



Blacks in the labor force

Emily Rolan and Mitra Toossi | February 2018

February is Black History Month, when we celebrate the contributions of Blacks or African Americans. In 2016, Blacks accounted for nearly 1 out of 8 people in the labor force. And the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) projects that share to increase slightly from 2016 to 2026 as the labor force continues to become more diverse.

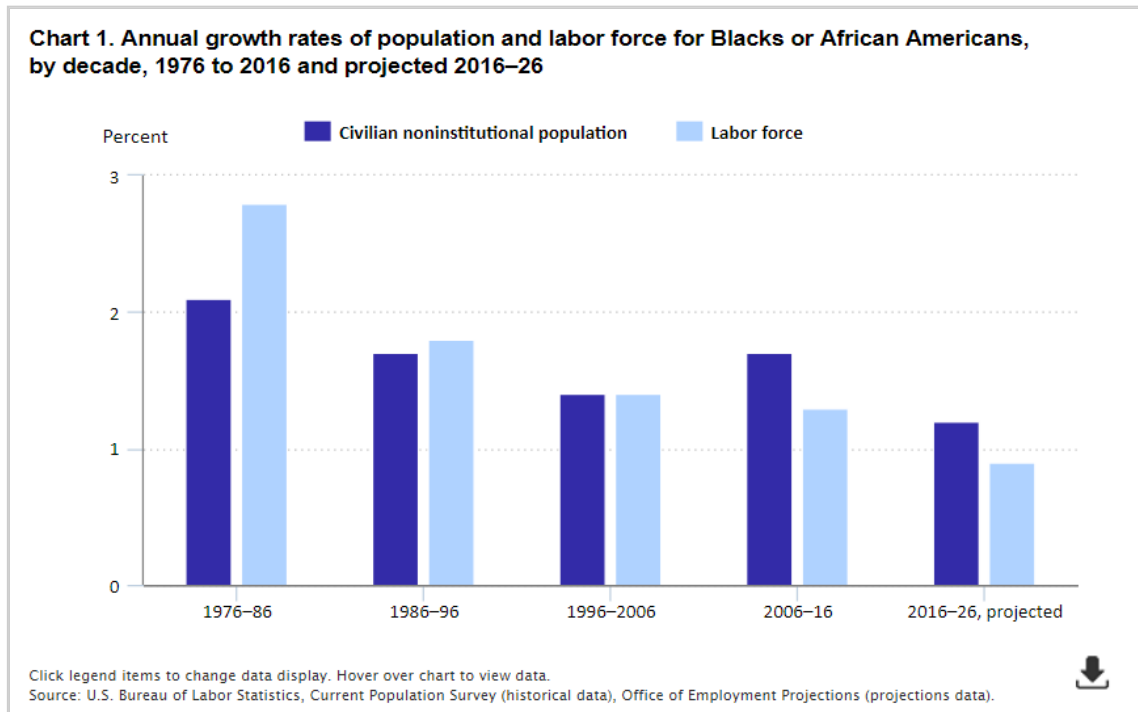
This article provides an overview of Blacks in the labor force, including their participation rates, educational attainment, and employment in occupations.

Changes in population and in the labor force

In 2016, there were 253.5 million people ages 16 or older in the U.S. civilian noninstitutionalized population. Of those, about 31.9 million (12.6 percent) were Black. That number is projected to grow to nearly 36.0 million, or 12.9 percent of about 278.2 million people, by 2026.

