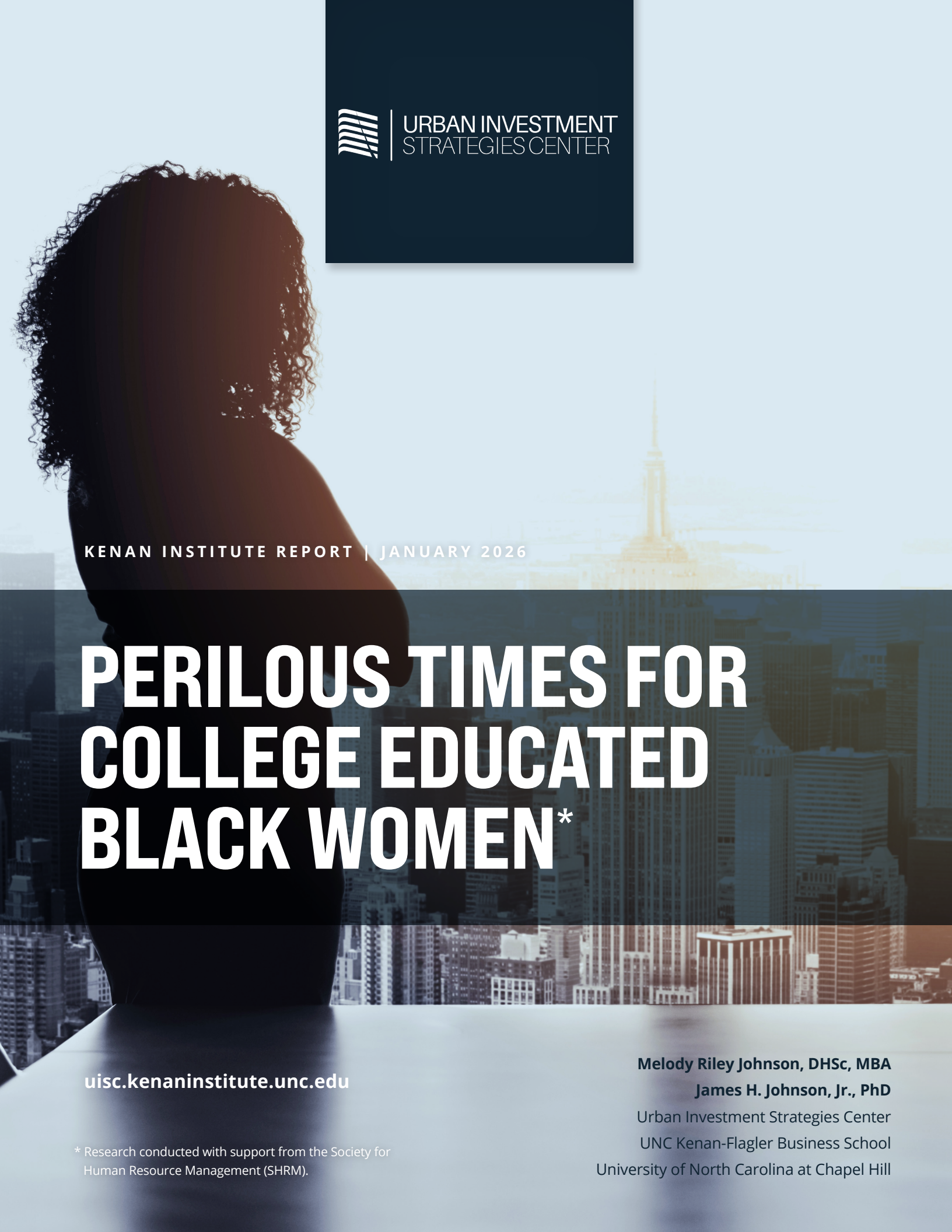

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PERILOUS TIMES FOR COLLEGE EDUCATED BLACK WOMEN*

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Melody Riley Johnson, DHSc, MBA
James H. Johnson, Jr., PhD
Urban Investment Strategies Center
UNC Kenan-Flagler Business School
University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

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Perilous Times for College Educated Black Women

One of the fastest-growing group of college educated women in the United States is also among the most economically vulnerable. Black women were responsible for one fifth of the nation's college educated female population growth between 2020 and 2024. Among women between the ages of 25 and 64 with a four-year degree or higher, Black women ranked second behind Hispanic women, who accounted for almost half the net growth (45%), and above Asian and non-Hispanic White women, who were responsible for 18% and 14% of absolute growth, respectively. And while the population of all college educated women increased by 4.7 percent, the college educated Black female population increased by 9.2 percent between 2020 and 2024 (Table 1).

