Panther leaders; intensified distrust in law enforcement
1970s–1980s	Redlining, contract sales, and housing discrimination	Chicago and statewide	Systemic housing segregation and disinvestment in Black neighborhoods
1980s–1990s	Jon Burge police torture scandal	Chicago	Dozens of Black men tortured by police to extract confessions; systemic law enforcement abuse
2003	Illinois Civil Rights Act strengthened	Statewide	Expanded protections against discrimination in housing, employment, and public accommodations
Oct. 20, 2014	Laquan McDonald shot by police	Chicago	Example of ongoing racialized violence by police
May 6, 2015	Chicago passes reparations ordinance for Jon Burge torture survivors	Chicago	Formal acknowledgment of racialized police torture
May 25, 2020	George Floyd protests	National / Illinois	Mass protests highlighted ongoing racial injustice and policing issues
Mar. 22, 2021	Evanston Local Reparations Restorative Housing Program	Evanston	First municipal reparations program in Illinois
Aug. 2024	Springfield Race Riot site designated National Monument	Springfield	Federal recognition of racial violence in Illinois history

REPORT AUTHOR & EXPERT COMMENTARY AUTHOR BIOS

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Almethia Franklin holds a PhD in Criminology, Law, and Justice from the University of Illinois Chicago and serves as a postdoctoral research associate at the university's Institute for Research on Race and Public Policy. Her scholarly work explores the intersections of race, incarceration, and structural inequality, with particular focus on the reentry experiences of formerly incarcerated Black men and the enduring effects of incarceration on families and communities. As co-principal investigator of the Chicago Subsidized Housing and Evictions Study, she examines eviction trends in public housing and their consequences for housing insecurity and community displacement. Additionally, she has participated in state- and federally-funded projects related to violence prevention, gang intervention, and victim advocacy. Employing both qualitative and quantitative research methodologies, her work sheds light on the ways punishment systems perpetuate racial disparities, while also advancing policy solutions grounded in research that promote equity, stability, and social reintegration.

Kaimara Herron is a PhD candidate in the Department of History at the University of Illinois Chicago. Her research focuses on Black women's political labor in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. She received her master's degree from the University of Mississippi in 2019. Her thesis project, *She Lived, and Served, and Died: Caroline Barr, Black Domestic Workers, and the Threat of Memory in Lafayette County, MS*, was selected for the Best Thesis Prize from the Mississippi Historical Society in 2020. Her forthcoming dissertation project will explore intersections between queer literature and history in Black feminist publishing communities. In addition to her academic work, Herron's professional experience includes work in museums, archives, and as an oral history researcher. She is currently project manager for *Listening for the Long Haul: A Long COVID Oral History Project*. Herron was born and raised in Chicago and enjoys film photography and walking the lakefront trail.

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Expert Commentary Authors

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Scott Heerman is an Associate Professor of History at the College of William and Mary. He received his PhD in history in 2013 and held a postdoctoral fellowship at Johns Hopkins University from 2013 to 2015. He has published several articles exploring the history of slavery in the state of Illinois. His monograph, *The Alchemy of Slavery: Human Bondage and Emancipation in the Illinois Country, 1730–1865*, was published by the University of Pennsylvania Press in 2018.

Amber S. Hendley is an accomplished researcher. In her full-time role as researcher in residence with the Chicago Bungalow Association, Hendley is developing a comprehensive case study on how to scale and replicate a successful project like *UnBlocked Englewood*, a combination of art and rehabilitation to redress decades of discrimination by helping current Englewood homeowners build equity. Hendley's academic background includes an MA in analytical and political economy from Duke University, where she co-authored *The Plunder of Black Wealth in Chicago: New Findings on the Lasting Toll of Predatory Housing Contracts*. This report shed light on the unjust extraction of wealth from the Black community in Chicago during the Second Great Migration. Beyond her institutional affiliations, Hendley engages in consulting work aimed at effectively contextualizing data and information for various stakeholders, principally community members, artists, and leaders. She is most notably the archival researcher for the City of Chicago's Black Reparations Study.

Lynn M. Hudson is a Professor of History and an affiliated faculty member of the Department of Black Studies at the University of Illinois Chicago. She is the author of *The Making of "Mammy Pleasant": A Black Entrepreneur in Nineteenth-Century San Francisco* (University of Illinois Press, 2003), and *West of Jim Crow: The Fight against California's Color Line* (University of Illinois Press, 2020). In 2021, she provided expert testimony for the California Task Force to Study and Develop Reparations Proposals for African Americans.

D. Bradford Hunt is a Professor of History and chair of the Department of History at Loyola University Chicago. He is the author of the award-winning *Blueprint for Disaster: The Unraveling of Chicago Public Housing* (University of Chicago Press, 2009), and the producer of *Chicago 1919: Confronting the Race Riots*, which won the 2020 National Council on Public History award for Best Public History Project. He received his PhD in History from the University of California, Berkeley.

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Larry A. McClellan is Professor Emeritus at Governors State University. He served as the organizing president of the Midwest Underground Railroad Network from 2018, and on the Illinois Underground Railroad Task Force in 2024. His books include *Onward to Chicago: Freedom Seekers and the Underground Railroad in Northeastern Illinois* (Southern Illinois University Press, 2023); *The Underground Railroad South of Chicago*, and *To the River: The Remarkable Journey of Caroline Quarlls, Freedom Seeker* (both Thorn Creek Press, 2019). He was the principal writer on three accepted applications for listings on the National Park Service Network to Freedom and has been a resource for a variety of projects and programs on the Underground Railroad across Illinois. He lives in Crete in Will County.

