JULY 2026 RESEARCH BRIEF
FIRST IN AN ANNUAL SERIES

The Economic State of Black Men and Boys in the United States

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Published by the John Mercer Langston Institute for African American Political Leadership, in conjunction with the Virginia Alliance for Black Men and Boys.

FROM THE INSTITUTE

Why This Report Exists

For decades, the economic condition of Black Americans has been reported as a single number. That number is useful, but it is also an average, and averages hide the people who are falling furthest behind it. When Black men's employment outcomes deteriorate differently from the broader Black population, an aggregate figure can absorb the difference and make the specific problem harder to see. The John Mercer Langston Institute for African American Political Leadership publishes this research brief because Black men and boys deserve to be seen in the data, not folded into it.

Disaggregating the numbers is not a competition with Black women, who carry their own well-documented burdens in wealth, retirement security, and income. It is a discipline. It is the only way an institution, a legislature, or a university can be held accountable for a specific outcome rather than an average one. A college that improves its overall graduation rate while losing Black male students can look successful in the aggregate and still be failing the population this brief is about. Disaggregation is how that failure becomes visible, and visibility is the precondition for action.

This brief is intended to be read three ways. Policymakers and university administrators should read it as a scorecard — a set of specific, sourced indicators against which their own institutions can be measured, year over year. Practitioners, coaches, pastors, and mentors should read it as confirmation of what they are already seeing on the ground, placed alongside relevant federal indicators to make the case to funders and decision-makers. And Black men and boys, and the families who raise them, should read it as an honest account of the conditions they are navigating — not to induce despair, but because an accurate diagnosis is the first step toward a different outcome.

This is the first edition in what will be an annual series. Each year, the Institute will update these indicators, track progress against the priorities identified here, and hold both itself and the institutions named in this brief accountable to the same standard. Nobody is coming to save us. This brief exists so that the people and institutions who can act have no excuse not to.

AT A GLANCE

The Economic State of Black Men and Boys, in Eight Numbers

A visual summary. Every figure below is labeled with the population it actually measures. The full analysis, data tables, methodology, and 26 sourced endnotes follow beginning on the next page.

22.7M Black men and boys in the U.S. (2025)	**6.6%** Black unemployment rate, June 2026 — all genders, highest among the four racial and ethnic groups presented in the BLS monthly summary table	**$1,039** Median weekly earnings, Black men, full-time (77¢ per White-male dollar)	**26%** Black men's share of HBCU enrollment, down from 38% in 1976
$2,200 Median transaction-account balance, households with a Black householder	**43%** Homeownership rate among households with a Black householder, vs. 73% among households with a White householder	**↓ 1.7 pts** Decline in Black men's employment-to-population ratio, Q1 2025–Q1 2026	**30%** Share of unemployed Black men out of work 27+ weeks (May 2026 analysis)

The Black Male Economic Pipeline

Disadvantage compounds across the pipeline below — but not every stage measures Black men and boys directly. The population actually measured is labeled under each figure.

Stage	Indicator	Figure	Population Actually Measured
Reading	NAEP Proficient, grade 4	17%	Black students, all genders, grade 4
College	Share of HBCU enrollment	26%	Black men, share of total HBCU fall enrollment
Employment	Unemployment rate	6.6%	Black civilian labor-force participants, all genders, age 16+
Income	Weekly earnings vs. White men	77¢	Black men, full-time workers
Wealth	Median transaction-account balance	$2,200	Households with a Black householder (2022 SCF data)
Mobility	Downward mobility vs. White peers	Elevated	Black boys raised in high-income families

Executive Summary

Black men and boys remain economically disadvantaged across several interconnected dimensions, including reading achievement, college enrollment, employment, earnings, household financial security, and intergenerational mobility. In several key areas the concern is no longer limited to persistent inequality: specific, named indicators — detailed below — show stagnation or, in the case of Black men's employment-to-population ratio, a recent decline not observed among other major race-by-gender groups.

Black male enrollment in higher education has declined substantially since 2010, including at historically Black colleges and universities. Black male HBCU enrollment increased between 2020 and 2022 following a 2020 low, but remained below earlier levels. In the labor market, recent analyses show a weakening employment-to-population ratio among Black men, particularly those without four-year college degrees. Black men also continue to earn substantially less than White and Asian men, while the households in which Black men live typically hold far fewer liquid assets with which to withstand a prolonged period without work.

These outcomes are interconnected, though this brief does not present that interconnection as formally established causation. Educational disadvantage is associated with reduced access to credentials and employment opportunities. Labor-market instability can reduce earnings and interrupt career development. Limited household wealth can make employment disruptions more financially damaging. Research on intergenerational mobility further shows that parental affluence does not protect Black boys from downward mobility to the same degree that it protects White boys.

This brief recommends six priorities, described in the final section together with the strength of evidence behind each: treating Black male enrollment and persistence as measurable institutional responsibilities; building mentorship, mental-health, and career supports earlier; investing in evidence-aligned literacy instruction and high-dosage tutoring; expanding pathways into growing sectors; targeting services to the long-term unemployed; and mobilizing state, local, institutional, and community action while broader federal policy remains uncertain.

