



Black Youth Achievement in Milwaukee

Prepared by Data You Can Use

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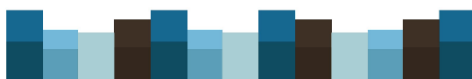


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“Milwaukee’s Black youth is a strength. The future generation is the one that is telling us what they need, and our job is to listen.” – Data Chat participant

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Introduction

Milwaukee consistently remains one of the most segregated cities in the United States, largely stemming from historical redlining and systemic disinvestment. This legacy has contributed to inequities in health, education, and employment outcomes for neighborhoods with large Black populations. Black youth in particular often especially experience a lack of resources and opportunities. While acknowledging the deep-rooted and systemic nature of these challenges is vital, it is equally essential to explore the “bright spots” in the data – the areas where Black youth are excelling. To truly understand how the data intersects with life experience, it's imperative to look beyond the available quantitative data and listen to the stories from Milwaukee's Black youth, as well as the mentors, teachers, parents, and other adults who work with them. By building on the successes, the insights, and strengths that emerge through these conversations, the Milwaukee community can more effectively champion a vision of equity, resulting in better health, education, and employment outcomes for Black youth.

About the data and data chats

Using data from the U.S. Census American Community Survey (ACS) and the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction (DPI) tool WISEdash, several indicators across a variety of topics were selected to examine Black youth achievement in Milwaukee. For the purposes of this project, Black youth were defined as individuals from the ages of 6 through 24. The indicators selected relate to population and wellness, education participation, and continuing/ post-secondary education (See Appendix for all indicators as they were presented in the slides). Using a model of small, focused conversations called “[data chats](#)”, groups of about five to fifteen individuals were convened by partner organizations that regularly work with Black youth in Milwaukee. Participants were compensated for their time and expertise.

The data chats provided an opportunity for participants to discuss how the data reflects their unique experiences and to consider possible solutions for issues that surfaced. In addition to capturing participants' reflections about the quantitative data, participants shared their ideas about what achievements aren't highlighted in the data, and shared recommendations about how to further develop resources that successfully support Black youth in Milwaukee, and to identify where change is needed.

In April 2023, sixty individuals participated in eight Black Youth Achievement Data Chats. This report highlights the main themes that emerged through these data chats. Data chat participants were all over 18 years old and represent a variety of ages and demographics, though participants' race or age was not explicitly requested or otherwise tracked. Participants all had direct experience with Black youth in Milwaukee.

About this report

This report identifies the themes that emerged during the data chats by sharing the stories and experiences of participants in their own words, while protecting their anonymity. The presentation materials used in the data chats include a slide deck and a script. The slides including the data are included as an appendix to this report. These materials were also shared

as part of a follow up with partners, with the intention that they could replicate the process as other opportunities to distribute the data emerge.

Participating partners

Data You Can Use relies on community partners to connect us with opportunities to convene residents. We are grateful for the enthusiastic participation and support of our partners from the following organizations:

- Black and Latino Male Achievement (BLMA)
- Boys and Girls Club of Greater Milwaukee
- Kellogg PEAK Initiative
- Lead2Change
- Mentor Greater Milwaukee
- Milwaukee City Year
- Milwaukee Succeeds
- PEARLS for Teen Girls

Acknowledgements

Contributions to this report were provided by Data You Can Use staff: Amy Rohan, Dr. Victor Amaya, Danya Littlefield, and Hannah Bessenecker. Technical assistance through the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and the Urban Institute was provided by Jake Cowan and Kathryn Pettit as part of the National Neighborhood Indicators Partnership.

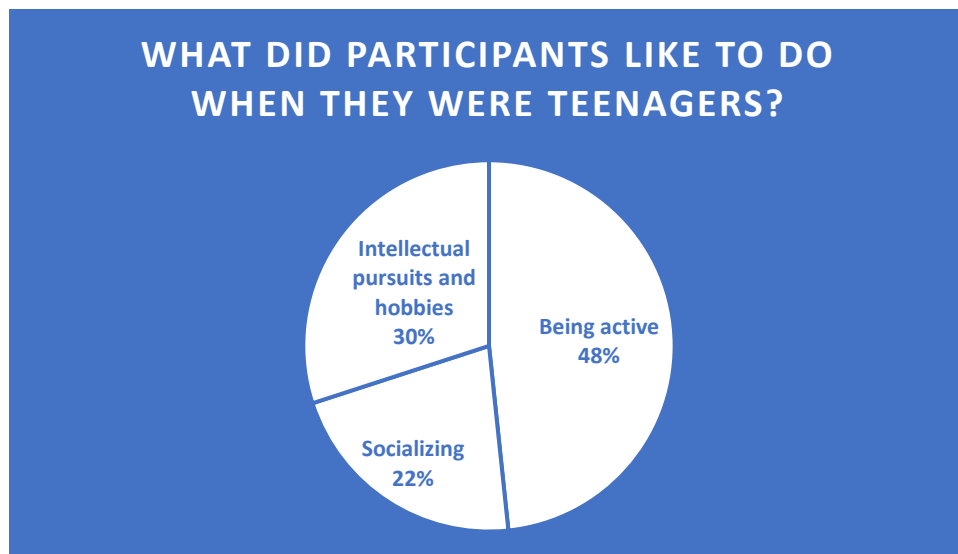
A special thank you to Nate Deans, Erin Fisher, Dionne Grayson, Clintel Hasan, Melinda Jansen, Kristin Kappelman, Paula Ky, Dr. Stephanie Maney-Hartlaub, Kari Nervig, Lanelle Ramey, Olivia Reel, Adriana Salgado-Santiago, and Commodore Williams for their coordination and support in bringing together extraordinary data chat participants.