Table 1: Absolute and Percent Change in the College Educated Female Population by Race, 2020-2024 (absolute change in thousands) *

Race/Ethnicity	2024 Population	Absolute Change 2020-2024	Percent Change 2020-2024	Share of Net Growth
ALL RACES	37,297	1,692	4.7	100.0
NON-HISPANIC WHITE	23,989	244	1.0	14.4
BLACK	4,292	361	9.2	21.3
HISPANIC	4,250	766	22.0	45.2
ASIAN	4,240	306	7.8	18.1

Source: Current Population Survey, Annual Social and Economic Supplement, 2020 and 2024. *Women between the ages of 25 and 64 with a four-year degree or higher.

The Paradox

However, in contrast to college educated women of other races, and despite rapid growth and reportedly some of the highest labor force participation rates in the country (Cooper & Opoku-Agyeman, 2025), Black women have experienced the brunt of recent job loss in the U.S. economy (Velshi, 2025). Between August and September of 2025, according to Bureau of Labor Statistics, the unemployment rate for Black women increased more rapidly (from 6.7% to 7.5%) than the unemployment rate for White women (from 3.2% to 3.4%) (Joint Center, 2025). In absolute numbers, more than 300,000 Black women exited the labor market during this period (Asare, 2025).

Two explanations have been advanced for the sharp uptick in Black female unemployment. The first is that the disproportionate concentration of less than college educated Black women in "volatile sectors like retail and hospitality makes them 'canaries in the coal mine' in the current economic downturn" (Cooper and Opoku-Agyeman, 2025). The second is that the downsizing of federal government departments and agencies as well as the dismantling of DEI programs and equity focused initiatives in both public institutions and private sector organizations have disproportionately impacted college educated and professional Black women (Haider & Mason, 2025).

While plausible, the veracity of these arguments must await future releases of data from the Census Bureau and the Bureau of Labor Statistics. Meanwhile, a substantial body of prior research offers insights into a set of longstanding challenges that will require major workforce and workplace as well as healthcare delivery accommodations to ensure college educated and professional Black women can successfully compete in the U.S. labor market moving forward (Sasson & Haywood, 2019; McCoy, 2023; Colen, Pinchak & Barnett, 2020; Omowale, Mangum, & Slatton, 2024; Okoji, 2022; Riley Johnson, 2024).

Role Management & Health Challenges

Studies confirm that balancing multiple societal roles (e.g., as sole or primary household breadwinner, motherhood, and/or caretaker for aging family members) while simultaneously navigating competitive workplace dynamics exact an especially heavy toll on the health and wellbeing of Black women (Riley Johnson, 2024). Often, the agency necessary to meet and exceed performance expectations is not fully available to professional Black women in work environments (COQUAL, 2019; Riley Johnson, 2024). And the negative health outcomes of these barriers and constraints are alarming.

Among the U.S. female population, Black women experience health issues earlier in life than women of other race/ethnic backgrounds and on average are 7.5 years older biologically than White women 49-55 years of age; carry the highest mortality for all cancers combined; bear the greatest burden of hypertension, stroke, heart failure, and coronary artery disease; and four out of five are obese or overweight (CDC,2022; Chinn et al, 2021; Kanchi et al, 2018; Ebong & Breathett, 2020). Further, and most disconcerting, research confirms these inequities hold true irrespective of Black women's socio-economic status, meaning advanced levels of educational attainment, well-paying jobs with benefits, and residing in "safe" neighborhoods or zip codes do not protect the health of Black women (Garovic and Kattah, 2022; Assari, Lapeyrous, & Neighbors, 2018).

Simply put, Black and Whites do not share the same health benefits of advanced education and increased incomes. In fact, research on the self-reported health status of various demographic groups has demonstrated statistically that Blacks experience "diminished returns" from advanced education, which exacerbates health gaps for a population that is already significantly predisposed to health risks (Assari & Zare, 2024).