Methodology and Scope

This is a policy research brief, not an original empirical study. It combines quantitative analysis of publicly available federal data with qualitative field engagement conducted by the John Mercer Langston Institute for African American Political Leadership and its partners over a twelve-month period. The quantitative findings are drawn from the Bureau of Labor Statistics, the U.S. Census Bureau, the National Center for Education Statistics, and published analyses of federal data by the research organizations identified in the notes.

Institute leadership estimates that it and its partners generated more than 10,000 engagement touchpoints with Black men and boys and other community stakeholders over the twelve-month period described. This is an approximate count of interactions, not unique participants. These engagements occurred through conversations at conferences, community events, and everyday gathering places, including 100 Black Men of America and NAACP conferences, Black male achievement convenings, National Alliance of Black School Educators conferences, barbershops visited during the Real Men Vote tour, basketball courts, community parks, and other community settings across the country.

These engagements were informal and were not collected through a standardized survey, interview, or attendance-tracking protocol. Participants may have engaged with Institute leadership or its partners more than once. The engagements were not nationally representative, were not randomly sampled, and are not used to generate any national statistical estimate in this brief. They inform the report's framing, interpretation, and recommendations only.

> ***Where the federal data tell us what is happening, the engagement tells us how it is experienced. The two are reported separately and should be read that way.***

A Note on Data and Definitions

The sources used in this brief do not always define race, ethnicity, age, employment, or household status in identical ways. Readers should keep the following in mind throughout, and should treat the population label attached to every figure in this brief as part of the finding — not a footnote to it.

- Racial universe. Federal racial estimates are not exclusive of Hispanic ethnicity unless otherwise specified. Where a source reports non-Hispanic Black estimates, or reports people identifying with more than one race separately, that is indicated. Estimates drawn from different agencies are not always directly comparable.
- Age universe. Labor-force statistics for major racial groups generally cover people age 16 and older, while gender-specific estimates commonly cover people age 20 and older, and youth rates cover a narrower population still. This brief does not place figures with different universes in a single table.
- Sampling variability. Monthly estimates for smaller demographic subgroups are subject to sampling variability and can move for reasons unrelated to underlying conditions.
- Percentages and percentage points. A decline from 60.5 percent to 58.8 percent is a decline of 1.7 percentage points, equivalent to a relative decline of approximately 2.8 percent. The two are not interchangeable.
- Household versus individual measures. Household wealth and income measures describe the households in which Black people live. They are not measures of the wealth or income of Black men specifically, and are reported here as context for the resources available to families.
- Group comparisons. Where this brief says a Black indicator is "highest" or "lowest," the comparison is limited to the racial and ethnic groups the underlying source reports — typically the four groups (White, Black, Asian, and Hispanic) published in the BLS monthly summary tables — and is not a claim about every population group in the country.

Unless otherwise noted, differences reported here are descriptive and should not be interpreted as causal.

Introduction

Black men and boys occupy a particular place in the American economy: highly visible in the culture, underrepresented on the balance sheet. They are workers, fathers, business owners, and the backbone of institutions that hold Black communities together. Across many of the educational, employment, earnings, and wealth measures examined in this brief, they also remain substantially behind national benchmarks, and several specific indicators have recently deteriorated.

This is not only a story of long-standing inequality. In two areas in particular — college enrollment and Black men's employment-to-population ratio — earlier progress has stalled or, on those two specific measures, reversed; this brief does not claim that every indicator it reports follows the same timeline. Black male college enrollment has been declining for more than a decade, and the decline has been somewhat steeper at HBCUs — approximately 25 percent, compared with 22 percent nationally. Black male HBCU enrollment increased between 2020 and 2022 following a 2020 low, but remained below earlier levels. In the period examined by recent labor-market analyses, Black men were the only major race-by-gender group shown to experience a meaningful decline in employment-to-population ratio, while the other groups examined were stable or improved. Among unemployed Black men, the share unemployed for 27 weeks or longer was higher than the corresponding share reported for other major racial and ethnic groups.

This brief draws on a year of the Institute's field engagement alongside analysis of federal data, and it is deliberately narrow. It examines Black men and boys as a distinct population, because aggregate figures obscure what is happening to them. When Black economic data is reported as a single number, the specific deterioration in Black male employment and educational attainment disappears into an average. The purpose here is to make it visible.

A note on framing

Documenting the disadvantage facing Black men and boys is not a competition with Black women, who face their own well-documented disparities in income, wealth, and retirement security. Black women enroll in and complete college at substantially higher rates than Black men. Among full-time workers, Black men continue to have somewhat higher median weekly earnings than Black women. Both groups remain below national benchmarks in income and wealth, and both face distinct forms of economic disadvantage. That is the honest reading of the data, and it is the reading this brief adopts.