For more information about this report, contact Amy Rohan at amy@datayoucanuse.org

Black Youth Achievement in Milwaukee – Themes and Quotes

Favorite Activity

By way of an introduction, participants were asked to share their favorite activity as teenagers. Their responses suggest that, despite generational differences and opportunities, young people are consistent in what they like to do – be active, socialize, and pursue hobbies and interests. Basketball was the most popular activity, with 20% of participants claiming this as their favorite activity.



Population Trends

The data shows that Milwaukee's **Black youth population has been declining** over the last ten years, while there **are more Black youth living at or above the poverty level** in Milwaukee. Both trends reflect national data but are at a higher rate locally. **(See Appendix, Slides 1 and 2)**

- "This data surprises me a lot. Is everyone being counted accurately?"
- "I feel like a lot of Black teens are being taken away and incarcerated."
- "It would be interesting to know how we compare [in terms of population] to other similar metro areas, as opposed to the whole United States."

The data shows that **Black teen pregnancy rates have gone down** dramatically over the last ten years. Participants suggested that Black youth seem to understand the difficulties of having kids as teenagers. As a result, they are trying to have more control over this aspect of their lives and putting off parenthood. **(See Appendix, Slide 3)**

- "I think [the lower teen birth rate] is due to more awareness due to sex education. Also, if you see your parents or grandparents struggle that also helps to make a conscious decision to make better choices."
- "This generation is becoming the wiser about making good decisions, based on what they witnessed, so they are choosing not to have kids. They see how their parents struggle or the experience of taking care of their brothers and sisters."
- "There is a new mindset about taking care of yourself first as a young person - wanting money for yourself and not wanting to pay for a kid if you get pregnant."

Discussion questions

- What cities or geographies should Milwaukee be compared to when it comes to the Black Youth population?
- How would incarceration data impact our understanding of changing demographics?

Mental health

Participants highlighted barriers to mental health services such as a **lack of culturally competent care** for Black youth, **social stigma and cultural norms**, as well as **stressors and traumas** that are especially common experiences for the Black population. **(See Appendix, Slides 4 and 5)**

Lack of culturally competent care and opportunities

- "There have to be more therapists that understand the Black experience."
- "Look at MPS and the school to prison pipeline. Black kids are not allowed to complain and show what we feel."
- "Why would I want to go to a social worker? I'm already in the system and I have to watch out for what I say. That plays into adverse childhood experiences. Our experience is tough because it is not expected, and they don't know how to deal with us."
- "What is available for youth to do in the City of Milwaukee? The city is geared towards adults, a drinking city. There are no teen clubs, places for them to go, they don't have an outlet."
- "There is a survey that we would take every year. I wonder if that is where this [mental health] data came from. The survey was intrusive, invasive, and triggering and there were no professionals in place to support the students that were triggered."

Social stigma and cultural norms

- "Generally speaking, in the Black community is not a normal thing to go to a counselor, so we keep our things inside and go through that difficult time on our own. That needs to be advocated for us more."
- "Black people are not allowed to have mental health issues that we can talk about."
- "I feel like the mental health epidemic is even worse in the black and brown community. Nobody really wants to talk about their issues or feels like they can talk to anyone. It's still looked at as a negative, with stigma, even after the pandemic."
- "It is hard to find services from people that look like us. Culturally are kids are taught to not be expressive, cry, show feelings ... I'm breaking that cycle, and I tell my kids it is ok to cry. We have to teach our kids that therapy is good."

Stressors and trauma

- "Now social media is available, and everyone is seeing you. That is a lot of pressure. At school you might have one or two bullies and in social media you have tons."
- "I think that due to shootings or drive-bys things have become normalized, but the trauma is still there."
- "I would say that the unfortunate exposure to violence, whether they witnessed it or it impacted their family, is also a mental trauma experience. And all this when you are already dealing with poverty and other obstacles. It adds to all the trauma."
- "Mental health in Black youth is at a crisis point in terms of the exposure. It is constant. It is not one person you know; it is several."
- "Trauma is a really big thing right now. I have three kids in my 3rd grade class who have lost a parent in the last year."

Discussion questions

- What type of support is available for Black youth facing trauma?

- What are the partners' recommendations for the ways that counseling and mental health care can be more supportive of black youth?
- How can existing resources change to demonstrate more cultural competence?

Homelessness

The data shows that **Black students experiencing homelessness has decreased** by about 40% over the last five years. Participants raised questions about why the data might show this downward trend and were generally skeptical that Black student homelessness was in fact less common. **(See Appendix, Slide 6)**

- "Is the homelessness decrease because of an actual decrease, or is it due to a change in the definition of how homelessness is defined?"
- "I noticed [homelessness decreased] during the pandemic year. In general, we report homelessness through the school social worker and during that time that was difficult to do."
- "In my opinion that was a reporting issue and I expect that number to be more than what is being reported."
- "How many of the homeless youth are LGBTQ? It is hard to find it because Black people do not talk about it."

Discussion questions

- What support is available for homeless students and their families?

Attendance and graduation rates

The data shows that **Black student enrollment in Milwaukee Public Schools (MPS) decreased** between 2016 and 2021 and **attendance rates went down** during the 2020-21 school year. This occurred even as **Black students made up a larger percentage of their graduating class**. Participants felt that the **Covid pandemic** played a large part in attendance and graduation rates for Black students and illuminated and exacerbated the **inequities between MPS and suburban schools**. **(See Appendix, Slides 7, 8, and 9)**

Attendance and the pandemic

- "Tracking attendance during Covid was counting students that signed in a minimum of five minutes on the computer."
- "After the stimulus package ended, I know I couple of kids that never went back to school because they had to work and support their families."
- "I wasn't going to put my son on public transportation. MPS [Milwaukee Public Schools] changed their bus transportation requirement. That was a reason for the [lower] attendance rate also."

