



Race to Equity 10-Year Report: Dane County

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Full report at kidsforward.org/race-to-equity.

Acknowledgements

This report is the product of the contributions of many Dane County community members, Kids Forward staff members, and consultants.

Cartecia Lawrence authored, developed the strategic antiracist vision, interviewed community members, and generated the arguments of this report. Silver Lynx Consulting co-authored the report and led the quantitative data collection. Michele Mackey provided antiracist insight and advice to focus the messaging and recommendations. William Parke-Sutherland provided invaluable thought partnership, recommendations, and editorial support. Emily Miota provided essential communications and layout support. The multiracial Kids Forward team - Liliana Barrera, Nicole Hoffmann, Amanda Martinez, and Daithi Wolfe - provided thoughtful suggestions and reviews.

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To our interviewees and external reviewers whose experiences and insights contributed to the formulation of this report, thank you for trusting Kids Forward with your stories and feedback.

Dedication

This report is dedicated to our current and former Black colleagues. Their devotion of professional expertise, lived experience, trusted community relationships, and emotional labor ensured the Race to Equity Initiative's relevance to Black life. These contributions often occurred outside the limelight.

Then and now, we see you, we honor you, and we thank you.

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In solidarity.

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INTRODUCTION

Advocacy and Reporting Prior to Race to Equity

Year after year Dane County has been named by several sources as one of the best places to live in the country. It is often touted as a resource-rich area where families and young professionals can thrive. But, Dane County is not an island. It is a product of the state of Wisconsin, which has been described as one of the worst states to live for Black people. While many Black families are thriving in Dane County, it is not an oasis for many of its Black residents, especially those making low and moderate incomes.

Black residents have not been silent over the years about the very real racial disparities that they experience. Black community members, religious leaders, parents, youth, educators, practitioners, and public officials have dared to name and fight against systemic racism for decades. [The Urban League of Greater Madison's 2008 State of Black Madison: Before the Tipping Point](#) is one of many important reports that described the experiences of Black Madison residents, highlighting “some of the significant challenges that African Americans face in the areas of employment, income, entrepreneurship, health, education, housing, criminal justice, and political influence in Madison and Dane County.”

The Race to Equity Initiative stood on the shoulders of Black residents, community activists, and leaders who used their lived experience and positional power to call

attention to some of the country's most extreme racial inequities.

Themes From the Race to Equity Baseline Report

On October 3, 2013, Race to Equity (R2E)—an initiative of Kids Forward, previously the Wisconsin Council on Children and Families—released “Race to Equity: A Baseline Report on the State of Racial Disparities in Dane County.” The R2E Baseline Report was a databook designed to highlight the profound and persistent Black-white disparities in employment, income, wealth, education, criminal justice, health, and child welfare. It added to the historical narrative that racial inequality was, indeed, an issue in Dane County. The R2E Baseline Report built upon many decades of resistance within Dane County's Black and Brown communities. The R2E Baseline report uplifted several themes¹:

1. The magnitude of racial disparities were profound, persistent and—on many indicators—exceeded state and national levels;
2. While outcomes for white Dane County residents measured far above national averages, Dane County's Black residents, on many indicators, measured far worse;
3. These profound and persistent disparities created a racialized poverty and economic “disadvantage” for Dane County's Black residents despite professional success and financial security;

4. Allowing this racialized “disadvantage” nurtured stereotypes, fostered profiling, and produced differential expectations for achievement within the community at large;
5. For Dane County, “continued marginalization of communities of color, undermine[s] the region’s cultural vitality, economic competitiveness, and overall quality of life in a world that increasingly valued and demanded racial and ethnic diversity and inclusion.”

The R2E Baseline report attributed these findings to several forces and factors²:

- **A mismatched labor market** oriented to advance-degreed, heavily credentialed, and well-networked job seekers leaving a substantial portion of Black residents with fewer pathways to quality jobs.
- **Small, under-resourced, disconnected communities** creating a challenge for Black residents. Given these systemic and environmental factors, residents were likely to be highly mobile with diverse origins, making social connection and political visibility a challenge.
- **Dane County and Madison needed to respond more effectively, inclusively, and accountably** to this growing racial equity challenge by evaluating and addressing underrepresentation of people of color in the Dane County workforce, especially in management-level positions.

