

NBCBLK

'Paying ransom for freedom': How cash bail is keeping Black mothers stuck in prisons

Many women in jail are Black single mothers who are awaiting trial there only because they can't afford bail. But groups across the U.S. are posting bonds on their behalf.



— Taylor Bates and her baby are healthy and at home after having spent a month in jail because she couldn't afford the \$1,000 bail. *The Bail Project*

Feb. 13, 2022, 4:30 AM EST / Updated Feb. 13, 2022, 5:56 PM EST

By Randi Richardson

In December, JaCari Letchaw's dog wandered to a neighbor's house, where it gave birth to puppies. Letchaw says when she tried to retrieve her dog and the puppies, a dispute broke out over who was the rightful owner of the puppies. She walked away, but later that night the Black single mother of five was arrested and eventually sent to Jefferson County's jail in Birmingham, Alabama.

Her bail was set at \$60,000 for a first-degree robbery charge. It was far more than she could afford; her most recent job had paid only \$14 an hour. The monetary difference meant Letchaw would have to wait in jail until her trial started – which could be months away.

"I absolutely had no idea how I was going to pay my bail. There was no way possible. Sitting in there, I even lost my job," Letchaw told NBC News.

She also almost lost her house while awaiting trial in jail for two weeks. She was only able to return home after a local social justice organization, Faith and Works, posted her bail on Christmas Day through its fund, In Defense of Black Lives. The group has a relationship with Birmingham's sheriff's department, which referred her case.

Letchaw recalled that when representatives from In Defense of Black Lives first approached her and offered to bail her out, she immediately thought, "Bail who out?"

"That kind of thing just doesn't happen very often," she said. "There was nothing else that I could do, there was absolutely nothing else. And when I hear Faith and Works, they want to come and bail me out, I'm crying. I think I almost went into a panic attack."



— JaCari Letchaw's youngest three kids met her at the Jefferson County Jail in Birmingham, Ala., to welcome her back home the day she was released. Faith and Works

Most women in jails are like Letchaw: Black, single mothers or only incarcerated because they can't afford to post bail. Of the more than 115,000 [women in jails](#) in the U.S., more than 60 percent haven't been convicted of a crime, but are incarcerated while awaiting trial because they can't make bail, [according to](#) the Sentencing Project. Forty-four percent of women in jail are Black, and 80 percent of women are single mothers or primary caregivers for their children, according to a 2016 [report](#) by Vera Institute of Justice.

These disparities are among the many reasons why advocates say the cash bail system is long overdue for reform, if not abolishment.

'Paying ransom for freedom'

Cara McClure founded Faith and Works in 2017 and its bail fund three years later, which is specifically dedicated to bailing out Black mothers. She said the cash bail system criminalizes poverty while rewarding wealth.

“Paying ransom for freedom is something that goes way back, historically,” she said. “Let’s just say, for instance, me and you committed the same crime. You have money, I don’t have money. You get to go home and I have to sit there. And I just don’t understand me sitting there.”

According to the Vera [report](#), poverty is a key reason many people commit crimes. Sixty percent of women in jail didn’t have full-time jobs before being arrested, and the majority of women in jail are there for low-level, nonviolent crimes such as property, drug or public order offenses.

While local, state and federal governments have been slow to overhaul the cash bail system, many organizations across the country, such as Faith and Works, are stepping up to bail people out for low-level, nonviolent offenses.

How a bail fund works

The National Bail Fund Network is an umbrella organization for [more than 90 community bail funds](#), most of which are organized by local or state activists who’ve collected donations from community members or businesses and usually have partnerships with public defenders and sheriff’s departments to get referrals on potential candidates. After receiving a referral, the organizations typically evaluate defendants according to re-entry options, threat to society and other markers before deciding who to bail out. Most states have at least one bail fund.

The organization fronts the money to post bail for defendants. If the case is dismissed, or the defendant returns for trial, the funds are returned and used for the next case. According to the Richmond Community Bail Fund, funds across the U.S. typically see a [more than 90 percent rate](#) of return for these funds.





— JaCari Letchaw and her oldest son were arrested following a dispute with a neighbor. Faith and Works posted her \$60,000 bail, but her son is still in jail on \$90,000 bail. *Courtesy JaCari Letchaw*

The funds have freed thousands of people from jail in recent years. [The Colorado Freedom Fund](#), for instance, has posted \$2.4 million for more than 900 people in the five years it's been around. [The Memphis Community Bail Fund](#) has spent \$1 million over five years bailing out more than 400 people. And the Richmond Community Bail Fund [spent \\$1.3 million in the second half of 2020](#) to bail out almost 400 people.

The Liberty Fund in New York City formed in 2017 and has since bailed out 1,200 people.

David Long, executive director of the Liberty Fund, said that cash bail no longer operates the way it was designed. Cash bail was originally intended to ensure a defendant showed up to court, he said, but what's developed instead is a system that disproportionately punishes the poor.

Letchaw's oldest son, who was with her during the neighborhood dispute, was also arrested and is currently in jail because the family can't afford to post his \$90,000 bail.

Disproportionate impact on Black women

The Bail Project, a national fund, has posted bonds for more than 20,000 people across the U.S. Seventy-six percent were women, and of that group, 1 in 3 were Black mothers.

One of those bailouts was Taylor Bates, a Black single mother who was five months pregnant when she was arrested in Atlanta last June following a dispute with a family member. She couldn't make her \$1,000 bail, so she stayed in DeKalb County's jail for almost a month until the Bail Project posted it on her behalf. Without that financial support, she would have delivered her baby in jail and would likely still be there, since her case is ongoing.

Twyla Carter, the organization's national director of legal and policy, said that "jail was a horrific experience" for Bates.

"Because of the pandemic, she was kept in isolation 23 hours a day. She had experienced a miscarriage before and was worried she would lose this baby, too. Fortunately, we were able to assist and her baby was born healthy. Her dream is to open her own restaurant one day."

DeKalb County jail officials declined NBC News' requests for comment.

Carter said Black mothers are particularly vulnerable to the cash bail system.

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“The disproportionate impact on Black women in particular and Black mothers is great because their inability to post a cash bond is the result of a wide range of societal issues and barriers that come into play,” she said. “Black women, in particular, carrying on the brunt of this humanitarian crisis that we’re seeing, especially when you think in terms of Black women having to afford their own bail amount, which is typically set at a higher rate when they are charged with the same offenses as white women or other women, and they’re less likely to be able to afford it.”

Meanwhile, Letchaw’s case is still ongoing.

“If I had not been blessed with Faith and Works, I would probably still be sitting in there,” she said. “The time there was very horrible. It is just like modern day slavery. They keep you in a cage. They treat you like animals.”

Jefferson County Jail officials declined NBC News’ requests for comment.

Attempts at reform

While locally organized bail funds have been popping up across the country, government-sponsored ones are less common. Long said they're scarce because there isn't a widespread model that federal and state governments can follow as a first step. New York is one of few states with charitable bail funds written into law. One of them is the Liberty Fund.

Other [states and cities have reformed](#) their cash bail systems.

In 2017, New Jersey phased out the use of cash bail and instead performs risk assessments to determine pretrial releases. In the same year, Kentucky started releasing low-risk defendants without having them see a judge and requiring pretrial service agencies to make release recommendations within 24 hours of arrests. In 2020, San Francisco District Attorney Chesa Boudin [said his office would no longer](#) ask for cash bail. California also [eliminated cash bail](#) for some defendants who can't afford it. And a handful of cities and states, including Nebraska, Illinois, Montana, Connecticut, Philadelphia, New Orleans and Atlanta, introduced reform legislation in 2020.

But there are challenges to reforming cash bail. At the beginning of 2020, New York's state Legislature passed a bill that effectively ended cash bail for most misdemeanors and nonviolent felonies, but the law was rolled back that April. The New York Police Department released data shortly after the law went into effect that showed an increase in crime, saying it was the result of softer bail rules. Supporters of cash bail used the [disputed data](#) to pressure New Yorkers into cornering elected officials to overturn the law, [according to the Marshall Project](#).

Long said overhauling the cash bail system is politically difficult for this reason: progress is usually interrupted any time there's an uptick in crime. Its supporters are worried about [appearing soft on crime](#) after any potential reform, and there's concern about releasing potentially dangerous people back into communities.

Another difficulty in reform is that advocates want it done right. [Californians voted against](#) replacing their cash bail system with risk assessments in a 2020 ballot measure. Opponents of the measure include notable civil rights organizations Color of Change and Human Rights Watch. Voting no was "a chance to advance real pretrial reform, instead of replacing the money bail system with a worse system of biased risk assessments and unlimited judicial power," Justice LA, an umbrella organization for more than 20 organizations, [said in a joint statement](#).

At the federal level, cash bail reform has gone largely untouched. Both President Joe Biden and Vice President Kamala Harris said they [support ending cash bail](#), but it hasn't been prioritized since they took office.

One reason federal reform has been difficult, Long said, is that what's classified as a crime isn't standardized across states. "You can look at our country and there's 50 different systems that are in place in 50 different states, and they're all at different stages," he said.

Carter, of the Bail Project, said the Biden administration should make it more of a priority.

“The use of cash bail is a fundamental issue right now in our civil rights and racial justice movement,” she said. “We have a humanitarian crisis happening with the use of cash bail.”

Carter said that the federal government should reward states that phase out the cash bail system and that now is the time, while Democrats still control the legislative and executive branches.

Finally out of jail, Bates is enjoying being a new mother at home with her baby, while Letchaw spends her time with her kids. They both have made their court dates, in the hopes that their cases will close soon.

The process can be time-consuming and emotionally exhausting, Letchaw said, but she’s just grateful that she was bailed out.

“Without God, I don’t know where I would be right now – would be locked up, because it was just God to have Faith and Works.”

NBCBLK

Black New Yorkers strike back at city program that seized their properties for developers

The plaintiffs say the program unfairly aided gentrification and pushed Black and Latino residents out of their homes and neighborhoods.



— Sherlivia Thomas-Murchison, right, and her two children became homeless when the city of New York retained ownership of her home. Matt Nighswander / NBC News; Sherlivia Thomas-Murchison

Aug. 5, 2021, 5:53 PM EDT

By Randi Richardson

Sherlivia Thomas-Murchison's mother worked for nearly 25 years to make sure her family had a permanent home in the Brooklyn borough of New York City.

The home of her mother, Margaret Blow, was in a co-op building, where Thomas-Murchison was a shareholder, on Madison Street in the Bedford-Stuyvesant neighborhood. Thomas-Murchison

owned her apartment, as well as an apartment she and her siblings inherited after their mother died.

But in 2018, she learned that the city had signed the building's deed over to a partnering developer. It meant she and her two children – like her neighbors in the eight-unit building – were without a home.

The transfer happened through a controversial citywide program called the Third Party Transfer program, or TPT, which experts who spoke to NBC News said has had an outsized effect on Black and Latino homeowners. Thomas-Murchison is one of three lead plaintiffs in a class-action lawsuit against New York City and its partnering developers, alleging that the program unfairly aided gentrification, is pushing out Black and Latino residents and has siphoned millions of dollars from families of color.

In June, the 2nd U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals said the suit could move forward after it was stalled by a lower court, [PoliticsNY reported](#).



— Protesters outside Bridge Street Development Corporation in Brooklyn in 2019.

Sherlivia Thomas-Murchison

Through the program, which began in the 1990s when Rudy Giuliani was mayor, private property can be seized on the grounds of [unpaid utility bills or abandonment](#). The purpose was to give properties to developers to create low-income housing while eradicating widespread blight.

The plaintiffs say the city seized properties that did not meet the "distressed" criteria and failed to notify nearly 700 homeowners, most of them Black and Latino, in a timely manner that their property was at risk of confiscation or offer any way for them to keep their homes.

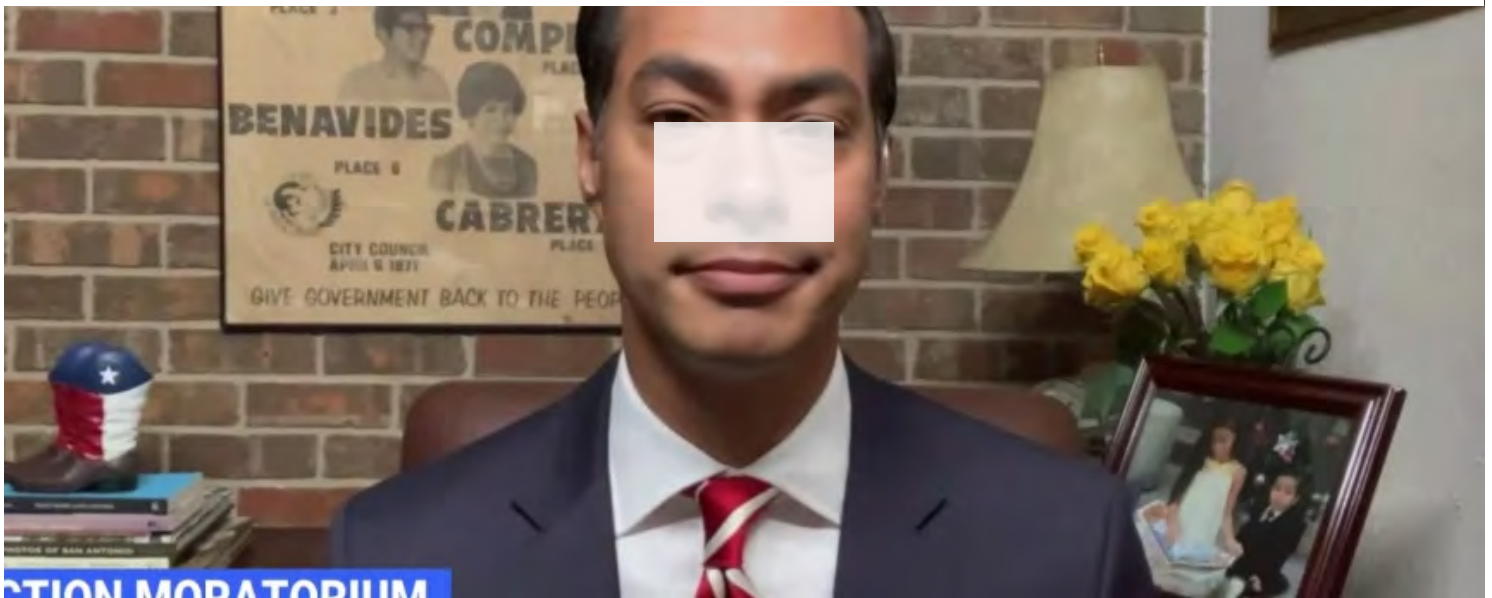
It is unlikely that the plaintiff homeowners will get their homes back, but they are asking for payment in the amount of lost equity and wealth, which they estimate to be a collective \$1 billion, said Gregg Weiner and Matthew Berman, attorneys for the plaintiffs. In 2019, Thomas-Murchison told the New York Senate in written testimony that her family and neighbors had lost at least a cumulative \$20 million in "real, personal and future assets" because of the program.

"The same laws were craftily manipulated and re-interpreted to usurp property rights, and steal resident-owned and controlled cooperative apartment units and eradicate me and my extended family's position as shareholders and equity owners, and our right to pass our shares and residences on to our children," she wrote. "I imagine the same has happened to hundreds of residents in my immediate community, which consists of predominantly Black and Brown people."

Amanda T. Boston, an assistant professor at the New York University Marron Institute of Urban Management, whose work focuses on gentrification in New York City, said the Third Party Transfer program targets "gentrification hot spots."

"At a time when homeownership is increasingly inaccessible for all New Yorkers, the TPT program has facilitated the loss of homes and wealth for the city's marginalized residents," she said. "This is especially true among Black homeowners, who primarily reside in areas which were very recently considered unworthy of investment, yet are now sites of real estate speculation."

Former HUD Secretary Castro, landlord discuss eviction moratorium's impact on renters and landlords



"The TPT program is just one in a long history of policies geared toward transforming the city for more affluent and 'desirable' residents," Boston added. "Black homeowners have disproportionately borne the burdens of these policies due to histories of structural racism and economic inequality that have, quite frankly, made their relationship to homeownership more precarious than other demographics. The fact that historically Black neighborhoods are gentrification 'hot spots' only adds a historically grounded level of suspicion of a policy that seizes hard-won homes from local residents."

The suit, initially filed in 2019, is led by Thomas-Murchison, McConnell Dorce and Cecelia Jones. Soon after it was filed, the Third Party Transfer program was suspended in a growing backlash until a working group could [issue a report and recommendations for its future](#).

New York City Law Department spokesman Nick Paolucci said the appeals court's advancing the case was procedural, not a merit-based or jurisdictional decision.

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"The City believes the case is meritless and should be dismissed," he said in a statement.

The attorneys for the other defendants did not respond to requests for comment.

Weiner and Berman said their clients' properties did not meet the legal criteria for seizure when the city took them as recently as 2019.

For a property to be considered "distressed" enough for seizure, outstanding tax liens on it had to be at least 15 percent more than its market value and there had to be a minimum of five violations per unit in the building ranked as at least "immediately hazardous." In the absence of the latter, the city must have previously issued fines or incurred costs of at least \$1,000 when addressing the violations. [The program guidelines](#) say owners can enter into payment plans at any time to stop the foreclosure process.

"I do think the TPT program started with noble intentions and a noble purpose," Weiner said. "There's two problems that have developed that made this, frankly, a pernicious program. One is that the city has extended the program to properties that themselves are not statutorily distressed, but they may be near other properties that are distressed. The second thing is that because the values have increased in many instances, there is substantial value to the owner far above any tax charges or water and sewer charges."

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Berman argues that other laws, like eminent domain, allow governments to seize property for public purposes like building highways "as long as it provides just compensation for that property." But, he added, "they have to pay the proper price for that, and here, they take property without paying for it."

Berman and Robert Valli, a partner at his firm, said the program cuts off the transfer of generational wealth in Black and Latino families. Black wealth is generally one-tenth that of white wealth, [according to the Brookings Institution](#). And Latino wealth is nearly one-fifth that of white wealth, [according to the Federal Reserve](#).

Boston, the NYU professor, said: "While TPT proponents hail the program's ability to make it easier for residents to remain in place, it has instead stripped properties and equity from individual homeowners and their communities, widened an already staggering racial wealth gap, opened up possibilities for further real estate speculation and gentrification and facilitated the externally determined development of Black, other marginalized neighborhoods."

Berman and Weiner said the lawsuit is unlikely to result in the city's returning the properties to the previous homeowners. Nonetheless, Weiner said he hopes the suit will end the TPT program.

"This is one of those cases where we heard about it," Valli said, "and when you tell the lay person, 'The city had the ability to take someone's property and then not give them the surplus equity,' they look at you quizzically, like 'how is that possible?'"

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Randi Richardson

Randi Richardson reports for TODAY Digital and NBC BLK from New York.

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Audra McDonald learned of her 10th Tony nom through a voice memo from a 5-year-old

10 nominations later, McDonald tells TODAY.com she's still shocked by each one: "My life has exceeded my wildest dreams."

May 3, 2023, 1:26 PM EDT

By Randi Richardson

Audra McDonald says she was riding the train to work on May 2 when she received a voice text message.

"A friend of mine has a little boy that plays with my young daughter. He was saying, 'Auntie Audra, congratulations on your nomination,'" she recalls to TODAY.com, imitating a little kid's voice.

"That's how I found out," she says, laughing. "It was a great way to find out actually, from a little 5-year-old."

The Broadway legend tied a record when the 2023 Tony nominations were announced Tuesday. She is now in a three-way tie with Chita Rivera and Julie Harris for most performing nominations at 10.