POPULATION AND DEFINITIONS

Population and Definitions

As of July 1, 2025, approximately 46.2 million Americans identified as Black alone, according to the U.S. Census Bureau's Vintage 2025 population estimates (released June 2026) — approximately 13.5 percent of the national population. This figure is not exclusive of Hispanic ethnicity. Black men and boys constitute approximately 49 percent of that population, or approximately 22.7 million people.[1]

The population is young. Roughly one in five Black Americans is under the age of 18, which means a substantial share of the population covered by this brief has not yet entered the labor market. That demographic structure matters in two directions. It represents a large future workforce, and it means decisions made about K–12 education, discipline policy, and youth employment over the next decade will shape the economic position of Black men for a generation.

It also means an honest assessment must begin earlier than the labor market.

Early Literacy

Population measured in this section: Black students, all genders.

17% of Black fourth graders performed at or above NAEP Proficient in reading, 2024

On the 2024 National Assessment of Educational Progress, approximately 17 percent of Black fourth graders and 14 percent of Black eighth graders performed at or above the NAEP Proficient achievement level in reading.[2] More than 60 percent of Black eighth graders performed below the NAEP Basic level, indicating that many students had not demonstrated the foundational reading knowledge and skills assessed by NAEP at that grade level.[3] These figures describe Black students of all genders. The publicly reported national summary tables cited here do not provide a Black-boys-specific proficiency percentage; this brief reports the published Black-student estimate and does not attempt to construct a race-by-sex estimate from other tools.

Black students made meaningful gains in reading performance between the early 1990s and the mid-2010s: the share of Black fourth graders at or above NAEP Proficient rose from approximately 8 percent in 1992 to 18 percent in 2015. Progress has since largely stalled, with the 2024 figure at approximately 17 percent.[4] Performance remains substantially higher than in 1992, but the upward trajectory has not resumed.

Where children go to school is part of the picture. Reported figures indicate that 37 percent of Black students — again, all genders — attended high-poverty schools during the 2020–21 school year, compared with 7 percent of White students.[5] National assessments generally show lower reading performance among boys than girls, and Black boys likely face the combined effects of racial disparities and the broader gender gap in literacy, though this brief does not have a sex-disaggregated Black reading statistic to confirm the size of that combined effect.

These trends raise serious concerns about the educational pipeline that prepares Black boys for postsecondary education, workforce participation, and long-term economic mobility. Early literacy is also an economic indicator: reading proficiency in the early grades is strongly associated with high school completion, postsecondary enrollment, employment, and later earnings — though that relationship reflects the combined influence of school quality, family resources, and neighborhood conditions rather than reading skill alone.

Postsecondary Enrollment

> ***↓22% decline in Black male postsecondary enrollment, 2010–2022***

The decline described in this section is a national phenomenon affecting American higher education broadly — it is not specific to any one type of institution. This brief gives particular attention to historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) because they have historically enrolled and graduated a disproportionate share of Black professionals and leaders relative to their size, and because their experience compounds an already severe national trend. Their numbers are an especially important indicator of what is happening to Black men in higher education — but, as this section makes explicit, they are not the whole story.

Across degree-granting postsecondary institutions, Black male fall enrollment declined by approximately 22 percent between 2010 and 2022, even as the overall Black population grew.[6]

The pattern at historically Black colleges and universities has been somewhat more severe, though not dramatically so. Black men represented approximately 26 percent of total HBCU fall enrollment in 2022, down from approximately 38 percent in 1976. Black male enrollment at HBCUs declined by approximately 25 percent over the 2010–2022 period, against an 11 percent decline in overall HBCU enrollment and a 22 percent decline in Black male enrollment nationally — a gap of roughly three percentage points between the HBCU and national declines. In absolute numbers, fewer Black men were enrolled at HBCUs in 2022 than in 1976. Notably, Black male HBCU enrollment increased between 2020 and 2022, outpacing other groups over that span, although the total remained below earlier levels.[7]

Black Men as a Share of HBCU Enrollment, 1976–2022

1976	**38%**
2010	**30%**
2022	**26%**

Source: Windsor and Reeves, "HBCUs at a Crossroads," American Institute for Boys and Men, 2024 (IPEDS data). The same analysis reports that Black male HBCU enrollment increased between 2020 and 2022.

> ***The non-Black share of HBCU enrollment is now approximately equal to the share represented by Black men.***

That comparison deserves to be read twice. It is not an argument against the students who fill those seats. It indicates that recruitment and retention of Black men has weakened at institutions that have historically played an outsized role in educating and graduating Black students.

The consequences appear in degree attainment. Among Black adults ages 25 to 34, approximately 26 percent of men and 38 percent of women hold a bachelor's degree or higher — a gender gap of approximately 12 percentage points, substantially wider than the gap observed in several other major racial and ethnic groups. Among labor-force participants, approximately 10.8 percent of Black men hold a master's, professional, or doctoral degree, compared with 15.7 percent of Black women, 19.3 percent of White women, and 31.6 percent of Asian women.[8]

Where Did They Go?

