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A tale of 10 cities

Metro areas signal what's at stake for Black Americans under Trump's anti-equity agenda

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Summary:

- From 1916–1970, 6 million Black Americans fled the violence and economic oppression of the rural South. Among the legacies of this Great Migration is the concentration of Black Americans in urban areas.
- Today, 10 metro areas—New York, Atlanta, D.C., Chicago, Dallas, Houston, Philadelphia, Miami, Los Angeles, and Detroit—have the largest Black populations in the country and are home to 38.6% of the Black labor force.
- This analysis finds evidence of relative economic prosperity and hardship across and within these 10 metro areas, demonstrating huge stakes associated with federal budget and job cuts, anti-equity backlash, and growing concerns of a self-inflicted recession.
- Since taking office, Trump has pushed an anti-equity agenda that rolls back the clock on hard-won federal policies establishing equal employment and core labor standards and protections for Black workers. The passage of those laws was pivotal in expanding rights and opportunities sought across the decades of the Great Migration and Civil Rights Movement.
- Mass firings of federal employees and budget cuts will have harmful consequences for Black Americans across class lines.
    - Given the large share of the state's federal workers in metro Atlanta (51% of GA total), D.C. (60% of combined D.C., MD, VA, & WV total) and New York (63% of combined NY & NJ total), Trump's attack on the public sector threatens what has historically been a pathway to better, more equitable jobs for Black Americans—thanks to robust anti-discrimination policies and public-sector collective bargaining.
    - Although these cities anchor metro areas with some of the highest Black median household incomes in the nation, federal grant funds provide critical support to under-resourced inner-city communities. Many of those federal investments in low-income and working-class communities were cut in the Republican-led budget

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reconciliation bill.

- In addition to his attacks on equity and workers' rights, Trump's policy path leads straight to recession—jeopardizing Black workers' labor market gains in recent years, including historically low unemployment and faster wage growth.
- Based on 2023 estimates from the American Community Survey, metro area Black unemployment was lower than the Black national average in Atlanta, D.C., Dallas, Miami, and Philadelphia.
- While overall real median household income declined 1.1% between 2019 and 2023, Black median household income grew by 2.8%.
- In 2023, Black median household income exceeded the national median of $53,927 in all but two (Chicago and Detroit) of the metros observed. It was highest in the D.C. ($89,912) and Atlanta ($70,969) metro areas.
- In the face of federal rollbacks of civil and worker's rights and growing concerns about recession, state and local governments should act to maintain and strengthen basic protections, like minimum wage and unemployment insurance, while continuing local efforts to advance racial equity and justice. However, local leaders in red states, like Florida and Texas, face state-imposed obstacles to passing progressive economic and racial justice policies.

The concentration of Black Americans in urban areas is one of the legacies of the Great Migration—the period between 1916 and 1970 when 6 million Black Americans fled the violence and economic oppression of the rural South in search of safety and better job opportunities in cities throughout the Northeast, Midwest, and West. But even in non-Southern U.S. cities, many continued to face poor working conditions as well as employment and pay discrimination, leaving them just marginally better off than in the places they fled. Rather, significant gains in economic status only became possible through sweeping changes to federal labor and civil rights laws born from years of protest and political pressure during the decades of the Great Migration and beyond. While landmark federal labor laws passed during the 1930s improved working conditions for most white workers, many Black workers were initially excluded from the right to organize unions under the National Labor Relations Act of 1935, or minimum wage and overtime pay protections under the Fair Labor Standards Act of 1938. The steady demand for equal protection under these and other laws led to the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, prohibiting segregation at all places of public accommodation and discrimination by employers and labor unions based on race, color, religion, or national origin. These federal labor and civil rights laws set a national standard for fair working conditions and equal treatment that some state and local governments have enhanced to varying degrees based on local political and economic conditions. In many cities with large Black populations, policy decisions and local economic conditions yield both positive and negative results for Black Americans.

The diverse experiences of Black people across metro areas[1] exemplify the notion that Black America is not a monolith. The unique political and economic dynamics in each place produce relative economic prosperity and hardship that make up the collective

economic experience of Black Americans. However, even areas once sought as places of refuge and economic opportunity are now contending with a president whose actions undermine federal laws establishing equal employment and other civil rights, as well as core labor standards and protections.

Since taking office, Trump has pushed a revisionist version of history that erases any acknowledgement of the racism, violence, and oppression that created persistent racial inequities and forever changed the demographic composition of U.S. cities. This includes issuing a barrage of executive orders that roll back the clock on hard-won federal policies that have helped Black Americans attain many of the opportunities sought through the Great Migration and Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s. Instead, Trump's anti-diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) rhetoric centers white men as the primary victims of discrimination and calls into question the "merit" or qualifications of almost anyone else. He has used those false narratives to justify eliminating the use of disparate impact liability and redirecting enforcement priorities at the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission and Office of Federal Contract Compliance Programs—severely weakening the two agencies responsible for making sure employers comply with anti-discrimination law. Trump's anti-equity agenda—along with efforts to decimate the federal workforce, cut services and programs that working families and low-income communities rely on, and attacks on labor standards and workers' union and collective bargaining rights—are just some of the many harmful actions that hurt workers and put the economy at risk (McNicholas et al. 2025).

As a benchmark for assessing what's at stake under Trump's harmful economic policies and anti-equity agenda, we explore economic conditions for Black Americans in 10 U.S. metro areas with the largest Black populations. This list includes nine of the country's largest metros overall—anchored by the principal cities of New York, Atlanta, Washington, D.C., Chicago, Dallas, Houston, Philadelphia, Miami, and Los Angeles—as well as Detroit. Today, these 10 metro areas, including four in Southern states, are home to 38.6% of the Black labor force and 26.9% of the total labor force. Each of these metro areas account for at least one-third of their respective state's Black labor force. Additionally, Black Americans are the largest demographic group in the principal cities of Detroit (75.9%), Atlanta (46.4%), Washington, D.C. (40.9%), and Philadelphia (39.5%) and represent over one-fifth of the population in all but Los Angeles (8.5%) and Miami (14.1%).