McDonald's most recent nomination was for her lead role in "Ohio State Murders," a play written by Adrienne Kennedy that details multiple traumatic events that transpired due to structural racism.

"Ohio State Murders" was on Broadway from Dec. 8, 2022, to Jan. 15, 2023, according to the Tony awards website .

"My life has exceeded my wildest dreams."

The actor says she is still processing her record-tying nomination.

"Those things are always hard to take in," she describes. "I've been so very lucky and my life has exceeded my wildest dreams, so it's hard to process and to take in. I'm super grateful and super honored."

The Julliard graduate has won six Tony awards, more performance wins than any other person, on nine nominations for her work in "Marie Christine," "Carousel," "Master Class," "Ragtime," "A Raisin In The Sun," "The Gershwins' Porgy and Bess," "Lady Day at Emerson's Bar and Grill," "Frankie and Johnny in the Clair de Lune" and "110 in the Shade."

The singer says there is still shock on nomination No. 10.

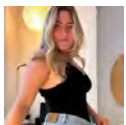
"Of course, it's always a shock because anything can happen," she says. "It's been an incredible season. All the women in my category and the women that were eligible are giving incredible performances this year, so you never know which way it's gonna go."

She was nominated alongside Jessica Hecht, Jessica Chastain and Jodie Comer.

McDonald says news of her record-tying nomination did not change her plans for the day. She found out on the way to a rehearsal and TODAY.com spoke to her when she finished up. She has no current plans to celebrate.

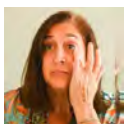
"I mean, I've been in rehearsals all day," she says. "I'm getting ready to get on the (train) and head home and give my 6-year-old dinner and put her to bed, get up tomorrow morning and get off to work again."

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"Ohio State Murders" earning a Tony nod is particularly significant to McDonald because it's a play written by a Black woman about a Black woman's experiences with racism. The play ran in a theater recently renamed after iconic actor James Earl Jones.

"I'm glad that that part of it was recognized," McDonald says. "To bring this Black woman's work to Broadway, to make her Broadway debut at 91 years old in a theater that has just been named for one of our great Black artists, James Earl Jones, censoring Black women or a Black woman's story, exposing how destructive racism is ... and then how, especially with this character, it was death by the thousand cuts of systemic racism.

"I have to say, it was very fulfilling," she continues. "It was one of the most difficult roles I've ever played."

She says learning of her nomination on a work day reminded her that she's doing what she loves.

"I love that it happened on a day like today where I was taking the train in to start a workshop and rehearsal for a possible (new) project," she says. "I always say the rehearsal is the best part. It was nice to just get right back in the saddle and do what I love. That was the best part of today. It was like, 'Oh, wow, that's awesome. I'm so honored and happy for Adrienne, that they remembered us, and that's wonderful.' And here I am right back in rehearsal. That part made it feel right."

"The Good Fight" actor says she "can't share too much" about the project she's working on but "it's something that thrills" her.

The mother of two's husband, Will Swenson, is also a Broadway actor and currently stars in "A Beautiful Noise: The Neil Diamond Musical," which opened last December, according to Playbill. Swenson was eligible to receive a Tony nod for his role, and notched one in 2009 for his role in musical "Hair," but wasn't nominated this season for his role as Neil Diamond.

McDonald says they approach their difference in nominations "with love and support."

"My husband and I have both been in this business long enough to know that sometimes you get the nod and sometimes you don't, and we have been with each other through both," she says.

"My husband's doing incredible work every night in his show," she continued. "I couldn't be more proud. Not being nominated should not invalidate the joy that they are bringing to that stage every night and the artistry that they're bringing ... and the joy and exhilaration on the audience's faces every night."

"It's about supporting each other, but at the same time realizing what's most important and that's what it's about," she says.

NBCBLK

3 Black women oversee voting access for more than 37 million Americans

The Secretaries of State in Pennsylvania, California and New Jersey are Black women committed to protecting and expanding voting rights.



— From left, the secretaries of state of Pennsylvania, California, and New Jersey: Leigh Chapman, Shirley Weber and Tahesha Way. States of Pennsylvania, California and New Jersey.

March 9, 2022, 3:04 PM EST

By Randi Richardson

California Secretary of State Shirley Weber knows all too well how the race for voting rights is an intergenerational marathon.

She's the proud daughter of sharecroppers and is the first Black person to hold the position in California after Gov. Gavin Newsom nominated her at the end of 2020.

She told NBC BLK that descending from a family who couldn't vote and becoming the state's chief elections officer is a full circle experience for her family. She said her grandparents were essentially barred from voting. Her parents never registered to vote in Arkansas out of fear for their lives during the Jim Crow-era. They moved to California and her mother made their house a polling place to increase accessibility to voting for the local Black community.

“To look at that, and see how difficult life was ... and know that my parents were so committed to voting, that to have their daughter really responsible for over 20 million voters in California is quite a hallelujah moment.”

California's secretary of state: Voting is powerful and that's why it's most divisive now



Weber is one of three Black women Democrats focused on expanding voting rights across the country who hold the position overseeing elections and securing voting infrastructure throughout their states. The other two, [Leigh Chapman in Pennsylvania](#) and [Tahesha Way in New Jersey](#), hold these posts that have become higher-profile statewide offices as the battle over voter access has amplified in recent years.

Virginia Secretary of State Kay Coles James, who was appointed this year by Gov. Glenn Youngkin, is a Republican. Last year as the president of the Heritage Foundation, James [spoke out against](#) federal legislation Democrats are pushing through Congress to expand voting rights,

but has also said she has “zero interest in disenfranchising or suppressing the vote of any portion of the population.”

Weber, Chapman and Way, however, say they consult with each other regularly, working toward the broader goal of increasing voter turnout and ultimately eliminating voter suppression. Between their three states, they oversee the enfranchisement of more than 37 million registered voters. Way said that having multiple Black female secretaries of state across the country is attributable to advocates who came before them and paved the way for it to be possible.

“It’s a wonderful feeling,” to be in this cohort, Way said. “You always think back to not only minorities who fought for the right to vote, but you also think about women who fought for the right to vote. ... So I’m in good company, with the lady secretaries from California and from my neighboring Pennsylvania.”

Chapman said it “means so much” to be a Black woman serving alongside two other Black women, with whom she speaks “frequently.”



— Pennsylvania's Secretary of State Leigh Chapman. Pennsylvania Department of State

“Throughout our history, Black women have really faced so many challenges. We’re [one of the largest voting blocks in the country](#). The way Black women vote really determines the outcome of many elections at the state level and at the federal level, and we are not represented equally in political office. So the fact that there are three African American women in significant states administering elections at a critical time in our country where we’re dealing with pandemics, we’re dealing with racial reckoning, it’s an honor to serve with my fellow African American women secretaries of state.”

The right to vote has long been precarious for Black Americans throughout history, and has become even more delicate after the Supreme Court ruled in 2013 to [rescind a key section](#) of the 1965 Voting Rights Act that enforced voter access in particular Southern states.

Without that section of the law, states such as Georgia and Texas have [closed polling sites in and near Black neighborhoods](#), taken actions to [limit permanent absentee ballots or mail-in voting](#), and taken other actions that have an outsize impact on Black voter turnout. Several Republican-led states have either introduced or [passed legislation to restrict voting access since the 2020 election](#), in which Black voters played a key role in electing Joe Biden as president, Weber said.

“They don’t think everyone should have the right to vote,” Weber said. “What they’re saying is that we don’t want all these folks who we haven’t validated, who don’t look like us, to have the decision to vote and to basically make decisions about their lives.”

Chapman became acting secretary of the commonwealth of Pennsylvania in January after Gov. Tom Wolf appointed her in the battleground state, which saw [numerous lawsuits seeking to recount verified ballots cast in the 2020 election](#). To keep a clear head through the scrutiny, Chapman keeps a visual reminder of the importance of her work in her office.

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“It’s called “[Sweet Liberty](#)” by [Kadir Nelson](#) and it’s a portrait that he painted after the 2020 election,” she said. “She has a blue iris in her hair, which represents hope, and her sleeves are rolled up, and that represents the fact that it’s a lot of hard work to make sure that we have equal voting rights in our country and sometimes you have to roll up your sleeves.”

Pennsylvania finished redistricting Feb. 23, ahead of its upcoming primary election. Chapman said she’s focused on making sure people know how the redistricting will impact them, while also sharing general voting information, such as polling locations and how to decide whether to vote in person or by mail.

Chapman also wants the U.S. Senate to pass the languishing bills to expand and confirm voter access, the [John Lewis Voting Rights Act](#) and the [Freedom to Vote Act](#).

“We really need to have more standards when it comes to voting in our country,” Chapman said. “The way you vote really shouldn’t be determined by what ZIP code you live in, but that’s the way our election system is run. And because there was a failure to make more national standards around the voting process, it’s now really up to the states to make sure that we’re passing comprehensive election reform.”

Pennsylvania passed legislation in 2019 to expand mail-in voting, a move that updated the election code for the first time in 70 years. While a challenge to the policy is [making its way through the state courts](#), she said there’s still more to do. She wants to see same-day voter registration and more options from which people can choose how to vote.

Local counties administer elections, so Chapman is already making plans with the state’s 67 counties to make November’s midterm “the smoothest election possible.” Her goal is to engage the estimated 3.2 million eligible Pennsylvanians who chose not to vote in the November 2020 election and make them participate this time around.

In New Jersey, Way has been in office since 2018, and has taken on the tasks of implementing automatic voter registration, online registration, in-person early voting, online ballot tracking, introducing ballot drop boxes and allowing people on parole or probation to vote. She overhauled the voting system to be almost completely by mail for the 2020 election and said that election saw New Jersey’s [highest voter turnout](#) and the state led the nation in [youth voter turnout](#).



— Tahesha Way serves as New Jersey's 34th Secretary of State. [State of New Jersey](#)

The next step for her office, she said, will be “informing and educating our voters” further into civic engagement.

Weber encourages people to become more involved with the political process, not just by voting, but also through writing letters to elected officials, sharing information about voting and bringing voting rights up in every civic meeting.

“We’ve got to be persistent,” she said. “That’s what our ancestors did. They didn’t just give up because it was hard.”

As a California state legislator, Weber co-authored legislation in 2020 to restore the right to vote [of people on parole, probation or still in jail](#).

But the policy faced a roadblock at first: How would parolees and formerly incarcerated people be told about their new rights? Weber said she initially faced resistance from the California Department of Corrections to notify beneficiaries of their restored voting rights, so she created a

campaign to disseminate that information to thousands of formerly incarcerated people, as well as register many to vote.



— California's Secretary of State Shirley Weber. 50+1 Strategies

Two years after the law went into effect, though, the department said it is now working with multiple agencies to inform parolees and formerly incarcerated people that they can vote, according to Vicky Waters, assistant secretary of communication. She added that voter information is also now included in the parolee handbook and that the department provides “wraparound re-entry services as we stand committed to the successful reintegration of formerly incarcerated people.”

Weber assumed her current role in January 2021, just weeks after the riot at the U.S. Capitol prompted increased scrutiny around elections and voting rights. She said she accepted her

appointment to become secretary of state after Alex Padilla left the position to become a U.S. senator, because “democracy is fragile. Our right to vote is under attack.”

“I felt this was our time to make good on the civil rights era – that they had fought for us and given us so much,” she said. “This was going to be this generation’s time to basically continue to struggle and continue to fight.”

Aside from the riot and its fallout, she said she accepted the appointment because “I also knew that no matter all the things I’ve done, that if people lose the right to vote in this nation, and voting is under attack, we could lose it all simply because of the way that the votes would go and the change that would occur.”

That’s why Weber, Chapman and Way have committed their careers to the issue. Specifically, as Black women, they say they do not take their work lightly.

Weber said that being part of the most consistent voting blocks without being well-represented in the upper echelons of government or without protected voting rights is a form of silencing.

“Black women have always, in this country, been sometimes ignored, and yet counted on,” she said. “We’ve been kind of the silent force for change. When you look at the civil rights movement – and as a professor, I’ve studied it – there were so many women who sat behind the throne, and who made the civil rights era happen, whether it was Xeroxing materials or getting ready for the March on Washington, or whatever it was. It was just so many unsung heroes that were female and we kind of push men forward because that was the society in which we existed.”

But the tide, Weber said, is turning.

“I know that they’re strong and persevering, and determined to make sure that this is a fair and open election, always,” she added. “And that’s what we’ve always done.”

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Randi Richardson

Randi Richardson reports for TODAY Digital and NBC BLK from New York.

Racial disparities in fertility care have persisted for years. Here's why.

"I had heard about IVF from the beginning, but I was afraid of it," Regina Townsend said.

Nov. 17, 2022, 2:00 PM EST

By Randi Richardson, TODAY

At age 23, Regina Townsend was doing everything right: She'd graduated from college, gotten married and now it was time for her to have a baby, Townsend, now 41, recalled to TODAY.

At the time, she thought it'd be easy to get pregnant. In fact, she thought it was hard *not* to get pregnant by the way her family drilled it into her growing up.

"Whatever you do, don't get pregnant. You need to go to college. You need to do well," family members would tell her as a teenager, she said. "But there was never a conversation about (fertility)."

That's why Townsend was so surprised to learn she wasn't able to conceive without fertility treatments.

"At 30-something, I'm thinking everything's going to be fine. And I'm hearing, 'Oh, you have fibroids. You have (endometriosis). Your egg quality isn't great.' It's like, wait a minute. I didn't know that I was even supposed to be concerned with all of this," she said.

It took 10 years for her to be diagnosed with endometriosis, polycystic ovarian syndrome (PCOS), and completely blocked fallopian tubes, Townsend said. She and her husband then decided to start in-vitro fertilization (IVF) treatments. They conceived son Judah, who is now 6.

Research shows that it's common for Black women to start fertility treatment after experiencing infertility for multiple years, whereas their white counterparts usually seek care sooner. And Black women are often in their late 30s or early 40s when they start, older on average than white

women. [Michelle Obama](#) started IVF when she was 37, and [Tyra Banks](#), [Kandi Burruss](#), [Angela Bassett](#) and [Gabrielle Union](#) started treatments when they were in their 40s.

The delay in care may contribute to higher rates of death in Black newborns conceived with fertility treatment versus white newborns, [NBC News reported last month](#). An October 2022 [study](#) in the journal Pediatrics found the neonatal mortality rate in Black moms using fertility treatments was four times higher than in white moms. (When fertility treatments aren't used, the neonatal mortality rate in Black moms is two times higher than in white moms.)

“It’s not an error on behalf of the patient ... (or) that they just show up late,” Dr. Tia Jackson-Bey, an infertility specialist and OB-GYN at Reproductive Medicine Associates of New York, told TODAY. “There may be other barriers that have prevented them from seeking care in a timely fashion.”



— Regina Townsend with her husband, Jahbari, and their son, Judah.

Regina Townsend via Broken Brown Egg

More infertility, less treatment

Black women are most likely to start their first round of fertility treatment at 41 or older, whereas white women are most likely to start before 35, according to a [2020 study published in Reproductive Biology and Endocrinology](#). Before their first appointment, the duration of infertility Black women experience is up to two years longer than when white women first seek care, according to a [2007 study published in Fertility and Sterility](#). Black women are also twice as

likely as white women to have fertility challenges, [according to a 2008 study in Fertility and Sterility](#).

Dr. David Seifer, a reproductive endocrinologist at Yale Medicine and lead author of the 2020 and 2007 studies, said “there’s no simple answer” to explain the delay. He suggested that insurance coverage, awareness of the “biological clock” and partners’ attitudes toward fertility treatment may all play a role.

‘Something that rich people do’

Jackson-Bey said the disparities are primarily due to insurance coverage and who has the means to pay for treatments. About 12% of Black Americans do not have health insurance, compared to 9% of white Americans, according to [2022 report from the Department of Health and Human Services](#). IVF treatments costs between \$40,000 and \$62,000, [according to the clinic CCRM Fertility](#).

“Infertility, diagnostic evaluation and treatment are one of the few areas of medicine that is not universally covered by insurance,” Jackson-Bey explained. “That creates a really large gap in terms of who is able to access care and who is not.”

Townsend, a librarian in Chicago, said money was a factor for her.

“I had heard about IVF from the beginning, but I was afraid of it,” she said. “First of all, the way that IVF is marketed traditionally is that it’s something that rich people do. It’s something that white people do. ... It’s not something that you think, first of all, that you’re going to need. And second of all, you don’t think you’re going to be able to afford it, even if you do need it.”

The only reason she was able to cover the cost, she said, is that she lives in Illinois, one of few states that requires insurance companies to cover fertility treatments. She also received a grant from the [Cade Foundation](#) to cover additional costs. Townsend has since started her own advocacy organization, The Broken Brown Egg, which provides grants to people in similar situations.



— The Townsends when they were still newly weds. Regina Townsend via Broken Brown Egg

‘The myth assigned to us’

National data identifying racial disparities in fertility care only recently became available when Seifer published his 2007 study. Previously, there were only smaller population studies that were “somewhat controversial,” he said.

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“One study would say there is a difference. Another study would say there wasn’t, depending on what patient population they were looking at,” Seifer explained. “To resolve that, we used this national database, and it was clear that there was a difference. Up until that point, I don’t think that practitioners were really aware of it.”

“I remember when I first looked at the data how surprised I was at what I was finding,” he added.

Doctors’ lack of knowledge about racial disparities in fertility treatment doesn’t surprise Townsend.

There are “the stereotypes and historical context of African Americans in this country as breeders. (Doctors) think only white women need (fertility treatment),” she said of her experience.

“We didn’t create that. That was a myth assigned to us. And without the context, people don’t think we need the treatment,” she added.

‘Less likely to speak’ about it

Seifer said infertility and fertility treatment is still stigmatized, particularly among the Black community, “so they tend to delay, they may have a hard time finding a doctor, they may be less likely to speak to their friends about it.... There’s so many questions about it that needs to really be pursued.”

He said health care providers knowing the gap exists and Black women knowing the stage of their biological clock are the first steps in evening the disparity.

“A lot of critics say, ‘You’re going to get a lot of people anxious (that) they have to get pregnant sooner than later,’” he said. “But let them decide. If you’re not aware of it, then you don’t really get to make a decision.”

Jackson-Bey said another step toward decreasing the gap is to establish a federal mandate that requires insurance companies to cover fertility treatment, and states should follow [the lead of](#)

[New York](#) and 18 other states that already require it.

Townsend said she thinks of her tumultuous fertility journey “every single day, every single time” she looks at her son.

“It is the typical happy ending, but it comes with its own level of stress and drama, too, because you never fully get over fertility issues. I tend to think of it as you get PTSD from infertility. I look at him now, and I still sometimes have to wonder, is he real? Did this really happen?”

Despite her trauma, she said it’s critical for people to discuss what’s happening to their bodies: “We stopped talking about those things. We don’t share when there’s something going on. That’s dangerous.”



Randi Richardson, TODAY

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Stephen ‘tWitch’ Boss, high-functioning depression and why ‘checking in’ isn’t enough

After Stephen “tWitch” Boss died by suicide, fans have struggled to reconcile his vibrant persona with someone who would take his own life.

Dec. 21, 2022, 9:51 AM EST / Source: TODAY

By Randi Richardson

This story discusses suicide. If you or someone you know is in crisis, call 988 to reach the Suicide and Crisis Lifeline. You can also call the network, previously known as the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline, at 988, text HOME to 741741 or visit [SpeakingOfSuicide.com/resources](https://www.speakingofsuicide.com/resources) for additional resources.