Harm Caused by the Race to Equity Baseline Report and Subsequent Publications

We fully acknowledge and thank the many Black, Indigenous and other People of Color (BIPOC) who have been calling attention to the racial inequities in Dane County for decades. The R2E Baseline report and subsequent published work attempted to add to the historical narrative and challenge the efficacy of claims that Dane County is a progressive safe haven for all of its residents. We also acknowledge that the Race to Equity Initiative missed the mark on achieving many of the goals it outlined in the Baseline Report.

Affected people are the best experts at explaining the forces and factors contributing to racial disparities, but community voice was missing from the R2E Baseline Report. While community engagement efforts certainly informed the work, the report was designed to be a databook. The R2E Baseline report also only acknowledged the contributions of activists and community leaders, but was silent about the contributions and realities of the everyday Black Dane County residents whose experiences qualify the data.

The R2E Baseline report and subsequent efforts lacked the contextualization necessary for readers to understand how and why the disparities existed. This led to dangerous, deficit and poverty-centered narratives that allowed people and the media to perpetuate a distorted understanding. In fact, when the report was released, most

Black and Brown community members were not shocked. Black and Brown residents felt vindicated. In contrast, white residents were shocked that the place they called home was so profoundly harmful to their Black neighbors. We know the different ways Black and white readers made sense of the Baseline Report was not a coincidence, but a result of missing context and the socialization of white residents into racist norms and stereotypes.

Race to Equity tried hard to acknowledge Black community leaders and organizations at the forefront of this movement in Dane County. Simultaneously, the R2E Baseline Report did not adequately acknowledge the work of its teammates (especially those who were Black) which minimized Black intellectual leadership and contributions. Black staff and community organizers leveraged (and continue to leverage) their personal and professional relationships to contribute to the success of the Race to Equity Initiative. Kids Forward thanks every Black staff member, past and present, for their invisible labor and intellectual contributions.

Because of the privileged position of Kids Forward as a predominantly white organization with longstanding connections to high profile decision makers and funders, there was significantly less scrutiny than there would have been on smaller, BIPOC organizations. The report received a level of conscious critique which is rarely afforded to Black organizations involved in racial equity work, allowing for minimal transparency and community accountability. We acknowledge how Kids Forward has benefited from that privilege and are working to use our positionality—as a 140 year-old organization—to stand in solidarity with

BIPOC community members, parents, caregivers, leaders, and organizations.

Kids Forward Has Shifted

In the ten years following the release of the R2E Baseline Report, Kids Forward has learned a lot about our role within the racial equity space in Dane County and Wisconsin. In response, our team, priorities, and orientation to the work is different. Our new team is personally and professionally committed to antiracism. Our antiracist policy and advocacy model is the foundation of our new theory of change, which embeds racial equity and lived experience into all areas of our work. We now choose to consult with lived experts first, elevate their insights and solutions, and prioritize their recommendations for policy change.

This 10-Year Race to Equity Report is a Result of that Shift

Community members and leaders have asked countless times whether there would be another Race to Equity report since the release of the Baseline Report. In September of 2022, Kids Forward committed to releasing a ten year report. Building upon years of community engagement efforts by Black and Brown staff members, we executed a vision for the report reflective of Kids Forward's values and antiracist mission. Our multiracial team – led by our Senior Racial Equity Policy Analyst – partnered with Silver Lynx Consulting to conduct an antiracist analysis of the quantitative data. The Race to Equity - Dane 10 Year Report is one of many ways Kids Forward is working to embody our antiracist mission.



The goals of the 10-Year report are different. It is designed to:

- 1. Unpack—using a root cause approach—how race, class, and in some cases gender impact Black Dane County residents, applying what our team has learned from years of community engagement and lived experience.** It also begins a discussion of why: Why extreme and persistent Black-white racial disparities continue in Dane County.
- 2. Be different from the Baseline Report; the 10 year report focuses narrowly on Economic Well-being, Education, and Health.** The 10 year report suggests that by focusing on the root causes of inequity we can gain insight into how systemic racism and anti-Blackness manifests into profound Black-white racial disparities in Dane County. While Kids Forward fully understands that the youth justice, child welfare, and adult justice data were particularly useful for advocates and community leaders, quantitative data in these areas can be particularly harmful if not adequately contextualized and leveraged. Because of this shift, we have not covered youth justice, child welfare, and adult justice in this report.
- 3. Provide a recent snapshot of quantitative, mostly pre-pandemic, county level data.** Of note, this report is not designed to compare current data to data from the Baseline Report. Readers may not be able to concretely answer the frequently asked question “are things better or worse?” Black Dane County residents are the best people to answer that question and their answers may vary based on proximity to overall wellness.
- 4. Include recommendations, which we hope will serve as a tool to support communities as they advocate** for investments and against anti-Black racism throughout the Dane County and State legislative processes, as well as in their efforts to hold public and private employers accountable.