We examine unemployment rates, median household income, the size of the federal workforce, and federal grant dollars awarded to these places in 2023. Our analysis compares economic outcomes for Black Americans across metro areas and relative to national and state averages and considers some of the factors contributing to those differences. This cross-metro analysis allows us to go beyond a simple categorization of economic conditions as good versus bad or equal versus unequal. Instead, it raises important questions about why conditions are better in some places and worse in others. Finally, we explore the potential for state and local policy to provide a buffer against damaging federal actions that increase the risk of recession, harm workers, and exacerbate racial inequities.

Metro area unemployment rates and income reveal relative economic prosperity and hardship among Black Americans

The chaotic and harmful actions of the second Trump administration have raised the risk of recession for the otherwise strong and resilient labor market Trump inherited. One of the greatest casualties of a completely self-inflicted recession would be the labor market gains experienced by Black workers in recent years, including historically low unemployment and faster wage growth (Cid-Martinez, Maye, and Marvin 2025).

According to official estimates from the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS), the average annual Black unemployment rate in 2023 was a record low (5.5%), compared with an overall national unemployment rate of 3.6%. This analysis compares estimates of national, metro, principal city, and state unemployment rates for Black workers using data from the American Community Survey (ACS). ACS provides better coverage of metro area and principal city Black unemployment rates, but 2023 national estimates are higher than those reported by BLS due to differences in the survey reference periods.[2]

As shown in **Figure A**, in 2023, five of the 10 metro areas—Washington, D.C., Miami, Atlanta, Dallas, and Philadelphia—each outperformed the ACS-estimated national average of 7.2% for Black Americans. Across all 10 metro areas, Black unemployment ranged from a low of 5.6% in metro Atlanta to a high of 10.4% in the Chicago metro area.

Figure B reveals that metro area Black median household income exceeded the national median of $53,927 in all but two of the metros observed. The exceptions were the Midwestern metro areas of Chicago and Detroit—the same places where Black unemployment was highest in 2023. Although incomes of Black residents in metro Chicago and Detroit were lower relative to the national median and other metros, their incomes were higher than the median Black household in the states of Illinois and Michigan. Median Black household incomes in those states were also the lowest among the states observed for this analysis.

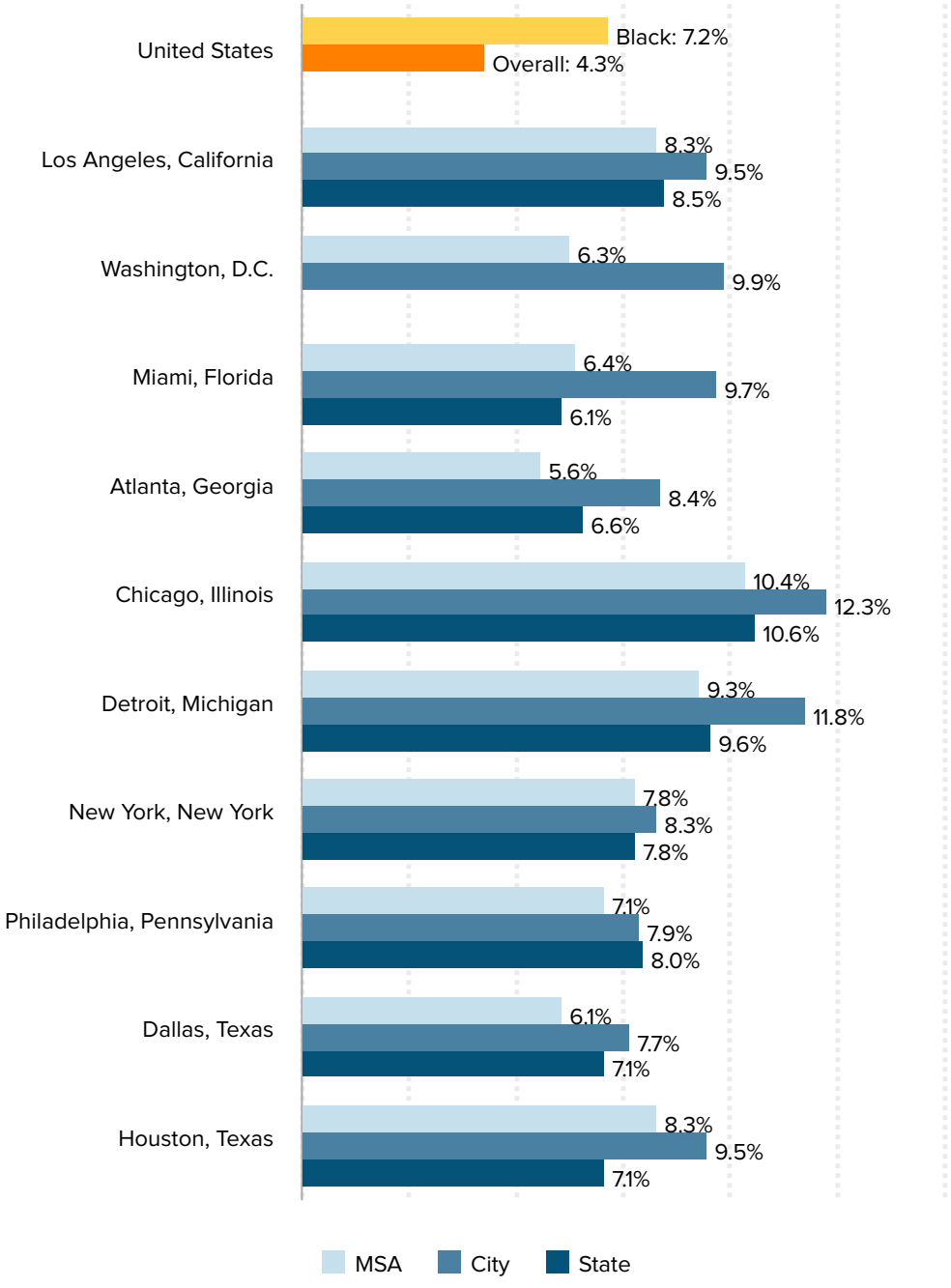
At the opposite end of the scale, Black median household income was highest in the D.C. ($89,912) and Atlanta ($70,969) metro areas. Notably, metro D.C.'s Black median household income was also significantly higher than the overall national median of $77,719. Black households in the New York ($65,758) and Dallas ($63,376) metro areas also had substantially higher median incomes than the typical Black household nationwide.

