

BLACK MALE EMPLOYMENT

Labor Market Conditions for Black Men and Boys
U.S. Commission on the Social Status of Black Men and Boys
April 2026

I. EMPLOYMENT TRENDS, 2024–2025

The unemployment rate for Black men rose sharply in 2025, widening the racial employment gap to levels not seen since 2021. The average unemployment rate for Black workers reached 6.9 percent in 2025, compared to 6.0 percent in 2024, while the overall rate rose only modestly from 4.0 to 4.3 percent.¹

Across all age groups, Black male unemployment peaked at 8.4 percent in November 2025, the highest monthly rate for this population since August 2021.² For Black men aged 20 and over specifically, the average rate in 2025 was 7.1 percent, up from 6.3 percent in 2024. Between December 2024 and December 2025, their rate climbed from 5.7 to 6.9 percent, while white men of the same age cohort remained flat at 3.3 percent.³

Young Black workers aged 16 to 24 were hit hardest: their average unemployment rate rose to 15.0 percent in 2025 (up from 13.2 percent in 2024), peaking at 20.8 percent in November, nearly double the 11.4 percent rate for all young workers.⁴

The national Black-white unemployment ratio held at 2-to-1 throughout 2025.⁵ Several states with large Black populations exhibited even wider disparities: Maryland (30.0 percent Black) had a Black-white unemployment ratio of 2.8-to-1; Michigan (13.9 percent Black) had 2.7-to-1; and Wisconsin (6.4 percent Black) reached 2.9-to-1.⁶ In each case, the state's Black-white unemployment ratio exceeded the national average, amplifying the economic consequences for Black households in those states.

In sum, 2025 marked a clear deterioration in employment conditions for Black men across every age group, every region, and at every level of the income distribution, reversing gains made during the post-pandemic recovery.

Preliminary 2026 data: As of March 2026, the unemployment rate for Black workers was 7.1 percent, compared to 4.3 percent overall. Because full-year averages for 2026 are not yet available,

¹Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies, "2025 Jobs Day Analysis," January 28, 2026, <https://jointcenter.org/2025-jobs-day-analysis/>.

²Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies, "2025 Jobs Day Analysis," January 28, 2026.

³Marketplace, "Why Are Unemployment Rates Climbing for Black Workers?" February 5, 2026, <https://www.marketplace.org/story/2026/02/05/why-are-unemployment-rates-climbing-for-black-workers>.

⁴Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies, "2025 Jobs Day Analysis," January 28, 2026.

⁵Economic Policy Institute, "2025 Annual Summary: State Unemployment by Race and Ethnicity," 2026.

⁶U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey, 2023: Maryland 30.0%, Michigan 13.9%, Wisconsin 6.4% Black population.

these figures should be treated as provisional and are not directly comparable to the annual data above.⁷

Table 1. Unemployment by Race and Gender, 2024–2025

Group	Dec '24	Dec '25	Change	2025 Avg.	Ratio*
All Workers	4.1%	4.4%	+0.3	4.3%	—
White Workers	3.6%	3.8%	+0.2	3.4%	1.0
Black Workers	6.1%	7.5%	+1.4	6.9%	2.0
Black Men (20+)	5.7%	6.9%	+1.2	7.1%	2.1
Black Youth (16–24)	—	20.8% [†]	—	15.0%	1.8

Sources: BLS; Joint Center; EPI. *Ratio to white unemployment. [†]November 2025 peak.

II. FEDERAL WORKFORCE REDUCTIONS

Federal workforce reductions in 2025 disproportionately eliminated positions in agencies and at pay grades where Black workers have long been concentrated. Black Americans comprised 18.5 percent of the federal workforce in 2024, compared to roughly 13 percent of the overall civilian labor force.⁸ Since peaking in October 2024, federal employment has fallen by 355,000 positions, an 11.8 percent reduction.⁹

For many Black families, federal employment has served as an important pathway to middle-class stability, offering stable tenure (averaging 12 years, versus 4 years for all civilian workers), union protections, and pension benefits.¹⁰ Cuts disproportionately targeted probationary and lower-level positions where Black workers are concentrated, compounded by rollbacks of DEI programs. These reductions affected Black workers broadly and are not limited to Black men specifically; data disaggregated by both race and gender within the federal workforce are limited, though available evidence indicates that Black women in particular experienced substantial losses in agencies such as the Department of Education and Health and Human Services.¹¹

In 15 states, including Maryland, Virginia, Georgia, Texas, and North Carolina, Black workers constitute at least one-fifth of the federal workforce; 29.5 percent of Black federal workers are

⁷U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, "The Employment Situation, March 2026," April 3, 2026,

<https://www.bls.gov/news.release/pdf/empisit.pdf>. Note: Preliminary data; full-year 2026 averages are not yet available.