Emblematic of this reality, the Pregnancy Related Mortality Ratio (PMPR) is 5.2 times higher for college educated Black women than their college-educated White counterparts (Petersen, et al, 2019; also see, Hill, Rao, Artiga, & Ranji, 2025; St. Catherine University, 2021). As declared by the CDC and confirmed by other research, these inequities are not solely due to behavioral or biological differences but stem from systemic issues, including historical devaluation of Black bodies and implicit racial bias in health care (see, for example, Wamsley, 2021; Macias-Konstantopoulos, et al, 2023).

Workplace Challenges

Making matters worse, bias does not just reside in healthcare. It also is endemic to many workplace cultures, as revealed in a recent exploratory study of what it is like to be Black in corporate America and other work environments (COQUAL, 2019). Among the study's key findings:

- Black women (16%) were more likely than White women (2%) to feel someone of their race would never achieve a top position at their company.
- Black women (69%) were more likely than White women (16%) to feel Black employees must work harder to advance.
- Black women (35%) were more likely than White women (20%) to believe people at their workplaces are afraid to address bias when it occurs.

Conversely, the study also revealed that:

- Black women (30%) were less likely than White women (40%) to have access to senior leaders at work.
- Black women (35%) were less likely than White women (41%) to report managers that give them growth opportunities.

When combined with the often-repetitive cycle of proving value by taking on high risk, high stress assignments, these attitudes, or realities for some, create unparalleled obstacles to success and advancement (Saunders & Hyter, 2019).

Research also confirms that these conditions often diminish Black women's ambitions for upward mobility in organizations (Lui, 2025). And in many cases the absence of appropriate HR accommodations undergird professional Black women's exits from their organizations or careers--and in some instances, from the workforce altogether (Riley Johnson, 2024).

Sometimes the exits are voluntary. In the COQUAL (2019) study, for example, Black women (36%) were more likely than White women (27%) to express intentions to leave their current company within two years. In other instances, the exits are involuntary; that is, professional Black women are forced to leave for alleged poor performance when in reality their ability to perform at a high level is severely limited or constrained by a host of personal and/or household challenges and work-related health issues that may not be evident or visible in routine workplace interactions (Johnson, Appold, & Bonds, 2025b).

Entering 2026, numerous organizations are adopting practices championed by the Department of Government Efficiency (DOGE), such as doing more with less, enforcing return-to-work policies, heightening focus on profit and loss as well as employee performance metrics, and revising compensation policies (Stewart et al., 2025). This, along with the elimination of DEI practices, is a strong signal that there will be fewer workforce accommodations leaving workers to make the choice to comply or leave. According to Needleman and Hornstein (2025), the message is "Bend the knee or go work somewhere else… get on board or quit." Ultimately, this scenario will lead to increased workplace anxiety, burnout, and possibly depression.

Stewart et al. (2025) reported speaking with ten workers in the Tech space who shared that colleagues have begun taking mental health leaves to get rest.

Recent data indicates that among cognitive impairments observed in the working-age population, anxiety is the most prevalent, affecting 52% of individuals (Table 2). This confirms that unyielding environments will bring added pressure to an already cognitively impaired, burdened population. "Cognitive impairments are defined as problems with a person's ability to think, learn, remember, use judgement, and make decisions. Reported impairments range from communication deficits--difficulty understanding or being understood---to reports of feeling down, depressed, or hopeless, among others" (Johnson, Appold, & Bonds, 2025a).

Table 2: Cognitive Impairments, U.S. Working Age Population, 2025

Percent with Impairment	Indicator	Absolute Number
7%	LIMITS IN UNDERSTANDING OR BEING UNDERSTOOD	17,730,089
33%	DIFFICULTY REMEMBERING/CONCENTRATING	85,583,353
52%	FEELING ANXIETY	134,583,262
42%	NOT ABLE TO CONTROL/STOP WORRYING	108,579,469
35%	LITTLE INTEREST/PLEASURE IN DOING THINGS	92,074,228
38%	FEELING DOWN, DEPRESSED, OR HOPELESS	99,500,641
38%	FEELING LONELY	98,280,278

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, HTOPS, February 2025.