Relatively higher incomes and lower unemployment in metro D.C. and Atlanta are consistent with the fact that these places also had the largest shares of highly educated Black workers. The share of Black college graduates in the D.C. (40.8%) and Atlanta (36.2%) metro areas is well above the share of Black college graduates nationally (26.2%) and at least as high as the share of all college graduates nationwide. In contrast, the Detroit metro area had the lowest share of Black college graduates (20.8%). As we will

Figure A

Black unemployment rates in D.C., Miami, Atlanta, Dallas, and Philadelphia were lower than the national average in 2023

Annual Black unemployment rates by Metropolitan Statistical Area (MSA), principal city, and state, 2023



Notes: Data are for single-race individuals and are not mutually exclusive with ethnicity (i.e., Black alone,

Figure A (cont.)

any ethnicity). Metro area and state refer to those associated with listed city.

Source: U.S. Census Bureau. 2024. 2023 American Community Survey 1-Year Estimates Detailed Tables S2301: Employment Status. Accessed March 2025

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discuss later, the high concentration of federal employment and related professional job opportunities in metro D.C. is a likely factor in attracting Black college graduates to the area.

The strength of the 2023 labor market and rise in employment among Black Americans also contributed to the growth in median Black household income. As shown in **Figure C,** while overall real median household income declined 1.1% between 2019 and 2023, Black median household income grew by 2.8%. The spike in inflation during this period generally muted real income growth; however, increased employment of Black workers managed to counteract the negative impact of inflation on income (Moore and Maye 2023). Black median income growth also outpaced total income growth in six of the 10 observed metro areas—Miami, Atlanta, Chicago, Detroit, Philadelphia, and Dallas. In places where real incomes declined, the decline was smaller among Black Americans.

Echoes of the Great Migration

Across all the observed metro areas, there is a clear distinction in the average economic status of Black Americans in the principal city compared with the broader metro area, which includes surrounding suburbs. We characterize these consistent place-based differences as echoes of the Great Migration. One of the factors contributing to these differences was "white flight"—the mass relocation of white people from urban centers to suburbs in response to the rising Black population in cities during the Great Migration. More than just a demographic shift, white flight initiated a draining of economic resources away from cities that continued as more affluent Black families moved to suburbs following the passage and enforcement of fair housing laws.

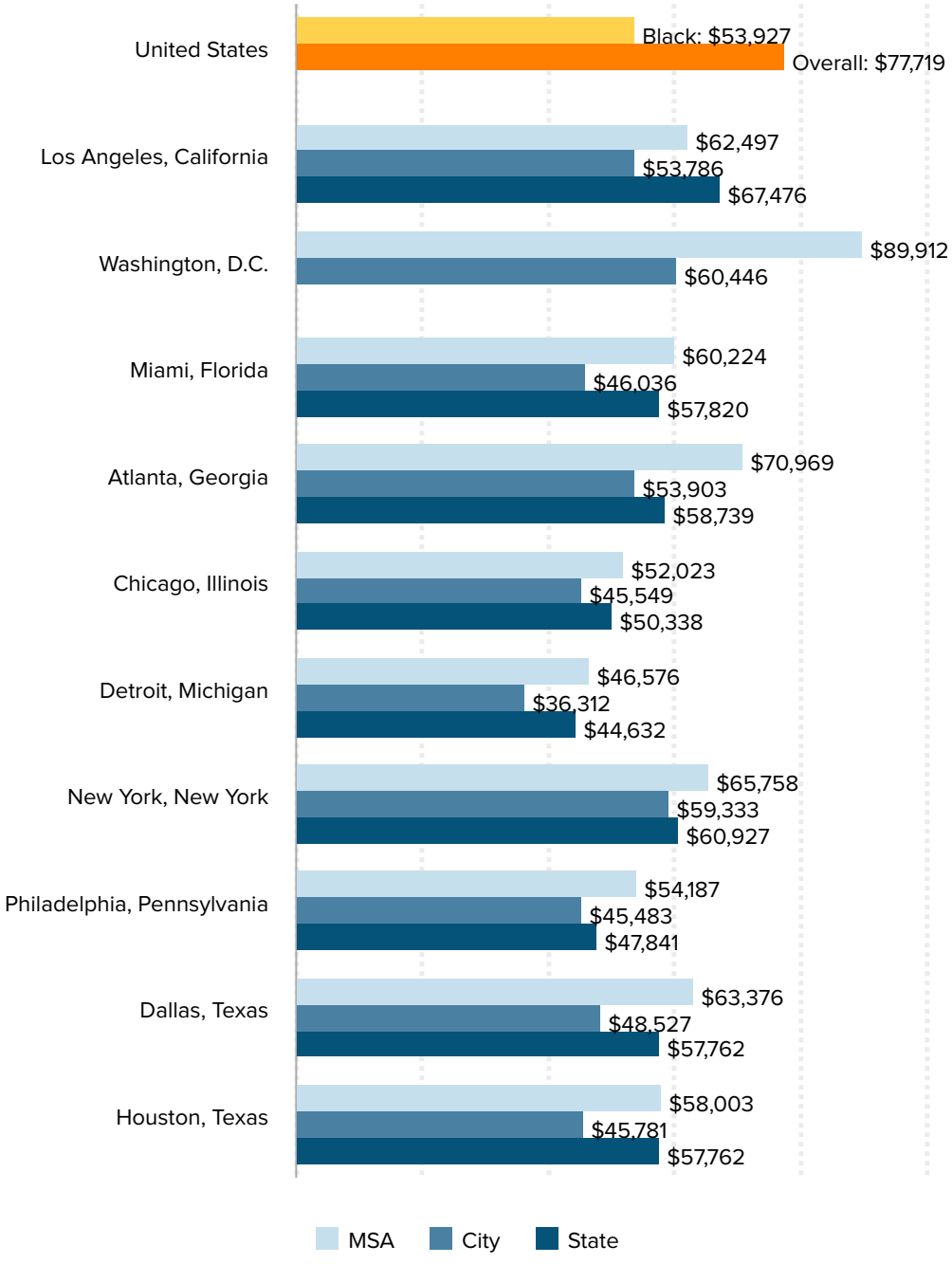
Across all 10 metro areas, Black unemployment was higher in principal cities compared with the broader metropolitan statistical area (MSA) and the state. Referring again to Figure A, in 2023, Black unemployment in the city of Atlanta (8.4%) was 2.8 percentage points higher than metro Atlanta where Black unemployment was lowest and closest to the overall national average. Similarly, the Black unemployment rate was more than 3 percentage points higher in the cities of Washington, D.C. (9.9%) and Miami (9.7%), relative to the respective metro areas. In Chicago (12.3%) and Detroit (11.7%), Black unemployment was nearly 2 percentage points above metro area rates that were already at least 2 percentage points above the Black national average. Recession-level Black unemployment rates in the Midwestern cities of Chicago and Detroit are also reflected at the state level for Illinois and Michigan. For Detroit, in particular, a second wave of white flight followed the post-1980s decline in manufacturing jobs and union density, once critical sources of Black economic mobility in the region (Scott et al. 2022).