⁸Marketplace, "Why Are Unemployment Rates Climbing for Black Workers?" February 5, 2026.

⁹BlackEngineer.com, "Persistent Disparities Mark March 2026 Employment Report," April 3, 2026,

<https://www.blackengineer.com/business/persistent-disparities-mark-march-2026-employment-report/>.

¹⁰Marketplace, "DOGE Job Cuts Disproportionately Affect Black Federal Workers," May 21, 2025,

<https://www.marketplace.org/story/2025/05/21/government-job-cuts-have-disproportionate-effect-on-black-federal-workers>.

¹¹Marketplace, "DOGE Job Cuts Disproportionately Affect Black Federal Workers," May 21, 2025.

veterans.¹² The broader economy added only 584,000 total jobs in 2025, the lowest annual total outside a recession since 2003, limiting reemployment opportunities for displaced workers.¹³

III. WAGES AND EARNINGS

In the third quarter of 2025, median weekly earnings for full-time Black workers were \$970, compared to \$1,238 for white workers, a gap of \$268 per week, or roughly \$13,936 annually.¹⁴ Black men working full-time earned \$1,053 per week, or 77.7 percent of the \$1,354 median for white men, based on fourth-quarter 2025 averages.¹⁵

These disparities are not new; they reflect a long-term pattern of widening inequality. Federal Reserve data drawn from tax records show that the Black-white earnings gap widened at most points of the income distribution between 2009 and 2019, with Black men's annual W-2 earnings at the median reaching just 62 percent of white men's.¹⁶ This longer-term trend matters because it demonstrates that the poor employment outcomes of 2024 and 2025 did not emerge from an otherwise improving trajectory. Rather, they represent the continuation, and in some cases the acceleration, of a decades-long pattern of stagnating relative earnings for Black men.¹⁷

IV. SERVICES SECTOR EMPLOYMENT TRENDS

A. Professional and Business Services Contraction

Professional and business services shed approximately 80,000 jobs in 2025, making it one of the largest areas of private-sector job loss outside the federal government. Within this broad category, employment services (which includes staffing agencies, human resources firms, and temporary help) accounted for a disproportionate share of the decline, falling 3.2 percent between July 2024 and July 2025.¹⁸ Two out of five Black men work in production and logistics roles, while Black workers more broadly are concentrated in professional services, human resources, and administrative support positions that bore the heaviest losses in this sector.¹⁹

¹²Economic Policy Institute, "Black Federal Workers by State," April 9, 2025, <https://www.epi.org/publication/black-federal-workers-by-state/>.

¹³Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, "The Economy Posed Challenges for Black Households and Black-Owned Businesses in 2025," February 3, 2026, <https://www.cbpp.org/blog/the-economy-posed-challenges-for-black-households-and-black-owned-businesses-in-2025>.

¹⁴LendingTree, "Snapshots of Black and White Disparities in Income, Wealth, Unemployment and More," February 2, 2026, <https://www.lendingtree.com/debt-consolidation/black-and-white-disparities-study/>.

¹⁵U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, "Usual Weekly Earnings of Wage and Salary Workers, Q4 2025," January 28, 2026, <https://www.bls.gov/news.release/pdf/wkyeng.pdf>.

¹⁶Federal Reserve Bank of Minneapolis, "The Growing Income Gap for Black Workers," July 2024, <https://www.minneapolisfed.org/article/2024/the-growing-income-gap-for-black-workers>.

¹⁷Federal Reserve Bank of Minneapolis, "The Growing Income Gap for Black Workers," July 2024.

¹⁸Economic Policy Institute, "What's Behind Rising Unemployment for Black Workers?" September 19, 2025, <https://www.epi.org/blog/whats-behind-rising-unemployment-for-black-workers/>. See also NBC News, "Five Worrying Employment Trends Buried in the Latest Jobs Report," December 17, 2025.

¹⁹NCRC, "The Jobs Recession Is Affecting the Entire Black Community," October 2, 2025, <https://ncrc.org/the-jobs-recession-is-affecting-the-entire-black-community/>.

