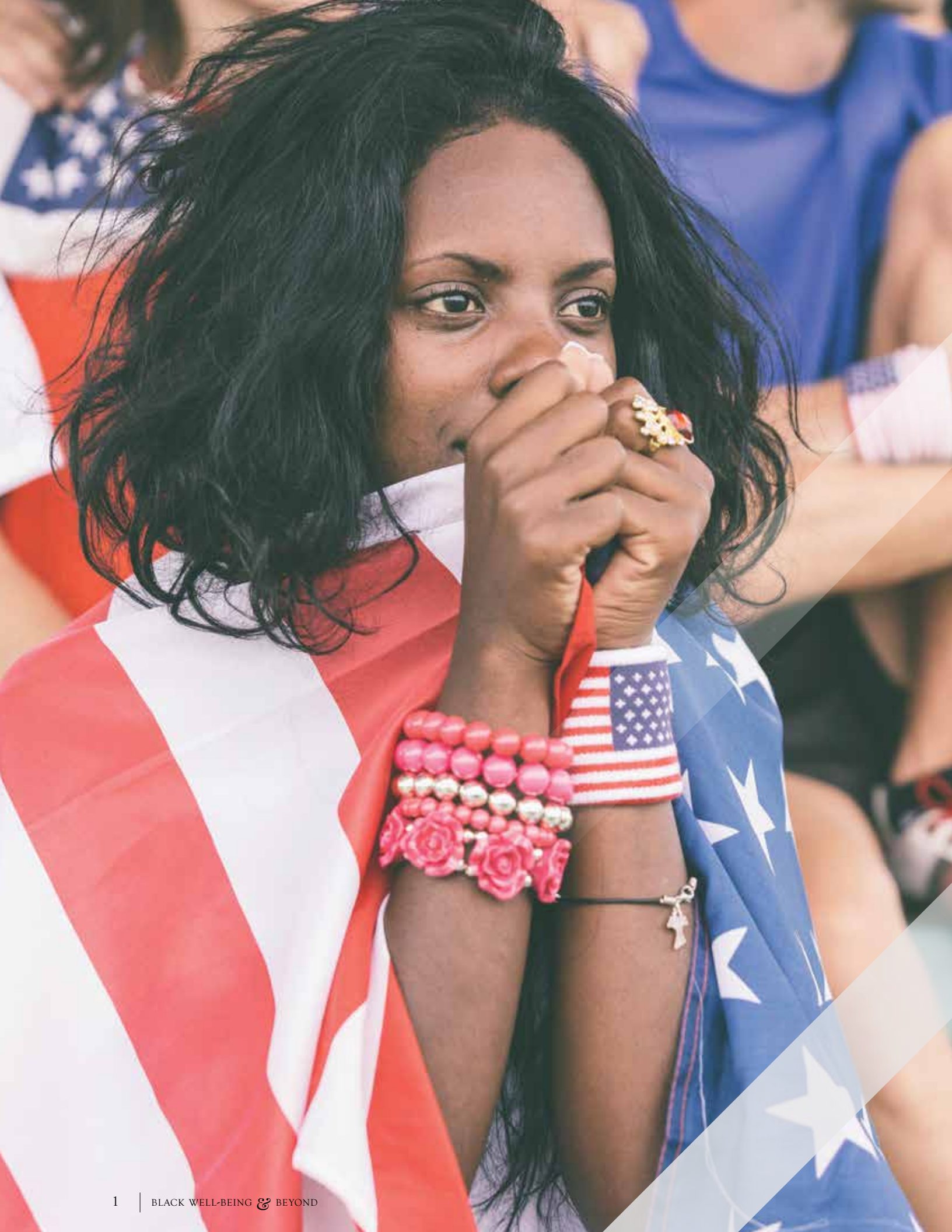




— CREATING —  
AN  
EQUITABLE  
FUTURE  
IN WASHINGTON STATE

20  
15

BLACK WELL-BEING & BEYOND



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## CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

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A representative and well-functioning democracy depends on the people it serves making their voices heard and taking action on their own behalf. When communities have an equal opportunity to engage in the decision-making processes that affect their daily lives, problems are more likely to be solved, communities are more likely to thrive, and public policies are more likely to succeed.