Where related data exists, even if not isolated to PWIs specifically, it points to a mixed picture rather than a simple one. On completion, the research is genuinely contested rather than settled: unadjusted federal longitudinal data show Black students completing a bachelor's degree within six years at almost identical rates whether they started at an HBCU or a non-HBCU (about 39 percent either way), while studies that adjust for student academic preparation and institutional financial resources find Black students completing at HBCUs at rates matching or exceeding comparable non-HBCUs. Neither body of research isolates Black men specifically, and this brief does not claim otherwise.[9] Black men also made up approximately 3 percent of all full-time faculty (of known race/ethnicity) at degree-granting postsecondary institutions in fall 2022, across all institution types — a representation gap relevant to mentorship and persistence, though not by itself a measure of student outcomes.[10]

The enrollment figures above still raise an obvious question this brief cannot fully answer: where are the Black men who are no longer enrolling? Because non-HBCU institutions enroll most Black male college students nationally, much of the national decline may have occurred outside HBCUs. However, this brief does not have institution-type-specific, Black-male-specific enrollment estimates sufficient to apportion the decline among PWIs, community colleges, HBCUs, or other pathways, and it does not manufacture an answer where the evidence does not yet exist. Potential destinations and explanations — not measured in this brief — include enrollment at community colleges, registered apprenticeships, or trade and technical education programs; delayed enrollment; military service; or exit from postsecondary education entirely.[11]

> ***Answering where Black men are going after high school is the founding research question for the Institute's next edition.***

EMPLOYMENT AND LABOR-FORCE PARTICIPATION

Employment and Labor-Force Participation

Unemployment

Population measured: Black civilian labor-force participants age 16 and older, all genders, unless noted otherwise.

> ***6.6% Black unemployment rate, June 2026 — the highest among the four racial and ethnic groups reported in the BLS monthly summary table***

In June 2026, the national unemployment rate was 4.2 percent. The unemployment rate was 6.6 percent for Black civilian labor-force participants, compared with 3.6 percent for White participants, 5.2 percent for Hispanic participants, and 3.9 percent for Asian participants. The Black unemployment rate has been the highest among the four racial and ethnic groups presented in the BLS monthly summary table throughout 2026.[12]

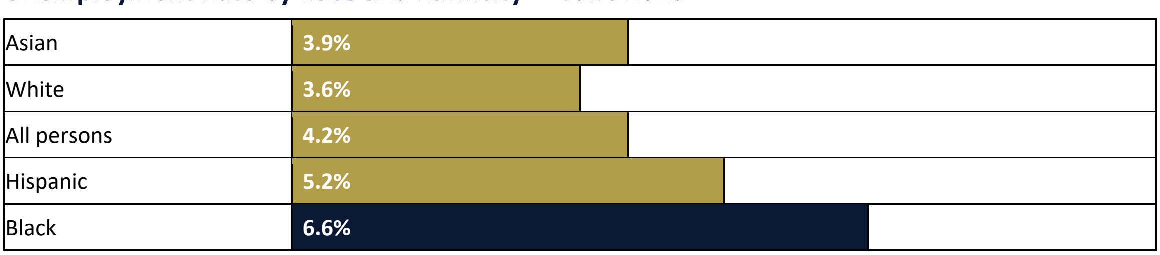
That figure has moved considerably over the year. The Black unemployment rate stood at 7.3 percent in January 2026, rose to 7.7 percent in February — the highest monthly reading of the first half of the year — eased to 7.1 percent in March, ticked back up to 7.3 percent in April, and settled at 6.6 percent in both May and June. Even at that lower June reading, the rate remained 3.0 percentage points above the 3.6 percent White rate, and 0.3 percentage point below the 6.9 percent Black unemployment rate recorded in June 2025 — a modest year-over-year improvement that has not closed the underlying racial gap.

Table 1. Unemployment rate by race and ethnicity, June 2026

Population group, age 16+	Rate
All persons	4.2%
Asian	3.9%
White	3.6%
Hispanic	5.2%
Black	6.6%

Source: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, Current Population Survey, June 2026 (released July 2, 2026). Gender-specific estimates are reported separately because BLS gender series commonly cover a different age universe.

Unemployment Rate by Race and Ethnicity — June 2026



The unemployment rate among young Black labor-force participants rose from 14.1 percent in May to 16.6 percent in June 2026, against 10.7 percent for young labor-force participants overall. Youth rates cover a narrower age population than the figures in Table 1 and are not directly comparable to them.[13]

A Complementary Measure

The unemployment rate counts only people who are actively searching for work. When unemployed workers stop searching, they leave both the unemployment count and the labor force, which can make the unemployment rate appear stronger than the underlying employment situation. For that reason the employment-to-population ratio provides essential additional information. It is the percentage of the relevant civilian population that is employed, and unlike the unemployment rate it does not improve simply because a person stops looking.

Between the first quarter of 2025 and the first quarter of 2026, the employment-to-population ratio for Black men declined from 60.5 percent to 58.8 percent — a decrease of 1.7 percentage points, equivalent to a relative decline of approximately 2.8 percent. Over the same period the ratio for Black women was approximately unchanged at 56.4 percent. The decline among Black men was concentrated among those without a four-year college degree.[14]

In the cited EPI analysis, Black men were the only race-by-gender group examined whose employment-to-population ratio showed a substantial decline from Q1 2025 to Q1 2026, while the ratios for the other groups examined were stable or increased.

