

# Taking Account: A History of Racial Harm & Injustice Against Black Illinoisans

A report commissioned  
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African Descent-Citizens  
Reparations Commission



**Institute for Research on  
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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The State of Illinois stands at a defining moment. Over more than two centuries, Black Illinoisans have faced deep, widespread, and state-sanctioned inequities that have shaped where they live, how they work, the degree of safety they experience, and the opportunities available to them and their families. Although Illinois technically joined the Union as a free state, in reality freedom for Black residents was severely limited by laws, policies, and practices that criminalized mobility, restricted political participation, denied economic opportunities, and perpetuated violence, displacement, dispossession, and surveillance against Black residents. This “unfreedom,” rooted in slavery and carried through Reconstruction, Jim Crow, urban renewal, mass incarceration, and racialized policymaking — among many other historical moments and processes — continues to create stark disparities in every aspect of life for Black Illinoisans.

This report, the first of its kind in Illinois, presents a thorough assessment of how slavery and its vestiges enabled the racial harms and injustices Black Illinoisans experienced historically and continue to experience today. Drawing on scholarly analyses, historical archives, government data, and community perspectives, this report describes not only individual harms, but the accumulated impact of harm over generations. Ultimately, it provides an evidence-based accounting of Black life in Illinois that will help to inform the critical debate over how to repair, redress, and ameliorate these lasting harms.

The report is broken into the following nine broad categories of harm, each of which is briefly outlined below: Enslavement and servitude; racial terror; political disenfranchisement; stolen economic labor; policing and the legal system; housing; education; family; and health. Throughout the report, commentaries written by researchers add in-depth perspectives related to each of these broad categories of harm. These commentaries are also summarized below.

## **Enslavement and Servitude**

Illinois’s early legal and economic systems were built on the exploitation of Black labor and the restriction of Black freedom. Although Illinois officially entered the Union in 1818 as a free state, it maintained slavery’s logic through state-sanctioned indenture, restrictive laws, and economic practices that reproduced racial hierarchy. These foundations created enduring harms that continue to shape Black life in Illinois.

## **Key Findings**

- Although the Northwest Ordinance of 1787 banned slavery, an exception for hiring enslaved labor within the federal salt works in the southeast part of the state was granted during the Illinois territorial period and subsequently written into the Illinois Constitution of 1818.
- The Illinois Constitution of 1818 only proscribed slavery “hereafter” introduced, thus allowing for the continued enslavement and servitude of people brought to the territory prior to 1818.
- Although there were never more than about 1,000 enslaved people in the state at any one time, the labor of enslaved people was an important part of the early Illinois economy.

### ***Expert Commentary: “The Many Faces of Slavery in Illinois,” Scott Heerman***

The institution of slavery in the region which would eventually become the state of Illinois persisted through French, British, colonial Virginian, and US government contexts. Despite antislavery laws, enslaved Black persons labored in brutal conditions, generating immense profits that were safeguarded by legal exceptions to ordinances limiting slavery, systems of indentured servitude, as well as the sanctioned abduction of free Black persons back into bondage. As a result, slavery and slavery-like arrangements endured in Illinois until the eve of the Civil War.

### ***Expert Commentary: “Freedom Seekers and the Underground Railroad: Reframing Illinois Stories,” Larry A. McClellan***

In the decades before the Civil War, the growth of Illinois was fueled partly by the journeys of people escaping enslavement in the southern states. These freedom seekers were supported by a range of abolitionist networks collectively known as the Underground Railroad. Contemporary research has worked to identify and highlight the experiences of these freedom seekers, moving beyond a simplistic dichotomy of White Saviors and Black Bravery to explore the human cost of slavery, its associated indignities, and the courage and risk faced by Black abolitionists, women, and other marginalized persons.

## **Racial Terror**

Racial terror has been wielded against Black Illinoisans since the state’s formation. Violence and intimidation enforced racial hierarchy from the antebellum era to the civil rights movement and beyond. Despite being a free state, Illinois sanctioned laws and extralegal practices that criminalized, terrorized, and excluded Black residents. From

lynchings and race riots to housing bombings and anti-integration violence, racial terror in Illinois mirrored the brutality of the South and left a legacy still seen today in persistent racial inequities and generational trauma.