Gregarious, joyful and full of light are just a few of the sentiments that people close to Stephen “tWitch” Boss have shared about him following his [death by suicide at 40](#). For people who knew him through TV and phone screens, his bright smile and always-dancing legs may come to mind.

The multi-hyphenate media personality first made a name for himself as a finalist in the reality competition “So You Think You Can Dance” and went on to DJ and executive produce “The Ellen DeGeneres Show.” He and his wife, fellow dancer Allison Hoker Boss, shared three children and celebrated their anniversary days before his passing. He recently told TODAY co-anchor Hoda Kotb about [his desire to host his own talk show](#).

In the days since Dec. 13, many have struggled to reconcile Boss’s outward persona and resume with someone who took their own life, which has ignited a conversation in some social media circles about high-functioning depression.

Carson Daly on tWitch: 'We have to stop assuming' people are OK



“High-functioning depression is a real thing, and it can have serious consequences if not addressed and treated,” [wrote](#) one Twitter user whose bio states that they’re a medical doctor.

Another influencer, ShiShi Rose, shared on [Instagram](#) a carousel of photos of tweets with a caption criticizing the oft-repeated notion that “checking in” is enough to combat suicidal thoughts.

“High-functioning depression is scary as f--k because no one knows you’re not okay, and even if you say something no one realizes the severity because you don’t seem like someone who is falling off the deep end,” one of the tweets read.

Another Twitter user [wrote](#): “Prayers for Twitch’s wife and kids, always check on your strong friends. high functioning depression is real. rest in paradise.”



— Stephen "tWitch" Boss on "Ellen's Game of Games." Mike Rozman / Warner Brothers / NBC

What is high-functioning depression?

High-functioning depression is a colloquial term and not a technical clinical diagnosis, explains Rheeda Walker, Ph.D., psychologist and leading researcher on suicide in the Black community. The official diagnosis for depression is major depressive disorder.

“There are a number of different things that fall under the umbrella of depression. Major depressive disorder, you have to have five (symptoms) at least, and they have to persist for a couple of weeks or more,” Walker said. “If you fall below that – everybody has a bad day ... you’re not going to meet criteria for ... major depressive disorder.”

Some symptoms of major depressive disorder, [per Mayo Clinic](#), are: feeling sad or hopeless, angry outbursts or irritability, sleeping too much or too little, lack of energy, weight loss or weight gain, anxiety, feeling worthless or guilty, trouble concentrating, suicidal thoughts and unexplained body pain.

Persistent depressive disorder is another official diagnosis that, for some patients, may include high-functioning depression, Walker says. But she also stresses that because high-functioning depression is not a technical diagnosis, she's hesitant to say they're the same. Mayo Clinic defines persistent depressive disorder as "continuous, long-term" depression that's "not as severe as major depression."

Walker adds that for high-functioning depression, the bad feelings may fluctuate: "Stressful things happen at work ... but then on the weekend or after work, you go spend time with people who support you and love you ... and it's like, OK, I got that. I can go back and I can take on the world."

It's common for people with depression to overcompensate for feelings of emptiness by becoming the life of the party, she says.

"I was a fan of [tWitch] and 'So You Think You Can Dance,' and I can't help but to wonder if the people who sometimes are the presumably happiest on the outside are the ones who are trying to create something ... that they want for themselves," Walker says.

Suicide and the Black community

Many prominent Black people [have died by suicide this year](#), several of them within one week in January: [Ian Alexander Jr., actor Regina King's only child](#), died Jan. 21 at age 26. [Kevin Ward, 44, mayor of Hyattsville, Maryland](#) died Jan. 25. "The Walking Dead" [actor Moses Moseley](#) died Jan. 26 at age 31. And [former Miss USA and attorney Cheslie Kryst](#) died Jan. 30 at age 30.

The young age of these figures highlights what Walker, who teaches psychology at the University of Houston and directs the Culture, Risk and Resilience Lab on campus, knows too well from her own work: Black people who die by suicide tend to be younger than white people who do.

The suicide rate among the U.S. Black population peaks between age 25 and 34, whereas for white people, it's between age 45 and 54, [according to a 2021 report from the National Vital Statistics System](#).

The same report found that the suicide rate is lower in the Black population than in the white population – for Black and white men respectively, 12.9 deaths per 100,000 versus 27.1, and for Black and white women, 2.8 versus 6.9. But a 2021 study indicates the [Black suicide rate is likely higher](#) than documented because the manner of death is often misclassified.

Walker says there's no data confirming why suicide affects the Black population at a younger age, but she's called for more research because, clearly, "there's something that's happening

differently for Black Americans.” Her theory is that the transition to adulthood and experiencing racism, possibly for the first time, play a role.

“My team has found that race-related stress is related to thoughts of suicide in the Black community,” she explains. “Those individuals ... may’ve been protected by family, protected in other ways but then went out into the world and saw institutional discrimination and racism ... and it’s like, ‘OK, I’m on my own now. I’m ready to thrive, ready to participate in society.’ But all those goals are ... thwarted. Then at some point, you start to lose hope. So it doesn’t happen right away, but it can take some time.”

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Reggie Howard, 31, who lives with major depressive disorder and attempted suicide multiple times in the past, says he was struggling with “the pressure of being a father and the pressure of coming from poverty.”

“It’s not that I wanted to not be here alive anymore,” he says. “It was the pain and internal struggles ... that I was going through. It just felt like that was the best option.”

Hearing about tWitch brought up some difficult emotions in Howard.

“It just showed me that people are still hurting,” he says. “I’m not all the way through with some of the trials and tribulations that I have in my life, and it triggers flashbacks of when I had those feelings inside of me (and I’m asking myself) do I still feel like that?”

After his last suicide attempt several years ago, Howard saw an ad on Instagram advertising “Free Therapy for Black Men,” and it changed his life. He’s now on the leadership team for Black Men Heal, the organization that provided him with free therapy. He’s in his third year as an

undergrad at Drexel University in Philadelphia, and he hosts the “Black Mental Health Podcast,” which has been downloaded 150,000 times.

Reflecting on his mental health journey, Howard says: “I try to come from a place of gratitude first and ... cherishing the things that I do have and the things that I have accomplished as a father, pulling myself out of (depressive states).”

Depression in the public eye

April Simpkins lost her daughter, Extra TV correspondent and Miss USA 2019 Cheslie Kryst, in January to suicide. Simpkins says Kryst had persistent depressive disorder and had attempted suicide before. Simpkins stresses that public figures are not immune to suicidal thoughts, no matter how bubbly they may appear.

“When you have someone who is an achiever and who does enjoy life, it is very easy for the general public to assume that they must be OK, that they couldn’t possibly be hiding something,” Simpkins tells [TODAY.com](https://www.today.com). “How could you hide something behind a smile that is so genuine? But I think it’s also important to realize that the general public is not with those people 24/7, and what you are seeing is what they are presenting in that moment at that time.”

Before Kryst died by suicide, Simpkins says she began paying closer attention to her daughter because she’d talk about some things over and over and wouldn’t stop. Simpkins saw it as a sign that something was wrong. In response, Simpkins would simply listen, which she says helped extend her daughter’s life.

“When I hear people saying, ‘Check in on your strong friends,’ which has become a very common mantra (along with), ‘It’s OK to not be OK,’ I think what gets dismissed in that is, if you have strong friends who are telling you they’re not OK, we don’t know how to listen,” Simpkins says. “We’re waiting for a five-alarm fire, and they’re telling us it’s smoldering. Then we miss it (because) we dismissed it.”

Coping with depression

Treating depression usually involves medication, therapy or both. Howard, who aspires to be a psychiatrist, leads a few mental health support groups and says they can also be a powerful tool to get people comfortable sharing their experiences and to learn coping strategies. For Black people, Howard recommends seeing a Black therapist, even if it’s difficult to find one, because it’s worth it.

“You want to date, you want to shop around,” he says. “One of the things that my Black (therapist) said to me was, ‘Hey, I understand you.’ He made me feel seen because he looked like me. ... He was almost like a fatherly figure to me, and I never had that. I saw myself represented.”

“He would make hip-hop references, he would make TV show references, he would make certain culturally competent references that made me resonate with the therapeutic information that he was sharing with me,” Howard explains.

If you’re concerned about a loved one attempting suicide, Walker notes that anxiety is “as strong a predictor” as depression. She also cautions against calling the police for help with a potential suicide and recommends the suicide prevention hotline, 988, instead.

And she encourages staying in close contact with anyone you’re concerned about.

“If someone seems like they’re in a low place or they’re acting out of the ordinary, go to them physically if possible,” Walker says. “If not, check on them because ... (they) can’t problem solve from a bad place, and so they have to rely on other people to be able to stand in the gap when they can’t problem solve. That’s why we desperately need a more educated society.”

Howard says more education will help break the stigma that the Black community commonly associates with mental health. Practicing self-care is something he teaches his sons, ages 10 and 4, to better prepare the next generation.

“Not too long ago, mental health was a taboo topic,” he says. “I do want to impart upon my sons that it’s OK to express yourself. ... The goal for me is to make sure I’m leading with vulnerability so that they feel comfortable to be able to share. My mental health goal is to make sure I create that safe space for myself and my children so we can have these type of conversations.”

This story first appeared on [TODAY.com](https://www.today.com).



Randi Richardson

Randi Richardson reports for TODAY Digital and NBC BLK from New York.

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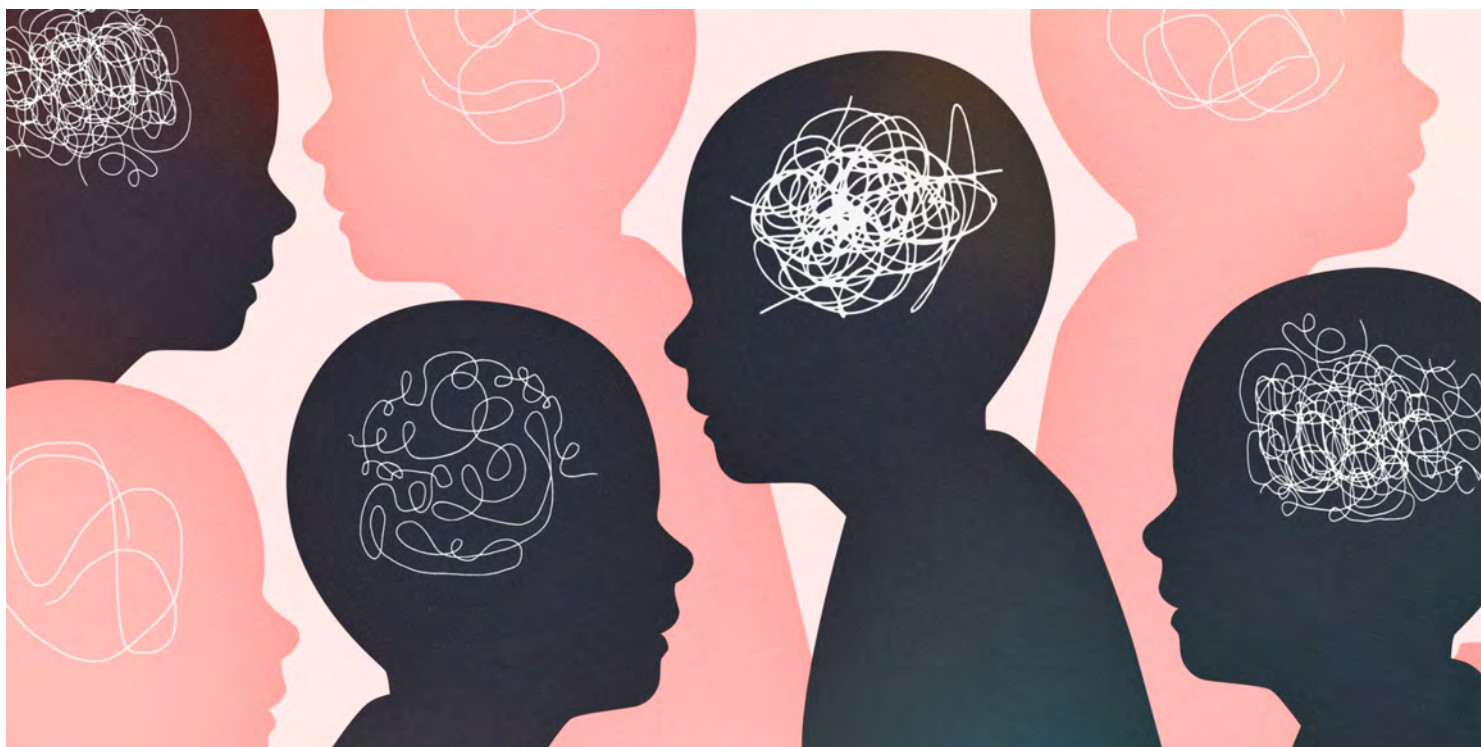
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MIND & BODY

How does structural racism impact a child's brain? A first-of-its-kind study has the answer

The study shows that being exposed to more adversity as a child can change the composition of your brain, which may lead to PTSD, depression and anxiety.



TODAY Illustration / Getty Images

Feb. 15, 2023, 11:57 AM EST / Source: TODAY

By Randi Richardson

For generations, Black children have faced a unique set of challenges regarding their mental health, from enduring more adversity to a lack of access to effective treatment. Finally, a new study pinpoints structural racism as a potential cause.

"Black youth in the United States experience significant illness, poverty, and discrimination," according to the American Psychological Association. "These issues put them at higher risk for suicide, depression, and other mental health problems."

For example, [a recent study in Pediatrics](#) found Black youth ages 5 to 24 saw a much greater increase in suicide deaths than white youth during the first 10 months of the pandemic when looking at the expected suicide rate versus the actual rate. [A 2021 report from the U.S. surgeon general](#) noted that suicide rates in Black kids under 13 have risen so much in recent years that they're now almost twice as likely to die by suicide as white kids.

[A 2022 study published in the journal Current Psychiatry Reports](#) found that rates of depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress, substance use disorders and suicide are rising in minority youth.

But at the same time, Black kids are less likely to receive mental health treatment for a range of reasons, from stigma to a lack of a diverse providers, the American Psychological Association stated. And when they do receive treatment, it's less likely to be evidence-based, [per a 2020 study in Children and Youth Services Review](#).

These disparities have been understudied for decades, experts tell TODAY.com. The new, first-of-its-kind study, [published in the American Journal of Psychiatry](#) on Feb. 1, will help close some of these gaps, they hope.

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"Toxic stress" and the developing brain

The new study found that Black kids were more likely than white kids to experience "toxic stress," which it defined as "prolonged exposure to adverse experiences that leads

to excessive activation of stress response systems and an accumulation of stress hormones.” Toxic stress can contribute to changes in the volume, size and shape of certain regions of the brain that are linked to PTSD, depression and anxiety, according to the study.

The study found the link by analyzing MRI brain scans of Black kids and white kids across the country, as well as surveys completed by the kids and their parents about their race, parental education and employment, income, measurements of neighborhood disadvantage and conflicts within the home.

Nathaniel Harnett, Ph.D, led the study and tells TODAY.com that the conclusions do not indicate a genetic, race-related difference in the child participants' brains.

"We have the folklore belief that Black and white people just have categorically different brains, but ... what we really want to point out here, when we interpret these data, is that these are not children with just different brains," Harnett explains. "They're children with different experiences that shaped and molded how they develop, and how they might develop through to adulthood."

Harnett, director of the Neurobiology of Affective Traumatic Experiences Laboratory at McLean Hospital in Massachusetts, worked with a team of researchers to analyze data from more than 7,300 white children and nearly 1,800 Black children in the U.S. who were 9 and 10 years old.

They found that three areas of the brain — the amygdala, hippocampus and prefrontal cortex — were slightly smaller in volume, size and shape in Black children compared to white children. These regions of the brain regulate fear, threat perceptions, emotions and memory.

“What we've seen in PTSD and, in some cases, depression and anxiety, is that the actual size of some of these brain regions, particularly the hippocampus and prefrontal cortex, are smaller in individuals with PTSD compared to those without PTSD,” Harnett explains.

Physical changes in these brain regions, the study suggests, may be due to how much race-related trauma Black children witness or experience firsthand.

The study found that white children on average experience less family conflict, material hardship, neighborhood disadvantage, and fewer traumatic events compared to Black children. For example, white children's parents were three times more likely to be employed than Black children's parents; 75% of white parents had a college degree compared to nearly 41% of Black parents; and about 88% of white parents made \$35,000 a year or more compared to about 47% of Black parents who made as much.

"Individuals exposed to more childhood trauma have a greater risk for developing (PTSD) later in life, suggesting that changes in these brain regions may be particularly important mediators of actually developing that disorder," Harnett says.

Harnett plans to continue to evaluate the same group of kids every couple of years to better understand the longterm effects of the traumas they experience. With further research, he's hoping to find out if changing a child's environment and exposure levels to adversity can reverse the changes in the brain.

"All children are susceptible to these effects of adversity, but ... we ultimately really need ... changes to the levels of adversity that we expose kids to," he says. "We really need to pay attention to the groups that are disproportionately affected," such as Black children.

Historically understudied

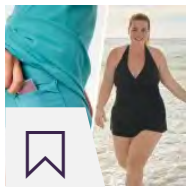
Racial mental health disparities in kids have been historically understudied due to "structural racism in medicine," Dr. Cheryl Wills, a board member of the American Psychiatric Association, tells TODAY.com, adding that the few ideas that did manage to get the green light were not taken as seriously as other non-race related studies in the field.

"In the '80s, people began to talk about it, and in the '90s, people began to deal with it," and slowly smaller research projects came out, but many ideas failed to get funding, she

explains.

Racial bias "has made it difficult to find studies of this caliber and scale and to conduct them," she says, referring to Harnett's study. "People have done small studies here and there. ... However, this is the first study where you had funding and a database that by design has incorporated diversity into it."

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Dr. Melissa Vallas, a children's psychiatrist and medical director of Southern California Evolve-PC Residential Treatment Centers, published a paper in 2010 in the journal *Child and Adolescent Psychiatric Clinics of North America* that had similar findings on home life and poverty. But the fact that Harnett could connect adversity and stress to physical changes in the brain adds another layer of understanding of these racial disparities.

Vallas tells TODAY.com that another reason more research in this area has not happened is because psychiatry is a relatively new field that wasn't originally created to study this issue.

"When we go back and understand the history of psychiatry specifically, it's important to know that the founders of psychiatry were all white men," she says. "Between the

'30s and the '50s is when psychiatry was really (coming into) its own."

At that time, "Black people in this country were really more focused on just trying to survive and have equal rights," she adds.

In fact, the American Psychiatric Association recognized the structural racism in its profession with a 2021 statement apologizing for "enabling discriminatory and prejudicial actions within the APA and racist practices in psychiatric treatment for Black (people)."

"Early psychiatric practices laid the groundwork for the inequities in clinical treatment that have historically limited quality access to psychiatric care for (Black people). These actions sadly connect with larger social issues, such as race-based discrimination and racial injustice, that have furthered poverty along with other adverse outcomes," the APA wrote.

Mental health care for Black youth today

The history of racism in the U.S. still impacts Black youth's mental health today. Chase Casine, a clinical therapist in New Orleans whose caseload is 40% Black youth, tells TODAY.com that structural racism's impact on the brain often goes misdiagnosed.

For example, the amygdala, home to the fight-or-flight response, can lead a child to act hyperactive if it's triggered constantly, which can make it seem like the child has ADHD when they actually have PTSD, Casine explains.

