

# **Illinois Will Win When Its Black Residents Win:**

We Must Support and Sustain  
a Black Liberation Agenda Now



CALL TO ACTION



**A**S A DIRECT RESULT of over-whelming racial inequities that surfaced in response to COVID-19, Black leaders of several Illinois philanthropies came together in Fall 2020 to understand and assess the opportunity and landscape required to develop and execute a statewide Black policy agenda.

This convening was driven by the dearth of data and analysis on the effects of COVID-19 on Black communities in Illinois. Though the pandemic has disproportionately impacted Black residents, it is not clear if the efforts of Black-centered advocates influenced the allocation of pandemic-related resources.

These lessons revealed an opportunity to bolster the existing Black advocacy ecosystem in Illinois and assess the need and appetite to improve coordination of efforts statewide. The Grand Victoria Foundation, the Julian Grace Foundation, the J.B. and M.K. Pritzker Family Foundation, and the Steans Family Foundation partnered with Chicago African Americans in Philanthropy to commission a landscape analysis to investigate these questions. The analysis found strong support for a statewide entity and a robust ecosystem of advocates. Below we make a case for a race conscious approach to advocacy in Illinois and call for specific actions our colleagues can take to support this endeavor, which we believe will result in a socially and economically stronger state. It is followed by a summary of findings and recommendations from the landscape scan.



## How We Became a Racialized Society

THE UNITED STATES HAS MAINTAINED A RACIAL CASTE SYSTEM for centuries. For this system to succeed, a social and economic hierarchy must be maintained. In the United States, white Americans comprise the dominant group with broad social and economic privileges. In contrast, Black Americans have been systematically oppressed through formal and informal laws and practices that extend from American slavery.

Throughout history, this caste system has been violently maintained. The practices of American slavery were notoriously violent and well documented. And they were legal. As the country transitioned away from formal slavery, state and local governments enacted laws, policies, and practices that enforced racial segregation, which maintained the privileges of whites and replicated oppressive social and economic conditions for Blacks who were no longer slaves. These Jim Crow laws were first enacted in the late nineteenth century and maintained through the 1960s. Despite these discriminatory policies, examples of Black economic progress could be found throughout the United States. Tulsa's Greenwood Avenue, dubbed as "Black Wall Street" was a prominent example. Capitalizing on the Dawes Act, Blacks acquired land, pooled the limited resources at their disposal, and created the

Greenwood district—a thriving, self-reliant, self-contained economy with shops, restaurants, grocery stores, hotels, movie theaters, a savings and loan bank, transportation services, and offices for doctors, lawyers, and dentists.<sup>1</sup>

The maintenance of racial segregation and deliberate civic and economic disenfranchisement of Blacks ushered in a new wave of violent backlash against them with explicit expressions of white power and white supremacy. This period was marked by the rise of white supremacist groups such as the Ku Klux Klan and thousands of violent lynchings of Blacks, which were often state supported and carried out with ceremony.<sup>2</sup> White mobs set fire to entire communities of Blacks in Tulsa, Oklahoma; Rosewood, Florida; and closer to home in Springfield and East St. Louis, Illinois. Their purpose was to destroy economic progress and social cohesion. The creation of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People was heavily influenced by the Springfield race riots of 1908. The organizing of Blacks through venerable institutions like the Black church sought to dismantle Jim Crow and produced the Civil Rights Movement.

Once again, Blacks learned that freedom is not free. The collective action of Blacks to seek liberation from Jim Crow during this time was again met with systematic, and often state-sanctioned, violence. The cost of progress continued to be high and at the expense of Black bodies.

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<sup>1</sup> Hannibal B. Johnson, *Black Wall Street: From Riot to Renaissance in Tulsa's Historic Greenwood District* (Austin: Eakin Press, 1998).

<sup>2</sup> Jamiles Lartey and Sam Morris, "How White Americans Used Lynchings to Terrorize and Control Black People," *The Guardian*, April 26, 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2018/apr/26/lynchings-memorial-us-south-montgomery-alabama>.

During this time, some of the world's most notable civil rights leaders were murdered and peaceful protesters were regularly and brutally subjugated by police. This period was capped by Bloody Sunday, in which hundreds of voting rights advocates in Selma, Alabama were viciously attacked by state police with the support of the sitting governor. The Voting Rights Act of 1965 was passed months later.