The rollback of diversity, equity, and inclusion programs in both the public and private sectors contributed to further losses in human resources and related professional occupations where Black workers have been concentrated. Almost all private-sector job growth over the second half of 2025 was confined to just two industries: health care and social services. Outside those sectors, the private labor market contracted or stagnated.²⁰

B. Health Care: Growth Without Wage Gains

The health care and social assistance sector added 647,000 positions in 2025, representing one of the only areas of sustained job growth. Home health aides, nursing home staff, and individual and family services positions led the expansion. However, average weekly earnings in private education and health services grew at only 1.9 percent, roughly half the 3.6 percent growth rate across all private-sector employment.²¹ Nearly four in ten Black women work in education and health services, and Black men are also represented in health care support and social assistance roles. The gap between job creation and wage growth in this sector means that many Black workers who found new employment in 2025 did so in positions that pay less and grow more slowly than the jobs they or their peers lost elsewhere.²²

V. UNDERLYING STRUCTURAL BARRIERS

The employment conditions documented above reflect the compound effect of longstanding structural barriers that have constrained Black male labor market outcomes for decades. These barriers include, but are not limited to, the following:

Educational inequity. Black men are less likely than their white peers to complete postsecondary education, in part because of disparities in K-12 school quality, school discipline practices, and access to college preparatory resources. Lower educational attainment limits access to higher-wage occupations and increases vulnerability to economic downturns.²³

Discrimination in hiring. Audit studies have consistently found that job applicants with identifiably Black names receive fewer callbacks than similarly qualified white applicants. This pattern persists across industries and education levels, contributing to longer unemployment spells and lower earnings trajectories for Black men.²⁴

Mass incarceration. At its peak, an estimated one-third of all Black men faced the likelihood of incarceration at some point in their lives, with rates among high school dropouts reaching two-thirds. Criminal records create lasting barriers to employment, and the disproportionate

²⁰Economic Policy Institute, "What's Behind Rising Unemployment for Black Workers?" September 19, 2025. See also NBC News, "Five Worrying Employment Trends," December 17, 2025.

²¹Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, "The Economy Posed Challenges for Black Households and Black-Owned Businesses in 2025," February 3, 2026, <https://www.cbpp.org/blog/the-economy-posed-challenges-for-black-households-and-black-owned-businesses-in-2025>.

²²Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, "The Economy Posed Challenges for Black Households and Black-Owned Businesses in 2025," February 3, 2026.

²³Brookings Institution, "Why Are Employment Rates So Low Among Black Men?" May 2023, <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/why-are-employment-rates-so-low-among-black-men/>.

²⁴Brookings Institution, "Why Are Employment Rates So Low Among Black Men?" May 2023.

incarceration of Black men reduces official labor force participation statistics by excluding incarcerated individuals from the count.²⁵

Geographic and social isolation. Residential segregation concentrates Black men in neighborhoods with fewer employment opportunities, weaker transportation networks, and less access to the informal professional networks that facilitate job placement.²⁶

VI. OVERVIEW AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The data in this report describe a period of accelerated disadvantage for Black men in the American labor market. Longstanding structural barriers, including educational inequity, hiring discrimination, mass incarceration, and geographic isolation, have constrained Black male employment for decades. In 2025, these chronic conditions were compounded by an external shock: the unprecedented reduction of the federal workforce, which eliminated 355,000 positions in agencies where Black workers were disproportionately represented.

For many Black families, particularly in the Washington, D.C. metropolitan area and across the South, federal employment has been among the most important pathways to stable, middle-class employment.²⁷ The impact of the reductions was felt most acutely in regions with high concentrations of federal employment and large Black populations, including the D.C. metropolitan area, the Southeast, and parts of the Midwest, though not uniformly across the country.

For young Black men, a 20.8 percent unemployment rate means more than one in five actively seeking work could not find it, at the critical juncture when first jobs and early career experiences set the trajectory for lifetime earnings and wealth accumulation. A Black man working full-time earns roughly 78 cents for every dollar earned by his white counterpart. Federal Reserve research has documented that, over time, slower earnings growth for Black workers compounds this gap, as those with lower initial wages experience less upward mobility than comparably situated white workers.²⁸

The Commission calls upon Congress, federal agencies, state governments, and the private sector to treat these conditions as requiring targeted intervention. Specifically, the Commission recommends: (1) expanding access to registered apprenticeships and career and technical education programs in communities with high Black male unemployment; (2) strengthening enforcement of federal anti-discrimination statutes in hiring, including increased funding for the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission; (3) investing in reentry and record-expungement programs that remove barriers to employment for justice-involved Black men; (4) preserving and restoring federal employment pathways that have historically provided stable, middle-class careers for Black workers; and (5) ensuring that federal labor market data collection, including the Current Population Survey, remains fully funded and operational so that disparities can be identified and tracked.

²⁵Brookings Institution, "Why Are Employment Rates So Low Among Black Men?" May 2023.

²⁶Brookings Institution, "Why Are Employment Rates So Low Among Black Men?" May 2023.

²⁷Marketplace, "Why Are Unemployment Rates Climbing for Black Workers?" February 5, 2026.

²⁸Federal Reserve Bank of Minneapolis, "The Growing Income Gap for Black Workers," July 2024.

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