"Research (shows) our kids being overly medicated, misdiagnosed, often labeled with ADHD or conduct disorder," he says, adding that these misdiagnoses can lead to incorrect treatment plans and stereotypes about Black kids when "it's not even what they have."

"I'm a trauma informed therapist, and I take culture into consideration, but a lot of other practitioners who don't look like (me) don't take culture into consideration," he continues. "Looking at the whole person takes into account what happened to you."

He says he thinks non-Black practitioners don't usually have this approach because they don't want to contribute to racial stereotypes.

"As much as we want to strive to live in a colorblind society ... that type of a toxic positivity is more of an avoidance of what's in front of us," he explains. "There is a clear divide between Blacks and whites. The research consistently and continually shows that there is an obvious disconnect."

Casine emphasizes that culturally competent mental health care is not just about being the same race. It's also about using the same reference points.

"I'm a person-centered therapist. ... I allow the clients to lead," he says. For example, if a client tells him they're spiritual or into music, he'll use scriptures or songs to help them process their thoughts.

What can parents do?

Vallas and Casine say white children can start learning about privilege and structural racism at an age-appropriate level, and there are resources available to help teach them.

For Black parents, Harnett, Vallas and Casine realize that many factors that may contribute to toxic stress — such as their income and educational levels — are difficult, if not impossible, to change, so they say it's important for Black parents to give themselves grace.

Vallas, who is a mother to a 14-year-old and twins who are 12, stresses the importance of listening to your children, especially as a Black parent.

"I think the first step is just being aware (of) what's happening, so if you see your child acting out, they don't necessarily just need a (punishment). Maybe the first step is to just try to have a conversation with them," Vallas advises.

She says her line of work "(puts) into perspective how easily kids can have these lives that parents don't know."

"It teaches me a lot about the importance of the connection that you need to have with your kids in order for them to feel comfortable to communicate with you," she adds.



Randi Richardson

Randi Richardson is a reporter for NBC News' TODAY.com based in Brooklyn.

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NBCBLK

A wave of Black students takes presidencies at top-tier universities

Black student body presidents at predominantly white colleges incorporated Covid-19, social justice, anti-Trump positions into their winning platforms



— Noah Harris is the first Black male elected student body president of Harvard University.

L. Kasimu Harris / for NBC News

Dec. 8, 2020, 2:49 PM EST

By Randi Richardson

Harvard University undergrad Noah Harris arrived at a Black Lives Matter protest in June in his home state of Mississippi bearing sunglasses, a bandana mask and a “say their names” sign. By summer’s end, he led his classmates in raising \$300,000 for Black advocacy and civil rights organizations.

His work grabbed the attention of his fellow Harvard undergrads, who elected him as their first Black male student body president last month. Harris, 20, is a part of a wave of Black student body presidents recently elected at top-tier academic institutions where Black students have been historically underrepresented.

The uptick coincides with the racial and political interlockings of Covid-19, the Black Lives Matter movement and a surge of political polarization on and off college campuses, the Black student presidents said. They added that these issues either influenced how they campaigned or reprioritized their goals once elected.

Harris said he knew that he and his vice president, Jenny Gan, would have to meet this “unprecedented time.” They [ran on](#) “building tomorrow’s Harvard” with an emphasis on “diversity, inclusion, health, wellness and student life” aimed at holding “Harvard accountable to its commitment to anti-racism” work and making the most of remote learning.

When they first put together their platform, they planned to advocate for “normal, in-person stuff,” Harris said. But now, getting Harvard to use its influence has become the priority: “When Harvard gets involved, they normally get the outcome they want,” he said, which would include pushing to eradicate chokeholds by police or holding police officers accountable for lethal actions.

He pointed to how Harvard successfully [sued](#) the federal government when it attempted to deny international students entrance into the country as an example of what the school’s involvement can accomplish.



— Noah Harris is part of a wave of Black student body presidents at major universities.

L. Kasimu Harris / for NBC News

Harris said he also wants to tackle creating a remote environment that is as close to the in-person campus community experience as possible. His plans include a program to help students store their dorm room items while they continue school from home, and “closing the gaps in student experiences and advocating to the administration when it needs to be better from an academic standpoint, a student life standpoint and a mental health standpoint.”

Harris is part of a cohort of Black student body presidents at predominantly white institutions across the country. Jason Carroll of Brown University, Danielle Geathers of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and Naomi Riley of the University of California, Los Angeles all took office in May. Midshipman Sydney Barber is the first Black woman to become brigade commander, the U.S. Naval Academy’s version of a student body president.

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“The entire state of America was different when I was running,” Carroll said. “My campaign was before Covid, before George Floyd. The Trump presidency has galvanized people, myself included. It’s all forced and allowed me to put things like housing conditions and general student life stuff on the back burner because that’s not the moment we’re in right now.”



— Jason Carroll, student body president of Brown University. Courtesy Jason Carroll

Universities often create “forums and committees and working groups without actually having to listen to Black students. My effort and attention has shifted to how the university interacts with Black students, the Black community in Providence as a whole, and ensuring Black voices are not pushed to the side” Carroll said.

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Geathers is the first Black woman to become student body president at MIT.

Geathers and her running mate Yu Jing Chen’s [platform](#) was “unity, equity and authenticity,” by boosting the “diverse perspectives and experiences” as a student body.

“I was always focused on diversity and inclusion issues,” Geathers said. “After the summer being really focused on anti-Black racism, I was able to be more unapologetic about now being the time. Most of my efforts go towards one of the biggest initiatives I took on: getting MIT to use one or more Black owned banks.”

Her proposal asks MIT to use OneUnited Bank, the nation’s largest Black-owned, Federal Deposit Insurance Corp.-insured bank, to conduct at least 10 percent of its cash deposits.

“If not for the summer and thinking-bigger picture, this wouldn’t have been on my radar. I wouldn’t have adopted the mentality of pushing MIT to take more action.”



— Danielle Geathers, student body president of MIT. Courtesy Danielle Geathers

Riley ran on “community, accountability, affordability and accessibility” to mitigate the adverse effect the coronavirus has had on students. Her platform included giving “a seat at the table, and advocating for student needs through policy,” according to her [campaign materials](#).

She said policing is a big issue on UCLA’s campus and Black Lives Matter activity over the summer provided an opportune opening to resurface concerns to the university’s

administration.

Riley said that when student leaders previously brought up issues of policing to the administration regarding “overpolicing and a disproportionate targeting of Black and brown students,” their concerns were dismissed or downplayed.

“We used protests during the summer to show this problem was happening here on our campus,” she said. “It helped us get more meetings with the chancellor.”





— Naomi Riley, student body president of UCLA. Sidney Cattouse

Riley added that protests across the country pressured the university to provide more resources for Black students.

“The African Student Union accomplished getting a Black resource center. Something we’d been fighting for, for five years was – at the blink of an eye – accomplished,” she said. If UCLA had “the resources to do this all along, why did it take this momentous time?” she added, expressing frustration.

The Black presidents have a group chat and often work together, bonded by their shared experiences of leading their respective student bodies. “It’s the best network to have,” Geathers said. “It’s incredibly supportive. Dealing with Covid and all the racial reckonings of the summer, not too many people – especially people who are not Black student body presidents – can feel that push and pull of wanting to represent your whole student body while acknowledging your identity and being truthful in these hard moments.”

“There’s times when I have no idea how I’m going to write a statement and appease everyone, but we’re all in the same boat. We hop on a Zoom call and are really just there for each other without having to sympathize or empathize because we’re walking in the same shoes,” she added.

Undergraduate presidencies typically last one academic term. But the impact of these presidencies could go beyond their tenure.

“The importance of our elections is the same as having Black leadership anywhere in America,” Kahlil Greene, Yale College’s first Black student body president who left office in September, said. “Having young, gifted Black students leading institutions that, in some cases, are older than the United States is extremely inspiring and symbolic of the Black community’s progress.”

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After meeting 17 years ago, sisters now helm the country's largest Black-owned wine brand

Thanks to one icebreaker question, Robin and Andréa McBride are now closer than ever and running a multi-million dollar company together.



— Robin (right) and Andréa McBride (left) are teaching others what they've learned about the wine industry as sister co-founders of a booming wine company. Michelle Magdalena

April 9, 2022, 6:00 AM EDT / Source: TODAY

By Randi Richardson

Andréa McBride was a 16 year old living in foster care in New Zealand when she got a phone call from her biological dad in Alabama. He told her he was dying of cancer and wanted to do one last thing before passing: connect her to another daughter he had – her sister, Robin.

In the 17 years since that fateful call, Andréa and Robin have not only met, but in 2005, they founded [The McBride Sisters Wine Company](#), the largest [Black-owned](#) wine company in the United States – and they did it without any seed money from investors.



— The McBride Sisters Collection wines are offered across the United States and New Zealand.

Michelle Magdalena

‘Sister, Sister’

Andréa said the aforementioned phone call was the first time she’d spoken to her dad in six years.

“The phone rang, and I picked it up, and the person on the other end of the phone, said, ‘Hey, Andréa, it’s your dad.’ And I definitely lost my breath,” Andréa recalled.

Her estranged dad shared his terminal diagnosis of stomach cancer and how he wanted to use his remaining energy to help her find Robin. He died seven months later, before he was able to find Robin (he’d lost touch with her after divorcing her mother).

But he did connect Andréa to his family beforehand and she traveled to his home state of Alabama to attend his funeral, during which family members vowed to fulfill his dying wish.

“It was crazy and awful and amazing sort of all at the same time. It was all the feels,” she said. “Losing our father, he was one of 12, meeting family and a lot of people that I’d never seen before but looked a lot like me. It was amazing. They were all just really focused on helping to try and find Robin.”

Andréa never doubted their intentions or efforts, but she did think their goal was unrealistic.

“I left there and had grown up in pretty tough circumstances, so didn’t really hope too much about it,” Andréa said. “It was just kind of like one thing in my mind was like, OK, yeah, yeah. But like, what are the chances we’re going to find this person out in the world?”

Andréa didn’t visit her family in Alabama again until two years later. By then, the family had been looking for Robin for five years and doubled down on their efforts after finding Andréa. The family had been sending letters to every Robin McBride in the phone book until finally one made it to their intended recipient in Monterey, California. Robin called the enclosed number, coincidentally, during Andréa’s time in Alabama. Their aunt answered and, after praising God, immediately handed the phone to Andréa so the sisters could talk for the first time.

“Andréa gets on the phone and we’re both pretty stunned and shocked because nobody thought that this was going to be happening at this moment because, according to the letter, she is in New Zealand, she’s not in Alabama,” said Robin. “So I didn’t know I was going to be talking to my sister as soon as I make the initial phone call.”

Robin remembers feeling more surprised than Andréa. “We laugh to this day because Andréa was very excited because, of course, she’s known about me for a long time. I literally just found out about her a few minutes before I called ... And she had a lot to share with me.”



— Andréa McBride told TODAY that the unconventional journey to her sister, Robin, makes the company they formed together all the more special. *Michelle Magdalena*

One of their icebreaker questions was: What was it like where you grew up? And it turned out they both grew up in small agriculture towns known for winemaking – and they were both passionate about wine. So, in an effort to bond, they went to wine tastings and vineyard tours. And eventually, they decided to start their own wine company together.

“A lot of our experiences of us being curious about wine and how we were treated when we were in those tasting rooms and stuff is really a lot of the foundation of what our company is built on today, which is making wine accessible for everybody and helping people on their journey and making it fun,” said Andréa.

‘It’s definitely an old boys’ club’

With the idea for the McBride Sisters Collection officially planted, Robin and Andréa scraped together initial seed money of \$1,800 just to cover licensing paperwork. Now, the company offers products across the United States and New Zealand and raked in over \$5.5 million in sales for fiscal year 2020, [according to Nielsen data cited by Wine Spectator](#).

The process was a grind. Robin said the industry is “very complicated” due to heavy reliance on gatekeepers – wholesalers, distributors, retailers and more – before it’s greenlit into production. Meaning, all those people have to buy the idea, granting access to the next in line, until the product finally makes it to shelves, where the profit can be made. That chain of command was the main challenge, according to Robin.

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“We had to like figure out how do we introduce new people to wine and then pull through this chain in business versus the more traditional way, which is kind of buying your way up to get access to the consumer. We just went around all of it and created demand,” explained Robin.

Another challenge was not having any investors or advisors at the onset and how the wine industry is “notorious for its gatekeeping,” said Robin. “I think we actually underestimated that.” The sisters felt discriminated against as young Black women attempting to join an industry in which they’d be a small minority.

SevenFifty Daily, an online magazine covering the business and culture of alcohol, [surveyed 3,100 industry professionals in 2019 and found](#) that of the respondents, 60 percent were men and 84 percent were white. [According to Bloomberg](#), there are more than 8,000 wineries in the country as of 2020 and 0.1 percent of them are Black-owned.

“It’s definitely an old boys’ club,” Robin said. “A large part of the industry is run by a very small group of older white wealthy men. There’s a lot of dynasties in wine. There’s a lot of family lineages that still run things. And a large part of opportunities and success has come from being associated with those people and those families. And so obviously for us coming in as opposite – really of everything that, to that point had been successful in the wine world, which was an older white man – we definitely were looked at as not just not belonging, but really incapable of being successful.”

The sisters say they made it against extraordinary odds, but it shouldn’t be that hard for Black women or minorities to join the wine industry.

Opening doors for other women of color

The sisters said their current career goal is to help usher in a more diverse generation of winemakers.

They launched the [She Can Fund](#) in 2019 and have invested more than \$3 million to date in women – particularly Black women and other women of color – in the food and wine industry. In March, they launched a new initiative that funds scholarships for women in agricultural

programs at Southern University, a historically Black college in Louisiana. Corporate sponsors of the fund include Morgan Stanley, the Wine Institute and Silicon Valley Bank. The fund also doubles as a mentorship program.

“We’ve been in the business so many years. We still don’t see a lot of women, a lot of people of color,” Andréa said. “ ... There was a lot of basic access to information that we didn’t have that we felt like shouldn’t have been one of the things that could have made or broken our company,” so they’re teaching it.

The sisters said with the doors they’ve opened, they’re committed to doing their part in leaving them open and helping others through.

“When we first started, (the wine world) was definitely a place where we felt like we didn’t belong,” said Robin. “And now we do.”

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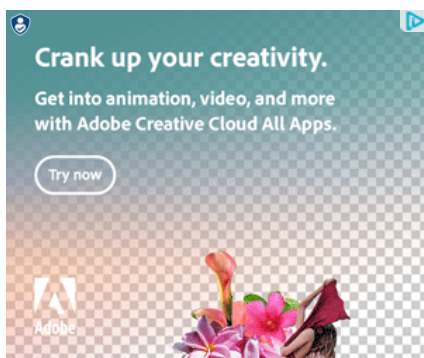
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Police violence against children sparks demand for use-of-force laws

Police use-of-force laws largely leave children out. Advocates want to change that.



— A protester holds up a skateboard during a demonstration April 16 against the police killing of Adam Toledo in Chicago. Eileen Meslar / Reuters

April 27, 2021, 3:59 PM EDT

By Char Adams and Randi Richardson

The recent deaths of two teenagers at the hands of police – Adam Toledo, 13, in Chicago and Ma'Khia Bryant, 16, in Columbus, Ohio – illustrate a glaring omission in policing practices and oversight.

[Policies](#) meant to stop police killings and the use of excessive force against civilians say little about interactions with children. The lack of oversight applies in schools across the country, where more officers have been called upon to patrol the halls, as well as on the streets. No sweeping federal laws regulate the police use of force against those 17 and under, and most law enforcement agencies don't have clear protocols.

"Policies seem to apply to both adults and juveniles equally – looking at factors like the threat posed by the subject, the physical size of the subject, how they're reacting to the police officer," said Jessica Huff, a research associate at the University of Cincinnati's Center for Police Research and Policy. "And a lot of those things aren't necessarily age-specific."

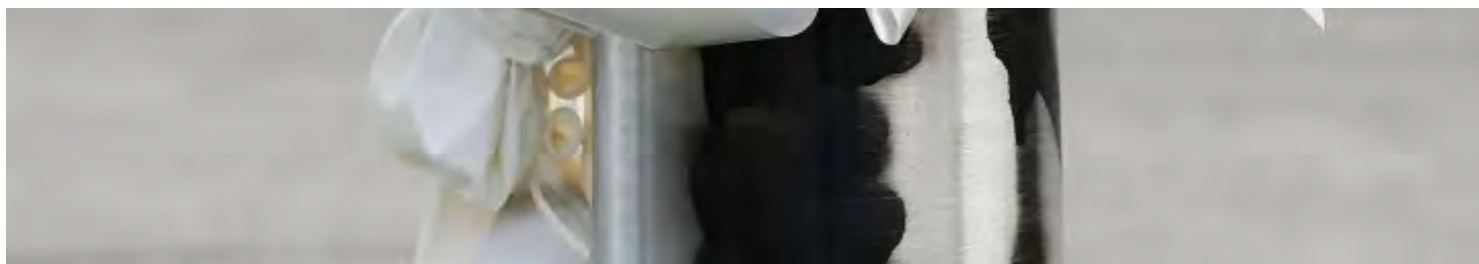
Organizers, academics and advocates have several suggestions about what should be done: Some say police need child-specific training, while others, including those who want to abolish the police, say that, short of full abolition, there should be fewer police encounters with minors and stricter legislation to oversee it. In most jurisdictions, police officers are directed to use their own discretion, said Christina Quaranta, executive director of the [Connecticut Justice Alliance](#), an advocacy group.

"At worst," she said, "it leaves the door open for the police officer to become violent with a young person and know there's not a certain piece of legislation or a law that's been passed that could push back on what they did."

Lack of clear guidelines

Before Adam's and Ma'Khia's deaths, video of officers [pepper-spraying a 9-year-old girl](#) in Rochester, New York, [choking a 13-year-old boy](#) in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, and [wrestling an 11-year-old to the ground](#) in Farmington, New Mexico, had thrust the issue of police encounters with children and teenagers into the spotlight.





— A small memorial is seen on April 15 at the scene where Adam Toledo, 13, was shot and killed by a Chicago police officer in the Little Village neighborhood. Kamil Krzaczynski / Getty Images

Lisa Thureau, founder of [Strategies for Youth](#), which trains police officers to interact with children and tracks use-of-force lawsuits, said organizations like the Commission on Accreditation for Law Enforcement Agencies, or CALEA, develop standards for law enforcement agencies – including releasing minors to their families instead of arresting them and referring them to counseling agencies instead of sending them to court. But the lack of federal oversight means ensuring that those standards are followed are an "aspirational goal" at best, she said.

"Even the legislative approach cannot always provide the level of protection you might need," Thureau said. "Most of the interactions between law enforcement and kids" aren't with federal agents, but through local police. "So you'd need to have a terrific system for ensuring oversight at the state level. And what we've seen is that's the first thing that gets cut."

Thureau pointed to [a report on a criminal justice reform law passed in Massachusetts in 2018](#), which showed that some members of the state's Juvenile Justice Policy and Data Board opposed efforts to develop youth policies and training because of the "administrative costs and challenges."

Travis Parrish, a spokesperson for CALEA, said the agency oversees 1,500 of the 18,000 law enforcement agencies in the country. Its mandatory juvenile operations standard urges law enforcement agencies to use the "least coercive" methods and to establish specific criteria to determine which of several options should be used when dealing with minors. Accredited law enforcement agencies must adhere to the juvenile standard to maintain their accreditation.

Parrish said the organization conducts annual reviews, along with physical, onsite reviews, every four years to make sure agencies are in compliance. Records show that CALEA accredited the Columbus police, responsible for Ma'Khia's death, seven times (most recently in 2017). And the Chicago Police Department was accredited in 2018.