Themes From the 10 Year Report Include Improvements in Economic Well-being but a Lack of Shared Prosperity

1

Our process allowed us to bring multiple sources of data—qualitative and quantitative—into conversation with each other: one informing, elucidating, clarifying, and the other contextualizing. It is through this process that we arrived at our conclusions about the context of Dane County as it relates to Black residents' experiences.

2

Black residents are substantial assets to the Dane County community. In the most highly educated county in Wisconsin, there is a growing population of Black professionals. These Black professionals have witnessed more opportunity in the workplace, and with economic opportunity comes greater means to devote themselves as parents and caregivers, towards civic engagement, and as staples of the community. Despite the fact that the Black professional population in Dane County is strong, racial disparities in health, education, and economic well-being still exist, even for them. In contrast, low-wage earning Black residents' voices are often unheard in conversations about wellness and prosperity.

3

Dane County is currently the fastest growing county in the state. But unfortunately, Black and low-wage earning residents are not experiencing the shared prosperity that working, paying taxes, and being an asset to the community and the workforce should afford them. Even despite improvements in wages, Black residents at all income levels—especially those earning low incomes—are more severely affected by this lack of shared prosperity than their white counterparts. This disadvantage is certainly racialized but—less obviously—there are also gendered disadvantages which affect Black women and girls, Black boys and men, and Black gender non-conforming residents differently.

4

The lack of shared prosperity has come at a cost for the entire county (and state), not just Black residents. Black residents report disproportionately experiencing negative stereotypes, profiling, and differential expectations for achievement while white residents bear witness to these inequities - both not without consequence. The R2E Baseline Report was clear that the consequences of not addressing the then growing—now spiraling—problem of racism would cost us all. The R2E 10 Year report takes this a step further and suggests that anti-Blackness and racism will continue to undermine the County's "cultural vitality, economic competitiveness, and overall quality of life"³ if its decision makers and employers do not stand firmly against it.

In our conversations with community members and leaders, the question that we were asked consistently was: Have things gotten better? Many Black residents are not convinced that things have, but they push forward because they must.

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I feel the city will never be as healthy as it should be until we truly invest in these nine low-income neighborhoods. I don't care what you say.

- Will Green



“

The state of Black Dane County is: we're in a state of emergency, even within our own community...It seemed like we were surviving back then when we started this [Race to Equity Community Ambassador] program. I feel like, now, we are all in survival mode...and no longer surviving and thriving.