- "I have seen students ask, 'how do I graduate the fastest'? So, they choose alternative educational pathways. Especially the ones that are tired of school. They want to be out the quickest."

Technology and virtual learning

- "What happened was that Covid happened. Everyone had to go to virtual. If I'm kid, I rather not do that. There are also areas of Milwaukee in which students didn't have access to technology, or Wi-Fi, or parents that could support them in that virtual world."
- "I did not like online school. I hated it. Sometimes Wi-Fi was not working or getting in the classes was difficult. The teachers didn't have the knowledge to lead a class online."
- "Some people did not have the Internet or laptop or computer to log in."
- "It was difficult for students to be on the computer for seven hours."

Inequities in education

- "It took months for Milwaukee Public Schools to get the technology for students. The need in the inner city was so much greater than suburbs. Students that were given technology also didn't get the latest technology, they got whatever was available."
- "I'm curious to know how many Black students are incarcerated during each year. What did they do to get incarcerated and what is the process for continuing their education?"
- "Some families chose to move their kids to go to districts outside of Milwaukee just so they could go to school in person because MPS was not providing that opportunity."
- "We have an anti-Black mentality in our schools and the way schools are funded."
- "Not all our teachers are bad but sometimes they give up on the kids too fast."
- "In the city of Milwaukee there is a vibe about the selective high schools; if kids don't go to those schools, then they don't have the resources."

Discussion questions

- How can the experience of Black youth in Milwaukee during the past three years influence future planning and strategy in Milwaukee Public Schools?
- What is specific about the experience of Black youth in Milwaukee schools, as opposed to other students, that should be considered by school leadership?

After high school

Participants suggested that Black youth have **doubts about the value of attending a traditional 4-year college**. The data shows that Black student **participation in Career Technical Education programs jumped** in the 2020-21 school to three times the participation rate of the year before. **Entrepreneurship** was highlighted by many participants as an area of growing interest as Black youth are drawn to the possibility of more creative freedom and autonomy in their professional pursuits. **(See Appendix, Slides 10 and 11)**

Doubts about the value of traditional college pathways

- "Black youth are exiting the traditional ways of participating in the workforce and creating their own spaces."

- “When I graduated from high school I was lost. I didn’t know what to do, I’m still trying to figure it out. We are taught things at school that we might not need.”
- “Going to college during Covid was not good. It was stressful.”
- “What about the wage gap? Why are Black people going to go to college if I’m going to make less money than my White counterparts?”
- “Jobs during college were not guaranteed so we had to find our own. Some of the students were probably first generation - who is going to help them with FAFSA, resume and all that?”
- “Kids do not want to have student loan debt.”

Career Technical Education and apprenticeships

- “There are more programs for apprenticeship. I heard a kid say, ‘I want to be a welder’. I would not have heard that in the past. It is hard to get those jobs, but once you get them, it is good.”
- “After the pandemic, people finally had permission to pursue something else beyond college. It became just as valid to be a plumber or an electrician than to be a doctor or a lawyer.”
- “I think there is an intentionality about who they target – ‘you are not smart enough so here is an opportunity to make you money right away’ - and getting people in the workforce. They need to diversify anyway. I feel like there should be a dual mission -tech school and college.”

Entrepreneurial pursuits

- “I see many of our youth go into entrepreneurship. They’d rather make money than rack up debt and pay thousands of dollars for school. They want to be their own boss. My daughter is 16 and she has a business - jewelry and clothing. There is not tons of support for black owned businesses and it is disheartening at times, but I keep telling her to push.”
- “There are a lot of Black, young entrepreneurs.”
- “How many of the students were getting help with financial aid during Covid? That is why many students decide to go work or become entrepreneurs.”
- “I’ve seen a lot of students with their own clothing line. I think that’s something very unique to this generation. People are putting themselves out there.”

Discussion questions

- How do changing ideas about 4-year college and technical education impact Black youth in Milwaukee?
- How are we currently supporting Black youth entrepreneurship?

Black youth resiliency

Milwaukee’s Black youth face a variety of notable and unique challenges – facing caretaking and financial responsibilities at a young age; shootings and other types of neighborhood violence; experiencing poverty and homelessness; and facing insidious and overt racism in their daily lives. Participants felt that the

resiliency of Milwaukee's black youth is not measured or highlighted in the proper ways.

- "A lot of the environments in schools aren't set up for Black students to be successful. So, the persistence to achieve in spite of that is amazing and we never see that reflected in the data."
- "For me, in my experience, for this part of my life, I had to already overcome a lot of stuff. I come from a bad neighborhood, and for me, making it here and making it to 18, that's an accomplishment."
- "The little things that I accomplish everyday are what I'm proud of. The smallest accomplishments are huge things for us."
- "The Black experience is a form of resiliency."
- "The data doesn't capture the resilience of young people by going through these experiences. It is striking to me that there is not more data to show their resiliency."

Discussion questions

- Are there any examples from other cities of how Black youth resiliency data is being collected?
- What group(s) would be responsible for collecting and disseminating the data?

What resources are needed in Milwaukee?

There are concerns about how the ongoing, negative **narrative** of Black youth in Milwaukee perpetuates negative cycles. Many of the participants highlighted the importance of **authentically connecting** with Milwaukee's Black youth and considering what **opportunities and limitations** influence their daily lives. Participants reflected that improved **coordination among the nonprofits** that support Black youth is necessary.

Reclaiming the narrative

- "The things that we say about our ZIP codes needs to stop. For example, '53206 is the most incarcerated ZIP code'. What is that going to do for kids? We need to change the narrative."
- "The narrative is so necessary. Data is not going to show the assets of our community or Milwaukee. There are a lot of people doing positive things and supporting each other. We need people sharing the stories more and more. We need to look at the whole picture and see all the great things that are happening."
- "The media is usually portraying our kids as violent and having data that shows otherwise would open up doors for other companies, so our kids can get those jobs."
- "Let's look at the things that are being successful, [and find] ways to document what is going great."
- "If we look at the numbers, we can see some assets. But the narrative that exists will erase all that."

