

Brief Harm Report for Champaign County

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According to “24/7 Wall Street” in June 2023, Champaign-Urbana ranks #20 in the country in the list of worst cities for Black Americans. An index of eight variables measuring racial socioeconomic gaps was used to determine the rankings. “It is important to note that this list does not rank the cities where Black Americans face the worst conditions, but rather the cities where the socioeconomic gaps between the white and Black populations are the largest.”

<https://247wallst.com/special-report/2023/06/14/the-worst-cities-for-black-americans-9/>

We present here only a sample of the history of Champaign County, but despite its brevity, the breadth and depth of laws and policies that have defined life for African American people in this community are clear.

Criminal Justice

In 2022, the City of Champaign’s Black population was 17.9 percent. Yet, it constituted more than 56 percent of traffic stops. In Urbana, Black people represented 18.3 percent of the population. However, they made up nearly 46.5 percent of that city’s traffic stops. [WBEZ, Chicago’s National Public Radio station and the Investigative Project on Race and Equality]

Over the last five years the average percentage of jail bookings to the Champaign County Jail is 57 percent African American. [Champaign County Sheriff's Annual Reports,

<http://www.co.champaign.il.us/sheriff/publicdocuments.php>]

Shamar Betts was convicted of inciting a riot at Market Place mall after the murder of George Floyd in 2020, sentenced to 4 years in federal prison and charged \$1.6 million restitution for the damages caused by the riot, which would require him to pay 50% of his disposable income every month until the restitution is paid off.

<https://publici.ucimc.org/2023/11/the-1686170-slap-the-shamar-betts-case-continues/> He’s now working with a lawyer to try to appeal his restitution and expunge his criminal history from his record. He was released from prison to parole in June 2023.

<https://ipmnewsroom.org/he-used-education-to-escape-a-violent-childhood-today-he-wants-to-help-kids-in-similar-situations/>

Education

It was not until 1966 when the Ellis Drive Six, parents of Urbana students, pushed the Urbana school district to desegregate. Despite being 12 years after the ruling of Brown v. Board of Education that declared that state-sanctioned segregation of public schools unconstitutional, this was the first Illinois school district in the state to implement a desegregation plan. While the segregation in Urbana was not required by law, it occurred de facto.

The Illinois State Board of Education’s 2022-23 school report card shows unacceptable achievement gaps between Black and white students. In Urbana just 2% of Black third graders are grade-proficient in mathematics compared to 24% of white students, remaining at 2% for Black eighth graders and dipping to 21% of white students in eighth grade. One percent of Black students are proficient in language arts in third grade compared to 16% of white students.

<https://www.illinoisreportcard.com/District.aspx?source=trends&source2=achievementgapiar&Districtid=09010116022> In Champaign, 7% of Black third graders read at grade level compared to 42% of white students in third

grade; 7% of Black students in 8th grade test at grade level in language arts compared to 46% of white eighth graders. In Champaign math scores reveal that only 10% of Black third graders test at grade level compared to 49 % of white students; by 8th grade the scores are one percent for Black students and 33% for white students. <https://www.illinoisreportcard.com/District.aspx?source=trends&source2=achievementgapiar&Districtid=09010004026>

With discriminatory housing practices in the county it is not an accident that Black students are likely to be stuck in an inferior public school than their white counterparts.....Because of the property-tax funding models for public schools, the through line from racism to inequitable public education outcomes couldn't be clearer. [“A Road Map for Repairing the Harm: the History of Racially Restrictive Covenants.” Ammons, Aaron, The Public I, April 1, 2024.](#)

Employment

During the 1950s and 1960s, African Americans fought for equal opportunity in employment across the nation. In Champaign-Urbana, the Champaign-Urbana Improvement Association (CUIA) was founded to demand greater job opportunities for African Americans, resulting in one of the most influential local civil rights victories known as the J.C. Penney Boycott. African American Heritage Trail <https://ccafricanamericanheritage.org/trail-stop/penney-picketing/>

“The racial oppression of white supremacy was expansive and was prevalent and punishing for employment opportunities. Regardless of qualifications, Black workers were systematically discriminated against in hiring, where the only jobs made available were lower- paying manual labor, which was less secure and segregated. In 1968, the unemployment rate in Champaign-Urbana was 2.6 percent for whites, and between 12 and 20% for Blacks, depending on the season. Especially oppressive was the lack of employment opportunities for Black professionals. Local Black residents, having completed a college degree, were unable to find employment in Champaign-Urbana and were forced to leave the area to find appropriate employment. As late as 1968, there were no local Black doctors, lawyers, firefighters, and only recently had bona fide Black police officers been hired. The lack of Black professionals meant that the Black community faced systematic discrimination, with no alternative local options, from professions pertaining to wealth, health, public safety, and the law.” [Source?](#)