All employees will be vulnerable in such settings and may face difficulty adjusting. Many Black women as evidenced by the earlier shared COQUAL data already find professional settings challenging to navigate. The aforementioned hardline ultimatums will create more navigational issues given 60.2 percent of Black households are headed by women (Goodman et al., 2021). Due to financial obligations many may be forced to conform or bend the knee, bringing additional stress to the equation.

Recommended Actions

The challenges that college educated Black women face accentuate the urgent need for an all-hands-on deck approach to successfully nurture, grow, and develop the U.S. workforce of the future (Johnson, Appold, & Bonds, 2025a). Three recommendations are offered here.

First, to reduce health inequities among women, the U.S. health care system and its providers must demonstrate a much higher level of sensitivity and unwavering commitment to specifically addressing the unique health care needs of Black women. That includes having culturally competent staff with the active listening skills to "hear" and "respond" to the expressed concerns and needs of Black female patients (Riley Johnson, 2024). Additionally, employers must challenge the myth of meritocracy

and hold leaders accountable for creating inclusive environments where trust and respect permeate (COQUAL, 2019); in turn lowering anxiety, reducing stress and stress related conditions such as hypertension. More than 50% of Black women suffer from hypertension (Kalinowski et al, 2021).

Second, and more broadly, given the impact of ongoing turbulence and uncertainty on college educated Black women--and U.S. individuals and households in general, government, K-20 education system, and other public and private sector leaders should mandate that their organizations conduct pulse surveys like the Census Bureau's monthly Household Trends and Outlook Pulse Survey (HTOPS), which is designed "to efficiently collect data on emerging social and economic matters facing U.S. households" (U.S. Census Bureau, 2025). At the organization or firm level, the pulse survey should be administered quarterly and designed to identify and monitor barriers, constraints, and challenges that affect employee morale and performance.

Such surveys, as we have explained elsewhere (Johnson, Appold, & Bonds, 2025a), are necessary because many of the challenges that college educated Black women, and other employees face or experience fall into a category we define as iceberg demographics. That is, like the 90 percent of a freshwater iceberg that is below the water line, many of the forces that shape or affect employee morale, behavior, and performance may not be visibly apparent or evident in routine encounters. In fact, they may be misconstrued as signs of disinterest, disengagement, or incompetence (Johnson, Appold, & Bonds, 2025a).

Iceberg demographic workforce and workplace barriers can exist at the person-level (e.g., cognitive impairments and autoimmune diseases like rheumatoid arthritis and lupus) or the household level (e.g., food insecurity and/or threats of eviction or foreclosure) (Johnson, Appold, & Bonds, 2025a, b, c). In the current era of ongoing turbulence and uncertainty, pulse surveys will enable organizations to not only assess the frequency of such barriers and constraints. They also will afford organizations the opportunity to demonstrate empathy and compassion by developing and implementing accommodation policies, programs, practices, and procedures that are responsive to employee needs (Johnson, Appold, & Bonds, 2025c). Employers are advised to think twice before using a "get on board or quit" approach to boost efficiency and growth. Such tactics may lead to negative feelings within the organization and in the marketplace, which could ultimately harm future workforce development when the market shifts back in favor of employees (Stewart et al., 2025).

Properly executed, pulse surveys can lead to data-driven human resource management strategies and policies that reduce costly employee turnover (i.e., quits and terminations) by improving employee morale, health, well-being, and sense of belonging in workplaces (Johnson, Appold, & Bonds, 2025a,b,c,d). By introducing these data-driven strategies, organizations can establish supportive frameworks that encourage greater engagement among Black female employees and the wider workforce.

Finally, higher education institutions must do a better job of equipping Black females—indeed all graduates—with the requisite business and professional communication skills that employers are demanding in today's turbulent and uncertain global business environment. To paraphrase Mahin & Johnson (2025), communication is not fluff, it is performance infrastructure, a core operating asset required for organizations to "groove on the ambiguity" that characterizes business and society today. Particularly for Black women, deploying best in class communication and self-advocacy skills will likely reduce stress induced health conditions often associated with the pressures of navigating workplace dynamics and role conflicts; and, by extension, enhance their ability to perform at high levels in today's ever-changing business environments.

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