### **Key Findings**

- Between the Civil War and World War II, Illinois had the third largest number of reported lynchings outside of the South.
- Major race riots in cities including Springfield (1908), East St. Louis (1917), and Chicago (1919) resulted in the deaths of hundreds of Black residents and millions of dollars in property damage to Black homes and businesses.
- In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Illinois led the nation in the number of Sundown Towns — locales in which Black people could not safely live or be present after dark — within its borders.

### **Expert Commentary: “Sundown Towns, Safety Nets, and White Advantage among Disadvantaged Whites,” David Roediger**

Sundown Towns, the communities that barred Black Americans after dark, have left an ongoing legacy of Black exclusion and White advantage in the United States. Drawing from personal family experience, David Roediger highlights how intergenerational wealth, inherited security, and access to exclusive jobs and subsidized housing shape life opportunities and argues that honest reckoning with these structural advantages is necessary for a meaningful conversation about reparative justice.

### **Expert Commentary: “Racial Terror Lynching in the Land of Lincoln During the Second Nadir, 1874-1924,” Sundiata Cha-Jua**

Despite its reputation as the “Land of Lincoln,” Illinois has a deeply entrenched history of anti-Black racial terrorism and White Supremacist violence that proportionally rivals southern states such as Georgia. From the late nineteenth to early twentieth centuries, Illinois experienced dozens of major incidents of racial terrorism, including large-scale attacks in Springfield, East St. Louis, and Chicago as well as dozens of lynchings.

## **Political Disenfranchisement**

Black political power in Illinois has been curtailed from the founding era to the present. Despite constitutional amendments and landmark reforms, disenfranchisement persisted through law (Black Codes, literacy tests, poll taxes), violence, machine politics, gerrymandering, and carceral policies. These tactics were also used to thwart

participation in mass movements and political organizing. Illinois’s political history reflects both early legal exclusion and later manipulation of Black voting strength. These historical and contemporary harms contribute to depressed voter turnout and diluted political representation, perpetuating inequities in wealth, housing, education, and health.

### ***Key Findings***

- Black Illinoisans were denied the right to vote pursuant to the Illinois Black Codes (also known as Black Laws), which were in effect from 1819 until 1865. Black men secured the right to vote with the ratification of the Fifteenth Amendment in 1870; Black women secured the right to vote with the ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment fifty years later, in 1920.
- In August 1966, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and other demonstrators were assaulted with rocks and bottles while participating in an action against housing discrimination as part of the Chicago Freedom Movement. King subsequently declared that even given the many demonstrations he’d seen in the South, he’d “never seen anything so hostile and hateful” as what he had witnessed in Chicago.
- Until the passage of HB3653 in 2021, the practice of prison gerrymandering — counting incarcerated people as residents of a prison’s location rather than using their last known place of residence — worked to funnel political power away from urban communities in Illinois and into districts that are often rural and majority White.

### ***Expert Commentary: “Marginal Lands: Rural Black Farmers and the Case for Reparations in Illinois,” Kelley Lemon***

In the early twentieth century, Black farmers in rural Illinois cultivated land and agricultural resources that were vital to their economic and cultural stability. Steered toward undervalued tracts and excluded from federal support, these pioneering Black families faced immense challenges with resilience. Over time, however, conservation initiatives, legal barriers, and persistent structural inequities have continued to dispossess Black landowners.

### **Stolen Economic Labor**

The history of Black labor in Illinois mirrors the national story of racialized economic exploitation. From slavery and restrictive “Black Laws” to postwar industrial exclusion

and present-day prison labor, Black Illinoisans have faced systematic barriers to fair employment and wealth accumulation. State institutions, private employers, and unions each played roles in suppressing Black economic advancement. The cumulative effect has been a persistent racial wealth gap and structural inequities that define Illinois's modern economy.