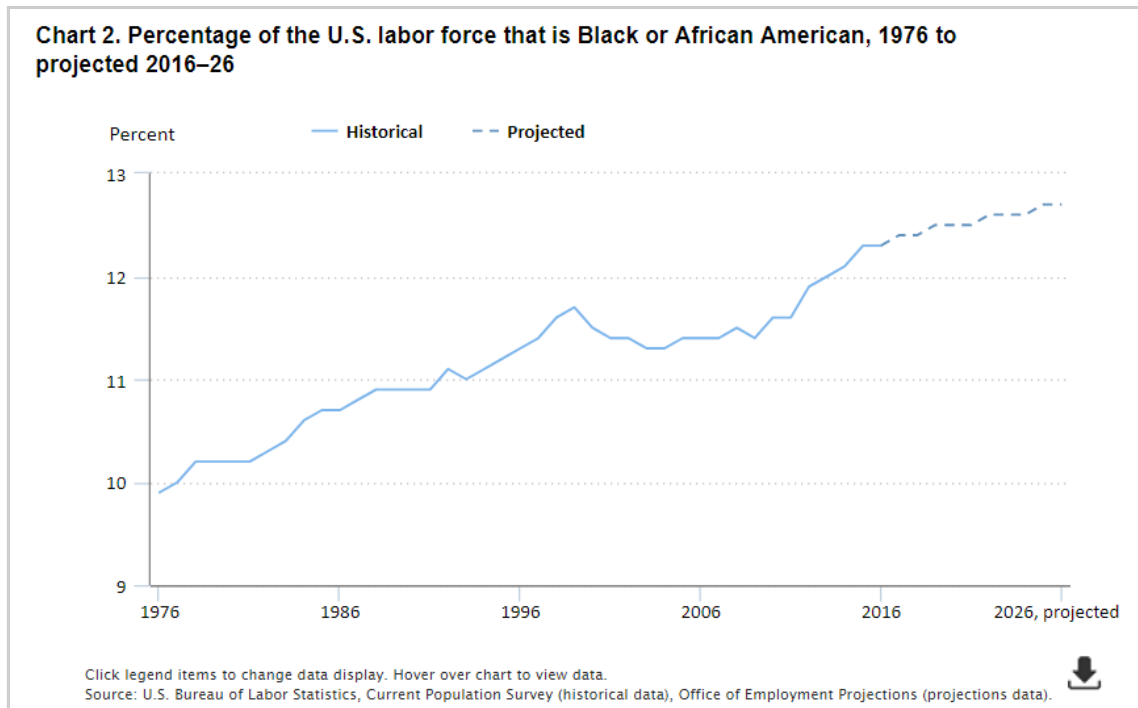
The labor force—noninstitutionalized people ages 16 and older who are not in the military and who are working or looking for work—is a subset of the population. The number of Blacks in the labor force is projected to increase from 19.6 million in 2016 (12.3 percent of the 159.2 million total) to 21.6 million in 2026 (12.7 percent of 169.7 million total).

As chart 1 shows, Blacks’ labor force growth outpaced their population growth in the 1976–86 and 1986–96 decades, leveling off and slowing after that. This group’s annual growth rates in both population and the labor force are projected to be slower over the 2016–26 decade than over the four previous decades.