Similarly, Black median household income was substantially lower in principal cities than

Figure B

Midwestern metro areas stand out with having lower Black median household incomes than the national average

Black median household incomes by Metropolitan Statistical Area (MSA), principal city, and state, 2023



Notes: Data are for single-race householders. Metro area and state refer to those associated with listed

Figure B (cont.)

city.

Source: US.. Census Bureau. 2024. 2023 American Community Survey 1-Year Estimates Detailed Tables S1903: Median Income in the Past 12 Months (in 2023 Inflation-Adjusted Dollars). Accessed March 2025

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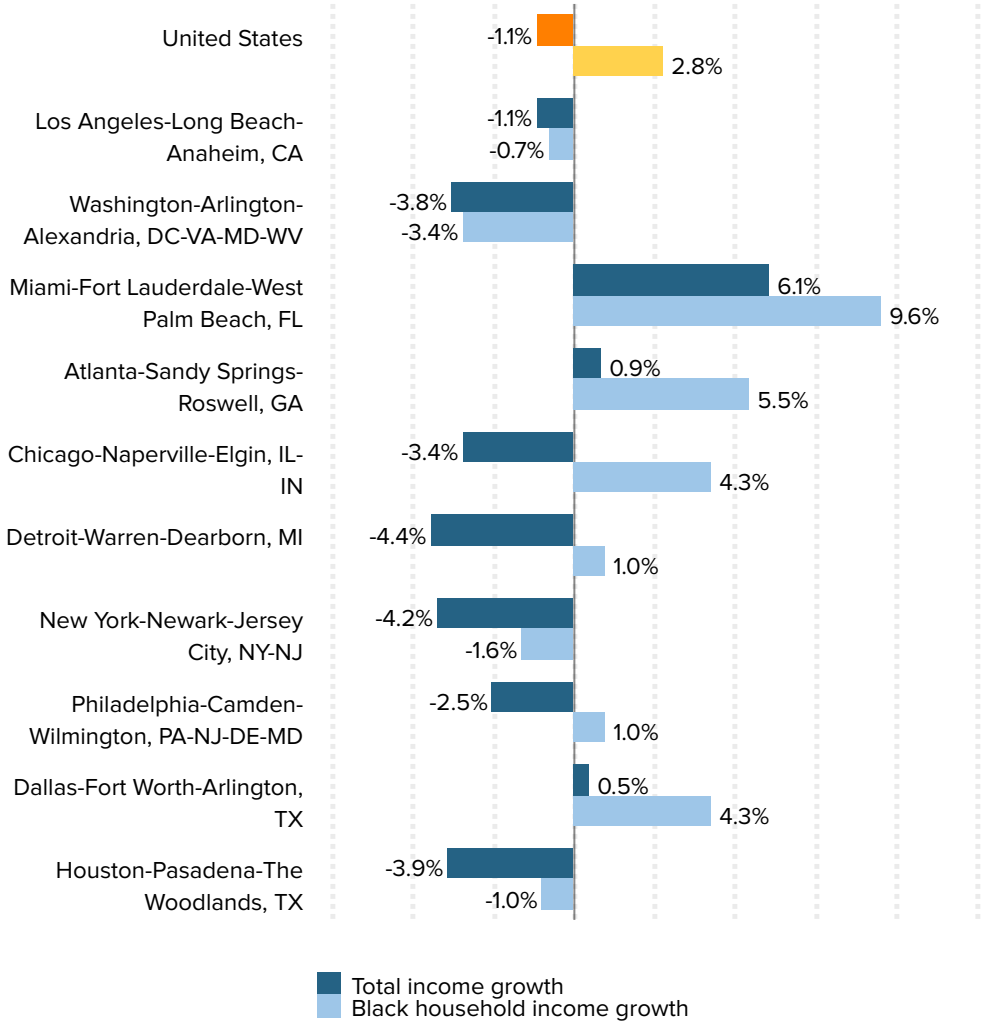
Figure C

Across the 10 metro areas, median Black income increased more or decreased less than the typical household

Overall and Black median household income growth by Metropolitan Statistical Area (MSA), 2019–2023



Note: Data are for single-race householders.

Source: EPI analysis of U.S. Census Bureau. 2024. 2023 American Community Survey 1-Year Estimates Detailed Tables S1903: Median Income in the Past 12 Months (in 2023 Inflation-Adjusted Dollars). Accessed March 2025.

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the metro area and the state. Figure B shows that across all 10 metro areas, Black median household income was at least $6,400 lower in the principal city than in the metro area. The largest gap was in the D.C. metro area, where there was a difference of nearly $30,000 between Black median household income in the principal city of Washington, D.C., and the broader metro area. In other metro areas with relatively high Black median incomes, like metro Atlanta and Dallas, the difference was $17,066 and $14,849, respectively. However, even in the Detroit metro area where Black incomes were lowest, there was a gap of more than $10,000 between households in the principal city and those in the broader metro area.

Federal grants are critical to filling resource gaps in urban areas

Federal grants are critical to filling the resource gaps in principal cities since those funds are often directed toward poorly resourced communities. **Table 1** provides a summary of federal grant dollars flowing to each city in recent years based on data available at USAspending.gov.[3] The grant amounts include funds from block, formula, project, and cooperative agreement grant obligations, and encompass COVID-19-related obligations from the American Recovery Plan Act.