The estimated number of employed Black men age 20 and older declined by approximately 650,000 between November 2025 and April 2026, according to the cited NCRC analysis of BLS data.[15] Because monthly estimates for demographic subgroups are subject to sampling variability, this figure should be read alongside the broader year-over-year decline in employment rather than on its own.

Labor-force withdrawal may reflect discouragement, but it can also result from disability, caregiving, schooling, incarceration, retirement, and other barriers. The available aggregate data do not establish the relative contribution of each factor, and this brief does not have the age-specific analysis that would be needed to rule any of them in or out with confidence.

Duration

In the May 2026 NCRC analysis of BLS data, approximately 30 percent of unemployed Black men had been unemployed for 27 weeks or longer — a higher share than the corresponding figures for unemployed men in the other racial and ethnic groups examined in that analysis. Nationally, the share of all unemployed workers out of work for 27 weeks or longer was above 26 percent as of that analysis.[16] This statistic describes unemployed Black men specifically, not all Black men, and reflects May 2026 data rather than the June 2026 figures used elsewhere in this section.

Research on duration dependence finds that extended unemployment can weaken professional networks, reduce opportunities to maintain skills, and increase employer reluctance to interview applicants with lengthy employment gaps.[17]

Sectoral Concentration

Transportation, warehousing, and related logistics occupations are major sources of employment for Black men, who are disproportionately represented in several transportation and material-moving jobs. Employment in transportation and warehousing declined by approximately 90,000 jobs over a recent twelve-month period, including roughly 22,000 truck-driver and 50,000 warehouse positions, during a period of heightened trade uncertainty and weak freight demand.[18] This brief treats sectoral contraction as one plausible contributor to the broader Black male employment decline, not as an established explanation —

the available aggregate data do not indicate how many of the approximately 650,000 fewer employed Black men described above were previously working in transportation or warehousing specifically.

Earnings

77¢ earned by Black men for every dollar earned by White men, 2025

Median usual weekly earnings for Black men working full time were approximately $1,039 in 2025, compared with $1,354 for White men and $1,780 for Asian men. Black men therefore earned approximately 77 cents — 76.7 percent — for every dollar earned by White men.[19]

Black women earned approximately $942 per week, producing a gender gap of $97 per week within the Black full-time workforce, with Black women's median weekly earnings at approximately 90.7 percent of Black men's. Although that gender gap is narrower than the comparable gap among several other racial groups, it represents convergence at a comparatively low earnings level rather than economic equality.

Table 2. Median usual weekly earnings of full-time wage and salary workers, 2025

Group	Median weekly earnings
Asian men	$1,780
Asian women	$1,395
White men	$1,354
White women	$1,108
Black men	$1,039
Hispanic men	$1,003
Black women	$942
Hispanic women	$889

Source: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, Current Population Survey, 2025 annual averages. October 2025 data were not collected due to the federal government shutdown.

Income, Wealth, and Financial Resilience

> ***$2,200 median transaction-account balance held by households with a Black householder — a limited buffer against a prolonged spell of unemployment***

Median household income for Black households was approximately $56,000 in 2024, compared with approximately $88,000 for White households and approximately $121,700 for Asian households. These Census racial categories are not limited to non-Hispanic origin. Black median household income declined approximately 3.3 percent from 2023 to 2024.[20]

The wealth picture is more consequential than the income picture, because household wealth is a major factor in determining whether and for how long a family can absorb a period without earnings. The measures in Table 3 are household-level, drawn from the Federal Reserve's 2022 Survey of Consumer Finances as compiled in a 2026 secondary analysis, and cover different populations, which are identified in the table.

Table 3. Selected measures of household financial position, by race

Measure	Black	White	Universe
Median transaction-account balance	$2,200	$10,000	All households
Median stock holdings	$5,000	$20,000	Holding households
Median home equity	$123,000	$205,000	Homeowners
Median student-loan balance	$26,000	$25,000	Households with debt
Homeownership rate	43%	73%	All households

Source: National Community Reinvestment Coalition, Racial Wealth Snapshot Series, 2026, drawing on Federal Reserve Survey of Consumer Finances data (2022 survey vintage). Measures cover different populations, as indicated.

These are household measures. They describe the households in which Black people live and provide context for the financial resources available to families. They are not measures of the wealth of Black men specifically. A fuller wealth analysis would also report median net worth, retirement-account and business ownership, and total debt.[21]

> ***A household holding approximately $2,200 in transaction accounts has limited capacity to absorb a prolonged period without earnings, without relying on benefits, debt, family support, or the sale of other assets.***

Intergenerational Mobility

Black men experience substantially lower adult employment and earnings than White men raised in families with comparable incomes. Even Black boys raised in high-income families face much greater downward mobility than similarly situated White boys. Parental affluence does not provide Black boys the same protection against downward mobility that it provides White boys.[22]

These findings demonstrate that parental income alone does not explain the racial mobility gap among men. Family and neighborhood conditions matter, but substantial disparities remain even when researchers compare children raised at similar income levels. Substantial race-associated disparities persist after researchers account for parental income and other measured characteristics.