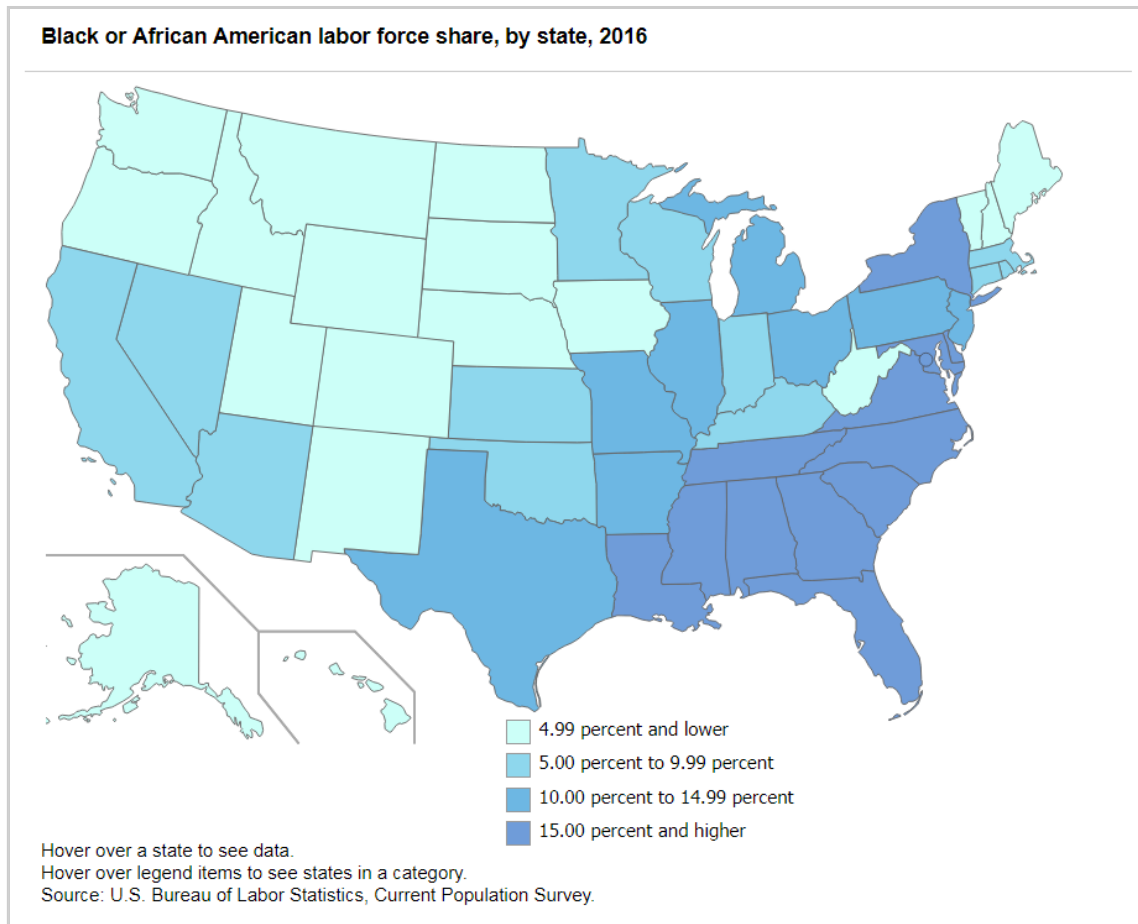


Labor force share

Although Blacks’ labor force growth rate is not as rapid as in past decades, their share of the labor force has increased: from 9.9 percent in 1976 to 12.3 percent in 2016. This increase is expected to continue, reaching a projected 12.7 percent by 2026. (See chart 2.)