Policing can be difficult to change, especially without clearly defined federal and state rules, Huff said. Thureau said that law enforcement agencies generally set their own guidelines and that most have no policy, implement vague rules after high-profile incidents or don't make changes after such incidents at all.

An incident in which a McKinney, Texas, police officer [body-slammed a 15-year-old girl at a pool party in 2015](#) resulted in the police department's adopting a youth policy requiring officers to use the "least coercive methods" with children. A school police officer in Orlando, Florida, who apprehended [a crying 6-year-old with zip ties](#) prompted the police department to require the deputy chief's approval to arrest children 12 and under.

And the Atlanta Police Department is standing by its decision to give officers full discretion to restrain and arrest children after a report revealed that the city's officers had [arrested more than 250 children 12 years old or younger](#) in five years, Sgt. Jarius Daugherty said in a statement.

The [federal minimum age of delinquency](#) is 7, but it varies among states. Police can arrest children as young as 6 in North Carolina. Eleven states bar arrests under age 10. [Thirty-four states don't specify ages at which children can be arrested](#). Advocates say raising the age would stop states from criminalizing childhood behavior, like [detaining a 6-year-old](#) for picking a flower.

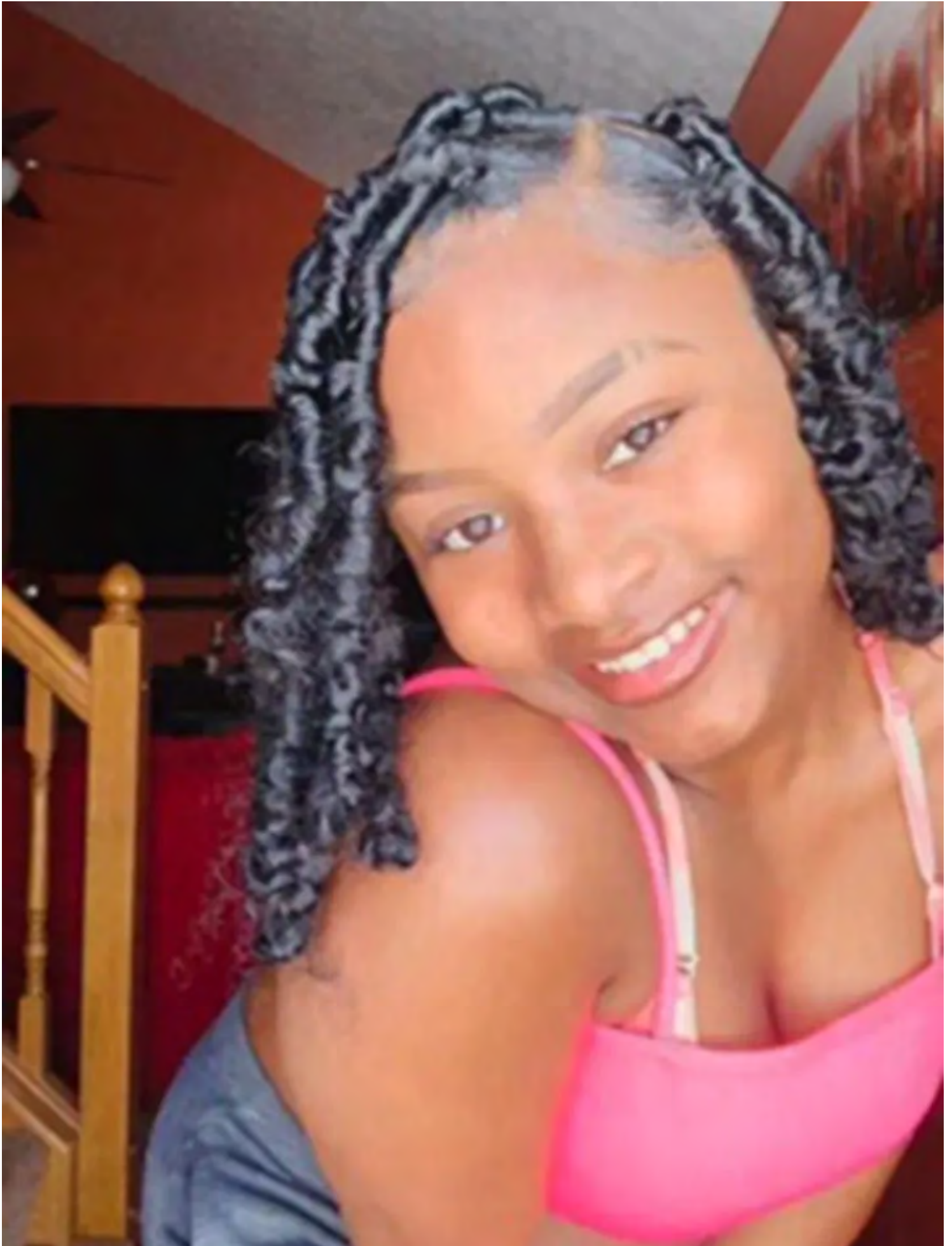
[The Federal Juvenile Delinquency Act](#) focuses on curbing youth crime but largely defers to states to make delinquency decisions. Juvenile arrest rates [have been declining](#) since the mid-1990s, but about 20,000 children 10 and under were still arrested from 2015 to 2019, according to the FBI. Even before children are swept into the court system, [facing potential violence and abuse](#) in juvenile facilities, initial interactions with police have proven to be dangerous.

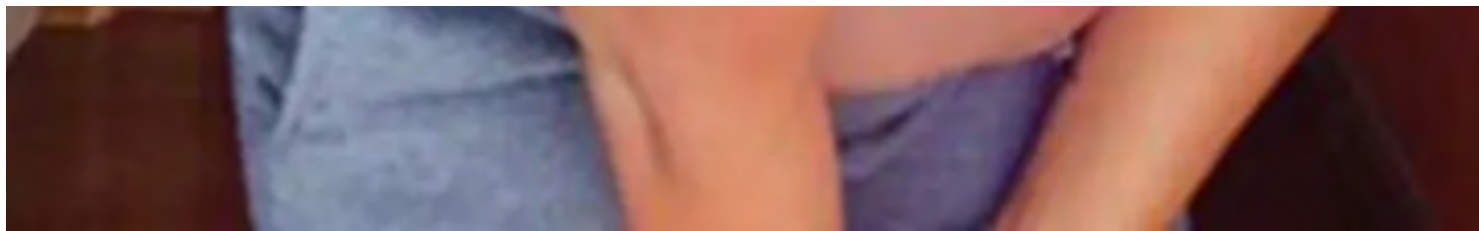
Robin Engel, director of the University of Cincinnati police research center, said policies governing police interactions with children must take into account adolescent development, age-appropriate communication and mental, behavioral or intellectual disabilities.

That is one of the reasons legislators in [Illinois](#), [Connecticut](#), [Pennsylvania](#) and [Montana](#), as well as [Cleveland](#), recently filed bills to curb police violence against children. And advocacy groups like the Connecticut Justice Alliance, the [Urban Youth Collaborative](#), [Make the Road](#), [Black Lives Matter at School](#), [Padres & Jóvenes Unidos](#) and others have spent years fighting for policy changes.

A history of racism in policing children

The country's first juvenile court system was [established in 1899](#) to act as "a kind and just parent." A little more than 50 years later, however, FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover began to vow to get "tough" on the ["flood tide"](#) of youth crime. The shift also allowed the racist criminalization of children.





— Ma'Khia Bryant. Courtesy Paula Bryant

A [1964 study found](#) that police officers who had broad discretion when engaging with children were more punitive in interactions with Black children. Today, Black children are five times more likely to be incarcerated than their white peers, according to a report from [The Sentencing Project](#), a research and advocacy center aimed at reducing incarceration. [About 14 percent](#) of all minors in the country are Black, but Black children make up 77 percent of people in juvenile facilities. And [police often criminalize Black children](#) for conduct [considered common among kids](#) – like mouthing off or fighting at school.

[William Bentley](#) said he was 14 when he was beaten by at least five police officers at Strawberry Mansion High School in Philadelphia, once known as one of the country's "[most dangerous](#)" schools. He said an officer approached him after he accidentally entered the wrong classroom.

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Inside the online world of people who think they can change their race

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"The police officer grabbed my neck and choked me. I couldn't breathe," said Bentley, who said he shook himself free and fled. "I was gripped up, slammed and beaten like I was an adult. They never treated me like a kid. The police were 'supposed to keep us safe,' but it felt more like they were guards. It was like we were inmates."

Bentley was arrested and charged with assaulting a police officer. Because of that and a subsequent armed robbery conviction, he spent six months in the Philadelphia Industrial Correctional Center, an adult jail, before he served three years at George Junior Republic, an all-boys residential center, he said.

Bentley, 20, works with grassroots organizations, including the [Youth Art & Self-Empowerment Project](#) and the [Philadelphia Community Bail Fund](#), to end pretrial detention and youth incarceration and to keep children from being charged as adults.

Neither Strawberry Mansion High School administrators nor the school district's office of school safety responded to a request for comment.

Violent interactions in schools

Because many interactions between Black children and police officers happen in schools, advocates say they've focused on that environment to reduce violence.

Schools with larger Black and Latino populations are [more likely to have police officers](#) in the halls, metal detectors and security cameras. That has prompted organizers to demand that [police officers be removed from schools](#) entirely and that federal officials [stop pouring millions of dollars](#) into school policing programs under the guise of protecting students from school shooters.

"There is no substantial evidence that police and hardened security measures make schools any safer," said Dmitri Holtzman, the director of education justice campaigns at the Center for Popular Democracy, a social justice advocacy group. "We should be maximizing interactions between students and their teachers, counselors, nurses, their interactions and participation in sports, arts and music and cultural programs. These are the things that will create a safe and healthy schooling environment, not interactions with police, metal detectors."

Steve Teske, chief judge of the juvenile court in Clayton County, Georgia, said school resource officer programs in the county succeed when departments train officers to interact with minors and establish rules for such interactions. Teske, who was a parole officer for 10 years before he became a judge, used his judicial role to begin a child-centered training model. He said that since the policy was implemented in 2003, the county's juvenile arrest rates have decreased by 80 percent and graduation rates have increased every year.

However, officer presence has done little to curb gun violence; a [2018 Washington Post report](#) found that officers successfully intervened in only two of nearly 200 gun violence incidents in schools across the country. And a recent report showed resource officers [stunning, assaulting or pepper-spraying](#) dozens of students over two years.

An organizer of Black Lives Matter at Schools, Erika Strauss Chavarria, a high school Spanish teacher in Columbia, Maryland, said she has seen police officers follow groups of students home

from school. "The same rules they have on the streets is the same rule they have in schools," she said. "The same type of brutality and use of force and intimidation and fear."

Because of mounting pressure to act, school districts in [Minneapolis](#); [Milwaukee](#); [Denver](#); [Portland](#), Oregon; and [Oakland](#), California, have suspended or phased out their school resource officer programs and cut ties with police in the last year. Meanwhile, proposed policies and legislation, including the [Youth Mandate for Education and Liberation](#) and the federal [Counseling Not Criminalization in Schools Act](#), call on federal leaders to remove officers from schools nationwide and divert funding from school policing to community programs.

Is change to come?

A renewed focus on police use of force overall could spur a change in policy about interactions with children. Federal and state leaders have [been slow to limit the use of force](#) in general, but [Cleveland, Illinois, Connecticut, Pennsylvania](#) and [Montana](#) have proposed policies and legislation to address the use of force against youths and in youth arrests.

Protests around the country over police killings of Daunte Wright, Adam Toledo



Cleveland, where police [fatally shot and killed Tamir Rice](#), 12, as he played with a toy gun in 2014, is one of the few cities to have developed an in-depth guide to reduce such use of force. The city's policy will require police officers to consider a person's perceived age, physical build

and emotional state before using force on anyone under age 18. Community members, including Rice's mother, said that [the policy is "weak"](#) and that it doesn't go far enough.

Organizers in Connecticut are working to increase the minimum age of delinquency to 12, from 7, said Quaranta, of the Connecticut Justice Alliance. And the Pennsylvania bill calls for experts to develop a policy to prevent the excessive use of force against children and teens that the state will then follow. But some advocates say efforts to end the police use of force against children must take a critical look at policing itself.

"I don't think working with police or just reducing the number of police is adequate. It's not about cutting down or reducing. It's about abolishing and redirecting funds to real community safety programs," Chavarria said.

"We're beyond training. No matter how much training they have with youth, cultural bias training or whatever, none of that supersedes their main training: to be a police officer. They will arrest our kids and use excessive force if they deem it necessary."

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Char Adams

Char Adams is a reporter for NBC BLK who writes about race.



Randi Richardson

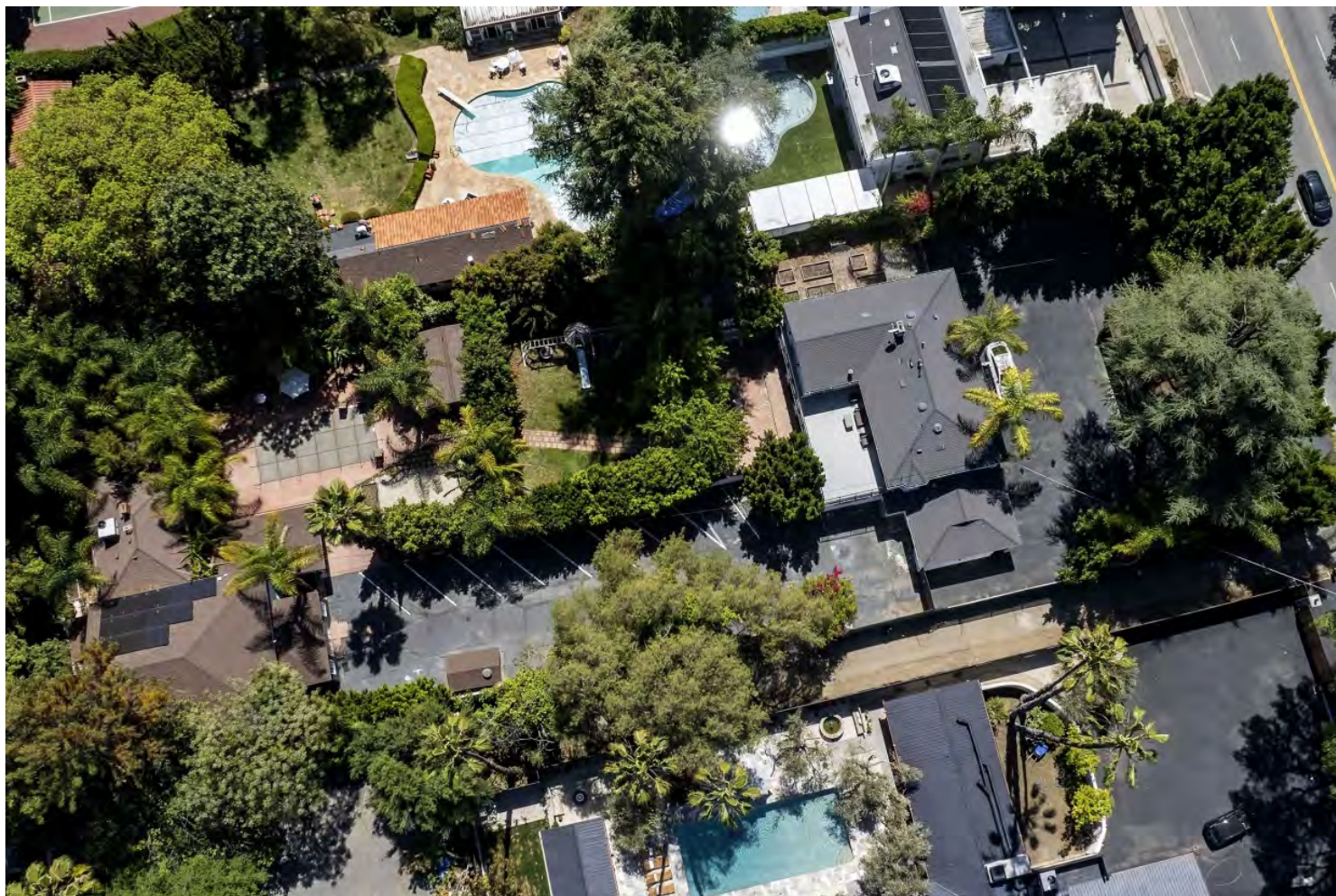
Randi Richardson reports for TODAY Digital and NBC BLK from New York.



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'Great sign' or 'very unfortunate'? Black Lives Matter supporters split over \$6M purchase

Some BLM supporters say the mansion is a sign of success. Others say it was a lapse in judgment.



— An aerial view of the property in Studio City, Calif., on April 5. Ringo Chiu / Zuma Press

April 26, 2022, 6:06 AM EDT

By Randi Richardson and Claretta Bellamy

When Kulia Petzoldt first learned of George Floyd's death in 2020, she and her teenage daughter ventured to Lake Merritt in Oakland, California, to protest alongside a mass of people

demanding justice.

Petzoldt, who is white, said growing up around different cultures and having friends who were Black made her feel more conscious of the racial discrimination Black people faced. The Black Lives Matter movement solidified that awareness.

“We can’t just do nothing,” Petzoldt, 42, said, “and particularly those of us who are sort of protected by society.”

Beyond protesting, Petzoldt and millions of others donated a cumulative \$90 million in 2020 as people rallied behind eradicating racial inequality. She said she donated a few hundred dollars to the Black Lives Matter Global Network Foundation on various occasions, including a donation of \$50 after reading that the foundation had purchased a \$6 million mansion in Southern California, which was first reported by New York Magazine. To Petzoldt, the purchase was a sign of stability, she said.

“I think that it’s a great sign that in addition to the public movement that a lot of us saw, that Black Lives Matter is investing in the long- term communication and influence within our society,” she said, “which is much more likely to make change compared to protests.”

Petzoldt is one of many people across the country trying to make sense of what has become a controversial decision BLM leaders made in October 2020 when they bought property in Southern California using organization funds. New York Magazine’s report details the appearance of impropriety and how BLM leaders intended “[to keep the house’s existence a secret.](#)”

Patrisse Cullors, co-founder of the Black Lives Matter Global Foundation Network, and Melina Abdullah, co-founder of BLM Los Angeles, dismissed accusations of wrongdoing during a [roundtable](#) meeting the following week. They said the property is used as a safe haven from death threats and that they had intended to share the news of the purchase but were just waiting until it became safe to do so. That response and the purchase itself have elicited mixed reactions.



— Patrisse Cullors during the Sundance Film Festival in Park City, Utah, on Jan. 27, 2019.

Taylor Jewell / Invision/AP file

Why the mansion is controversial

Tiffinie Larkins works in accounting in Florida and said she's never donated to the foundation but has supported the organization since it started. She's against the purchase because it used organization funds; she said using personal salaries would have been the better option.

"I'm completely against that because that's not what those donations were for," Larkins said. Instead, she posited, why didn't the organization invest in secure office space if leaders were worried about security?

During the roundtable, Cullors said that she and Abdullah used the residence as a safe haven, which interfered with their plans of announcing that the foundation had bought the mansion. "Conditions changed, and that's it," Cullors said.

Abdullah said she and her two daughters have stayed there on four occasions after her home was erroneously the target of police raids, a harassment tactic known as swatting. Since news of the mansion's purchase was made public, Abdullah said she and her family have received 2,500 online threats and hateful messages – one from someone who Abdullah said physically attacked her in 2017. The alleged attacker sent her an article about the mansion, along with a profanity-laced message.