As shown in Table 1, D.C. and New York received the most in federal grant funds (an annual average of more than $6 billion each over fiscal years 2022–2024) followed by Atlanta. However, when adjusted for population size, D.C. and Atlanta had the highest per capita averages ($9,158 and $6,769 per person, respectively).

Although these cities anchor metro areas with some of the highest Black median household incomes in the nation, federal grant funds are directed toward the needs of less advantaged residents. For example, over the last three years, Atlanta's largest federal grants were from the Department of Education to support students from low-income families in Title I schools. The largest federal grants to Washington, D.C., were from the Environmental Protection Agency, authorized through the Inflation Reduction Act to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and other pollutants and to bring green projects to low-income and disadvantaged communities. Most of the federal grant dollars going to the city of New York were from the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) to support public housing.

The Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) was a major source of federal grants awarded in nine of the 10 cities. While the agency is most often associated with Medicaid funding for states, HHS funds programs like Head Start, HIV emergency relief, cancer treatment, and children's hospitals at the city level. Across all 10 cities, the Departments of HHS, HUD, and Transportation were commonly among the top three awarding agencies, representing critical investments in health and well-being, housing, and transportation infrastructure in urban areas.

Table 1

Federal grant obligations by city, FY 2022–2024

Location (City) – Place of performance	Average, FY 2022–2024	Average per capita	Top three awarding agencies
Los Angeles, CA	$1,734,308,896	$454	HHS, HUD, DOT
Washington, D.C.	$6,217,880,363	$9,158	EPA, DOT, DHS
Miami, FL	$689,519,083	$1,512	HUD, HHS, DOT
Atlanta, GA	$3,457,838,277	$6,769	ED, HHS, DOT
Chicago, IL	$2,052,705,689	$770	HHS, HUD, NSF
Detroit, MI	$476,823,975	$753	HHS, HUD, DOT
New York, NY	$6,030,822,103	$730	HUD, HHS, EPA
Philadelphia, PA	$2,354,685,750	$1,519	EPA, HHS, HUD
Dallas, TX	$780,150,931	$599	HHS, DOT, HUD
Houston, TX	$1,307,224,973	$566	HHS, HUD, DOT

Source: Federal Awards, USASpending.gov. Last accessed May 28, 2025.

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However, due to the upside-down priorities of the current Congress, many federal investments in low-income and working-class communities have been cut to give tax cuts that overwhelmingly benefit the wealthy. In July 2025, Congress passed the Republican-led Budget Reconciliation Bill (or H.R. 1) which guts Medicaid and slashes the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), while also eliminating clean energy tax credits established under the Inflation Reduction Act, potentially putting over half a million jobs at risk (Seeburger et al. 2025). The bill results in 16 million fewer people having health coverage through 2034 and places approximately 11 million individuals at risk of losing SNAP benefits. Medicaid cuts alone could depress local spending enough to force the loss of 850,000 jobs (Bivens 2025). Overall, the Congressional Budget Office estimates that annual income for households in the lowest decile would decline by about $1,600—highlighting the devastating impact this bill will have on vulnerable families and the added strain it would place on state and local budgets (CBO 2025).

The city of Washington, D.C., was placed in a uniquely precarious position when the House's reconciliation bill reverted D.C. to its 2024 budget. That decision slashed the city's 2025 budget by more than $1 billion, an impossible deficit to close without laying off many city employees and severely cutting public programs and services. At of the time of this report's publication, the House had yet to vote on an unanimously passed Senate fix that would reverse the budget cuts, needlessly placing the city's budget in limbo. In response to House's inaction, the mayor of D.C. proposed a 2025 supplemental budget that cuts services and freezes hiring to cover the budget gap while avoiding layoffs. Combined with federal job cuts, these actions represent a major blow to the area's economic base and fiscal autonomy that would be especially tragic for Black Americans across class lines in the D.C. metro area.

Federal jobs cuts threaten relative economic security for the Black middle class

For Black Americans, public-sector employment has historically been a pathway to better, more equitable job opportunities. Through executive actions and legislation introduced in the 1960s and 1970s, the federal government once led in adopting anti-discrimination and affirmative action practices that increased the number of Black workers in the federal government. In the decades that followed, federal jobs have provided stable employment, excellent benefits, and opportunities for career advancement that supported a robust Black middle class. Public-sector collective bargaining has also helped to maintain the quality of these jobs through labor contracts that foster transparency through clearly defined policies and pay structures. This plays a critical role in reducing discrimination and providing workers with critical protections and recourse against other forms of exploitation or mistreatment.

That history stands in sharp contrast to the Trump administration's efforts to dismantle the public sector, beginning with workers in DEI departments within federal agencies. Trump's attacks on the federal workforce also include attempts to limit the approval of collective bargaining agreements with federal workers. The targets of such actions include skilled and often highly educated Black workers who typically experience less employment volatility, even during economic downturns. Nationally, Black federal workers average 12.3 years of service and 45.3% hold at least a bachelor's degree (compared with 26.2% overall) (Maye and Marvin 2025).

While federal jobs losses will obviously have an impact in the D.C. metro area, over 90% of federal workers are employed outside the nation's capital (McNicholas and Oakford 2025). The ripple effects from large-scale job cuts are expected to show up in higher unemployment and the disruption of critical public services and government functions throughout the nation. **Table 2** shows the number of federal workers who live in each of the 10 metro areas, as well as the metro's share of total federal jobs in the state. For metro areas that cross state lines, including metro D.C., Chicago, New York, and Philadelphia, we calculate metro area jobs as a share of the combined state totals. Over 300,000 federal workers reside in the D.C. metro area, accounting for 60% of all federal workers in the District of Columbia and surrounding states of Virginia, Maryland, and West Virginia. The second largest number of federal workers (over 100,000) are in the New York metro area, representing 63% of all federal workers in New York and New Jersey. Among the single state metro areas, Atlanta is home to over half (51%) of Georgia's federal workforce and 47% of Michigan's federal workers are in metro Detroit.