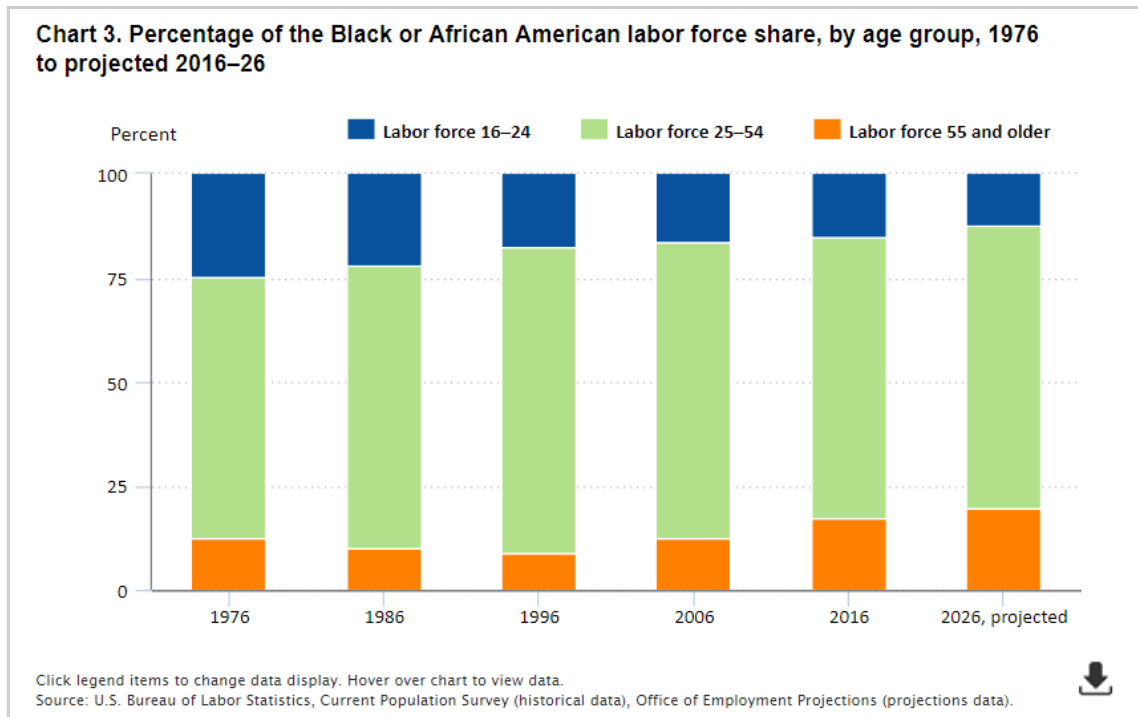


The Black share of the labor force varies by geographic location. In 2016, the Black share of the District of Columbia labor force was 37.2 percent, the highest share held by Blacks as a percentage of the total labor force in the United States; in Idaho and Montana, Blacks represented less than 1 percent of the labor force. (See map.)



Aging labor force, lower participation rates

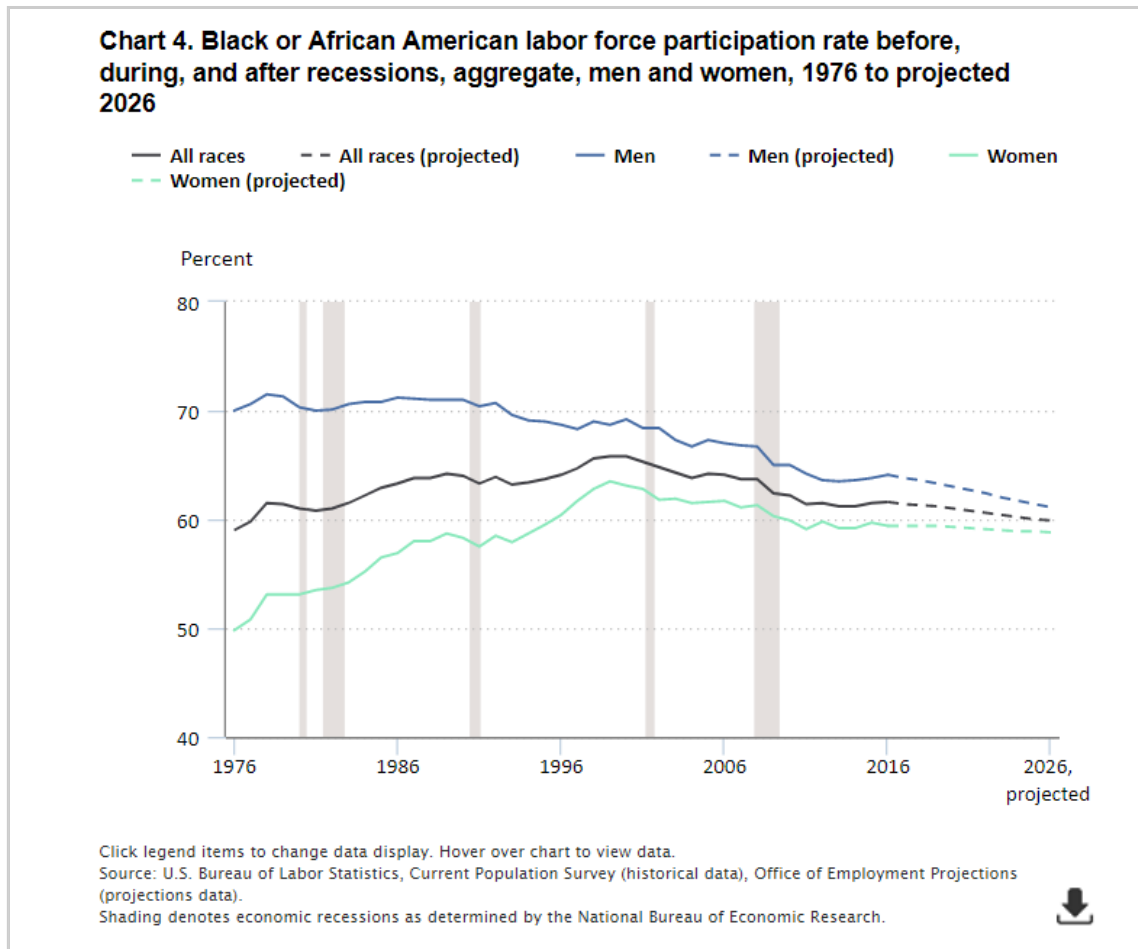
The Black share of the labor force by age group continues to shift. The labor force share of Blacks ages 55 and older was larger in 2016, and is projected to be larger in 2026, than that of the 16- to 24-year-old group. The reverse in age group share was true over the previous four decades. (See chart 3.)