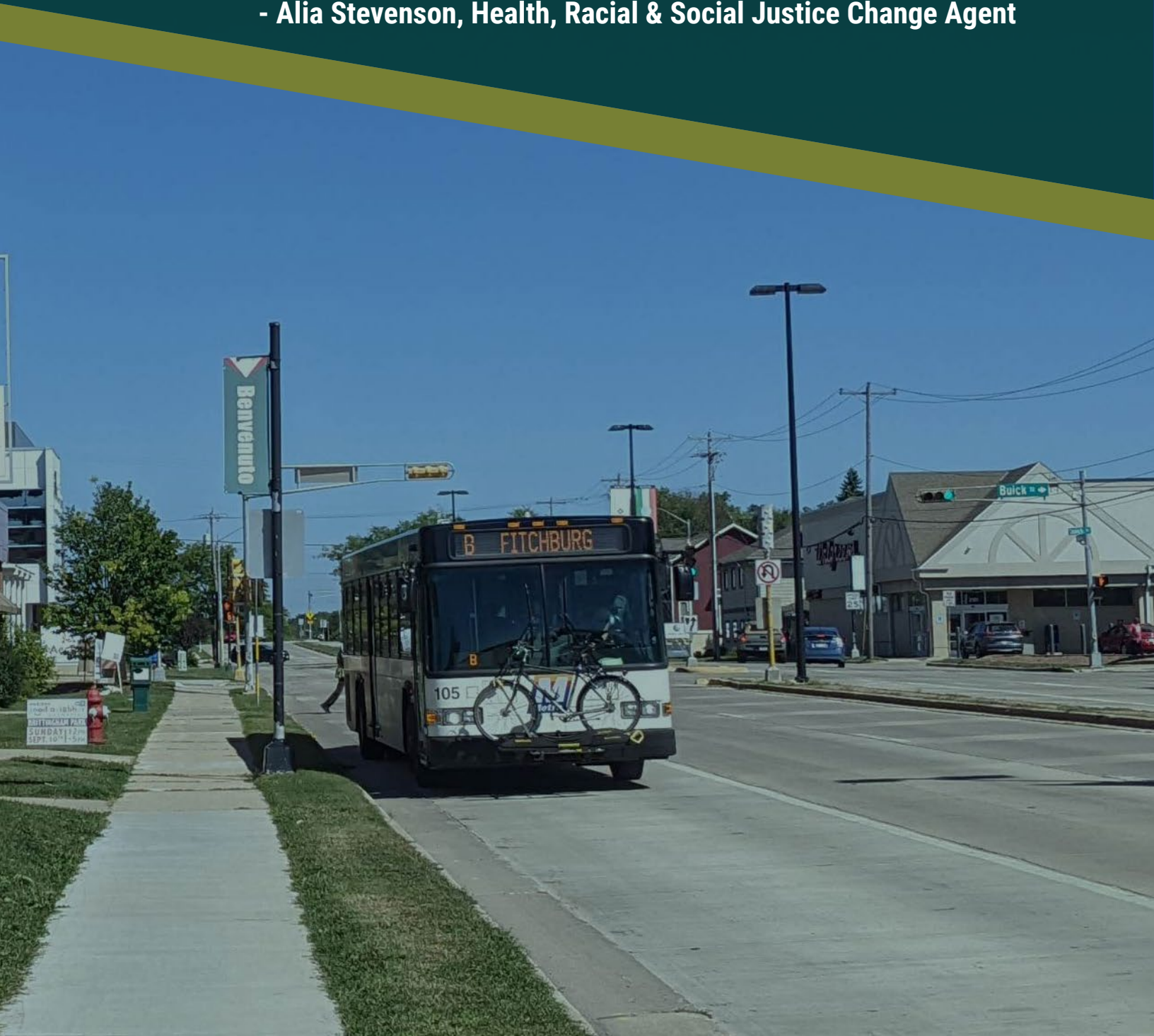
COVID really did a major number and showed the issue of discrimination. [It] showed the racism. It showed the inequities...It really opened our eyes to a lot, but I think part of that is also a lot of companies and organizations are still using that as an excuse for things that are happening...going to go back to pre 2020...We're never going to get that version of experience back. It was almost like we all died, partially, in so many ways.

- Felicia Turner-Wallace

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The purpose of the Race to Equity report of course is to shine a light on the deep disparities ... and it tells the truth and does just that. However, my experience also is filled with joy and community and support. My life, my family, and my work have been deeply influenced, impacted and encouraged by the work and words of the Black Community. I see us win, smile, celebrate, laugh, support, heal, build, etc...despite what we are facing. That is also my experience.

- Alia Stevenson, Health, Racial & Social Justice Change Agent



The lack of shared prosperity that impacts Black Dane County children and families will continue to influence the amount of control, autonomy, and opportunity they have access to if racial inequity and systemic racism continues to be embedded into the fabric of the community. While there is no way to fully measure reductions in anti-Blackness and racism, we can reasonably interpret substantial improvements in the economic well-being, health, and education of Black Dane County residents as evidence of true progress.

Dane County Is Not an Island

While this report focuses mostly on the experiences of Black residents in Dane County, it's critical to note that the impact of state policies is experienced by Black residents across Wisconsin. Unfortunately, disparities between Black and white residents across Wisconsin are some of the most severe in the country compared to other states. State decision makers, for example, passed a law that prohibits local communities from increasing the minimum wage, a move that would especially benefit Black residents in Dane County. Read more here about state level decisions that have harmed Wisconsin's communities of color at kidsforward.org.