Healthcare

As in other parts of the country, African Americans in Champaign County are disproportionately suffering from myriad health issues, such as high infant mortality and various cancers. According to the Illinois Department of Public Health, in 2019 Champaign County was second in the state in infant mortality (rate of 9.4), surpassing Chicago (6.3) and East St. Louis (9.3). The infant-mortality rate among African American women is 11.4 compared with 5.5 for Caucasian women. <https://dph.illinois.gov/data-statistics/vital-statistics/infant-mortality-statistics.html>

Housing

The discriminatory housing practices of redlining in Champaign County negatively affected Black families in a multitude of ways. When looking at a map of Champaign-Urbana overlaid with a mapping of race, the effects of these practices are apparent, resulting in segregation, lower housing values, and inadequate infrastructure, for example. The Champaign County Clerk's office has uncovered 18 local subdivisions that deployed restrictive covenants to keep Blacks out of certain neighborhoods. Federal policy that limited home loans in segregated neighborhoods was a contributing factor. Examples of the suffering resulting from this discrimination include the presence of predatory lenders, food deserts and higher crime rates in segregated predominantly Black neighborhoods.

“In the mid-20th century in contrast to the mostly White residents in neighborhoods south of University Avenue, banks would not lend, realtors would not sell, and landlords would not rent to African American people. African American households were forced to live in the North Side, at the time unincorporated Urbana, in substandard homes. Without bank lending for new construction or improvements, homes were often little more than shacks, lacking basic heating, kitchen facilities, and plumbing. These areas were intentionally outside of municipal boundaries, making utilities and public investment inaccessible..... It must be emphasized that local segregation was not produced by accident, but through persistent discrimination at every level, including banks, developers, realtors, neighborhood associations, landlords, and cities. Today, zoning ordinances perpetuate segregated housing. ”

<https://urbana.ccgisc.org/portalurbana/apps/storymaps/collections/60fa01f4adad4f7d9c72cec7a3ae5a93?item=5>

African Americans were admitted to the University of Illinois from the beginning in the late 1800's but were not permitted to live on campus until a token integration of two women in 1945. Housing discrimination at the University of Illinois continued to exist without much abatement into the early 1960's. Community members generously provided rooms to African American students and Black fraternities and sororities also provided some housing. Bethel AME and other churches offered a positive environment and opportunities for students. <https://www.champaigncountyhistory.org/single-post/2018/02/24/african-american-student-housing-at-the-university-of-illinois> See also “A Home of Their Own”, produced by the Office of the Chancellor, UIUC, 2017. 15 minute video <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GGcwWMFQL8o>

Neighborhood Amenities and Safety

During World War II (1943), two rooms in the basement of Lawhead School were used as a Servicemen's Club, organized by community members for African American soldiers who were not welcomed in the USO at Chanute Field. The creation of the Douglass Center (DC), partially funded by the neighborhood, was related to this failure of other institutions to provide adequate recreational facilities for African American residents. Then, as Burns reported, “Despite the efforts of the DC Steering Committee and its advocates, in September of 1974 the park board approved a plan that did not comply with any of the plans developed by the Community Design Center, and the old DC was slated to be demolished in April 1975. In fact, “compromises were made and the plan that would have satisfied all 36 program needs was dropped in favor of a plan that included only 15. Michael S. Burns. (2013) “The Rhetorics of Community Space: Critical Events in Champaign-Urbana's Black Freedom Movement.” PhD dissertation, University of Illinois

African Americans going to the movies were required to sit in the balconies. Many restaurants would not serve African Americans until the 1960's and services such as haircuts were restricted. “In 1953, All-American halfback J.C. Caroline is illegally denied a haircut in a campus barbershop because of his race—despite the fact that his photo is on display in the shop's front window.” Being Black at Illinois

<https://uiaa.org/2023/04/17/being-black-at-illinois/>

Terrorism

The Ku Klux Klan maintained a significant local presence, operating out of the Illinois Theater in Urbana and holding events with upwards of 3,000 members at a time when the County's population was less than 60,000. In the 1920's the Illini Chapter of the Klan included representatives from University of Illinois fraternities.

<https://archives.library.illinois.edu/features/kluklux.html>

<https://www.smilepolitely.com/opinion/the-klan-in-cu-and-beyond/>