While metro-level federal employment numbers by race are unavailable, EPI analysis of state-level data from the Office of Personnel Management (OPM) reveals that 43.8% of Georgia's federal workers are Black—the largest share in the country (Wilson 2025). The District of Columbia, Maryland, and Virginia each have larger numbers of federal workers than Georgia, and Black workers are just over one-fourth of the federal workforce in each

Table 2

Number and share of federal workers by Metropolitan Statistical Area (MSA)

MSA	Number	Share of state total
Los Angeles-Long Beach-Anaheim, CA	69,106	27%
Washington-Arlington-Alexandria, DC-VA-MD-WV	321,127	60%
Miami-Fort Lauderdale-West Palm Beach, FL	34,675	22%
Atlanta-Sandy Springs-Roswell, GA	54,295	51%
Chicago-Naperville-Elgin, IL-IN	64,978	47%
Detroit-Warren-Dearborn, MI	25,587	47%
New York-Newark-Jersey City, NY-NJ	116,036	63%
Philadelphia-Camden-Wilmington, PA-NJ-DE-MD	52,151	33%
Dallas-Fort Worth-Arlington, TX	57,793	23%
Houston-Pasadena-The Woodlands, TX	41,561	17%

Notes: For multistate MSAs, the MSA share is based on the total number of federal workers across all states represented in the MSA. Maryland is excluded from the Philadelphia-Camden-Wilmington, PA-NJ-DE-MD multistate total. We assume the majority of Maryland's federal workers are accounted for in the Washington, D.C., metro area based on proximity.

Source: Author's analysis of data published in Economic Policy Institute, "How many federal workers live in your state?" (web page). 2025.

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those states—28.8% in D.C., 27.9% in Maryland, and 26% in Virginia.

Between January and July of 2025, BLS reported a loss of 84,000 net federal jobs but the full impact and consequences of those job losses are yet to be revealed. Though thousands of fired federal workers were reinstated by court orders in February 2025, the Supreme Court later sided with the Trump administration when it lifted a lower court's block on mass federal layoffs, clearing the way for the Trump administration to proceed with planned large-scale cuts to the federal workforce. However, DOGE's lack of transparency and the Trump administration's broader data erasure efforts make it difficult to keep track of whether job cuts fall disproportionately on certain groups of workers.[4]

Troubling changes at the EEOC stifle equity and would be harmful to economic growth

As a large independent federal agency, the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) is relatively small compared with many cabinet level agencies experiencing job cuts. Headquartered in Washington, D.C., the EEOC operates 53 district and field offices across the country,[5] including locations in each of our 10 featured cities with large Black populations. For 60 years, the EEOC has been integral to the enforcement of U.S. anti-

discrimination laws—efforts that helped reduce employment discrimination and boost average living standards by an estimated $493 to $1,233 per person since 1960 (Maye and Wilson 2025). However, troubling changes to the structure and priorities of the agency paralyze some of the commission's key functions and weaken enforcement against racial and gender discrimination—the most common types of discrimination claims filed (Mark, Gurley, and Rein 2025).

Instead, the Trump administration has redirected the EEOC's priorities to focus more on investigating so-called DEI-motivated race and sex discrimination and anti-American national origin bias and discrimination (DOJ 2025; EEOC 2025). Trump also issued an executive order designed to end the use of disparate impact liability, a legal standard that works to prevent otherwise "race-neutral" policies and practices from perpetuating racial inequities (EPI 2025b). This restructuring of priorities threatens to turn the mission of the EEOC on its head by framing equity efforts intended to remedy decades of documented employment discrimination as discriminatory.

Just as the presence of EEOC offices in these cities signaled the federal government's nationwide vigilance over employment discrimination, efforts to undermine the agency signal that employment discrimination—particularly against racial, ethnic, sexual, or religious minorities—will go unchecked. The impact of those changes extends beyond the millions of Black Americans working in and around these 10 cities alone and erodes workplace equity writ large.

State and local policy levers

As the Trump administration pushes the federal government toward a more anti-worker and anti-equity stance, decisions made by state and local policymakers will determine what kinds of protections workers in their states and cities will retain. **Table 3** presents a sample of state and local policy positions related to workers' rights for the ten metro areas featured in this analysis. These positions represent the relative progressivity of those state and local governments which could indicate their propensity to provide some buffer against harmful federal actions that raise the risk of recession, weaken labor standards, and exacerbate racial inequities. These policies include unemployment insurance (UI), minimum wage, paid leave, state preemption of local minimum wage or paid leave policies, and right-to-work laws. As a measure of the likelihood that state and local leaders will fight to maintain or strengthen equity efforts, we also include the number of Black mayors elected in each city and the existence of state or local reparations initiatives.

A basic scan of state and local policies reveals that while there is some variation in the generosity of UI benefits across states, the need for expanded federal support will once again be essential for recovery from the next recession. The scan also shows that local leaders in red states face state-imposed obstacles to passing progressive economic and racial justice policies.

Table 3

State and local policies

City	State unemployment insurance: Maximum # of weeks of available benefits	State unemployment insurance: Maximum weekly benefit	Taxable wage base	Minimum wage	State paid leave	State preemption of local wage or leave policy	Right-to-work state	Number of Black mayors	Governmental reparations initiative
Los Angeles, CA	26 weeks	Up to $450	$7,000	$17.28	Yes		No	2	Yes, city and state
Washington, D.C.	26 weeks	Up to $444	$9,000	$17.50	Yes		No	7	Yes, city
Miami, FL	12 weeks	N/A	$7,000	$13.00	No	Minimum wage Prevailing wage Paid leave	Yes	0	No
Atlanta, GA	26 weeks	Up to $365	$9,500	$7.25	No	Minimum wage Paid leave	Yes	6	Yes, city and county
Chicago, IL	26 weeks	Up to $593 as an individual; $707 with a spouse; $808 with a child	$13,271	$16.20	No		No	4	Yes, city
Detroit, MI	20 weeks	Up to $446	$9,500	$12.48	No	Minimum wage Prevailing wage Paid leave	No	5	Yes, city
New York, NY	26 weeks	Up to $504	$12,300	$16.50	Yes		No	2	Yes, city and state
Philadelphia, PA	26 weeks	Up to $605	$10,000	$16.35	No	Minimum wage	No	4	Yes, city
Dallas, TX	26 weeks	Up to $591	$9,000	$7.25	No	Minimum wage Prevailing wage Paid leave	Yes	2	No

Table 3 (cont.)