What Success Looks Like

This brief is, by design, an unflinching account of where Black men and boys are falling behind. That should not be mistaken for a claim that the trend is fixed or the outlook is hopeless. The following illustrative cases show different stages of institutional response — from convening and assigning responsibility to implementing strategies associated with measurable outcomes. They demonstrate that institutions are beginning to act, not that every approach listed has already produced results.

Institution / Body	Action	Status
Alabama A&M University	Reported record enrollment, with Black men making up approximately 42 percent of its incoming class in a year that included targeted recruitment efforts.[23]	Reported enrollment outcome
Morgan State University	Established a Presidential Task Force on the State of Black Male Enrollment to study causes and drive institutional response.[24]	Institutional response
U.S. Commission on the Social Status of Black Men and Boys	Convened a national business meeting in March 2026 focused specifically on reversing the decline in Black male enrollment at HBCUs and other colleges.[25]	National convening
Mississippi Department of Education	A multi-part strategy — structured literacy instruction, teacher coaching, universal screening, and stronger accountability — produced measurable statewide reading gains, offering a template beyond higher education.[26]	Documented statewide reading gains

These examples demonstrate institutional action and, in the Alabama A&M and Mississippi cases, reported measurable outcomes. They do not establish that every approach listed will produce the same results elsewhere.

Conclusion

Black men and boys face interconnected disadvantages in education, employment, earnings, financial security, and mobility, and several specific indicators warrant urgent institutional attention. The decline in Black male college enrollment since 2010 means fewer Black men are currently positioned to earn credentials associated with stronger employment and earnings outcomes. Potential contributing conditions include labor-market restructuring, sectoral concentration, discrimination, and limited household wealth, although this brief does not estimate the independent contribution of each. No single factor explains the pattern, and this brief does not claim to have isolated one.

One important feature of the period examined here is the combination of elevated Black unemployment with a declining employment-to-population ratio among Black men. The Black unemployment rate continues to exceed the rates reported for the other three groups in the BLS monthly summary table, and in the cited EPI analysis, Black men were the only race-by-gender group examined whose employment-to-population ratio declined over the year studied. The aggregate data cannot tell us definitively why. The Institute's community engagement suggests that discouragement and declining confidence in the labor market are an important part of the lived experience, though those observations are qualitative and should not be treated as national causal estimates.

The interventions described in the priorities below are known, and several are already operating at institutions that decided to act. Important evidence gaps remain — including where Black men go after they stop enrolling, why their employment-to-population ratio is declining, and which institution-specific interventions most reliably produce persistence — and this brief has been explicit about each of them. Even so, institutions already possess enough evidence and capacity to begin acting on the priorities below while continuing to evaluate results.

> ***Nobody is coming to save us. What this requires now is institutions willing to be measured against it — even as the Institute continues to close the evidence gaps identified throughout this brief.***

Six Priorities, Labeled by Strength of Evidence

The following recommendations combine interventions supported by existing research with institutional priorities derived from the Institute's field engagement. The strength and type of evidence vary by intervention, and each is labeled accordingly — a policy recommendation and a peer-reviewed finding are not the same kind of claim, and this brief does not present them as such.

Priority 1 Make Enrollment and Persistence a Measured Institutional Responsibility

Recommendation. Colleges and universities should report annually on Black male applications, admissions, yield, enrollment, first-year retention, credit accumulation, financial holds, stop-out rates, transfer, graduation, and post-graduate outcomes, and should assign a senior administrator responsibility for coordinating that work. These are enrollment, persistence, and completion goals, not admissions quotas.

Who. Colleges and universities.

Evidence. Institutional recommendation; not independently evaluated in this brief.

Priority 2 Build the On-Ramp Earlier

Recommendation. Schools and colleges should build coordinated systems combining culturally responsive mentorship, licensed mental-health services, academic advising, emergency financial assistance, and career guidance beginning well before the point of crisis. The relevant standard is culturally responsive training and demonstrated competency, not counselor race.

Who. K–12 schools and colleges.

Evidence. Promising evidence on individual components (mentorship, tutoring); the combined model has not been evaluated as a package.

Priority 3 Invest in Evidence-Aligned Literacy Instruction

Recommendation. Mississippi's improvement in fourth-grade reading followed a multi-part strategy including structured literacy instruction, teacher training and coaching, universal screening, targeted intervention, and stronger accountability — not phonics alone. A substantial research literature also finds that high-dosage tutoring can produce meaningful gains when it occurs several times weekly, uses trained tutors, aligns with classroom instruction, and maintains consistent tutor relationships.

Who. State education agencies, districts.

Evidence. Strong experimental evidence summarized in a systematic review and meta-analysis; the principal synthesis cited here is an NBER working paper, not a peer-reviewed publication. Mississippi's statewide result is a single, well-documented case rather than a randomized evaluation.