- "It is important to recognize that the deficits don't happen by accident, they happen by design."
- "When kids are labeled then they act according to their label."

Authentic connection and representation

- "There's an identity issue. There are so many Black students while there are more White teachers that don't represent the Black population."
- "Teachers of color are a great resource and also need to be increased as representation for kids."
- "Black youth just have to be listened to. If we do not know how to serve them effectively then things won't work. Kids need to be heard. People that are in positions of power need to listen and tell students what they are going to do for them differently and what programs are going to be created based on what they need."
- "We have to normalize that it is ok to ask for help."
- "There are also not things around that look like us - like TV shows or stores for teens."
- "We need more people that look like us to be in more programs and have the lived experience and resources."
- "We've started to see people that look like our students in positions of power and success. We have a Black Mayor, and that's really important for our Black students. People are successful and positive and look like them, and that's really important to our Black students."

Opportunities and limitations

- "If it is a free program you might have to drive somewhere that is far and that is a problem."
- "There are skating rinks that require kids to have their own skates otherwise they have to be with a parent."
- "There are not enough places for youth to be in."
- "We need more mentoring support - not in scale but with more intention in the development of those supports."
- "Long term, I'm thinking about the communities and the spaces that we ask our Black youth to live in. What are we doing to make sure our communities and our houses are safe?"

Coordinating resources and nonprofits

- "Being able to consistently retain the spaces that are useful to our youth [is needed in Milwaukee], especially when it comes to nonprofits. There have been programs that have been really helpful, but then suddenly the funding runs out and it's just gone. And maybe nothing replaces it, or seventeen other nonprofits rush to replace it, but no one does it well. We need to make sure we're keeping the lights on."
- "We don't have a money problem; we have a people problem. It is a bad system. And then we as Black people feel like we have to compete with one another because we do not know any better. It's like we all are fighting for the same resources and there is plenty, but the system makes it like that by not sharing information."
- "Some programs only accept the best kids, but some kids need more support. Some programs do not want to be associated with all kids - the troublemakers - because they want to make their organization look good."

- "There are many resources available, but we do not know about them, and no one encourages them."
- "Milwaukee is resource rich, and resource limited. There are lots of people giving, but sometimes they don't understand the difference between the programs."
- "How are people working together and coordinating services more effectively? Right now, the school district is taking on a lot, which is distracting from their true mission of educating young people."
- "We need long-term commitment. Nothing changes in a year."

Discussion questions

- What data do we need about Milwaukee's Black youth that could help us change the problematic narratives? How should we go about getting that data?
- As we discover and highlight positive stories related to Milwaukee's Black youth, how should this narrative continue to be articulated, publicized, and shared?

Organizations specifically highlighted as resources during the Data Chats

- [Black and Latino Male Achievement](#)
- [Boys and Girls Clubs of Greater Milwaukee](#)
- [City Year Milwaukee](#)
- [College Possible Milwaukee](#)
- [Educational Opportunity Program Marquette University](#)
- [First Stage Childrens Theater](#)
- [Greater Milwaukee Urban League](#)
- [Lead2Change](#)
- [Leaders Igniting Transformation \(LIT\)](#)
- [Patch Program](#)
- [PEAK Initiative](#)
- [PEARLS for Teen Girls](#)
- [PEOPLE Program](#)
- [Running Rebels](#)
- [Sponsor a Scholar](#)
- [Teens Grow Greens](#)
- [Teacher's Observations of Potential in Students \(TOPS\)](#)
- [Urban Underground](#)