City	State unemployment insurance: Maximum # of weeks of available benefits	State unemployment insurance: Maximum weekly benefit	Taxable wage base	Minimum wage	State paid leave	State preemption of local wage or leave policy	Right-to-work state	Number of Black mayors	Governmental reparations initiative
Houston, TX	26 weeks	Up to $591	$9,000	$7.25	No	Minimum wage Prevailing wage Paid leave	Yes	2	No

Sources: Workers' rights preemption in the U.S., 2023 Comparison of State Unemployment Laws, Table 2-1, and author's analysis of city minimum wage laws, state unemployment insurance, mayoral election history, and state and local government reparations initiatives.

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Unemployment insurance

Unemployment insurance benefits are among the most *efficient* sources of support to families and the economy during a recession. Since they are targeted at individuals whose income falls due to a job loss, UI benefits provide direct income support to eligible unemployed workers while also helping to stabilize aggregate demand, the largest driver of economic growth. Estimates suggest that each dollar in UI benefits can generate nearly $2 in local spending (Evermore 2024). Despite the efficiency of UI benefits, they are often the target of austerity politics fueled by exaggerated and frequently debunked claims that overly generous benefits suppress employment (Martinez Hickey and Cooper 2021).

While adequate federal action and support for expanding UI during a recession are critical to a quick recovery, state policymakers have some flexibility in determining how their UI programs are structured and resisting the austerity impulse. As a joint state and federal program, each state can adjust its own eligibility requirements, length of time for available benefits, and maximum weekly benefits in coordination with federal guidelines. Among the states represented in Table 3, Florida and Michigan are the only two that currently cap the number of weeks benefits can be received at less than 26 weeks. However, the maximum weekly benefit for unemployed individuals varies from a high of $605 per week in Pennsylvania (Philadelphia) to a low of $365 per week in Georgia (Atlanta).

The COVID-19 pandemic revealed the potential for major federal reforms to boost UI as a macroeconomic stabilizer by enhancing the duration, generosity, and eligibility of UI benefits (Bivens and Banerjee 2021). The pandemic also exposed administrative and fiscal inadequacies in state UI systems. Federal funds were allocated by the American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) to improve UI systems administration, prevent fraud, and increase equitable access (DOL n.d.). However, few states took steps to strengthen severely underfunded state UI systems long term by increasing their taxable wage base (Sawo and Sherer 2022). UI reform advocates recommend increasing the taxable wage base to half of the taxable maximum for Social Security (Bivens et al. 2021). The increase would result in employers paying state unemployment taxes on a larger percentage of higher wage

earners' pay, generating more revenue and sustaining more fairness, equity, and administrative efficiency over time. Among the states considered, only New York and Illinois have a taxable wage base above $10,000, but still far below the much higher recommended base of $88,500 needed to address underfunding.[6]

In red states, a city's ability to enact pro-worker policies is often at the mercy of state preemption

Several states and localities across the country have established minimum wage ordinances that exceed the federal standard. Since the federal minimum wage has remained stuck at $7.25 for over 15 years, failing to keep up with rising costs and inflation, this is a critical policy lever for supporting workers and their families' right to a livable wage (Payne-Patterson and Maye 2023). Rasing the minimum wage supports all workers, but especially Black workers who are overrepresented in low-wage occupations.

Currently, 19 states and Washington, D.C., have passed laws raising their own minimum wage to at least $15 an hour by 2027, including several cities listed in Table 3 with local minimum wages well above the federal minimum (Hickey 2024; EPI 2025a). Washington, D.C., New York, Los Angeles, and Chicago all have a minimum wage standard of at least $15 an hour and Detroit's minimum wage increased to $12.48 in 2025.

Sadly, four cities with large Black populations—Atlanta, Dallas, Houston, and Philadelphia—have not raised their minimum wage above the federal level. In June, the Pennsylvania state House passed a bill that would raise Philadelphia's minimum wage to $15 an hour after years of failed attempts to increase the state's minimum wage to that level (Huangpu 2025). The House proposal now awaits approval by the state Senate. For relatively progressive cities that also happen to be in red states, state preemption laws are a major barrier to passing a higher local minimum wage. In Atlanta, workers not covered by the Fair Labor Standards Act are paid a minimum of $5.15 an hour—$2.10 below the already insufficient federal minimum wage (GDOL n.d.). While local governments are prohibited in establishing a higher city-wide minimum wage, Dallas, Houston, and Atlanta have each passed increases for city, county, or contract workers (Cooper 2024; Barrera and Heilman 2025). Apart from preemption, right-to-work laws in these states also present barriers that limit workers' collective bargaining rights, resulting in lower wages and benefits for all workers.

While raising the minimum wage can raise living standards for low-wage hourly workers, paid family leave enables workers to avoid the difficult tradeoff between income stability and caring for family. There is no federal law that guarantees paid family or medical leave to workers; up to 12 weeks of unpaid leave are available to eligible employees under the Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA). However, as of 2025, 13 states and Washington, D.C., have passed their own paid family leave laws (Williamson 2024). Of the states listed in Table 3, only California, New York, and the District of Columbia currently have paid leave policies on the books. In D.C. and New York, eligible employees receive up to 12 weeks of

paid leave (DCPFL n.d., NYSPFL n.d.). In California, eligible employees receive up to eight weeks of paid time off (EDD n.d.). All three policies allow workers to use this leave for caring for a loved one, bonding with a child, or military assistance. In New York, employees taking paid family leave receive 67% of their average weekly wage, while in California, workers can receive about 70–90% of wages earned five to 18 months before the claim start date. D.C. Paid Family Leave provides wage replacement of 90% of wages up to 1.5 times D.C.'s minimum wage and 50% of wages above 1.5 times D.C.'s minimum wage (DCPFL n.d.).

Will local steps toward racial reckoning withstand the rising tide of federal and state anti-equity backlash?