— Janaya Khan embraces Black Lives Matter L.A. co-founder Melina Abdullah at a downtown demonstration on Sept. 23, 2020. Robert Gauthier / Los Angeles Times via Getty Images file

“The way that the articles are written makes it sound like people live in the home,” Abdullah said. “It spurs these kinds of acts of violence.”

Larkins said she is an adamant supporter of the organization and its goals, but disagrees with the acquisition because the optics look bad.

There “was so much controversy regarding Black Lives Matter – racists and people against it were saying it’s a scam and it’s all of this. It’s very unfortunate that it played right into that topic,” Larkins said.

Abdullah said that [right-wing media](#) have cast the purchase of the mansion as “unethical” or “unscrupulous.”

“I don’t donate, I think for that reason, to any cause,” Larkins said. “But I do believe that people should still support the organization. I think tighter controls need to be managed over the company to restrict that and then bring in someone new because I believe in the organization. and I think they need a new marketing strategy to kind of pivot away” from this controversy.

How nonprofits allocate donations

How nonprofits disperse donations is legally regulated according to standards aimed at protecting donors. “They have a right to expect the money to be used consistent with the appeal” for donations, said Lloyd Mayer, an expert on nonprofit groups and a law professor at the University of Notre Dame in Indiana, said.

He said the standards require putting donations toward whatever goals the nonprofit used to attract donors, whether the call was to support administrative costs or provide rent assistance. He said that legally, the mansion purchase was “consistent with Black Lives Matters purposes.”

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“It’s a creative space for activists to highlight racial justice issues,” Mayer continued. “But most donors weren’t expecting money to go buy a really nice house in a nice neighborhood.”

To win in the court of public opinion, Mayer said BLM can release financial records without disclosing leaders' personal information or posing a threat.

Mayer said releasing tax returns and audited financial statements is the industry standard BLM should follow.

“Despite the fact they received the tax status in late 2020, there is no financial information available to you besides the very basic numbers that don't really tell you much,” Mayer said. “I'd just like to know whether the accounts that say they still have \$60 million in the bank, somehow, are true? And if so, where is that \$60 million and what are the plans for it?”

BLM chapter leaders say they feel the pinch

The national chapter released [a report at the beginning of 2021](#), which said it raised \$90 million in 2020 towards an annual budget that was \$8.4 million. It dispersed \$21.7 million to local chapters and 33 other organizations.

“We are left with an approximate balance of \$60 million. Returning to fiscal sustainability, it is important that an organization not end its year at a balance of \$0,” the report said as the only reference to how the excess money would be used.

Anthony Beckford, president and co-founder of Black Lives Matter's Brooklyn, New York, chapter, said that his organization had never received funds from the national chapter.

He said funds that went to the foundation were not distributed to his chapter, despite being told by donors that they thought they were funding the Brooklyn arm.

“We need funding,” he said. “We need resources that the people need.”

These resources, according to Beckford, include more testing kits for Covid and other diseases that greatly affect the Black community, and access to transportation to give free rides to commuters.

Regarding the mansion, Beckford frowns upon it, because it “doesn't benefit the people at all,” he said. He also said that purchasing the mansions can be problematic, because people think all BLM chapters are receiving millions of dollars, when that's not the case.

Despite people's skepticism of BLM, Beckford said that the mansion was not a reflection of the movement, which he tied to the people who lost loved ones to police brutality and seek justice.

“If you’re going to donate to the movement, realize that everybody you see marching out there, that’s the movement – the people, the organizations that you see out there who are grassroots – that’s the movement,” he said, “because they’re controlled by the people. They’re run by the people; and every effort they put forth is grassroots for the people.”

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Claretta Bellamy

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NBCBLK

Beyond the Ivy League: How HBCUs have groomed prominent politicians like the vice president-elect

Why Kamala Harris, Stacey Abrams and others credit HBCUs with their political prominence



— Vice President-elect Kamala Harris addresses the nation during an election event in Wilmington, Del., on Saturday. Sarah Silbiger / Bloomberg via Getty Images

Nov. 10, 2020, 6:02 AM EST

By Randi Richardson

Vice President-elect Kamala Harris went to Howard University. Stacey Abrams is a graduate of Spelman College. Raphael Warnock attended nearby Morehouse College.

These three politicians and a handful of others who grew in prominence during this election cycle hold degrees from historically Black colleges or universities, or HBCUs, which has prompted loud cheers among alumni and students.

HBCU representation in politics is not new, but after a contentious electoral season during a year when racial justice was front and center, students and graduates say it's heartening to see other alumni reach some of the highest echelons of political office.

"Our degrees are powerful," said Elandra Gilmore, a middle school social studies teacher and University of Arkansas at Pine Bluff alumna. She said "petty" arguments often pit HBCUs against predominantly white institutions, especially because positions of power often go to people who graduated from Ivy League schools or their peer institutions.

The arguments generally result in the presumption that "our degrees don't hold any weight," said Gilmore, who said seeing fellow HBCU alumni in their positions is refreshing to confirm that any degree is powerful no matter where you go.

"In a word, it's validation," said Mason Smith, a senior at Alabama State University. "To see these Black men and women succeed on one of the most difficult stages of the United States shows HBCUs can and will prepare you for any career."

Harris, Abrams and Warnock, as well as Atlanta Mayor Keisha Lance Bottoms and Missouri's first Black congresswoman, Cori Bush, have said they owe their success, in part, to HBCUs' jump-starting their careers.

"Howard University is one of the most important aspects of my life," Harris said over Martin Luther King Day weekend in January 2019 shortly after she announced her bid for the Democratic nomination for president. "It is where I ran for my first elected office. So this is where it all began."

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Abrams, who narrowly lost her campaign for governor of Georgia in 2018, invoked the power of her alma mater, Spelman College in Atlanta, as she accepted the school's Local Community Service Award last year. "I may not occupy the governor's office, but we have made our imprint," she said. "With our election - and I say it's our election because Spelman, you were with me every single day - with our election, we changed the narrative of what it means to be a leader in America. ... I didn't have to change my hair, my gender or my skin color" to run for political office.

Abrams did not run for office during this election cycle, but [many credit](#) the Democratic Party's slight lead in Georgia, so far, to her organization Fair Fight, which registered 800,000 first-time voters over the past two years.

"We have leaders who now have to look over their shoulders every day, because we're coming," Abrams said in the same speech.

Bottoms, a mainstay on the campaign trail for Joe Biden who was reported to have been on his running mate shortlist, graduated from Florida A&M University; Bush, who will be the first Black woman to represent Missouri in Congress, went to Harris-Stowe State University in St. Louis; Warnock is in a runoff for a Senate seat from Georgia.

Justus Hawkins, a senior at Morgan State University in Baltimore, points to figures like Harris, Bottoms and Warnock to reject claims that HBCUs "don't prepare you for the 'real world'" and debates about whether graduates "will be qualified enough or have a skill set."

"Look at everyone who just won," Hawkins said. "Look at everyone who continues to win. They're products of HBCUs."

Jainaba Seckan, a Spelman graduate who is a project manager in the Office for Diversity, Inclusion and Belonging at Harvard University, [tweeted](#), "Proud of the talented HBCU grads who have played critical roles in this election or are competing in major races."

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Charles Walton III, a Howard University graduate who is the founder and CEO of Living Legends Group, a sports, entertainment, production and brand management company, [tweeted](#): "HOWARD UNIVERSITY STAND UP! We in the White House."

Rick Hart, a junior at Morehouse College, said, "It's encouraging to see people who look like you, who've attended similar institutions as you, who have the same experiences as you, rise to the highest levels of the political sphere."

In addition to the HBCU graduates' sheer presence in politics, their voter drives also encouraged others to elevate their civic engagement.

Most recently, Hart was a fellow on the Biden-Harris campaign. Before that, he interned in the Baltimore mayor's office and on Abrams' campaign for governor.



— Former Georgia House of Representatives Minority Leader Stacey Abrams speaks ahead of former President Barack Obama's address in Atlanta on Nov. 2, 2020. Brandon Bell / Reuters

"People like Rev. Warnock is why I wanted to get involved in politics," Hart said. "It's super powerful to see people who look like me fighting for a seat at the table while showing me that I can, too."

Harris, Abrams, Bottoms, Bush and Warnock add to a long history of HBCUs' impact across generations.

Noliwe Rooks, the W.E.B. Du Bois professor of literature in the department of Africana studies at Cornell University, said in a statement that HBCUs in contemporary and historical politics speak "to a very different conception of and path to access and influence."

"One of the extraordinary facts about the incoming administration is that neither the President-elect or Vice President-elect attended an Ivy League institution [...] in a nation that valorizes and rewards those graduates," Rooks said. "These realities should put to rest questions about how and if such schools are relevant to American politics in the 21st century."

There are over 100 HBCUs, which were established primarily to educate Black students when local, state and federal laws barred them from attending predominantly white institutions.

As a result, HBCUs are widely credited with providing top-tier educations while preparing students for the discrimination they may face post-graduation.

HBCU representation in contemporary politics confirms that legacy, as do notable alumni throughout history. Thurgood Marshall, the Rev. Jesse Jackson, Martin Luther King Jr., Alice Walker and Rep. John Lewis all graduated from HBCUs.

"This election showed us exactly how crucial the African-American agenda is to the landscape of politics," FAMU senior Titilayo Okuwa said in a statement. "HBCU's produce the largest number of black professionals. It is clear that alumni will continue to run for and excel in political offices."

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'Abbott Elementary' creator Quinta Brunson on why she almost quit before her hit new show took off

The 32-year-old multi-hyphenate star sat down with TODAY to talk about why she wanted to highlight the beautiful difficulty in being a teacher at an underfunded school.



Quinta Brunson photographed for TODAY at 30 Rockefeller Center on March 16, 2022. **Nathan Congleton / TODAY**

March 16, 2022, 6:18 PM EDT / Updated March 18, 2022, 1:51 PM EDT / Source: TODAY

By Randi Richardson

Quinta Brunson always loved school.

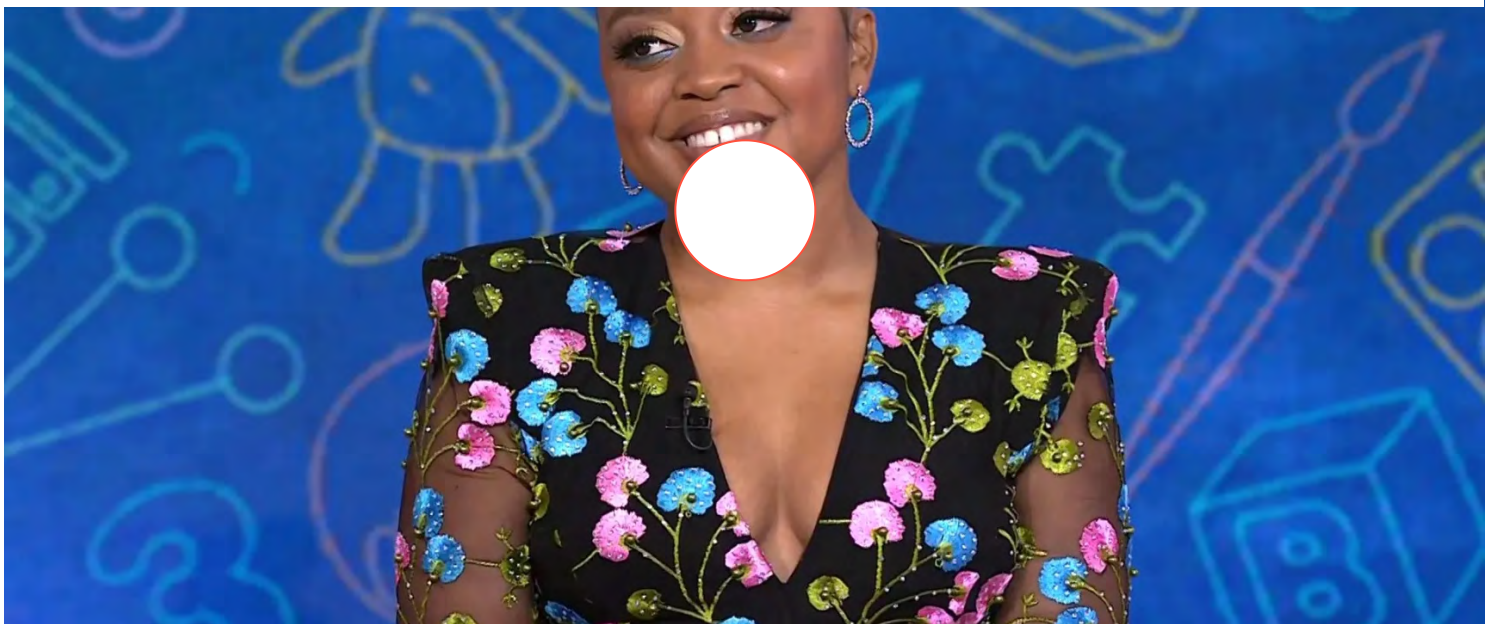
Her mom was her kindergarten teacher and they went to school each day in the same building for six years. Brunson vividly remembers specific teaching-related stories that her mother shared, inspiring her to weave some of them into the new hit ABC sitcom "Abbot Elementary," which she created and stars in.

"One of her stories I used in the pilot actually, of another teacher punching a kid," Brunson told TODAY in a conference room at 30 Rockefeller. "She has so many tidbits here and there that I kind of pull from. It's just stuck in my brain — everything that she's told me over the years and everything I've witnessed because I was with her so much at school."

The "Abbot Elementary" character Barbara Howard (Sheryl Lee Ralph) — the seasoned teacher often offering wisdom to the rookies — is molded after her mother. Brunson said her mom and the character both have a knack for getting through to misbehaving children.

Quinta Brunson on 'Abbott Elementary' being renewed for 2nd season

MARCH 16, 2022 / 05:50



"She always had a kid every year who would be the kid that caused trouble, but who would be her favorite," she said. "We would know who her favorite was by who she came home talking about who caused the most trouble. It was always this relationship like, 'Jamal gets on my nerves.' (Jamal) is the only name we'd hear all year and by the end, she's crying when he's going to first grade."

As a kid, Brunson would get in trouble for flipping around the house and unintentionally breaking things in her path. Her parents didn't punish her, but instead encouraged her exploration.

"My parents, they're solution-based people, so it was like, 'We're gonna put her in dance school,'" she explained. "So that kind of solved that problem. I didn't get in trouble for too long, because I had somewhere to go."

Redirecting kids as they advance in life is one of the reasons Brunson is passionate about education and kids. At one point, she even wanted to be a teacher herself.

"There was a point in time where I really considered it, but it didn't last long," she said. "It didn't go anywhere. My mom really wanted me to be one and I just knew it wasn't for me. I knew I didn't have the patience that it took ... *that* time."

'Real people who are choosing, most times, to do the most underpaid job in the world'

Originally from West Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, Brunson is now becoming a household name across the nation because of "Abbott Elementary," but her fame is not a story of overnight success.

The 32-year-old actor and writer first gained prominence as a meme before memes were really a thing, when a short skit of herself went viral back in 2014. From there, her humor and internet savvy landed her a job at BuzzFeed, where she worked for four years as a content creator. After leaving in 2018, she helmed a number of creative projects, including one pilot for the CW that was never picked up. She then worked on "A Black Lady Sketch Show," the animated series "Magical Girl Friendship Squad" and the third season of "Miracle Workers."

But "Abbott Elementary" is her triumph.

In the ABC-sitcom set in her hometown of Philadelphia, Brunson plays Janine Teagues, a novice teacher still holding out hope that the school district will provide desperately needed resources. Barbara Howard and Melissa Schemmenti (Lisa Ann Walter) are seasoned educators who have learned to lean onto their own tricks after countless instances of not receiving enough support from administrators. Along with long-term substitute teacher Gregory Eddie (Tyler James Williams) and history teacher Jacob Hill (Chris Perfetti), the group bands together when the shady principal — Ava Coleman (played by the hilarious Janelle James) — pulls stunts that are disadvantageous to the students.



"My mom really wanted me to be (a teacher) and I just knew it wasn't for me. I knew I didn't have the patience that it took, that time." **Raymond Liu / Getty Images**

Why teachers pick their career is one of two reasons Brunson made "Abbott" from the perspective of educators. The other reason is because until now, there's never been a school-based show told completely from this perspective.

"It's usually been half and half — half the students, half the teachers," she explained. "Usually, the show is bouncing between those people and more focused on students but I thought there was something really significant about going into teachers lives in a real way. Not in a jokey way that starts with our perceived comedy impression of them. That's what was compelling to me about doing this kind of show, because there's so much more to show: Real people who are choosing, most times, to do the most underpaid job in the world. What makes up that kind of person?"

That question compelled Brunson to create characters who had that same combination of fire, patience, kindness and stability.

"I knew I didn't have the patience to be a teacher," she said. "My mom did and that's so significant to know this is the job for you and you know what it takes in the long run to do it ... It's actually a really hard job that you have to have a lot of gall, hurt and emotional stability to be able to do. So if you can't do all of that, you're not going to be a good teacher. If you *can* do all of that, it's actually really special."





Originally from West Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, Brunson is now becoming a household name across the nation because of "Abbott Elementary," but her fame is not a story of overnight success. **Nathan Congleton / TODAY**

That's why, despite not having the patience before, Brunson wants to become a teacher one day.

Brunson once taught dance classes and said after her Hollywood reign, she wants to teach middle schoolers what she's learned in the industry: that content is "fascinating."

"It'd be cool to start teaching that to people younger than when they're in college," Brunson — who ended her studies in journalism and communication at Temple University early to pursue a career in comedy full-time — said. "If that could become a course even for middle schoolers because now they're so ahead of the game with digital stuff, it'd be beneficial for them to actually know the financial component behind all this, or just to know the actual business behind it."

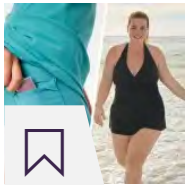




The cast of "Abbott Elementary." Pamela Littky / ABC

For now though, Brunson is booked and busy because "Abbott Elementary" was recently renewed for a second season. There's one question fans want answered: When is Janine going to dump her leach of a boyfriend and begin dating Gregory?

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"I don't know; we'll see ..." Brunson coyly said, before adding, "I have to say that."

The show returns March 22, 2022 after a three-week hiatus. Fancasts (fans predicting what will happen or what they want to see) have been circulating on Twitter of dedicated viewers wanting to see legendary actors [Delroy Lindo](#) or [Tichina Arnold](#) guest star on the series.

"What makes you think I can afford these people?" Brunson said in response to fans' demands. "That's what kills me."

But next week, she promises "there's someone in the show that people are going to be really excited to see."

'My heart on paper'

Brunson's support of education goes beyond warm childhood stories and a hit show predicted to become a cash cow. The marketing team behind "Abbott" redirected funds from the series to buy supplies for teachers and made them available in a renovated bus that doubles as a mobile lounge when they need a break. But Brunson wants to see more done from elected officials to pay teachers more and support public schools.

Average teacher salaries are shockingly low and while there's a lot of public support and commitments from elected officials to fund public schools, the problem continues. Brunson said, "Teachers should never have to want for anything."

She said we have yet to see change in droves in this area because it's "easy to talk about stuff to seem cool or smart" of the platitudes elected officials often preach, but it's another thing to actually make it happen.

In order to see any real action, "sometimes it takes a teachers strike to get that kind of effort," or otherwise make it clear that they will "not let up" on getting the funding they need.



