

Why poverty and unemployment continue to fuel health inequities for the Black population in Kent County, Michigan

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According to [research efforts](#), public health scientists and researchers investigated the root causes of poor health and outcomes for many years and discovered that there are many structural, social, economic and environmental factors that impact a population's overall health. These factors include a population's access to quality education, health care, employment opportunities, affordable housing, transportation, healthy food and safe places to exercise. Unfortunately, Blacks are least likely to experience or have access to these crucial needs that support quality life and overall health. For this article, the Grand Rapids African American Health Institute ([GRAAHI](#)) will explore how poverty and unemployment may still be influencing health inequities for Blacks in Kent County, Michigan.

According to the United States (US) Census, nearly [26% of Blacks in Kent County](#) lived in poverty in 2021 compared to 6.5% of whites. In conjunction in 2020, [38% of Black children in Grand Rapids](#) lived in poverty compared to only 12% of white children. A similar theme occurred with unemployment in 2021, as [8.4% of Blacks in Kent County](#) experienced unemployment compared to just 3.7% of whites. Moreover in 2020, [15% of Blacks in Grand Rapids](#) experienced unemployment compared to only 3.7% of whites. These stark differences in poverty and unemployment between Blacks and whites have remained substantial for decades, wreaking havoc on the financial landscape of the Black community and the many areas attached to it.

Not having sufficient or equitable employment or income presents a myriad of problems in one's life. This affects decisions with seeking or not seeking health or dental care for preventative or treatment needs. It sways decisions when choosing adequate housing and the necessities for maintaining that housing. It influences a person's dietary habits or ability to afford healthy foods, when the majority of healthy foods are costly compared to cheap unhealthy foods. It impacts the educational capacities of families living in low-income areas without access to quality education and schools. It affects safety when living in impoverished areas that are known to have higher rates of crime, which indirectly reduces a person's desire to walk or exercise in their neighborhood. So evidently, it's safe to say that improving the employment or income-earning capacity of a population can have a widespread and positive impact on their overall health.

While Blacks in Kent County continually battle with poverty and unemployment, their rates for many chronic conditions remain troubling. Using data from the MI Department of Health and Human Services (MDHHS), Blacks in Kent County experienced worse rates of asthma, diabetes, cost prevented care, health care coverage, obesity and physical activity compared to whites from 2018-2020. Moreover using data from [GRAAHI's Health Equity Index](#), Blacks in Kent County also had higher rates of breast cancer mortality, disability, heart disease mortality, HIV, infant mortality, low birthweight babies, prostate cancer mortality, stroke mortality and teenage births compared to whites in the county. This sad song isn't new to researchers and organizations in the region, as many persist in their efforts to remedy these health conditions.

To make matters worse, the US is experiencing rises in inflation, interest rates, and price surges in food, gas, electricity, housing, rent and many other life needs. In addition, unemployment rates increased in the US and Kent County from 2019-2021, which is more than likely linked to the recent COVID-19 pandemic and people either quitting their jobs or being laid off for many reasons. With Blacks already

having the highest rates of unemployment in 2019 and 2020 in Kent County, the pandemic couldn't have helped. However, the efforts of many in the county may be showing, as the Black unemployment rate dropped to 8.4% in 2021 from 10.1% in 2020, which is also lower than their 2019 rate of 9.1%. (US Census) This slight decline may not be significant, but it may be a sliver of hope for better days ahead.

Moving forward, it will take boldness, persistence, compassion and community for the people of Kent County to reverse the concurring health problems in the Black community. Will policymakers truly attack these issues with piercing legislation that directly benefit Black residents in Kent County, ensuring they receive the employment opportunities, educational tools and housing needs to live a high quality of life? Will schools in the county ensure that Black children are being afforded a high standard of education, giving them tools to create their own opportunities in the future? Will health care organizations meet the challenge to educate, treat and rehabilitate Black patients and residents with the highest standards of care? For it will take many systems, programs and individuals to reduce the burden of poverty and unemployment in the Black community, alleviating the chronic health conditions that plague many in the region. To some, it may seem improbable, but for GRAAHI and others, it certainly is possible.