Every city and town in the United States has its own complicated racial history to reckon with. That history is infused in local policy and politics and shapes social and economic outcomes. As is true at the national level, decisions made by local elected leaders can either widen or narrow racial disparities. Leadership also reflects and sets the tone for how a city acknowledges, confronts, and seeks to resolve current and historic racial injustice. As measures of perceived racial progressivity, we consider the number of Black mayors elected in the principal city for each metro area and whether any local reparations initiatives have been introduced since 2020. While these are admittedly imperfect metrics, we interpret them as signals of the local political will to advance racial equity and defend current efforts. However, it is uncertain how much local efforts will be jeopardized by legal challenges triggered by aggressive federal and state anti-equity policies.

Table 3 shows that among the 10 cities observed, all except Miami have elected at least two Black mayors. The cities with the longest history of Black leadership are Washington, D.C., and Atlanta, having had seven and six Black mayors, respectively. Five Black Americans have served as mayor of Detroit. Since Black Americans are the largest demographic group in each of these cities, the larger number of Black mayors elected in these cities reflects city demographics and perhaps the degree of influence Black Americans wield in local elections. A more comprehensive analysis of city management and the policy priorities of individual mayors would be needed to assess their direct impact on Black economic outcomes or racial equity.

While little progress has been made to advance the issue of reparations at the federal level, since 2020, several state and local governments have taken initiative in addressing their own histories of racial and economic injustice against Black Americans. Reparations initiatives exist in all except the three cities in red states whose governors have aggressively pushed anti-DEI legislation: Miami in Florida, and Dallas and Houston in Texas. In most places where a reparations initiative exists, activity has been at the city or county level. However, both city- and state-level initiatives exist in California and New York. Current state and local reparations efforts range from the appointment of a task force to study the issue, to exploring plan options, approving legislation, and implementing a plan. While there are open questions about whether local plans are truly reparative or will have

any measurable economic effect on closing the racial wealth gap, they are at least a signal of willingness to confront and seriously consider government accountability for eliminating racial inequities (Moore 2023).[7]

Conclusion

The strong and stable economy Trump inherited withstood months of his administration's harmful and chaotic policy actions before clear signs of a softening labor market became evident in the July jobs report. Large downward revisions to May and June payroll employment estimates signaled a weaker labor market than originally reported, bringing average three-month job growth down to just 35,000 net new jobs compared with 127,000 over the preceding three months. Rather than taking this sobering news as a sign that he should reconsider the current policy path, Trump misrepresented the news as a politically motivated personal attack and fired BLS Commissioner Erika McEntarfer. Such careless actions unjustifiably erode confidence in one of the world's most respected statistical agencies and endangers sound economic decision-making.

If the Trump administration and Congress continue along the current path, there is a very real risk of a recession in the coming months—and a lot at stake for Black Americans who typically suffer higher rates of unemployment and take longer to recover lost jobs and income from a downturn. In recent years there have been economic gains that should be protected and expanded. Five metro areas in this analysis had Black unemployment rates below the national average in 2023 and the median Black household income was above the national median in eight metros. At the same time, there is evidence of persistent inequities and economic hardship that demand a commitment to long-term solutions and investment in underserved communities. Two metro areas were below national measures of Black unemployment and income, but across all 10 metro areas, principal city residents had higher unemployment and lower incomes compared with the broader metro area which includes surrounding suburbs. Trump's anti-equity, anti-worker agenda undermines both of those objectives by decimating the federal workforce and attacking public sector unions; cutting the federal budget for Medicaid, SNAP, and other programs that benefit low-income families; weaponizing civil rights enforcement to discourage diversity, equity and inclusion; and weakening core labor standards and protections.

State and local governments have some policy levers at their disposal for improving worker protections, but the effect those policies can have on the economic well-being of Black Americans varies by place, and in some cases is conditional on federal or state actions. For example, while cities and states have some capacity to increase their minimum wage or pass paid leave policies, preemption is a major barrier for local leaders seeking to pursue more progressive policies in red states. The law allows states some flexibility to adjust the duration and amount of unemployment insurance benefits, one of the most efficient sources of income support during a recession. Yet severe underfunding of state systems due to a far too low state taxable wage base starves their capacity to make substantial improvements in the fairness, equity, or generosity of benefits without federal funding. Moreover, in a recession, there is little any state can do to expand benefits

and speed recovery without increased federal support—a step we can't assume to be a priority of the current Congress or president. Finally, while many of cities we observe could be considered more racially progressive than the country as a whole, federally led anti-DEI backlash raises the possibility of legal challenges against local policies in support of equity and racial justice.

Black America is not a monolith. That statement is an assertion of the right to self-determination and individual expression that racism denies Black Americans. It is also a reflection of the varied experiences shaped by differences in local policy, economic conditions, political influence, and culture. Still, history shows that the pursuit of collective freedom, justice, and equity for Black Americans has always required decisive national actions that raise the standards for fair and equal treatment of all people in this country. The Trump administration's denial of that history and lowering of those standards is not just several steps backwards for Black Americans, but moves all of the United States in the wrong direction.

Notes

1. A metro area is a region that includes a principal city and surrounding cities and towns with economic and social ties to the urban core.
2. The labor market statistics produced by BLS are based on data collected in the Current Population Survey (CPS). CPS interviews are conducted in a single designated week each month and annual averages align with the calendar year, whereas respondents answer the ACS at times that vary throughout the month and year and annual figures are averaged over the prior 12 months.
3. USAspending.gov is the official open data source of federal spending information, including information about federal awards such as contracts, grants, and loans. Since annual grant totals can change as data are updated on a rolling basis, we use a three-year average to minimize the sometimes substantial effect updates can have on a single year's grant total. A downloaded transaction summary as it existed at the time of our analysis is available upon request.
4. The OPM data used to report the share of Black federal workers are no longer publicly available.
5. Workers can call or visit EEOC field offices to ask questions about potential employment discrimination or to directly file an individual complaint. Field offices may also recommend charges for EEOC Commissioners to pursue against specific employers.
6. The $88,500 corresponds to half of the 2025 taxable wage limit for Social Security, which was $176,100, up from $168,600 in 2024.
7. In May 2025, FirstRepair and Decolonizing Wealth Project launched a mapping tool that documents state and local reparations initiatives across the United States. See: FirstRepair and Decolonizing Wealth Project, "Mapping the U.S. Reparations Movement" (web page), https://www.reparationsresources.com/.

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