As the Jim Crow era receded, it was replaced by a period a mass incarceration. Beginning in 1970, the nation's prison population exploded. The growth was driven by a familiar narrative, public anxiety about both actual and alleged criminal behavior by racial and ethnic minorities and the use of state punishment to control them.<sup>3</sup> Black migration from the South had peaked and racialized "law and order" narratives took hold that painted Black people as menacing criminals. These shifting beliefs drove rates of incarceration up sharply. In 1970, the prison population was just under 200,000; by 2008, it was nearly 1.6 million<sup>4</sup>. During this period, Black men were incarcerated at a rate six and a half times higher than white men. And in 2019, the number of disenfranchised Black people in Illinois was 21,533 because of prison system involvement. The mass incarceration era, which continues today, is marked by more intense policing and sentencing policies; continued decreases in social cohesion; and dramatic loss of economic opportunity, agency, and power for Black families. In short, the social and economic implications of this era are tragic for the Black community and hurts the long-term sustainability of the country.

<sup>3</sup> Ruth Delaney et al., "Reimagining Prison Web Report," Vera Institute of Justice, last modified October 2018, <https://www.vera.org/reimagining-prison-web-report>.

<sup>4</sup> Ruth Delaney et al., "Reimagining Prison Web Report."



## Where Are We Now?

THE MODERN-DAY CULTURE and norms of the law enforcement, justice, economic, and civic structures are rooted in the long, brutal history of enforcing false notions of Black inferiority and white supremacy. Although progress has been made in overturning formal laws and codes designed to racially segregate, discriminate, and disenfranchise, the twenty-first century demonstrates the strength and persistence of anti-Black narratives. Though we are moving beyond explicit codifying of anti-Black racism, strong forces continue to oppress. Today we see renewed voter suppression efforts, new narratives of Black criminality, continued (and now broadcasted) acts of fatal police violence, entrenched policing policies and practices that disproportionately penalize Blacks, and open activism and support of white supremacist groups.

The United States Census Bureau estimates that Illinois is the sixth most populous state in the United States, with 12.7 million residents in 2019. Blacks comprise the second largest racial group at nearly 14 percent of the state's population. It has a combination of cities that are all or predominantly Black, such as East Saint Louis, Dolton, and Cairo, and cities that have

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significant concentrations (at least 20%) of Blacks, such as Peoria, Rockford, Carbondale, Alton, Decatur, Springfield, and, of course, Chicago. Some of these same cities are cited as some of the most dangerous to live in and are among the poorest in the state. Persistent, systemic disinvestment in their Black communities has produced tremendous adverse consequences. In every case, the social and economic conditions of the Black community are key drivers of how well these communities fare overall.

Recent events suggest a new urgency to set and support a Black-centered and informed policy agenda for Illinois. At a macro level, the events of 2020 have raised the consciousness of Illinois residents about the prevalence of racism and its social and economic consequences. The COVID-19 pandemic has served as a stark reminder of the endurance of structural racial inequities, as they left Black communities particularly vulnerable to the virus. The long-term effects of the pandemic on the Black community in Illinois will deepen social, educational, economic, and health inequities. It will take a highly intentional, serious, and deliberate effort to reimagine, redesign, and reform systems and policies to repair this harm. The murder of George Floyd by a Minneapolis police officer was a seminal moment. It forced a collective reflection on the treatment and value of Black bodies and the role law enforcement plays in maintaining and acting upon false notions of Black inferiority. The strong, swift, and voluminous statements and actions of support to the Black community from all sectors creates a unique opportunity to improve our social and economic conditions and set a path for true Black liberation.

Closer to the ground, Illinois is losing population. The effects of this are two-fold and straightforward. We are losing talent and wealth. Given the inextricable link between the fate of Blacks and the fate of the state, if we do nothing to confront the history of Black oppression, we leave Illinois even more vulnerable to social and economic decline, a decline of our own making.