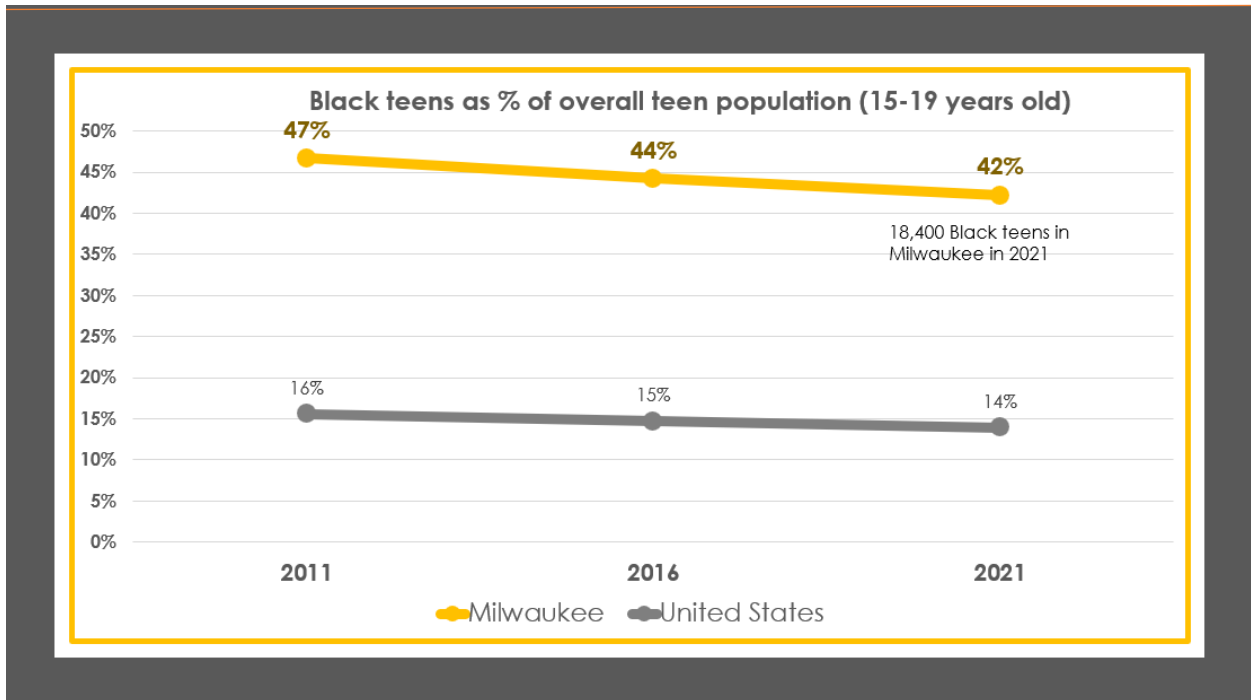
Next steps and research recommendations

As this report indicates, several themes and key issues were identified through the course of the eight data chats. Developing strategies requires identifying a manageable number of priority areas, determining what group(s) will be responsible for leading a strategy, and advocating for any additional funding or other resources that may be needed.

1. Continue to update the data collected through this project in order to identify what may be anomalies that were a result of the Covid pandemic and what may indicate trends.
2. Determine how definitions of homelessness may be affecting the data and how incarceration rates might affect population data.
3. Develop a plan for identifying, collecting, and analyzing indicators around Black youth resiliency, leadership, and entrepreneurship. Research how other cities collect this data.
4. Engage with local mental health organizations and advocacy groups to build a collaborative network for the support of Black youth.
5. Ensure alternative educational pathways are effectively communicated to students, offering them choices that fit their personal circumstances and goals.
6. Explore public-private partnerships to bridge the resource gap in technology and infrastructure available in Milwaukee schools.

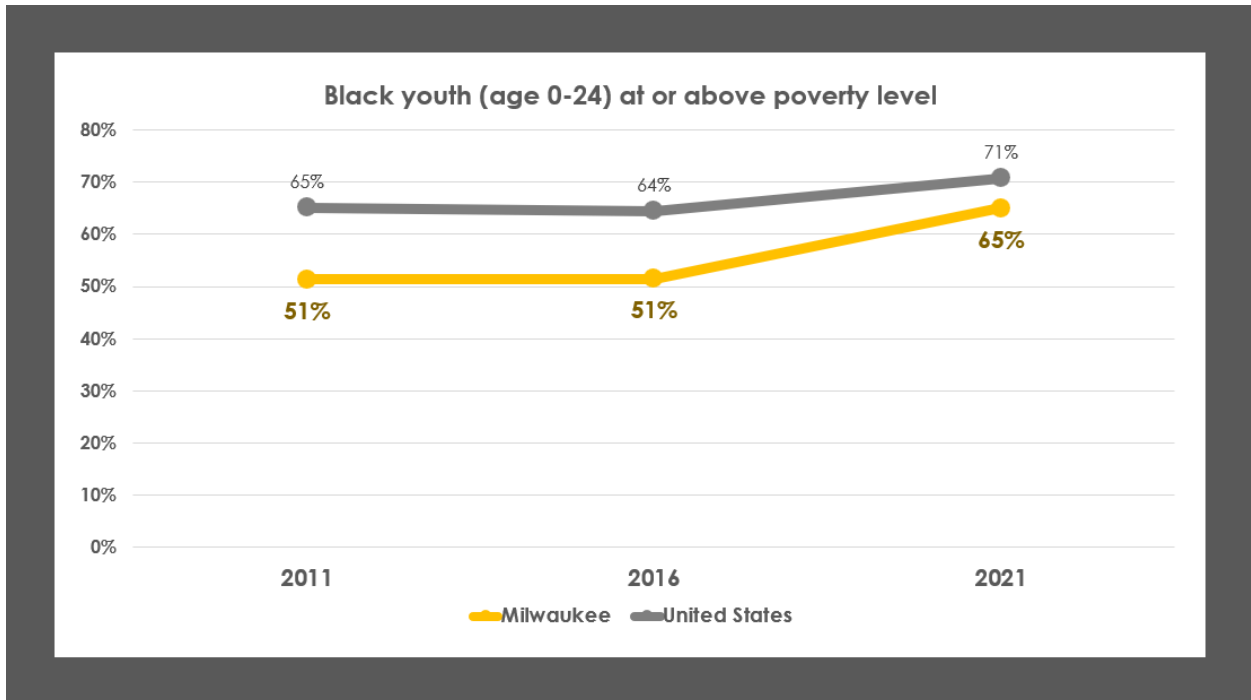
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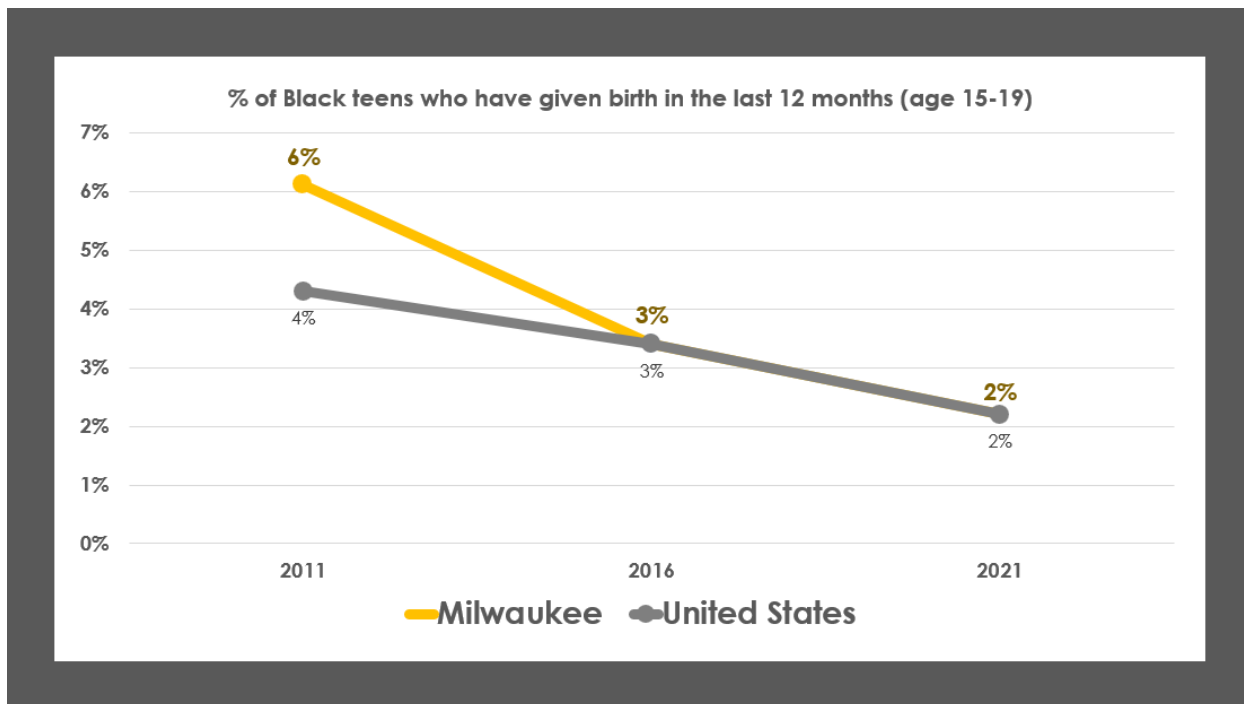
Source: American Community Survey 5 Year Estimates, 2011, 2016, 2021 TABLE ID: S0902, 15-19 year old