Priority 4 Diversify the Sectoral Base

Recommendation. Workforce systems should expand registered apprenticeships, paid work-based learning, and industry-recognized credentials in sectors with sustained regional demand, including health care, advanced manufacturing, information technology, infrastructure, energy, and skilled construction. Programs should be evaluated on completion, placement, earnings gains, job quality, and employer demand, not on enrollment or credentials issued.

Who. Workforce systems, employers.

Evidence. Promising evidence.

Priority 5 Reach the Long-Term Unemployed Directly

Recommendation. General job growth may not be sufficient to reconnect workers who have been unemployed for 27 weeks or longer, particularly when extended unemployment itself creates barriers to reemployment. Reemployment services, wage subsidies, transitional jobs, paid retraining, targeted hiring incentives, transportation assistance, and individualized case management address reemployment directly. Extended unemployment benefits provide income stability during prolonged searches but do not by themselves produce employment.

Who. Workforce boards, employers.

Evidence. The duration-dependence problem itself is backed by peer-reviewed field-experiment evidence; the individual interventions listed have mixed-to-promising evidence depending on design, and are not established here as a single package with “strong” evidence.

Priority 6 Act at the State, Local, and Institutional Level

Recommendation. Because federal action may be uncertain or slow, states, municipalities, school systems, colleges, employers, and community organizations should not delay locally available interventions. Broadly available policies can still reduce race-specific disparities when they target conditions that disproportionately affect Black men — long-term unemployment, weak access to quality literacy instruction, transportation barriers, and limited liquid wealth.

Who. State/local government, institutions, nonprofits.

Evidence. Policy proposal.

Notes

1. U.S. Census Bureau, Population Division, “Annual Estimates of the Resident Population by Sex, Age, Race, and Hispanic Origin for the United States: April 1, 2020 to July 1, 2025” (Vintage 2025, file NC-EST2025-ASR6H), released June 2026. This table reports the Black-alone population by sex and single year of age; as of July 1, 2025 the Black-alone population totaled approximately 46.2 million (13.5 percent of the total population). The estimate of approximately 22.7 million Black men and boys applies the male share of the Black-alone population reported in that table (approximately 49 percent) to the total; readers seeking the exact unrounded male count should consult table NC-EST2025-ASR6H directly.

2. National Center for Education Statistics, National Assessment of Educational Progress, 2024 Reading Assessment, Grades 4 and 8. Under NAEP reporting conventions, the Black category includes African American students and excludes students of Hispanic origin; students identifying with two or more races are reported separately. The national summary tables cited here do not provide a Black-boys-specific proficiency estimate; NAEP's Achievement Gaps Dashboard permits more granular exploration but was not used to construct a race-by-sex figure for this brief.

3. American Enterprise Institute analysis of 2024 NAEP reading results, March 2025. NAEP Proficient is a federally established achievement level denoting solid academic performance and demonstrated competency over challenging subject matter. It is not equivalent to grade-level proficiency as defined by state or district assessments.

4. National Center for Education Statistics, NAEP Reading Assessment, long-term national results by race and ethnicity, grade 4, 1992–2024.

5. National Center for Education Statistics, Condition of Education, concentration of poverty in public schools, 2020–21. A high-poverty school is one in which more than 75 percent of students are eligible for free or reduced-price lunch.

6. DJ Windsor and Richard Reeves, “HBCUs at a Crossroads: Addressing the Decline in Black Male Enrollment,” American Institute for Boys and Men, August 22, 2024, analysis of Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) data.

7. Windsor and Reeves, “HBCUs at a Crossroads.” The same analysis reports that Black male HBCU enrollment increased between 2020 and 2022, outpacing other groups over that span, although the total number remained below earlier levels.

8. Cantrell Dumas, “The Economic State of Black Women in the United States,” Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies, March 2026, analysis of U.S. Census Bureau data.

9. Urban Institute analysis of the Beginning Postsecondary Students Longitudinal Study (BPS): among Black students who first enrolled in 2011, six-year bachelor's completion was approximately 39 percent at both HBCUs and non-HBCUs. Separately, studies that adjust for student academic preparation and institutional financial resources (e.g., analyses cited in Windsor and Reeves, “HBCUs at a Crossroads”) find Black student completion at HBCUs matching or exceeding comparable non-HBCUs by approximately 10 percentage points. The two findings use different methodologies and are not in direct conflict; neither isolates Black men specifically.

10. National Center for Education Statistics, Condition of Education, “Characteristics of Postsecondary Faculty” (2024), citing U.S. Department of Education, Digest of Education Statistics 2023, Table 315.20, “Full-time faculty in degree-granting postsecondary institutions, by race/ethnicity, sex, and academic rank: Fall 2020, fall 2021, and fall 2022,” based on IPEDS Human Resources component, Fall Staff section data. Percentages are of full-time faculty whose race/ethnicity was reported (approximately 90 percent of the total); Black men were 3 percent of that total in fall 2022.

11. This brief does not have institution-type-specific, Black-male-specific enrollment data for community colleges, registered apprenticeships, trade and technical education, or military service. Addressing that gap is a stated research priority for the Institute's next edition.