### ***Key Findings***

- In the nineteenth century, racial violence and mob attacks on Black residents by White residents in places like Braidwood (1877), Virden (1898), and Pana (1899) reinforced racial subjugation by targeting Black workers competing for jobs.
- New Deal programs that required workers to hold union membership incentivized the displacement of Black workers in favor of White workers and elevated unions, which often discriminated against Black workers, to unprecedented power.
- Black labor activists developed a hybrid form of activism in which they fought both for broad workers' rights and for racial inclusion in skilled labor and labor unions.
- Today, the median household income for Black Illinoisans is \$40,000 less than that of White Illinoisans and Black Illinoisans are three times as impoverished as White Illinoisans.

### ***Expert Commentary: "Nineteenth-Century Black Labor Activism in Illinois," Alonzo M. Ward***

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Black Illinoisans faced racist hiring practices and exclusion from white-dominated unions. Despite entrenched systemic racism, Black workers built their own labor organizations and called for racial inclusion within the labor movement, fought for the rights and dignity of Black workers, and developed strategies to protect them against abusive and discriminatory hiring practices.

### **Policing and the Legal System**

Illinois built a policing and legal system that criminalized Black mobility and survival, evolving into modern forms of surveillance, punitive sentencing, and mass incarceration. These practices destabilized families, extracted wealth, and disproportionately punished Black residents.

## **Key Findings**

- Long before formal police departments existed, Illinois’s public safety system relied on sheriffs, constables, and county militias whose duties included monitoring Black movement, questioning Black travelers, detaining Black people suspected of escaping bondage, and facilitating forced returns to bondage.
- Between 1978 and 1998, Illinois’s prison population grew by more than 260 percent. By 2000, Black residents made up over 60 percent of the incarcerated population in Illinois, even though they were less than 15 percent of the state’s population.
- In 2015, Chicago passed a landmark reparations ordinance after acknowledging that Chicago Police Commander Jon Burge and officers under his command tortured and coerced confessions out of at least 120 people, mostly Black men, between the early 1970s and early 1990s.
- In 2017, the US Department of Justice found that the Chicago Police Department (CPD) had engaged in a “pattern or practice” of excessive force, unconstitutional stops, and discriminatory policing. Two years later, CPD entered into a binding consent decree requiring it to reform its policies, training, and practices in several key areas.
- In 2023, Illinois passed the SAFE-T Act, making it the first state to end the cash bail system, which was widely considered to be inequitable and discriminatory toward low-income people and Black people and other people of color.

### ***Expert Commentary: “We Charge Genocide’: Black Critiques of Racist Policing in Chicago,” Andy Clarno***

In 2014, the organization We Charge Genocide submitted a report to the United Nations documenting the Chicago Police Department’s pervasive violations of the UN Convention Against Torture. In response to a history of more than a century of state violence against Black Illinoisans, We Charge Genocide joined generations of activists and organizers, from Ida B. Wells to Black feminist abolitionist groups such as BYP100, Assata’s Daughters, and Black Lives Matter Chicago, who were guided by a vision of safety grounded in community investment and structural transformation and who achieved important police reforms.

### ***Expert Commentary: “Public Housing Discrimination in Illinois,” D. Bradford Hunt***

Illinois municipalities have a long history of using the federal public housing program to discriminate against Black Americans and reinforce racial residential segregation

rather than promote integration. Intentional discrimination, underfunding, chronic neglect, resistance to affordable housing, and the demolishing of Black-occupied housing underscores how systemic racism has undermined the promise of federal public housing and of affordable housing as a fundamental right for all.

## **Housing**

In Illinois, housing has long served as a mechanism of racialized control designed not simply to exclude Black communities, but to contain and exploit them strategically. From the early twentieth century through the present day, a convergence of federal, state, and local policies, in conjunction with private actors, have created a state-sanctioned architecture of segregation that systematically deprives Black residents of the benefits of homeownership while concentrating harm in their neighborhoods.