Slide 2.



Source: American Community Survey 5 Year Estimates, 2011, 2016, 2021 TABLE ID: B17001B

Slide 3.



Source: American Community Survey 5 Year Estimates, 2011, 2016, 2021 TABLE ID: S0902

Slide 4.

2022 WI Child Well-Being Indicators Dashboard

Office of Children's Mental Health

CLINICAL CARE

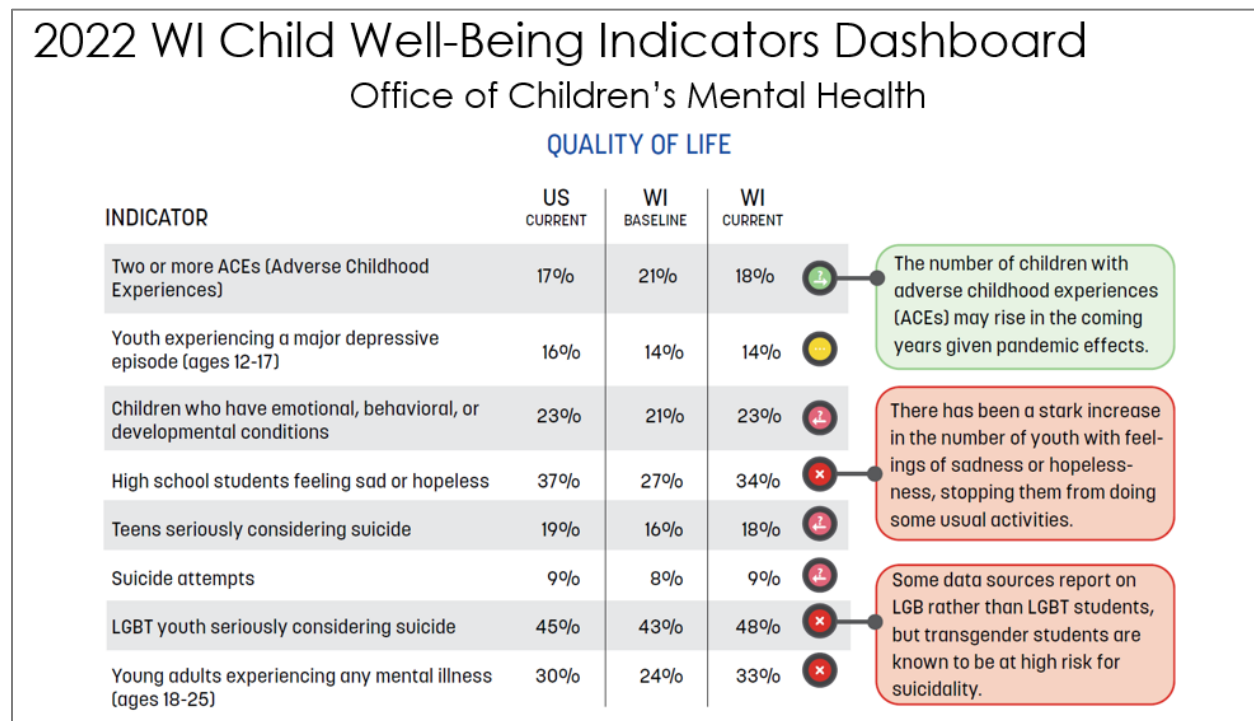
INDICATOR	US CURRENT	WI BASELINE	WI CURRENT	
Psychiatrists	N/A	390	360	↓
School Social Workers	N/A	586	741	↑
School Counselors	N/A	2049	2195	↑
School Psychologists	N/A	890	1017	↑
Children with mental health conditions who did not receive treatment (ages 3-17)	48%	47%	49%	↓
Difficulty obtaining mental health services	47%	45%	50%	↓
Doctors who did not ask about parental concerns with learning, development, or behavioral problems (ages 0-5)	70%	62%	66%	↓

The count of school-based mental health professionals has increased. There are a number of initiatives funded by pandemic relief dollars that will continue to invest in these positions. However, like all states, Wisconsin is far below recommended levels.