Mary Pattillo is the Harold Washington Professor of Sociology and Black Studies at Northwestern University. She studies race and inequality, housing, urban politics, education reform, criminal legal studies, and stratification within the Black community, with a focus on Chicago. She is the author of two award-winning books about Chicago — *Black Picket Fences: Privilege and Peril among the Black Middle Class* and *Black on the Block: The Politics of Race and Class in the City* — and co-editor of *Imprisoning America: The Social Effects of Mass Incarceration*. Pattillo is a member of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences and the American Academy of Political & Social Science. She sits on the Boards of the Russell Sage Foundation and Chicago Appleseed Center for Fair Courts. Pattillo holds a BA in Urban Studies from Columbia University and an MA and PhD in Sociology from the University of Chicago.

David Roediger teaches American Studies and History at the University of Kansas. He was born in southern Illinois and educated in public schools in that state, with a BS in education from Northern Illinois University. He holds a PhD from Northwestern. Roediger has taught labor, immigrant, and African American history at the University of Missouri, the University of Illinois, and the University of Minnesota. He worked as an editor of the Frederick Douglass papers at Yale University. His books include *Seizing Freedom* (Verso, 2015), *The Wages of Whiteness* (Verso, 2022), and *How Race Survived U.S. History* (Verso, 2019). Roediger has received the Merle Curti Prize from

the Organization of American Historians, the C.L.R. James Prize from the Working Class Studies Association, and the lifetime achievement award from the Society for the Study of Multiethnic Literature of the US. He is past president of the American Studies Association.

David Stovall is a Professor in the Department of Black Studies and in the Department of Criminology, Law and Justice at the University of Illinois Chicago. As a critical race theorist, he works among a community of co-conspirators locally, nationally, and internationally to abolish the school/prison nexus. An internationally recognized expert on race, place and schooling, he has published a number of books including his newest, *Engineered Conflict: Structural Violence and the Future of Black Life in Chicago* (2026).

Elizabeth Todd-Breland is an Associate Professor of History at the University of Illinois Chicago. She is the author of *A Political Education: Black Politics and Education Reform in Chicago Since the 1960s* (University of North Carolina Press, 2018), co-author of *I Didn't Come Here to Lie: My Life and Education* (Haymarket Books, 2025). Her research and teaching focus on US urban history, African American history, the history of education, and public policy. From 2019 to 2024, Todd-Breland served as a member of the Chicago Board of Education.

Alonzo Ward is an Associate Professor of History at Eastern Illinois University. He has authored several articles on Black workers in Illinois, including an award-winning journal article titled "'A Revolution in Labor': African Americans and Hybrid Labor Activism in Illinois during the Early Jim Crow Era." He is currently working with a cohort of educators at the Social Studies Network at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign on a textbook on Black History for middle schoolers. His current book project, *Relegated to the Bottom: Illinois African American Workers and their Struggle against Systematic Oppression during the Early Jim Crow Era*, explores Black labor in Illinois during the late nineteenth century in conjunction with the burgeoning American labor movement.

LaDale Winling is an Associate Professor of History at Virginia Tech. He is author of *Building the Ivory Tower: Universities and Metropolitan Development in the Twentieth Century* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017), co-creator of the digital humanities project *Mapping Inequality: Redlining in New Deal America*, and director of the Chicago Covenants Project. He is writing a book entitled *Property Wrongs: The Forty-Year Battle Over Race and Real Estate*, for the University of Chicago Press.

REPARATIONS: A CONTEMPORARY READING LIST‡

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Chicago: The Home of Racialized Real Estate

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Painting the Wealth Gap

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- 451 *"And when African Americans who left the South entered a northern labor market, federal, state, and local government collaborated with private employers to ensure that they were paid less and treated worse than Whites" (Rothstein, *The Color of Law*, 155).
- 452 *The FHA's Underwriting Manual stated that "If a neighborhood is to retain stability it is necessary that properties shall continue to be occupied by the same social and racial classes. A change in social or racial occupancy generally leads to instability and a reduction in values" (Rothstein, *The Color of Law*, 65); AFL unions mostly would not permit African Americans to join (Rothstein, *The Color of Law*, 160); The Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) not only segregated residential camps but allowed local policies that did not permit African Americans to enroll or restricted them to menial jobs in which they could not develop the higher skills that the corps was meant to provide. "The enactment of the Wagner Act was accomplished with the knowledge that it sanctioned an unconstitutional policy of legally empowering unions that refused to admit African Americans. For at least the next thirty years, the government protected the bargaining rights of unions that denied African Americans the privileges of membership or that segregated them into janitorial or other lower-paid jobs" (Rothstein, *The Color of Law*, 157-58).
- 453 *In 1944 the G.I. Bill was adopted to support returning servicemen. The VA not only denied African Americans the mortgage subsidies to which they were entitled but frequently restricted education and training to lower-level jobs for African Americans (Rothstein, *The Color of Law*, 167).
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Reparations as Redress for Educational Debt

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Black Women and Violence in Illinois: A Reparative Justice Issue

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