ECONOMIC WELL-BEING

The ability to put food on the table or keep a roof over your family's head are important indicators of economic well-being. The more complex reality is that economic well-being determines how much autonomy families have over their lives, their political and social capital, and how quickly they are able to bounce back during tough times.

Some Black Dane County residents have seen improvements in their economic well-being over time.

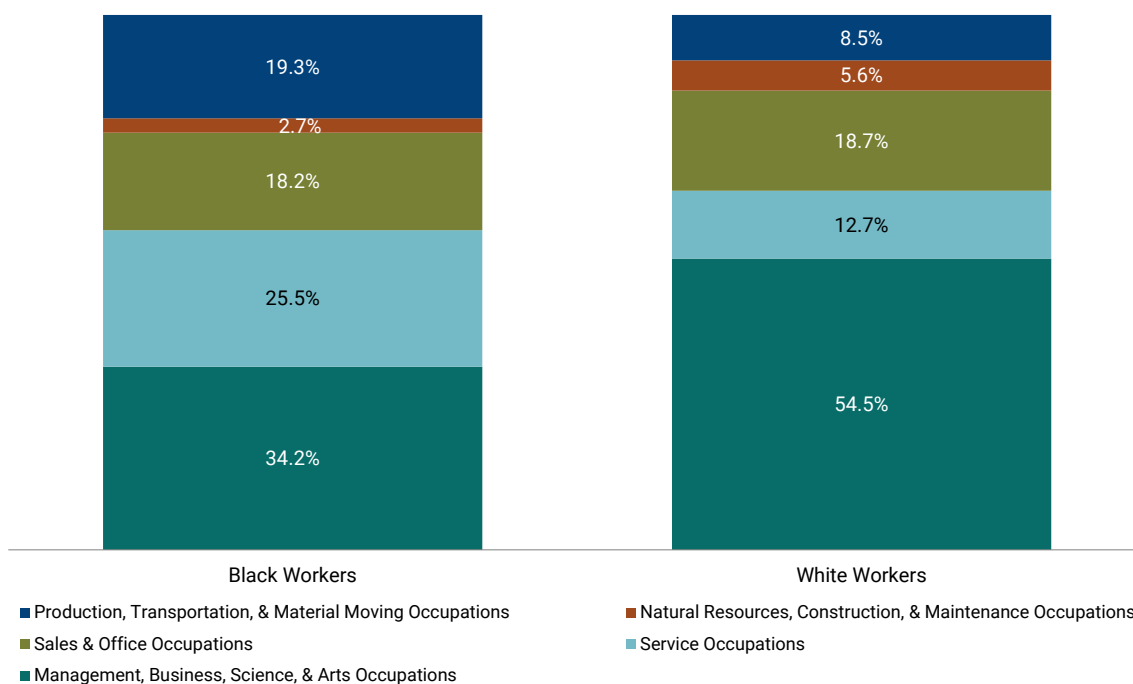
- The median annual income among Black households was higher in 2016-20 (\$37,815) compared to 2011-15 (\$28,106).
- Unemployment among Black residents decreased between 2011-15 (14.2%) and

2016-20 (6.2%), as did poverty falling from 39.2% to 22.8% during the same time period.

Simultaneously, centuries of policies—created to benefit wealthy, white residents and enacted by lawmakers at the city, county, state, and federal level—have blocked others from opportunity. These policies have produced and continue to perpetuate the racialized disadvantage of Black Dane County residents which impact Black men and women uniquely.

As a result of these policies, Black residents are the first and hardest hit during times of economic turmoil, such as the Great Recession, and are usually the last to recover from it.

Occupations of Workers in Dane County, 2016-2020



Source: US Census Bureau, American Community Survey

Notes: Data for white people do not include Latiné people; data for Black people may include Latiné people. Data are for the civilian employed population ages 16 and over.

Any improvements for particular Black residents are more than likely a direct result of their individual accomplishments and are in spite of public policies that aimed to do otherwise.

Race neutral policies will not be sufficient to improve the economic well-being of Black Dane County residents who still:

1. Earn less and are more likely to work in low-wage paying occupations (40% of Black and 75% of white residents earn \$45,000 or higher),
2. Are four times less likely to own homes despite income level, and
3. Experience poverty at disproportionate rates (2.7 times higher for Black residents).