"I definitely felt if 'Abbott' didn't get made, I thought I might have to quit." **Nathan Congleton / TODAY**

"Abbott Elementary" is raising awareness about these disparities and the real trials teachers go through. Memes and related Twitter threads regularly go viral on social media. She said she knew they were making a good show with impact but didn't know if it would reach people. Well, it is, and the warm reception has been a pleasant surprise.

"I'm just shocked," Brunson said. "This rarely gets to happen for a sitcom where everyone is (excited) for the first season. So I'm shocked about that but I do believe we made a good show. It's all warranted so yes, it's not *too* surprising. But it's just like, wow, this is what you dreamed of."

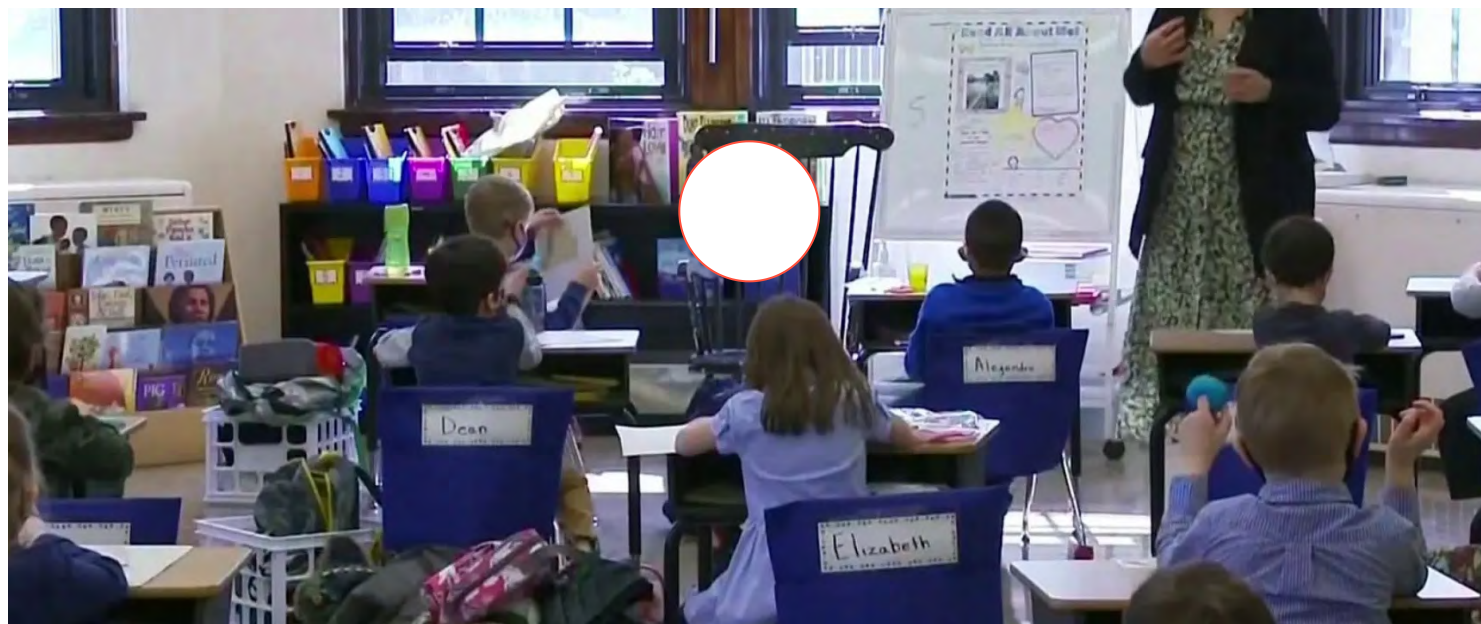
Brunson said the outpouring of support confirmed that she is walking in her purpose.

"'Abbott' is definitely a dream show. I definitely felt if 'Abbott' didn't get made, I thought I might have to quit," she revealed. "But I wasn't gonna *have* to quit. I probably would've called it quits because I knew it was the best I can do. It is good enough, and if for some reason this doesn't make it, then that's a sign that I need to redirect my energy elsewhere. Go where I will be loved and accepted.

"'Abbott' is my heart on paper. So I knew, this is it."

Teachers struggle as debate continues over teaching race during Black History Month

FEB. 17, 2022 / 04:34



Randi Richardson

Randi Richardson is a reporter for NBC News' TODAY.com based in Brooklyn.

NBCBLK

Biden is under pressure to forgive student debt. Here's why it's a racial issue.

Why student loan forgiveness could make a huge impact on Black people for generations



— Former Vice President Joe Biden takes a selfie with a supporter at Benedict College in Columbia, S.C., on Oct. 26, 2019. Logan Cyrus / Bloomberg via Getty Images file

Nov. 20, 2020, 6:06 PM EST

By Randi Richardson

President-elect Joe Biden is facing mounting pressure to extend student loan debt relief or forgive thousands of indebted dollars for the millions of people who had their loan payments

suspended throughout the pandemic.

With payments expected to resume in the new year, action on this front could help many who are out of work or facing financial hardship. Such relief could have a significant impact beyond the pandemic for Black student loan borrowers who are regularly forced to take on higher debt loads to afford college.

Student loan debt hit a [record](#) \$1.6 trillion among 45 million borrowers in February, and has only increased during the pandemic. Biden's Plan for Education Beyond High School during his presidential campaign to forgive some student debt has recently gained notoriety as many have called for a complete forgiveness of all such debt.

More than [86 percent](#) of Black students take out federal loans to attend four-year institutions compared to about 60 percent of white students, according to [data from](#) the National Center for Education Statistics. Student loan cancellation could have a sizable impact on the Black community and shrink the racial wealth gap.

“Structural racism creates a world where Black families are denied the ability to build wealth,” said Dominique Baker, an education policy professor at Southern Methodist University.

Households headed by white adults 25 to 40 years old have 12 times as much wealth as their Black counterparts, according to The Roosevelt Institute, a progressive think tank that focuses on economic equality. Eliminating student debt would narrow this gap to [five times](#).

Black adults have an average of over 85 percent more debt than their white peers when starting their careers due largely to student loans, a disparity that grows by 6.7 percent annually, the authors of a study in [Sage Journals](#) concluded after controlling for family background and postsecondary paths.

This gap often results in Black students having fewer economic resources to finance their education, often turning to loans at a higher rate, Baker said.

A significant body of research shows that Black students rely on loans at a disproportionate rate than white students, they're more likely to borrow, they borrow larger amounts and they struggle significantly more with repayment because they're always one step behind white counterparts who tend to have more access to various forms of wealth, Baker said.

Baker noted the irony in telling young people that the path toward economic prosperity comes with higher education, even though student debt can be a life-long burden.

Jae Crawford, a junior at Brown University, was raised by a single mother of three who works as a public school teacher in Florida. She said her mother still owes about \$50,000 in student loan debt and another \$30,000 in medical bills.

“I’ve spent many nights worrying about finances and paying for college,” Crawford said

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Parents took out billions in loans to pay for kids' college. Now they're buried in debt.

Biden’s detailed plan maps out the future of student loans and tuition-free colleges and universities. But he has not disclosed whether those plans would be established by Congress, by executive order or by government agencies such as the Department of Education.

Crawford said she is hinging her future on “student debt forgiveness from the incoming administration.” She currently owes \$12,000 and is “pretty unsure” of how she’s going to repay it. Crawford may attend law school, where she’ll “take on significantly more debt.”

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Biden’s [plan](#) does include some cancellation, but there are also some caveats that determine eligibility: Some will be eligible for \$10,000 of relief in exchange for each year of national or

community service up to five years. Those who earn less than \$25,000 annually would not be responsible for repaying their undergraduate federal loans and would not incur any interest.

People earning more than \$25,000 would have to make their monthly payment for 20 years to be considered for forgiveness.

For Crawford, total debt forgiveness “would mean the world to me. My mom is still paying off her student loans.” Crawford said she is concerned she’ll end up in a similar position.

Sara Wilson, a senior at Bethune-Cookman University and a multimedia journalist at WDHN News in Alabama, said, “It would be a huge weight off my shoulders if the debt just got cleared.” Wilson graduates this semester and loans are “the only thing I think about. I’m extremely worried about it.”

“I don’t even make \$20,000 in a salary, and that’s how much I owe in student loans,” Wilson said. “You’re in debt forever because the interest is so high, and it keeps increasing your loans. It’s like a trap. It’s an economic jail.”

The default rate among Black college students is at “crisis levels,” the [Brookings Institution reported in 2018](#), due largely to the racial wealth gap and a lack of economic resources. Some Democratic lawmakers are urging Biden to forgive everyone’s loans once he takes office to help boost the economy.

Sens. Chuck Schumer of New York and Elizabeth Warren of Massachusetts, both Democrats, have proposed erasing the first \$50,000 of debt for each borrower through executive order, Schumer [said](#) in an interview this month with the writer Anand Giridharadas.

Rep. Adam Schiff, D-Calif., [encouraged Biden to](#) “cancel student debt on day 1. He doesn't need to wait for Congress. And millions of Americans saddled with debt can't wait, either. It's good policy, too – and will stimulate the economy quickly. We need to think big to build a better, fairer economy for all.”

Biden has not commented on this possibility and continues to stress his plan. If he does not issue an executive order, sending legislation through Congress would be an option.

Sen. Lamar Alexander, R.-Tenn., [introduced](#) a bill in July that similarly proposed Biden’s 20-year undergraduate loan cancellation timeline and tacked on an additional five years for graduate loans. Alexander added that monthly payments “will never be more than 10 percent of your income,” after deducting “necessities of life such as housing and food.”

Numerous other student loan-related [bills](#) have been introduced by other legislators.

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RACIAL RECKONING

Undergraduates at Brown vote for university to offer reparations

They want reparations in several forms, including preferential admission for descendants of enslaved people, direct payments to descendants and targeted investments in Black communities.



— The Brown University campus in Providence, R.I. Courtesy Brown University

March 29, 2021, 5:57 PM EDT

By Randi Richardson

Undergraduate students at Brown University have voted overwhelmingly that the institution should offer reparations to descendants of slaves who were affiliated with the school and its founders.

Undergraduate students at the Ivy League school in Providence, Rhode Island, voted on two referendum questions last week during its annual election. One asked whether Brown should make "all possible efforts to identify the descendants of enslaved Africans who were entangled with and/or afflicted by the University and Brown family and their associates." The other asked whether Brown should provide reparations to those descendants of slaves. The questions were approved with about 89 percent and 85 percent, respectively.

The students voted for reparations in multiple forms, including preferential admission for descendants of enslaved people, direct payments to descendants and targeted investments in Black communities, [according to the Undergraduate Council of Students](#).

Brown would not be the first higher education institution to weigh whether to issue reparations to descendants of enslaved people who were associated with the university – the ballots referred to 2019 efforts at Georgetown University in Washington, D.C., where students voted for the university to offer financial aid to descendants of the enslaved people who labored there. While the 2019 referendum called for a mandatory fee to fund the aid to be charged to students, the fee has not been implemented. According to a spokesperson for Georgetown, the university is committed to matching the funds that the fee would generate for a reconciliation fund.

The same year, Princeton Theological Seminary announced a \$27 million commitment for initiatives to recognize how it benefited from slavery. Last summer, the Reparations at University of Chicago Working Group [called](#) for the university "to develop a comprehensive reparative justice process to fully make amends for the University's past while building a new relationship" with the Black community.

More recently, the Virginia House passed a measure Feb. 4 that would require five colleges in the state to offer "tangible benefits," such as scholarships or development programs, for nearby Black communities. The bill advanced to the Democratic-controlled Senate, where it is likely to pass.

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Just over 2,000 of Brown's nearly 7,000 undergraduate voters cast ballots. The Undergraduate Council passed a [resolution](#) last month "calling upon Brown to attempt to identify and reparate the descendants of slaves entangled with the university."

In a 2006 report examining its historical ties to slavery, the university said it owned slaves but was not a major slave trader. [In a letter in 2004](#), the president at the time, Ruth Simmons, the first Black president at an Ivy League school, said: "the committee's work is not about whether or how we should pay reparations. That was never the intent nor will the payment of reparations be the outcome."

The current president, Christina H. Paxson, has yet to comment on the vote. Brian Clark, a university spokesperson, said in a statement: "Confronting questions of reparations and institutional reckoning with connections to the transatlantic slave trade has a deep history at Brown. The University interrogated this issue as a full community from 2003 to 2006, and Brown committed to a series of actions whose impact persists in our education, research, engagement with historically underrepresented groups and ongoing work in diversity, equity and inclusion. The current work of Brown's Task Force on Anti-Black Racism will make recommendations on more Brown can do to address the legacy of slavery."

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Randi Richardson

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Tulsa Race Massacre, 100 years later: Why it happened and why it's still relevant today

The city's "Black Wall Street" was among the most prosperous neighborhoods in America, and a Black utopia – and then it was burned to the ground.

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May 28, 2021, 6:00 AM EDT / Updated May 29, 2021, 11:36 AM EDT

By Randi Richardson

Just decades after slavery in the United States left Black Americans in an economic deficit, one bright spot stood out in Tulsa, Oklahoma – its Greenwood District, known as “Black Wall Street,” where Black business leaders, homeowners, and civic le



But 100 years ago, on May 31, 1921, and into the next day, a white mob destroyed that district, in what experts call the single-most horrific incident of racial terrorism since slavery.

An estimated 300 people were killed within the district's 35 square blocks, burning to the ground more than 1,200 homes, at least 60 businesses, dozens of churches, a school, a hospital and a public library, [according to a report issued by Human Rights Watch](#).



— Corner of Greenwood and Archer devastated in Tulsa, Okla., on June 1, 1921.

Department of Special Collections, McFarlin Library, The University of Tulsa





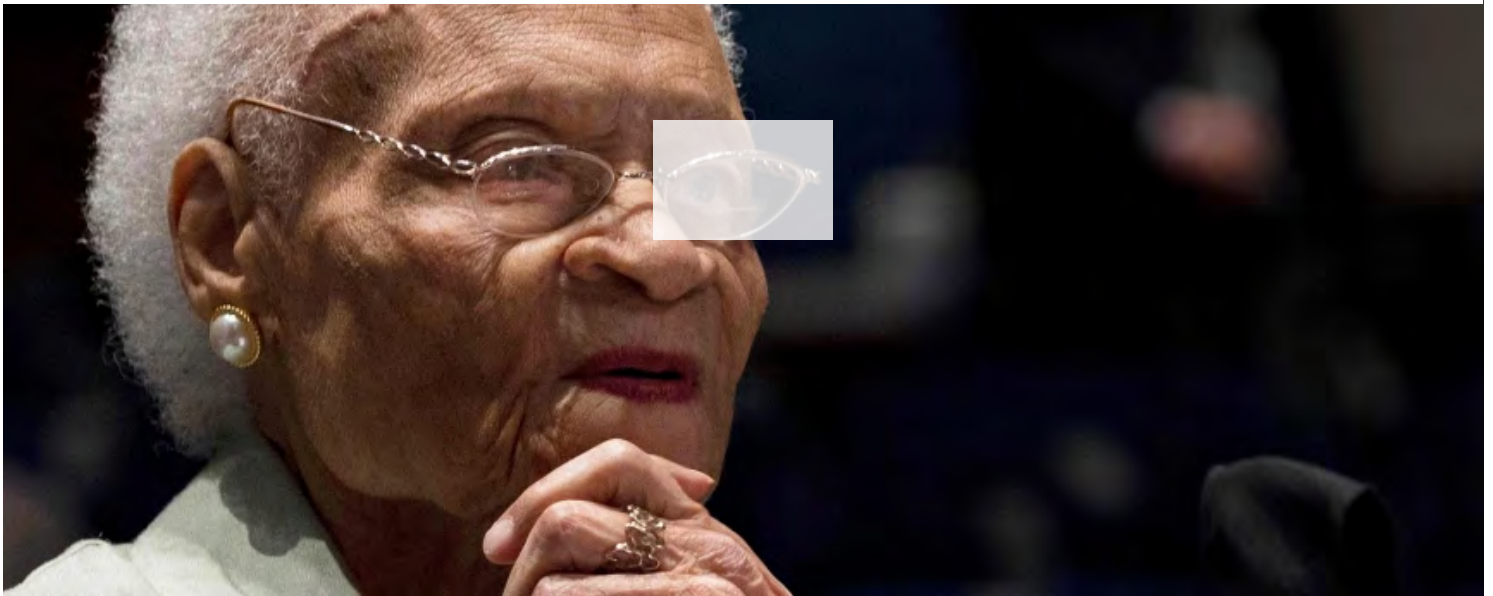
— The Williams Building, no.2 on Greenwood Ave., site of the Dreamland Theater, June 1, 1921, in Tulsa, Okla. Department of Special Collections, McFarlin Library, The University of Tulsa.

At least \$1.4 million in damages were claimed after the massacre, or about \$25 million in today's dollars, after controlling for inflation and the current economy, but experts say it's an underestimation.

Survivors never received government assistance or restitution for their losses. The House Judiciary Subcommittee on the Constitution, Civil Rights, and Civil Liberties held a hearing on the issue May 19 in which three remaining known survivors, experts and advocates called on Congress to issue reparations to the living survivors and all descendants to rectify the lasting impact of the massacre.



107-year-old survivor of Tulsa Massacre Viola Fletcher calls on U.S. to acknowledge 1921 event



“I had everything a child could need,” Viola Ford Fletcher, 107, told the committee. “The night of the massacre, I was awakened by my family. My parents and five siblings were there. I was told we had to leave and that was it. I will never forget the violence of the hate mob when we left our home. I still see Black men being shot, Black bodies lying in the street. I still smell smoke and see fog. I still see Black businesses being burned. I still hear airplanes flying overhead. I hear the screams. I live through the massacre every day. Our country may forget this history, but I cannot.”

How 'Black Wall Street' began

O.W. Gurley, a wealthy Black landowner, purchased 40 acres of land in Tulsa in 1906 and named the area Greenwood. Its population stemmed largely from formerly enslaved Black people and sharecroppers who relocated to the area fleeing the racial terror they experienced in other areas.



Looking back at the Tulsa Race Massacre a century later



But Oklahoma, which became a state in 1907, was still staunchly segregated at the time. So as Gurley opened a boarding house, grocery stores and sold land to other Black people, they secured their own houses and opened businesses. The population grew to 11,000 and the area became an economic powerhouse affectionately called “Black Wall Street.”

Greenwood functioned independently, with its own school system, post office, bank, library, hospital and public transit. It also had luxury shops, restaurants, grocery stores, hotels, jewelry and clothing stores, movie theaters, barbershops and salons, pool halls, nightclubs and offices for doctors, lawyers and dentists.





— North Greenwood Ave. in Tulsa, Okla., prior to the 1921 Tulsa massacre.

Collection of the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture

Hannibal Johnson, author of “Black Wall Street: From Riot to Renaissance in Tulsa’s Historic Greenwood District,” said the area thrived as an ancillary economy that kept money within the community. Even those who worked outside of Greenwood only spent their money in the area, reinvesting in the neighborhood, he said.

“The district really took off as an economic and entrepreneurial kind of Mecca for Black folks because this was an era of segregation,” he said. “Black folks were shut out from the dominant white-led economy in what I call an economic detour. In other words, when they approached the gate of economic opportunity at the white dominated downtown Tulsa economy, they were turned away. So they created their own insular economy in the Greenwood district and blossomed because dollars were able to circulate and recirculate within the confines of the community because there really was not much of an option, given the segregation here and elsewhere.”

This prosperity continued through the years even as racial terrorism around Tulsa grew, the Ku Klux Klan gained power, and Oklahoma’s Supreme Court regularly upheld voting restrictions

such as poll taxes and literacy tests for Black voters. By 1919, white civic leaders sought Greenwood's land for a railroad depot or other uses.