Half of Wisconsin youth with a diagnosed mental health condition such as depression, anxiety, or behavioral problems receive no treatment.

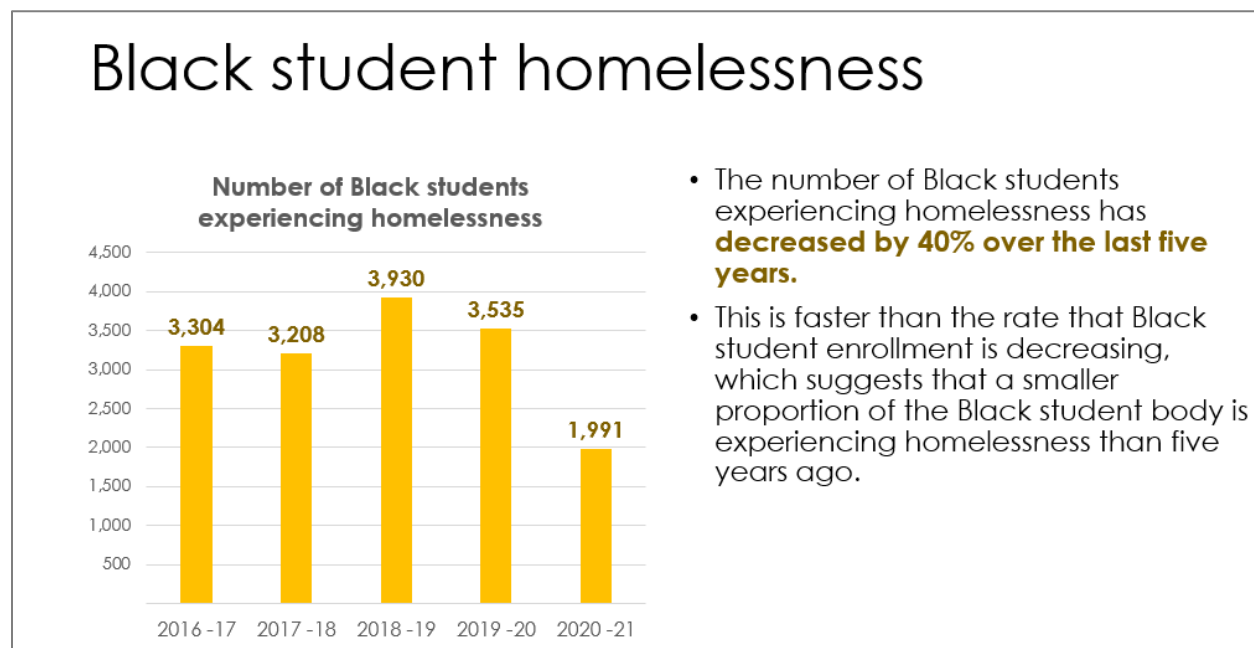
Source: Office of Children's Mental Health children.wi.gov Data is for all races of children in Wisconsin.

Slide 5.



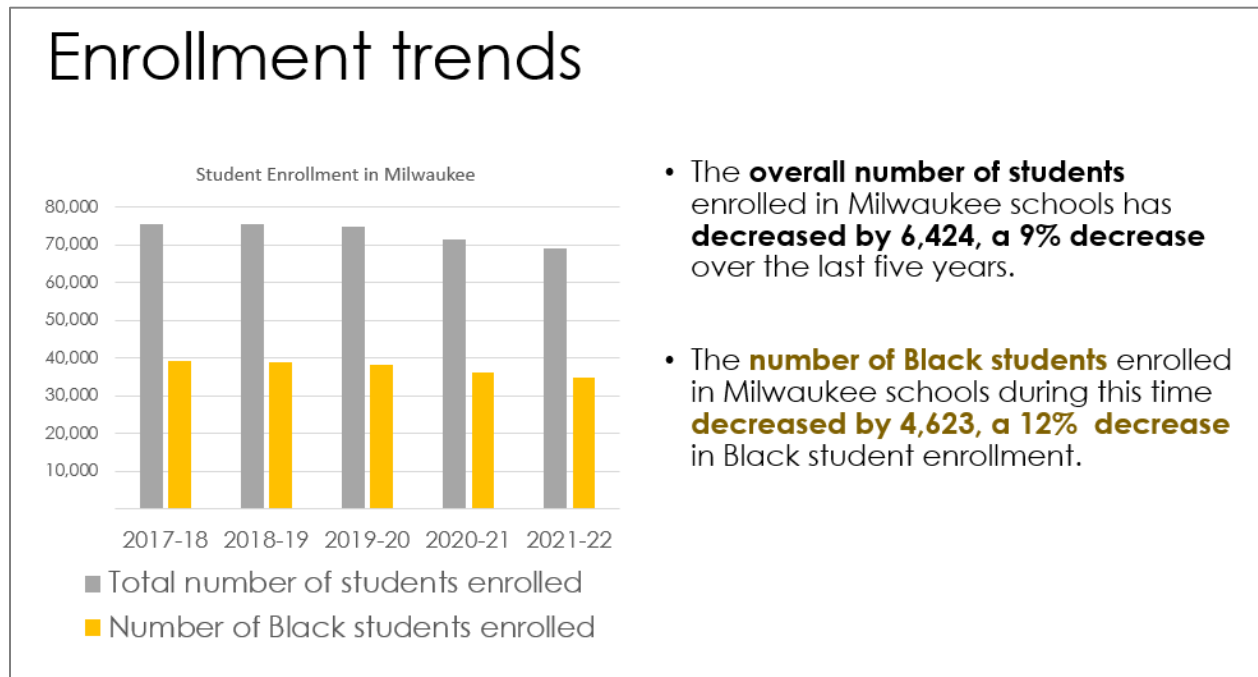
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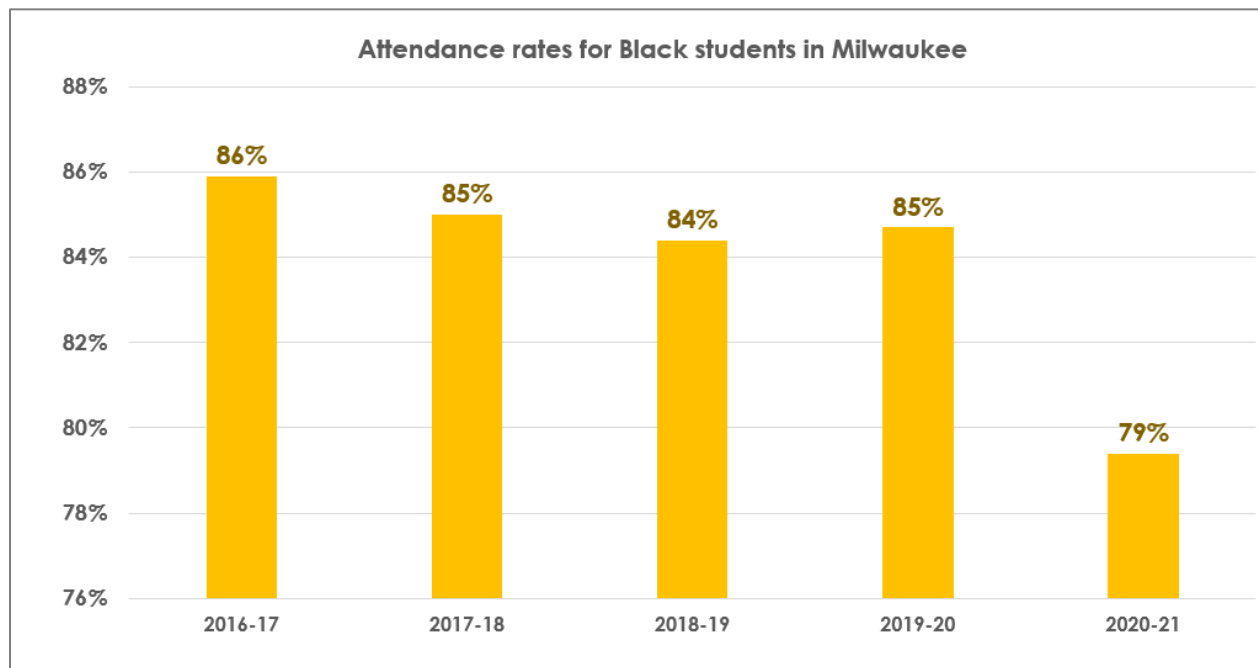
Source: WISEdash public portal, Department of Public Instruction, wisedash.dpi.wi.gov