Intentional efforts to understand and address centuries of disenfranchisement in Dane County, and more broadly Wisconsin, are needed. When we work together—lawmakers, state and local agency officials, advocates, public and private sector employers, and residents—we can build stronger communities where more Black residents can thrive and build economic security for generations to come.

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Even the Black community in Madison is very elitist. We only see certain Black people in Madison who are connected to the University or Epic or state government, but what about the rest of them? They are there, working hard. But, [Black people] also have a different plight in this world where we have a burden to lift others up while we are also fighting to go further as well.



Recommendations

By acting at the local, county and state level, we can eliminate the racialized economic disadvantage facing Black families in Dane County.

Local

- Local employers can raise the floor on hourly wages in Dane County, committing to a living wage. According to the MIT Living Wage Calculator, a living wage in Dane County is \$37.52/hr for a family with one earner and one child.
- Developers and financial institutions can ensure availability of affordable, environmentally safe, high density, multi-family housing.

County

- Expand the Madison Guaranteed Basic Income initiative to provide basic needs support across the County.
- Increase access to direct housing assistance and eviction protection funds.

State

- Enact a fully-refundable, targeted state Child Tax Credit which prioritizes young children.
- Expand the Earned Income Tax Credit to allow childless adults the ability to claim it.

HEALTH

Wisconsin's downright refusal to expand Medicaid due to partisan politics, racism, and classist tropes have hurt residents across the state, contributing to high medical bills, late stage diagnosis for chronic diseases, disproportionately higher maternal mortality rates for Black women, and the closure of rural hospitals. Wisconsin is also one of only four states refusing to extend postpartum Medicaid coverage to mothers and other birthing people, a decision that further exacerbates racial health inequities, especially maternal and infant mortality.

Despite Wisconsin's failure to expand Medicaid to assist people facing cost related health care barriers, Wisconsin stands out nationally for its relatively low uninsured rates, especially as one of only ten states who have refused Medicaid expansion to assist people facing cost-related health care barriers.

Even though health insurance coverage is

essential it does not guarantee that people have access to the affordable, high-quality, culturally appropriate care that they deserve. Black Dane County residents experience some of the most inequitable health outcomes in the country and are disproportionately more likely to experience worse health outcomes than their white peers. This forces us to consider whether Dane County (and Wisconsin) is harmful to Black residents' overall well-being.

More than 97% of Dane County's Black children had health insurance. Compared to statewide, Black babies born in Dane County were less likely to be born premature (1.5 times in Dane compared to 1.7 times statewide) and with low birthweight (2.1 times in Dane compared to 2.3 times statewide). No significant disparity exists between the likelihood of breast cancer diagnosis for Black and white residents in Dane County or statewide, with the Black incidence rate lower in Dane County than state or national rates.



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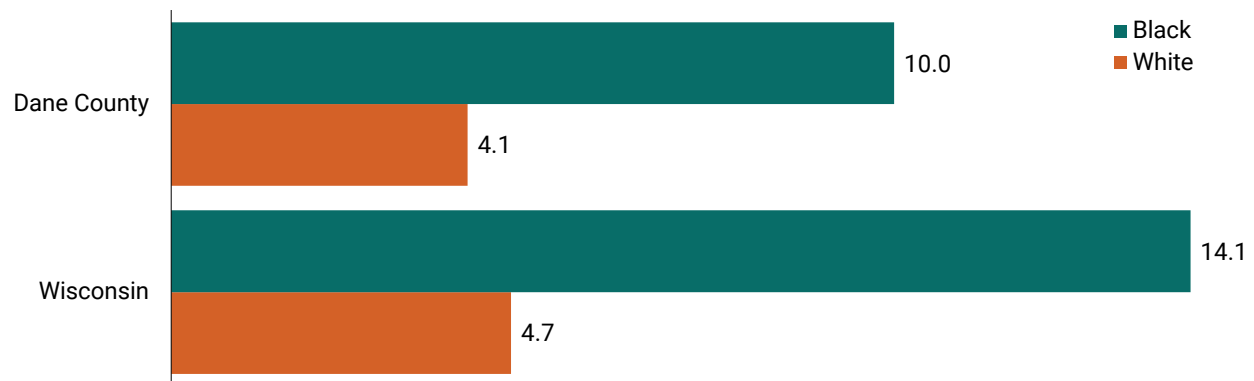
This is all just like an interrelated web of human existence. You can't necessarily pull on one string of the fabric of anyone's life and not touch these other areas...