A history of discrimination, combined with the effects of lower economic and educational opportunities, has kept Black people from being equally represented at all levels of decision making. Exercising our right to vote, for example, is the most direct way to engage in our democracy. But policies intended to suppress the Black vote—like poll taxes, literacy tests and, more recently, overly restrictive voter identification requirements — taint our history.<sup>77</sup> In addition, laws that restrict felons from voting have reduced political power in the Black community, one of the many consequences of harsher sentencing policies stemming from the War on Drugs, which disproportionately sent Black people to prison for drug felonies.<sup>78</sup>

Beyond voting, a lack of social and economic resources puts Black people at a significant disadvantage in a political system influenced so heavily by money, which may discourage, or outright prevent, Black people from running for office.<sup>79</sup> How campaigns are financed significantly hinders Black representation in government, and is a key area where reform is needed. Greater representation in government, as well as in the private and nonprofit sectors, can lead to more racially just decision making, but a larger conversation about the root causes creating such large gaps in wealth and power is needed to ensure equity in policymaking moving forward.<sup>80</sup>

## OBSTACLES TO EQUITY IN CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

For public policies and programs to truly reflect the needs of Black Washingtonians, barriers to civic engagement must be removed. In particular, policies that bolster the inclusion of Black people in politics and policymaking need to be a priority for policymakers.

### Wealth inequality and the campaign finance system.

Nationally and in Washington state, the political system is increasingly dominated by wealthy people and corporations, whose interests differ considerably from those of average Americans. Wealthy people, for example, tend to favor policies that will increase their wealth—like lower taxes on capital gains and tax breaks for corporations—and are less likely to favor policies that support the middle class, like adequately funding K-12 education, public transportation, and affordable health care.<sup>81</sup> As a result, the overwhelming influence of money in politics fuels greater inequality and undermines the very premise of a well-functioning democracy—equal representation.

For Black people, whose median net worth (\$6,314) is far below the median for the United States as a whole (\$68,828),<sup>82</sup> and minuscule compared to the net worth of most wealthy people and corporations, the obstacles to equal political participation are virtually insurmountable. The wealth gaps for Black people are rooted in systemic barriers to economic and education opportunities that should be removed to improve overall conditions for the Black community. But removing those barriers alone will not elevate Black representation in politics and policymaking until the laws that allow wealth to dominate United States and state politics are reformed.

**Voter disenfranchisement.** A person convicted of a felony in Washington state who is currently serving time in a correctional facility, or is on parole or probation, is unable to vote. The disproportional impact of the War on Drugs on the Black community has disenfranchised a greater share of Black voters with a felony record—four percent compared to just one percent of felons overall.<sup>83</sup>

## MAKING PROGRESS: KEY GAPS TO CLOSE

In Washington state, legislators who are majority white, male, and older are making decisions for a rapidly diversifying electorate that looks much different than them. A political system that fails to guarantee equal representation for people from all social and economic backgrounds is harmful to civic engagement, as is the disproportionate impact of voting restrictions for people convicted of a felony.

### IN WASHINGTON STATE, BLACK PEOPLE:



**Are less likely to be registered to vote.** Among eligible Black voters, 68 percent are registered compared to the state rate of 83 percent.<sup>84</sup>



**Have almost no representation in the state Legislature.** The lack of the Black community's access and influence in politics and policymaking is evident in our state Legislature, where there is just one Black legislator out of 147 total.

# 11x

The median net worth of the average U.S. household is 11 times greater (\$68,828) than the average Black household (\$6,314). In a political system so heavily influenced by wealth, it is nearly impossible to ensure equal representation for a strong democracy.



# 4:1

Four percent of Black people with a felony have lost their right to vote, compared to an average of one percent for the felon population as a whole.

## DIALOGUE FOR AN EQUITABLE FUTURE

Equal representation is essential to a strong democracy, and is critical to advancing equity in all areas of Black well-being. Below are a set of questions policymakers should explore with the Black community to improve civic engagement and advance racial equity in policymaking.

1. What barriers to civic engagement exist for Black immigrants and refugees? Are they similar or different to native-born Black people?
2. In addition to addressing voter disenfranchisement, how can we increase voter registration and turnout in the Black community?
3. What are some community-driven strategies to create a more just and equitable political system? Until we have a more equitable political system, how can we overcome barriers to ensure that Black voices are represented in the state Legislature?
4. What other aspects of our political systems need to be changed to increase representation and elevate the voices of the Black community in Washington state?