As chart 3 shows, about one-quarter of Blacks in the labor force in 1976 were in the 16- to 24-year-old group. The share of this youngest labor force group of Blacks declined to 15.2 percent in 2016, and it is projected to continue declining, to 12.4 percent, in 2026.

The share of the oldest labor force groups—those ages 55 and older—is expected to account for 19.5 percent (nearly 1 in 5) Blacks in the labor force in 2026, up from 17.3 percent in 2016 and 12.5 percent in 1976.

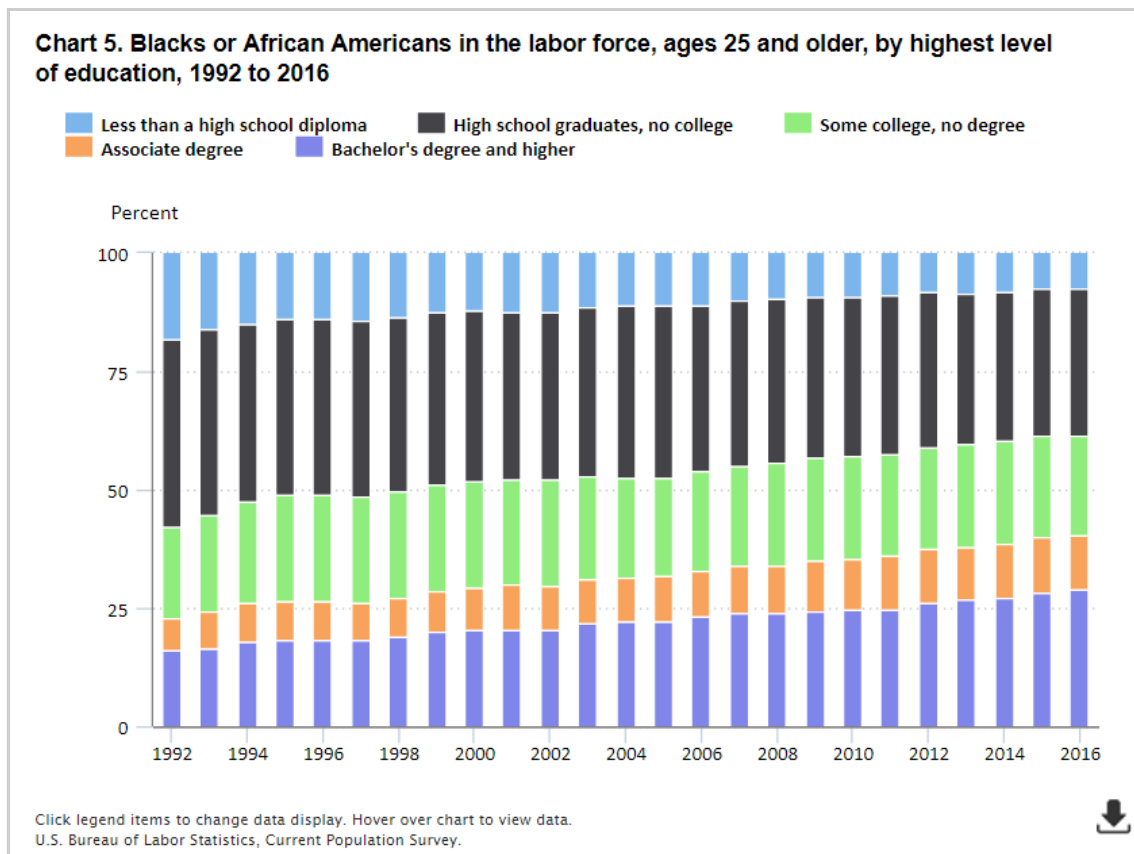
The overall labor force participation rate for Blacks, like the rates for all race groups, is projected to decline by the year 2026. But as chart 4 shows, the rates differ for men and women.