### ***Key Findings***

- Redlining, racial covenants, blockbusting, and exclusionary zoning ordinances were mechanisms used by both government and private entities to structure and reinforce residential segregation in communities throughout Illinois.
- 75 to 85 percent of homes purchased by Black Chicagoans between 1950 and 1970 occurred through contract sales — a predatory lending model that left buyers vulnerable to high interest rates, inflated purchase prices, and excessive down payments, but without the protections afforded to buyers with conventional mortgages.
- By the mid-twentieth century, Black Illinoisans were being disproportionately funneled into public housing developments that were underfunded, stigmatized, and structurally neglected. These developments evolved into sites of surveillance and social regulation that functioned to criminalize, endanger, and stereotype residents.
- The HOPE VI program, a public housing development program initiated by the federal government in the 1990s, the Plan for Transformation launched by the Chicago Housing Authority in 2000, and other related programs led to the wholesale demolition of public housing across the state. The promised mixed-income housing that was to replace these developments was often slow in coming and these programs largely worked to displace residents, deepen housing instability, decrease the availability of affordable housing, and accelerate gentrification.

***Expert Commentary: “Chicago, the Home of Racialized Real Estate,” LaDale Winling***

Throughout the twentieth century, Illinois real estate institutions used property valuation through racially restrictive covenants, discriminatory appraisal standards, so-called ethics codes, and redlining as tools to enforce and entrench racial segregation. In turn, racial exclusion was embedded into the organizational practices of the Home Owners’ Loan Corporation and Federal Housing Administration during the New Deal, creating housing patterns that continue to shape residential inequality in the present day.

***Expert Commentary: “Painting the Wealth Gap,” Amber S. Hendley***

From the end of the Civil War to the present, discriminatory US policies have systematically denied Black families the wealth, stability, and economic opportunity afforded to White Americans. Using their family history as a case study, Dr. Hendley shows the resilience and solidarity of Black households in the face of structural barriers that shuttled them into underpaid labor, denied them access to quality schools and housing, burdened them with high costs of living and immense debts and produced the profound racial wealth gap that persists to this present day.

## **Education**

Racial discrimination in Illinois’s education policy and infrastructure has created structural barriers to Black residents’ ability to access quality education. In the early years of statehood, Illinois made little provision for the public and formal education of Black residents. Even as public schooling expanded, Black students were segregated into unequal and under-resourced schools. Into the twenty-first century, Black Illinoisans have continued to organize to fight de facto segregation, to push for equitable funding of public schools, and to have the full history of Black people included in public curricula.

### ***Key Findings***

- The Great Migration brought millions of Black Americans to Illinois between 1910 and 1970, expanding the need for public education infrastructure. The growing Black population entered into the existing mostly de facto segregated school systems.
- The 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* decision reverberated in significant ways across Illinois, bringing to light how entrenched racial discrimination continued to limit and compartmentalize the educational opportunities of Black Illinoisans. Districts across the state experimented with busing programs to bring some Black students into White schools, but

busing was often met with resistance from White families and ambivalence from Black families.

- Despite steadily expanding educational access across the twentieth century, the struggle for high-quality schooling for Black Illinoisans continues today. Illinois public schools remain highly segregated, with recent data showing Illinois among the top four nationally on some indices of segregation.

***Expert Commentary: “Black Struggles for Education in Illinois,” Elizabeth Todd-Breland***

From the nineteenth century to the present, Black Illinoisans have faced state-sanctioned racial exclusion and segregation in the ongoing fight to secure equal education. Despite efforts to build independent schools and legal and policy mandates that challenged discriminatory laws, Black children were systematically denied access to adequately funded public education through gerrymandered attendance zones, racist housing policies, restrictions on school transfers, and the underfunding of Black schools compared to White schools. Today, Illinois remains one of the most segregated states for education and predominantly Black schools continue to experience the burden of systemic disinvestment.

***Expert Commentary: “Reparations as Redress for Educational Debt: Schools, Community Determination, and Justice in Illinois,” David Stovall***

Black families in Illinois have always had to fight for equal access to education. The persistent educational inequities that Black children in Illinois face constitute an “educational debt,” a structural deficit created by the state’s refusal to provide high quality schooling and by the relationship of housing segregation to inequities in education. As such, the redress for these harms must be structural and statewide, building on existing reparations-forward legislation to pay the educational debt owed to Black Illinoisans.