— The Greenwood district in Tulsa, Okla., prior to the 1921 massacre.

Collection of the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture

“You have a really successful Black business community across the Frisco tracks, literally across the tracks from downtown Tulsa,” said Johnson, the education chair for the [Centennial Commission](#). “You have white people, some of whom are not doing well economically, who can look across those tracks and see Black people living in homes, driving cars, furnishing their homes with pianos, women wearing furs, all the trappings of economic success. And so there's that dissonance between what these people think ought to be, based on white supremacy, and what actually is. And one of the ways to harmonize that dissonance is to bring the Black folks down a peg through violence.”



What ignited the massacre

Tulsa police officers arrested Dick Rowland, a Black 19-year-old, May 31, 1921 for allegedly assaulting a white girl, the report said, but there was little evidential proof. The [Tulsa newspapers swiftly published incendiary articles](#) about the allegation, prompting a group of mostly white men to descend on the courthouse to lynch Rowland.



— African-American men being detained and led down a residential street on June 1, 1921 in Tulsa, Okla.
Department of Special Collections, McFarlin Library, The University of Tulsa

When Greenwood residents learned of the impending lynch mob, a group of mostly Black men, which included World War I veterans, armed themselves and went to the courthouse to protect Rowland. This method became custom whenever Black people were on trial as they usually faced lynchings.

But the sheriff told the group to leave and they complied. The white mob grew to 2,000 and Tulsa police did not disperse the crowd. Later that night, the army returned to protect Rowland and a fight broke out when a white man tried to arrest a Black man, prompting shooting that lasted through the night, the report said.



In the early hours of June 1, 1921, then-Gov. James B. A. Robertson dispatched the National Guard and declared martial law. The National Guard, local law enforcement, and deputized white citizens canvassed Greenwood to disarm, arrest and move Black people to nearby internment camps, dragging some out of their homes. This upheaval resulted in the uncontested mob outnumbering the remaining Black people by 20 to 1, the report said. [Old World War I airplanes](#) dropped bombs on Greenwood, with the mob fatally shooting Black people and looting and burning their homes and businesses.



— Detainees being marched through downtown Tulsa, Okla., on June 1, 1921, viewed from the roof of the Daniel Building. Department of Special Collections, McFarlin Library, The University of Tulsa

Dreisen Heath, a researcher at Human Rights Watch who authored the report, said law enforcement's involvement in the massacre illustrates the demands of racial justice movements a century later. ✕

“A number of the massacres that happen that are normally coined as a riot - those are all places where you also have documentation of police participation and being deputized,” she said.

No one in the white mob was prosecuted or otherwise punished for the massacre, the report said.

The massacre's aftermath

Within a week of the massacre, [at least 6,000](#) of the remaining residents were detained in internment camps. They were issued identification tags and remained at the camps – some for months – and could not leave without their tags and permission from white supervisors, the report said. Black residents never received any financial assistance after the massacre to rebuild. Some filed insurance claims or lawsuits, but none resulted in payment due to riot clauses, the report said. They were left to rebuild on their own.



— Crowds of people watching the fires on June 1, 1921 in Tulsa, Okla., looking from Cincinnati Ave. from 2nd St. to Detroit Ave. Department of Special Collections, McFarlin Library, The University of Tulsa

Fletcher's brother Hughes Van Ellis, 100, and a World War II veteran, said hi hard as his family recovered from the massacre.



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“We didn’t have much. What little we had would be stolen from us,” Ellis told the committee. “When something is stolen from you, you go to the courts to be made whole. This wasn’t the case for us. The courts in Oklahoma wouldn’t hear us. The devil courts said we were too late. We were made to feel that our struggle was unworthy of justice and that we were less valued than whites, that we weren’t fully American.”

Fletcher served white families for most of her life as a domestic worker. “I never made much money,” she said. “To this day, I can barely afford my everyday needs.”

The siblings, Lessie Benningfield Randle, 106, and some of the experts who testified called on Congress to provide reparations to the survivors and descendants of the massacre.





— Hughes Van Ellis, left, a Tulsa Race Massacre survivor and Viola Fletcher, second right, oldest living survivor of the Tulsa Race Massacre, testify before the Civil Rights and Civil Liberties Subcommittee hearing on "Continuing Injustice: The Centennial of the Tulsa-Greenwood Race Massacre" on Capitol Hill on May 19, 2021.

Jim Watson / AFP - Getty Images

“We are not asking for a handout,” Ellis said through tears. “All we are asking for is for the chance to be treated like a first-class citizen, that this is the land where there is liberty and justice for all. We are asking for justice for a lifetime of ongoing harm.”

That harm includes the city of Tulsa faulting Greenwood residents for the damage. “Let the blame for this negro uprising lie right where it belongs – on those armed negroes and their followers who started this trouble and who instigated it and any persons who seek to put half the blame on the white people are wrong,” the Tulsa City Commission wrote in a report issued two weeks after the massacre.

Shortly after the massacre, a grand jury was empaneled to prosecute the riot looting and arson charges. The all-white jury indicted more than 85 people, Black. Those indictments were largely dismissed or not pursued, according to the Watch report.



The final grand jury report agreed with the Tulsa City Commission that Black people were the main culprits. “There was no mob spirit among the whites, no talk of lynching and no arms. The assembly was quiet until the arrival of the armed Negroes, which precipitated and was the direct cause of the entire affair,” the grand jury wrote.

The case against Rowland was dismissed.

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NEWS

Tulsa's Greenwood district rebuilt after the massacre 100 years ago. Then came another blow.

Black Wall Street did, eventually, rise from the ashes and Greenwood enjoyed another heyday in the 1940s, but [integration and urban renewal](#) in the 1960s and the 1970s led to new declines the neighborhood was unable to fully overcome, Johnson said. The setback has only compounded since then as Tulsa remains largely segregated and riddled with racial disparities.

Greenwood is just outside of North Tulsa, which is mostly Black, while South Tulsa is a mostly white area. These days, more than 30 percent of North Tulsans live in poverty compared to 13 percent of South Tulsans, the report said. On average, North Tulsans live [14 years less](#) than South Tulsans. Black Tulsans [are three times more likely to face police brutality](#) in comparison to their white counterparts. Statewide, [43 percent of Black people own their homes](#) compared to 72 percent of white people.





— Vernon AME Church with a plaque commemorating the 1921 Tulsa Massacre, in Tulsa, Okla., on May 21st, 2021. Christopher Creese / for NBC News

Johnson said there are two main casualties of the massacre that contribute to these discrepancies and affect everyday life – a breach in trust between Black and white communities and the inability to transfer accumulated wealth.

“Many people in the white mob that destroyed the Greenwood community back in 1921 were deputized by local law enforcement. You have an incident like that, then the breach in trust is huge. The other thing that happened post-massacre – there are a lot of promises made by local leaders, these are white men, about rebuilding the Greenwood community, and they didn't really materialize. So, promises broken. So trust is a real lingering issue,” he said.

The other lingering issue is how **Black wealth is generally one-tenth of white wealth**. Johnson said the inability of Black people to accumulate wealth and transfer it intergenerationally is a root cause.

“Slavery was obviously a huge example of an inability to accumulate wealth – uncompensated labor,” he said. “But the 1921 Tulsa Race Massacre is an example of the inability to transfer wealth intergenerationally because of disruptors – some of these wealthy Black men, their wealth was lost in the massacre, and it was not restored.”

That’s why, Randle said, it is important for the survivors and descendants of the massacre to recoup some restitution.

“Justice in America,” Randle said, “is always so slow or not possible for Black people and we are made to feel crazy just for asking for things to be made right.”

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Randi Richardson

Randi Richardson reports for TODAY Digital and NBC BLK from New York.



NBCBLK

Howard U's housing issues aren't new. They've just hit a boiling point.

The historically Black school's students say they haven't seen enough action to fix the decades-old problem, while the administration says it won't budge until their sit-in ends.



— Howard University graduate and professional students protested in solidarity with undergraduates as part of the "Blackburn Takeover" at Howard University, Washington, D.C., on Oct. 20, 2021. Nicholas A Priest

Oct. 28, 2021, 2:27 PM EDT / Updated Oct. 28, 2021, 3:59 PM EDT

By Randi Richardson

A version of this article was published on Today.com.

The Howard University community was not surprised when undergraduate students [started occupying the student center](#) two weeks ago in protest against living conditions in residential halls.

The Washington, D.C., university, one of the nation's leading historically Black schools, has recently been under fire after mold was identified in at least 38 dorm rooms out of 2,700 total rooms on campus, a university official confirmed to NBC News. Students have also complained about rodents, flooding and other haphazard conditions. But both current students and alumni have raised concerns over the condition of some residence halls for decades.

In 2018, students occupied the administration building for nine days before reaching an agreement with university officials who promised to meet their demands, [according to NPR](#). And in 1989, up to 3,000 students occupied the administration building for almost a week over housing conditions and other issues, [according to The Washington Post](#).

Chandler Robinson, a first-year student who is part of The Live Movement, said protests in 2016 and 2017, in addition to 2018 and this year, have resurfaced the same issues. Robinson, her fellow student Channing Hill, a junior who's a part of The Live Movement campus organization that co-organized the sit-in at the Blackburn Center, and Yedidya Kefale, also a student, who said she was hospitalized for mold exposure on campus, said students have not seen enough action to fix the problems.



— Howard University students said even temporarily living outside in tents is better than living in the residential halls riddled with rats, mold and flooding. Courtesy Chandler Robinson

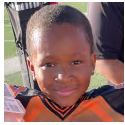
That's why a group of students has been occupying Blackburn University Center for two weeks now in a sit-in known as the "Blackburn Takeover." The students issued [a list of demands](#) via The Live Movement's Instagram. The demands include permanently [reinstating all affiliate board positions](#), a town hall with the school's president, legal and academic immunity and Howard leadership sharing a detailed housing plan that fixes the problems.

Howard President Wayne Frederick [released a statement](#) Tuesday morning saying the school has [already shared a detailed housing plan](#). He also called for the occupation to end.

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“There may be areas where we agree to disagree,” Frederick wrote. “That’s the nature of a vibrant community. However, Howard University’s proud tradition of student protest has never been – and can never be – invoked as a justification for tactics that harm our students. The current occupation of the Armour J. Blackburn Center is a departure from past norms. There is a distinct difference between peaceful protest and freedom of expression and the occupation of a University building that impedes operations and access to essential services and creates health and safety risks.”



— Students say residential halls regularly flood due to faulty pipes. [The Live Movement](#)

Frank Tramble, Howard's vice president and chief communications officer, said in a statement to "TODAY" that Howard's provost and general counsel met with some protest leaders Monday "and engaged in a discussion regarding their extended protest and a possible path forward. ... The university is willing to continue engaging in substantive conversations with our students regarding their expressed concerns, but the occupation of the Blackburn Center has to end before we agree to do so."

Howard has eight residential halls, [at least four of which are recently renovated](#). But students say the figures are misleading.

"The buildings themselves aren't in terrible condition. It's the maintenance of them," said Nira Headen, who graduated in May.

Howard students clash with campus security during protests over housing conditions



Hill said part of the maintenance discrepancy is not due to a lack of funding but the allocation of those resources, and "that affects the students." Like most schools, Howard receives annual federal funding and outside donations, [including \\$40 million last year from the philanthropist](#)

[MacKenzie Scott, the former wife of Amazon founder Jeff Bezos](#). Frederick said in his full statement that Howard has allocated [\\$2 billion toward completed and future renovation projects](#).

[President Joe Biden has also promised](#) increased funding to historically Black colleges and universities.

Frederick said, “The truth remains that all of our students deserve a best-in-class dormitory experience at Howard, and we will continue to do our best to ensure that they receive it. While there have only been a small number of documented facilities reports relative to our entire inventory of residence rooms, we are actively inquiring about unreported issues that may be in the residence halls by going door to door to interview and assist each resident.”

Still, Robinson, Kefale and Hill said students think Howard has been slow to move and unresponsive to the demonstration, other than to tell protesters to leave.

“Hopefully they understand that we are very serious in the fact that we are not moving,” Robinson said. “I think they have yet to take us seriously. I think that they see us as children. But we are young adults who are being exposed to hazardous conditions that can affect us for the rest of our lives.”

How alumni and professors are helping

Robinson said that some alumni are staying overnight in Blackburn in solidarity with the protesters, while other alumni have been vocal on Twitter in support of students.

[One alumni tweeted](#): “My beloved Howard University is on the wrong side of history this time around. Give these babies what we been asking for since I can remember stepping foot on campus in 2011.”



— Alumni and community donations have been funding tents and food for demonstrators, students said.

Courtesy Chandler Robinson

Brittney Cooper, a Howard alumni and gender studies professor at Rutgers University, [tweeted](#), “I love Howard and anyone who knows me knows this. And that is why I stand unequivocally with the students of #BlackburnTakeover and against any attempts by the admin to silence them. Student housing was an issue 20 yrs ago when I was there and for decades before. It has to change.”

Students say Howard has threatened them with legal action if they don't leave Blackburn and "TODAY" obtained videos of campus security physically intimidating protesters.

This sit-in is the latest happening. There was a cyberattack at the beginning of the semester that shut down Wi-Fi for one month. Kefale and Robinson said students are still behind in their classes and that internet access regularly goes in and out.

Between the sit-in and shaky Wi-Fi, professors are showing some flexibility. Robinson said some professors have started teaching their classes at the protest and that in general they're "very understanding" of the Wi-Fi situation because it affects them, too.



— Some Howard professors are teaching their classes at Blackburn University Center where the sit-in is happening. Courtesy Chandler Robinson

Marcus Alfred, a professor of physics and astronomy and chair of the [faculty senate](#), said in a statement to "TODAY" that the faculty organization is supporting students in a number of ways.

"We voted to recommend that the HU Administration and Board (among other things) address student housing, reinstate affiliate trustees, hold open town halls with students, and neither punish nor retaliate against student protestors," hed wrote in an email, adding that the senate has encouraged colleagues to offer as much academic flexibility to protesters as possible.

Howard [eliminated student, alumni and faculty affiliate positions](#) from the board of trustees in June, a move students say lacks transparency.

“Part of the issue is the university refuses to talk directly to the student body,” Hill said. “We have no students, alumni, trustees or representatives on the board. Who does the university even have to listen to? They’re not in a position to be accountable to the student body.”



— Moldy ceilings and other issues in residential halls inspired students to occupy Blackburn University Center since Oct. 12 to demand better living conditions. [The Live Movement](#)

Howard defended the removal of those positions in an Oct. 15 email sent to university students and employees and obtained by "TODAY."

“We remain committed to our decisions to update the board structure,” the email said, while adding that over 60 percent of board members are alumni and past elected student affiliate trustees who were not seated due to the pandemic can still serve their term. “The revised board structure, combined with our determination to broaden our community engagement will allow more – not fewer – voices to be heard.”

Among other demands, students want financial compensation since they are still required to pay the full cost of attendance.

Hill added, “Why is it that I’m paying \$48,000 a year, but can’t get a room without mold in it?”

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POLITICS NEWS

States revive push to crack down on protests after Capitol riot

Critics say the effort stems from the pushback to last summer's Black Lives Matter demonstrations.



— Police clash with then-President Donald Trump's supporters who breached security and entered the Capitol building Jan. 6, 2021. Mostafa Bassim / Anadolu Agency via Getty Images file

Jan. 31, 2021, 6:01 AM EST

By Randi Richardson

In the weeks since the [deadly Jan. 6 riot](#) at the U.S. Capitol, at least 13 states have taken up legislation to crack down on protests. The push, critics say, is a revival of broader anti-protest

efforts that emerged amid the Black Lives Matter demonstrations that rocked the country in the summer.

Lawmakers in Florida, Indiana, Mississippi, Nebraska, Arizona, Maryland, Minnesota, New Hampshire, North Dakota, Oklahoma, Rhode Island, Virginia and Washington filed bills that critics claim are using the violence at the Capitol to target social justice protests more broadly. Many of the bills are similar or identical to ones introduced in those states last year.

"These legislations came about as a result to push us over the summer," said Emmanuel Cannady, the co-founder of Black Lives Matter South Bend, Indiana. "There's a cloaking that's happening right now."

Since 2016, 15 states have enacted legislation to limit protests, [according to the International Center for Not-for-Profit Law](#), which tracks related state and federal legislation. A total of 17 states have pending legislation aimed at regulating demonstrations.

Ravi Perry, chair of the political science department at Howard University, attributed the sudden increase to the [historic gains Republicans have made in state legislatures](#) over the past two decades and their relationship with the Black Lives Matter movement. All of the bills were introduced by Republicans except for the one in Rhode Island.

"Two-thirds of the states are controlled by Republican governors and or Republican state Legislatures," he said. "And they are interested in cracking down on what they perceive to be the unruliness of Black Lives Matter protests."

The majority of bills use almost identical language and suggest similar penalties, most requiring third-degree felonies for property damage, injuring a person or obstructing roadways, second-degree felonies for destroying or toppling over monuments, and first-degree misdemeanors of harassment for confrontations in public spaces, such as confronting elected officials in restaurants. The lawmakers also propose hefty fines and mandatory jail sentences ranging from 30 days to four years depending on the offense.

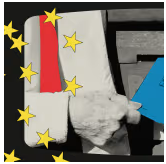
Florida, Indiana, Nebraska, Oklahoma, Virginia and Washington bills redefine a riot or unlawful assembly as three or more partaking in "tumultuous activity."

Mississippi, Missouri, New Hampshire and South Carolina bills expand stand-your-ground laws to include using deadly force against protesters if deemed necessary.

Arizona, Indiana and Mississippi bills strip state benefits, including scholarships, health care and unemployment or food assistance, from anyone convicted of protest-related crimes and bars

them from future state or local government employment.

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CONGRESS

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Cannady and his group's co-founder Jordan Giger said the new legislation does not surprise them. Republicans in Indiana previously told them it was coming down the pipeline.

“We’re going to continue to be vigilant,” Giger said. “When Black people begin to respond to oppression with protests and mass movements, the state becomes more punitive. We’ll just continue to be careful.”

Florida introduced its bill, which mirrors a proposal [that Republican Gov. Ron DeSantis first floated in September](#), on the night of the riot. At a Jan. 7 press conference, DeSantis framed the bill as a response to the riot and a way to prevent similar attacks.

“I hope maybe now we’ll get even more support for my legislation because it’s something that needs to be done,” he said.

Florida state Rep. Anna Eskamani, a Democrat, tweeted that [DeSantis](#) "is trying to re-write history & say his anti-protest bill is in response to what happened @ Capitol Hill. Lies. It’s about scoring political points off racial tension & consenting to uneven application of law based on skin color."

In an interview with NBC News, Eskamani cautioned that "conservatives look towards each other for inspiration. If this is passed in Florida, there's a very real concern other states will pass it." She added that the bill is "clear commentary" on Black Lives Matter because it seeks to penalize any efforts to reallocate resources from police departments and criminalizes protesters who remove or deface Confederate statues.

The bill passed out of committee Wednesday in a party-line vote, the first step in a long legislative process. Micah Kubic, executive director of the American Civil Liberties Union of Florida, said he was hopeful that some Republicans would oppose the bill, noting that there are already legal tools in place to address violence at protests.

"We can regulate behavior when it's violent and dangerous," he said. "But that's not what this is. This is about stopping people from speaking up, in particular for racial justice and democracy."



Randi Richardson

Randi Richardson reports for TODAY Digital and NBC BLK from New York.

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