12. U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, “The Employment Situation,” Current Population Survey, monthly releases, January–June 2026 (seasonally adjusted; series LNS14000006). The Black unemployment rate by month was: January, 7.3 percent; February, 7.7 percent; March, 7.1 percent; April, 7.3 percent; May, 6.6 percent; June, 6.6 percent. June figures released July 2, 2026 (USDL-26-1125); see also Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies, “June 2026 Jobs Day Analysis.”

13. Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies, “June 2026 Jobs Day Analysis,” July 2026.

14. Economic Policy Institute analysis of Current Population Survey microdata, EPI CPS Extracts, Version 2026.4.13, May 2026. The EPI estimates use the working-age civilian noninstitutional population represented in its CPS microdata analysis. Published BLS race-by-sex estimates for persons age 20 and older showed a similar decline.

15. Joseph Dean, “Black Men Face a Worsening Jobs Market: May 2026 Race, Jobs and Economy Update,” National Community Reinvestment Coalition, May 21, 2026, analysis of BLS Current Population Survey data. Monthly estimates for demographic subgroups are subject to sampling variability.

16. Dean, “Black Men Face a Worsening Jobs Market”; U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, Current Population Survey. These shares describe unemployed workers within each group, not the total population of each group.

17. For a review of the duration-dependence literature and audit-study evidence on employment gaps, see Kory Kroft, Fabian Lange, and Matthew J. Notowidigdo, “Duration Dependence and Labor Market Conditions: Evidence from a Field Experiment,” Quarterly Journal of Economics 128, no. 3 (2013).

18. Dean, “Black Men Face a Worsening Jobs Market,” analysis of BLS Current Employment Statistics. The association with trade conditions is descriptive; no formal analysis isolating the effect of trade policy on sector employment is cited here.

19. U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, Current Population Survey, “Usual Weekly Earnings of Wage and Salary Workers,” 2025 annual averages. Data for October 2025 were not collected because of the federal government shutdown; the 2025 annual averages therefore reflect fewer than twelve months of collection.

20. U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey Annual Social and Economic Supplement, Income in the United States: 2024 (Report P60-286), Table A-1. Household race is defined by the race of the householder. Figures reflect the Census Bureau’s “Black,” “White,” and “Asian” householder categories as reported in Table A-1. These racial categories are not limited to non-Hispanic origin; the report separately publishes a “White, not Hispanic” estimate ($92,530 in 2024), which is not used here. Figures are rounded.

21. National Community Reinvestment Coalition, “Racial Wealth Snapshot Series: Overview of Black American Economic Outlook,” 2026, compiling data from the Federal Reserve's 2022 Survey of Consumer Finances. Median net worth is generally more representative than mean net worth, which is heavily influenced by households at the top of the distribution.

22. Raj Chetty, Nathaniel Hendren, Maggie R. Jones, and Sonya R. Porter, “Race and Economic Opportunity in the United States: An Intergenerational Perspective,” Quarterly Journal of Economics 135, no. 2 (May 2020): 711–783.

23. Henri A. LaSane, “Black Male College Enrollment Is Falling. Here's Why That Matters,” U.S. News & World Report, November 14, 2025, reporting figures provided by the institution.

24. Morgan State University, “Morgan State University Forms Presidential Task Force to Address Decline in Black Male Enrollment,” January 2025.

25. U.S. Commission on the Social Status of Black Men and Boys, FY26 First Quarter Business Meeting, “Closing the Gap: Addressing Declining Black Male Enrollment at HBCUs and Other Colleges,” March 24, 2026.

26. On Mississippi, see Mississippi Department of Education literacy program documentation and state NAEP results, 2013–2024; researchers continue to examine the contribution of individual components. On tutoring, see Andre Nickow, Philip Oreopoulos, and Vincent Quan, “The Impressive Effects of Tutoring on PreK–12 Learning: A Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis,” National Bureau of Economic Research Working Paper 27476 (2020).

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About This Brief

This brief was prepared by the John Mercer Langston Institute for African American Political Leadership, in conjunction with the Virginia Alliance for Black Men and Boys, and released at the BlackPrint Leadership Institute on July 30, 2026, at the Jefferson School African American Heritage Center in Charlottesville, Virginia.

It follows the structure of the Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies' March 2026 brief on the economic state of Black women, and is intended as a companion analysis rather than a comparison or a rebuttal.

This is a policy research brief synthesizing existing federal data and Institute field engagement — not an original empirical study, a peer-reviewed paper, or a nationally representative survey. Labor-market figures reflect the most recent BLS release available as of publication (June 2026 data, released July 2, 2026); other federal indicators reflect the most recent release available for each respective series as of July 2026, as identified in the notes.

This is the first in an annual series of research briefs from the John Mercer Langston Institute for African American Political Leadership examining the condition of Black men and boys and evaluating the policies, institutions, and practices that shape their lives. Subsequent editions will update the indicators reported here and assess progress against the priorities identified in this brief.

“NOBODY IS COMING TO SAVE US.”

Institutions already possess enough evidence and capacity to begin acting on the priorities in this brief — even as the Institute continues to close the evidence gaps identified throughout it.