# We have a choice.



## Dismantling Racism Requires a New Advocacy Approach

PROMINENT POLICY ADVOCACY ORGANIZATIONS place a necessary focus on progressive public policies and system reforms that address the **effects** of racism and discrimination. Unfortunately, they do not sufficiently focus on the root **causes** of racism nor do they adequately center the Black experience, voice, or analysis in identifying problems or designing solutions that are laser-focused on repairing the harms of structural racism over generations. The time has come for a twenty-first century advocacy organization designed to dismantle structural racism. To do this, it must be shaped and led by Black leaders and organized with the communal perspective and values of the Black experience. A Black-centric culture would create conditions for the organization to:

- **take an explicitly race-conscious approach to a robust communications strategy** that deconstructs racial stereotypes and false historic narratives of Black inferiority;

- **reframe and validate the affirmative and accurate Black experience as critical** to the ultimate success of our social and cultural fabric, economy, and civic life;
- **produce data and analysis on issues** with an intentional racial lens;
- **examine how the intersections between race, gender, class, and other individual characteristics inform** redesign and reform of public systems and policy solutions;
- **support a vibrant ecosystem** of activists, organizers, policy advocates, scholars, researchers, and civic and public sector leaders working toward Black liberation across all dimensions of society;
- **facilitate public discourse** around some of our most urgent and vexing issues; and
- **advocate for issues and causes that promote justice** and liberation for Black people and communities.





## Our Call to Action

THERE IS A LONG HISTORY OF UNDERINVESTMENT in Black institutions and social change. Whether consciously or unconsciously, the standard practices of the sector are influenced by the entrenched narratives of Black inferiority. Black-led and focused organizations are often deemed risky, too small, lacking capacity, unable to fundraise, ineffective and lacking evidence, and poorly networked. When Black-led and focused organizations are supported, they receive less money and are trusted less to make decisions about how to spend those funds.<sup>5</sup> This is true even when Black-led organizations and their leaders have long track records of success.

A next-generation Black-centered statewide advocacy organization focused on eradicating structural racism is a timely opportunity for philanthropy to profoundly change its relationship to Blackness.

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**As long-time and experienced leaders in the philanthropic and nonprofit sectors, we call on our colleagues to work collectively to build more powerful Black organizational infrastructure, leadership, influence, power, and agency to develop and execute a race-conscious agenda that unleashes social and economic freedom for Black communities and all of Illinois.**

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<sup>5</sup>“Nonprofits Led by People of Color Win Less Grant Money With More Strings,” The Chronicle of Philanthropy, May 2020, [www.philanthropy.com/article/nonprofits-led-by-people-of-color-win-less-grant-money-with-more-strings-study](http://www.philanthropy.com/article/nonprofits-led-by-people-of-color-win-less-grant-money-with-more-strings-study).

Black people have a powerful documented history of making positive, pivotal change in America. Our labor built this nation, and the success of our Civil Rights Movement allowed gains for women, people of color, and all marginalized groups. The success of this project will require investors, policymakers, and other civic leaders across sectors to recognize the power of Black industry and leadership, and therefore:

**Trust Black leaders.** Acknowledge that racism renders the lived experiences of Black leaders as distinctly different from white-dominant groups and results in uniquely diagnosed problems and designed processes and solutions to address anti-Blackness and dismantle structural racism. These solutions may look different from mainstream approaches, but effectiveness is not diminished due to lack of understanding by white leaders. In fact, this model can yield solutions that are more authentic, relevant, and sustainable.

**Invest appropriately to support generational change and redress historic disinvestment.** This effort will require funding that is generous, flexible, unrestricted, and sustainable. Racial equity and justice must be appreciated as generational work that necessitates risk-taking, is not easily measured, requires intensive inputs, and may not be linear or predictable. Persistent, responsive financial investment is necessary to achieve long-term outcomes associated with this work.

**Build Black power and strength by investing in the ecosystem.** This new advocacy approach will not be successful if it cannot partner, collaborate, and take collective action with existing advocacy organizations working in Black communities throughout Illinois. These organizations must be healthy and sustainable to build, grow, and effectively deploy Black power and agency on both individual and

collective agendas. They must not be in competition with each other or pitted against each other but rather work together in solidarity to achieve common goals.

**Get out of the way.** Too often the Black agenda is appropriated by white donors and other well-meaning supporters who prescribe their visions for how to best achieve equality and equity for communities rather than support Black-centered analysis and ideas for racial justice.

As Black leaders, we see an extraordinary opportunity to move away from outdated, incorrect, demeaning, and racist narratives about Black people and our communities. Now is the time to build a bold new vision, opportunity, and agenda for Black-centered social change. Though 2020 reminded us of the astonishingly painful history of Blacks in this country, our resilience and persistence were also on full display and embraced in the solidarity shown through the numerous racial protests and actions with other social justice allies.

We have a unique chance to leverage current racial justice movements and support a marked shift in the way advocacy and policy is shaped in the state. If we are successful, Illinois will be a place where Black lives, and all lives, thrive and truly matter.





FOR MORE INFORMATION

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