Health care coverage is not enough to improve health outcomes for Black Dane County residents. Black residents are still disproportionately more likely to experience worse health outcomes than their white peers. Black residents of all ages in Dane County were 3 times more likely to lack health insurance than white residents. Black infants in Dane County were over twice as likely to die before their first birthday than white infants. With a likely persistent post-pandemic trend, Black youth mental health diagnoses have risen sharply (8.8% in 2017-18 compared to 25.7% in the 2019-2020 school year). Black

Dane County residents are substantially more likely to be hospitalized for heart failure (5.6 times), diabetes (8.1 times), and hypertension (11 times). Black Dane County residents were more likely to experience cancer of all kinds than their white counterparts.

Health outcomes are the result of a variety of different factors including health care access, socioeconomic factors, and physical environment, as well as people's ability to engage in actions that impact their health, such as exercise, eating healthy, or stress management.

5-Year Average Infant Mortality Rates per 1,000 Births, 2016-2020



Source: Wisconsin Department of Health Services, Wisconsin Interactive Statistics on Health

Notes: Data for racial groups do not include Latiné people. Data on race are for the mothers / birthing parents, not the babies.

Recommendations

By acting at the local, county and state level, we can better connect health care coverage to quality, culturally competent care, and equitable health outcomes.

Local

- Provide at least 12 weeks of paid family and medical leave for public and private employees.
- Utilize public-private partnerships to establish “health equity zones” and provide services such as cancer screenings in communities with substantial need.
- Incentivize and create pathways within Dane County’s health care anchor institutions for more Black health care providers to enter the health workforce as doctors, therapists, and nurses.

County

- Fund Black-led, grassroots, wellness initiatives in high-need communities (eg. Darbo, Meadowood, Allied) designed to address Black resident’s social determinants of health.
- Increase funding and support for community health worker programs.

State

- Address the punitive nature of birth cost recovery by acknowledging the racial disparities and ending the administrative collection process.
- Allow Medicaid to reimburse for doula and community health worker services. Create partnerships with BIPOC doulas and community health workers to strategize for and implement policy changes.
- Establish multi-year continuous coverage for children insured through BadgerCare (Medicaid/CHIP).
- Expand Medicaid coverage to include those at 138% of the Federal Poverty Level or above.

Education

When early care and education (ECE) is accessible, affordable and culturally relevant, it provides a space for children to learn and develop during their most formative years. Kindergarten is too late to catch learning and developmental disparities, which appear long before K-12 education. Unfortunately, and despite significant reform efforts, Wisconsin's ECE infrastructure as we know it has been broken and underfunded for far too long.

ECE in Dane County is wildly unaffordable for Dane County's Black households, costing those earning the median income more than one third of their pay. Simultaneously, child care providers operate on razor thin profit margins since their revenue is almost completely dependent on caregivers' ability to pay tuition. Even though revenue is stretched to cover low staff wages, ECE worker wages are still far lower than competing industries, with a median wage of \$11.48 per hour in Madison to \$13.63 in rural South Central Wisconsin. Substantial, ongoing investment is needed in Dane County's ECE infrastructure.

Dane County public school districts, though most are rated as meeting or exceeding expectations according to the Wisconsin

Department of Instruction, are failing to meet the needs of their Black students. Due to persistent funding challenges, most school districts in Dane County report experiencing staff shortages (4.1% of District employees are Black), non-competitive staff salaries (\$56,376 median salary), and a lack of available mental health services for students (nearly double the recommended 250 to 1 ratio of students to counselors).