## **Family**

Structural racism has systematically undermined Black family life in Illinois from statehood to the present. Across every era — enslavement, migration, industrialization, and modern welfare reform — the state’s laws and institutions have destabilized Black households through exclusion, surveillance, and economic marginalization. Early state policies sanctioned family separation, denied access to education and housing, and criminalized the survival strategies of Black families. Despite centuries of policy-driven

harm, Black families have sustained community life through self-organized mutual aid, women’s clubs, churches, and advocacy movements that filled gaps left by the state. Understanding Black family life in Illinois requires confronting how racialized policy design — rooted in the White, male-breadwinner ideal — continues to define which families are deemed legitimate, deserving, and worth protecting.

### ***Key Findings***

- During the active enforcement of the Illinois Black Laws (1819-1865), Black children and adults were vulnerable to kidnapping under the Fugitive Slave Law or to being sold through legal indentures, thus ripping them from their loved ones and forever severing familial and communal bonds.
- In the twentieth century, Black women’s labor as caregivers, breadwinners, and organizers was central to family survival. Their leadership in mutual aid societies and women’s clubs built parallel welfare systems where the state failed to provide protections and services that were routinely provided to White families.
- Today, Black families receiving public assistance in Illinois are significantly more likely than White families to be sanctioned, placing them at greater risk of losing benefits altogether.

### ***Expert Commentary: “Black Women and Violence in Illinois: A Reparative Justice Issue,” Terrion L. Williamson***

Racialized gender violence such as the disappearance and murder of Black women in Peoria in the early 2000s is entwined with long-term disinvestment, abandonment, mass incarceration, failed policing, economic deprivation, and societal apathy toward Black women. Serial murder cases involving Black women across Illinois illustrate how marginalized victims of violence are made uniquely vulnerable and invisible, which in turn creates impunity for perpetrators of gendered violence and requires a response that centers the needs and experiences of victims and survivors.

## **Health**

Racism operates as a public health crisis in Illinois, shaping health outcomes for Black residents from the state’s founding to the present. Across more than two centuries, health inequities have been systematically produced through policy, environment, and institutional design. Historical exclusion from hospitals, medical training, and professional networks intersected with segregation, redlining, and labor exploitation

to create structural barriers to care. Today, these inequities persist through limited access to quality health services, environmental degradation, housing instability, and systemic bias within the health care system.

### ***Key Findings***

- In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, medical facilities in Illinois were often segregated and most Black residents did not have access to quality health care. In 1891, Provident Hospital and Training School in Chicago became the first hospital in the US to admit both Black and White patients and one of very few at the time that would educate, train, and employ Black medical professionals.
- The *Healthy Illinois 2028* plan identifies racism as a core determinant of health disparities statewide.
- Black people in Illinois are eight times more likely than White people to experience homelessness and, due to their housing status, unhoused people often receive poor or low-quality healthcare.
- In Illinois, rates of diabetes, adult asthma, cancer, hypertension, obesity, high cholesterol, COVID-19 mortality, maternal and infant mortality, drug overdose deaths, and HIV infection are all higher among Black Americans. Overall, Black Illinoisans experience higher rates of chronic illness and premature death.
- Black Illinoisans in communities such as Altgeld Gardens, East St. Louis, and Cahokia Heights are disproportionately exposed to hazardous environmental conditions due to industrial development, toxic waste, and dilapidating infrastructure.

### ***Expert Commentary: “Segregating Recreation in Chicagoland,” Lynn M. Hudson***

Recreational spaces in Chicago such as beaches, parks, pools, and playgrounds were central but often overlooked sites of racial segregation and violence against Black Illinoisans in the twentieth century. The violent enforcement of the color lines was tragically exemplified by the 1919 murder of Eugene Williams, whose death sparked the Chicago Race Riot. Despite discriminatory city policies and harassment by White gangs, Black Chicagoans fought tirelessly to desegregate recreational areas, recognizing them as vital markers of true citizenship and equality. Their struggles reveal how public spaces reinforced systemic segregation in Chicago and across Illinois.

