Black men face the highest levels of unemployment, underemployment, and low-wage jobs in the United States [1]. This population is exposed to fewer opportunities and must confront racist federal policies, structural inequality in employment aid programs, and the harmful effects of deindustrialization. To dismantle the historical and contemporary barriers that exclude Black men from the workforce, the Durham Success Summit must:

Black male unemployment has remained stagnant at a level twice the rate of white men since 1972 [2]. Many politicians cite the “Human Capital Theory,” blaming the 2:1 employment gap on lower education among Black Americans. However, over the past 45 years, the increase in education rates in Black communities have had no correlation with improved employment outcomes. Therefore, policymakers should look beyond the Human Capital Theory and shift focus to local policy, civil rights enforcement, and structural trends [3].

Durham in particular must prioritize its Black residents, who make up 39% of the city population. In Durham, white people out-earn all other groups and occupy most high-wage jobs, despite not being a majority group in the population [4]. This discrepancy stresses the importance of considering the key barriers to labor force participation in Black men.

**Barrier 1: Systemic Racism in Federal Policies**

Ineffective anti-discrimination laws and limited protection for service workers are two federal policy areas which perpetuate the unemployment gap between Black and white men. Workplace discrimination increases job turnover, stress, and depression and lowers job productivity and satisfaction [5]. Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 is the main law addressing discrimination in the workplace. Under this statute, individuals are responsible for reporting cases of discrimination to the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) or a state or local anti-discrimination agency [6]. However, in 2021, 56% of the 61,331 people who submitted a complaint to the EEOC faced retaliation from the perpetrator [7]. As a result, minority groups tend to not speak out in the first place or leave their jobs, halting advancement in the career ladder [8]. Shifting to preventative anti-
discrimination laws where organizations are responsible for stopping discrimination can help reverse the current power imbalance.

Lack of protections for service workers compounds the issues of anti-discrimination laws. Following the Jim Crow Era, Black men were confined to service work in agricultural and domestic jobs [9]. During the New Deal, progressive labor reforms such as collective bargaining rights, a federal minimum wage, and improved working conditions did not apply to service work [10]. Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 continued this limited scope of benefits; protections only apply to employers with 15 or more employees and do not extend to workers classified as independent contractors [5]. As a result, 14% of workers, who are disproportionately people of color, cannot file a complaint to the EEOC or gain protection from harassment by their employers [5]. Consequently, Black men lack worker power and are still overrepresented in low-paying service jobs, as the top five occupations for Black men all pay less than the median hourly wage in the US [2].

Barrier 2: Unequal Access to Employment Aid & Post-Carceral Support

Redlining, gerrymandering, unfair hiring practices, and other racialized implementations of the law dictate where Black Americans can live and work. The disruption of COVID-19 only amplified this structural exclusion. In 2021, over 1 in 5 Black employees worked in either the “leisure and hospitality” or “wholesale and retail trade” fields [2]. These face-to-face, front-line jobs led to increased infection and indefinite unemployment, disproportionately putting Black men out of work [2]. Support systems such as the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act of 2020 (CARES) only minimally benefitted Black employees. CARES aimed to expand the Pandemic Unemployment Assistance Program in predominantly Black job markets. However, because states determined their own eligibility requirements and benefit amounts, the program only helped 13% of unemployed Black workers, while 26% of their white counterparts received benefits. The South, which consists of the states with the highest Black populations in the nation, offers the lowest unemployment benefits of any U.S. region [2].

The lack of consistent support and the systematic exclusion of Black communities force families into a cycle of generational poverty and neglect [10]. This cycle is further perpetuated by the carceral system—though only 22% of the North Carolina state population is Black, Black inmates account for over half of North Carolina’s prison population [11]. These inmates cannot work to support their families and when released, do not receive support from the state to reenter society and overcome denied rights and opportunities.

Barrier 3: The Harmful Effect of Deindustrialization

Deindustrialization is an economic trend that preserves inequalities in labor force participation. Discriminatory housing practices forced Black men into inner cities, leaving low-skill manufacturing jobs as a key source of work. In 1970, manufacturing companies employed the greatest proportion of Black workers in 10 cities across the country [12]. However, as companies increasingly outsourced low-skill labor out of city centers and overseas, industrial jobs became less available. By 2000, Detroit was the only one of the 10 cities where manufacturing was still the greatest employer of Black men [12]. This new model of work sets the standard of working long hours in a high-paying job, creating greater contrast between skill and service work. Outcomes of this contrast include increased unemployment, a larger wage gap, and increased incarceration rates for low-education, low-skilled workers [13]. Less educated Black men experience these effects more severely than less educated White men, creating a cycle of greater rates of crime, welfare dependency, and poverty [13].

Policy Options to Address Labor Force Barriers

Federal policy action has already been taken to advance racial equity in the labor force. President Biden’s American Rescue Plan included many provisions that invested in Black communities, such as allocating $40 billion in federal funds to equitable workforce training and expanding the Registered Apprenticeship program [14]. The Registered Apprenticeship program equips individuals with paid work and on-the-job learning and mentorship, alleviating unemployment barriers by providing direct, structured opportunities for professional development. The President also signed an executive order to address “longstanding wage disparities” in the federal workforce, which is disproportionately made up of Black workers [14].
THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT should implement policies targeting specific labor force barriers, such as the carceral system and ineffective anti-discrimination laws. These interventions can directly help bridge the employment gap for Black men, and city legislators can use these federal policy options on the local level by tailoring them to fit the unique needs of the Durham community.

TO MITIGATE INEQUITIES FROM THE CARCERAL STATE, second-chance hiring policies can give individuals with criminal records opportunities for employment. Ban-the-box policies, which prevent employers from asking about criminal history on initial job applications, have already been successfully implemented in 37 states and over 150 localities, including North Carolina [15].

TO REFORM ANTI-DISCRIMINATION LAWS AND ADDRESS STRUCTURAL INEQUALITIES, provisions from the Biden Administration should be further expanded. More widespread apprenticeship programs and affordable job training programs can be rolled out to target Black men in skilled trades. Increased funding to Historically Black Colleges and Universities and the Minority Business Development Agency will support and advance education, Black-owned businesses, and ultimately Black communities.

POLICY MAKERS MUST PASS LAWS to secure collective bargaining rights for workers and prevent coercive practices such as forced arbitration clauses and NDAs. Initial actions include creating more union jobs and eliminating Section 14(c) of the Fair Labor Standards Act, which allows employers to pay sub-minimum wages. Higher and living wages should be instituted, particularly in industries and occupations with lower wage floors.

FOR THE DURHAM COMMUNITY IN PARTICULAR, establishing youth programs is a crucial policy effort. Project Learn, a national program within the Boys & Girls Clubs of America, reports that 87% of students missed fewer school days than students not within Project Learn [16]. Summer youth employment programs aim to reduce crime and incarceration rates [17]. Providing Black boys in Durham with such opportunities will positively impact the workforce by increasing education and crime prevention in the long run, directly reducing barriers for Black men in the workforce.

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