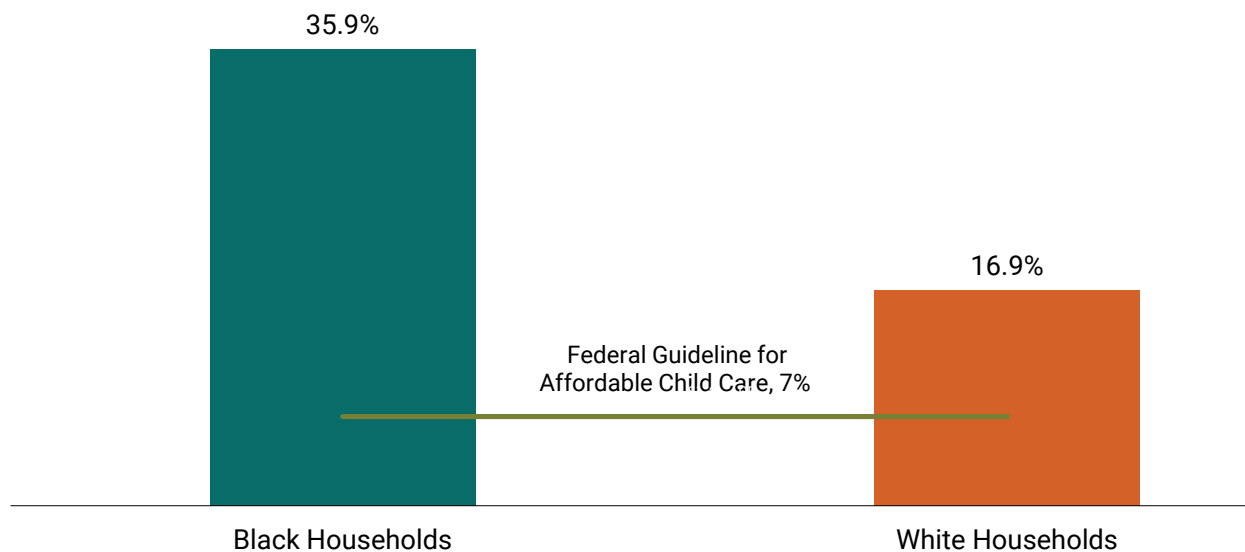
Dane County's Black and white students are increasingly experiencing school differently. From 2018 and 2021, safety (72% to 68% felt safe) and belonging (64% to 52% experienced closeness) have declined for Black high school students, while they increased for their white counterparts. Unfortunately, many Black students in Dane County and nationwide also experience adultification and push out. As a result, Black students are perceived as less innocent, older, and stronger than they are. Adultification is particularly dangerous because it puts Black children at risk of biased treatment from adults. Without a commitment to addressing the many ways in which anti-Blackness and racism lead to harm in schools, Black students and those with disabilities are most harmed.

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Earlier intervention would be the most ideal, enough resources to put in place to help. The school piece is so huge. Schools are such a huge part of a kid's life. [Kids should be able to] experience all the stability, connections, and engagement that being in school [should come with]....because once kids get disengaged, we see what happens. There is a ripple effect down the road for everything.



Annual Infant Child Care Costs in Dane County as a Percentage of 2016-2020 Annual Household Income



Sources: US Census Bureau, American Community Survey; MIT, Living Wage Calculator

Notes: Data for white people do not include Latiné people; data for Black people may include Latiné people. Annual child care costs reflect the average cost of care across all racial / ethnic groups. Federal affordable child care cost guidelines are 7% of income.

Recommendations

From early childhood education through post-secondary, consistent and substantial investment is required to address historic educational disinvestments and discrimination against Black youth.

Local

- Expand youth mental health services to ensure that pupil support staff-to-student ratios in Dane County public schools meet at least the recommended levels.
- Increase teacher wages to at least \$65,000 across Dane County school districts.

County

- In partnership with Black family child care providers, fund the development and maintenance of a shared services network to decrease barriers to child care access and increase affordability for Black families.
- Remove any and all police officers from Dane County public schools.

State

- Provide general purpose revenue through Child Care Counts to address the impending financial cliff facing providers in 2025, and commit to sustainable funding levels for future generations.
- Increase Wisconsin Shares child care subsidy reimbursement rates.
- Decrease barriers to accessing child care assistance, such as the requirement that applicants be employed prior to receiving assistance.

Endnotes

1. Wisconsin Council on Children and Families "Race to Equity: A Baseline Report on the State of Racial Disparities in Dane County", 2013, <https://kidsforward.org/assets/WCCF-R2E-Report.pdf>.
2. Ibid
3. Ibid



An initiative of Kids Forward, Race to Equity is a comprehensive approach to reducing racial disparities through community engagement, research and advocacy.

Kids Forward inspires action and promotes access to opportunity for every kid, every family, and every community in Wisconsin, notably children and families of color and those furthest from opportunity. We envision a Wisconsin where every child thrives.

For the full report, visit kidsforward.org/race-to-equity.