Historically, Black men have had a higher labor force participation rate than Black women. However, the gap narrowed as the participation rate for Black women increased throughout the 1980s and 1990s. Participation rates for both genders witnessed declines during the early 2000s, before flattening out from 2012 to 2016. The men’s rate is projected to decline at a faster rate than women’s from 2016 to 2026, further narrowing the labor force participation gap between the sexes.

Educational attainment

Like the overall rate of educational attainment for the nation as a whole, the rate for Blacks has risen in recent years. As chart 5 shows, the shares of Blacks who earned an associate’s degree or a bachelor’s or higher degree have risen over the past 24 years while shares with a high school diploma or less have fallen.



The sharpest increase in attainment is at the level of bachelor’s degree and higher. In 1992, about 16 percent of Blacks in the labor force had at least a 4-year degree. That share grew to 29 percent by 2016. Meanwhile, the share of the Black labor force with less than a high school diploma has consistently declined over the same period, from 18 percent in 1992 to about 8 percent in 2016.

Occupational employment

Black workers were employed in a variety of occupations in 2016. [Office and administrative support occupations](#) had the largest concentration of Black workers than did any other occupational group: about 14 percent, compared with 12 percent of workers as a whole. (See table 1.)

Table 1. Occupations with the largest concentration of Black or African American workers, ages 16 and older, annual average 2016



Occupational group	Share of Blacks or African Americans	Share of total workers
Office and administrative support occupations	13.8%	11.7%
Sales and related occupations	9.7	10.5
Transportation and material moving occupations	9.5	6.1
Management occupations	7.2	11.5
Food preparation and serving related occupations	6.5	5.6
Production occupations	6.1	5.6
Healthcare practitioners and technical occupations	5.9	5.9
Healthcare support occupations	5.4	2.3
Personal care and service occupations	5.1	3.8
Education, training, and library occupations	5.0	5.9



Source: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, Current Population Survey.

For all workers, the office and administrative support group is projected to have the largest number of occupational openings annually, on average, from 2016 to 2026. Most of those openings are projected to arise from workers who leave the occupation permanently, rather than from job growth.

For more information

Find detailed data and information about hundreds of occupations in the [Occupational Outlook Handbook \(OOH\)](#). Along with projections data for the OOH, the BLS Office of Employment Projections prepared the population and labor force projections in this article.

Labor force data, including those on participation rates, educational attainment, and occupational employment of Blacks, are from the BLS [Current Population Survey](#), a monthly survey of about 60,000 households that provides data on employment and unemployment in the United States.

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