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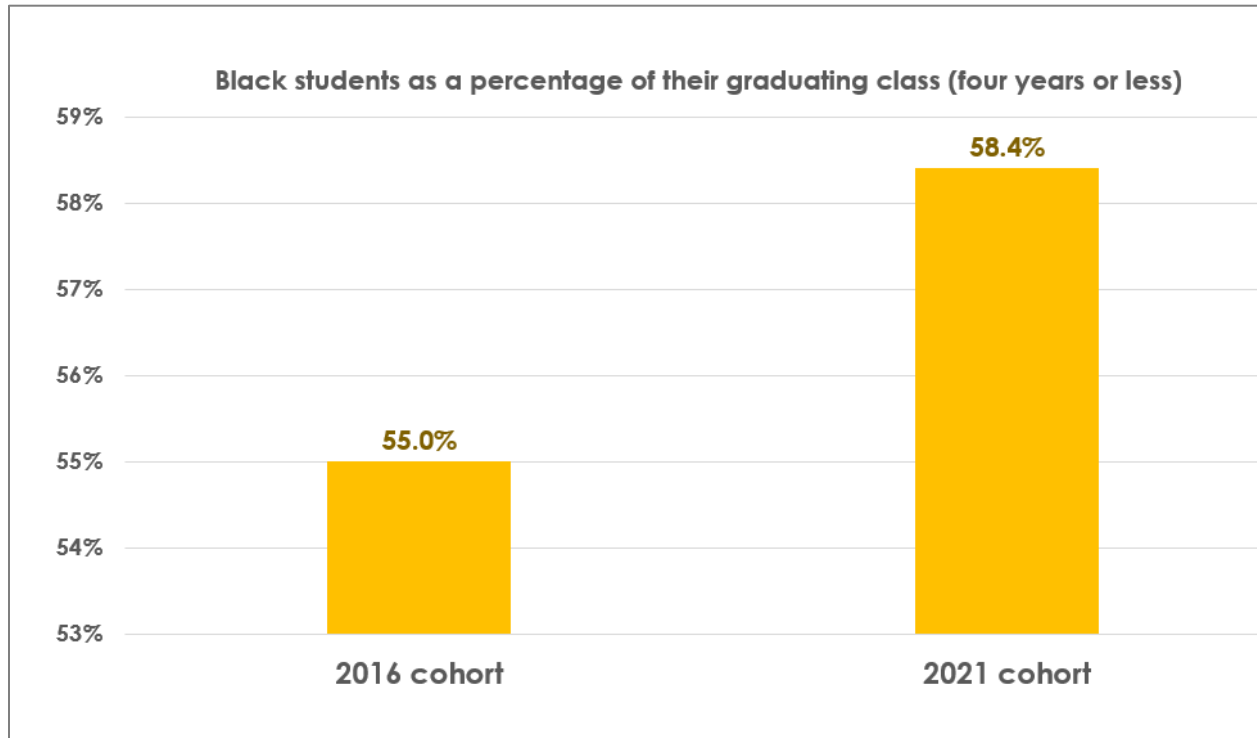
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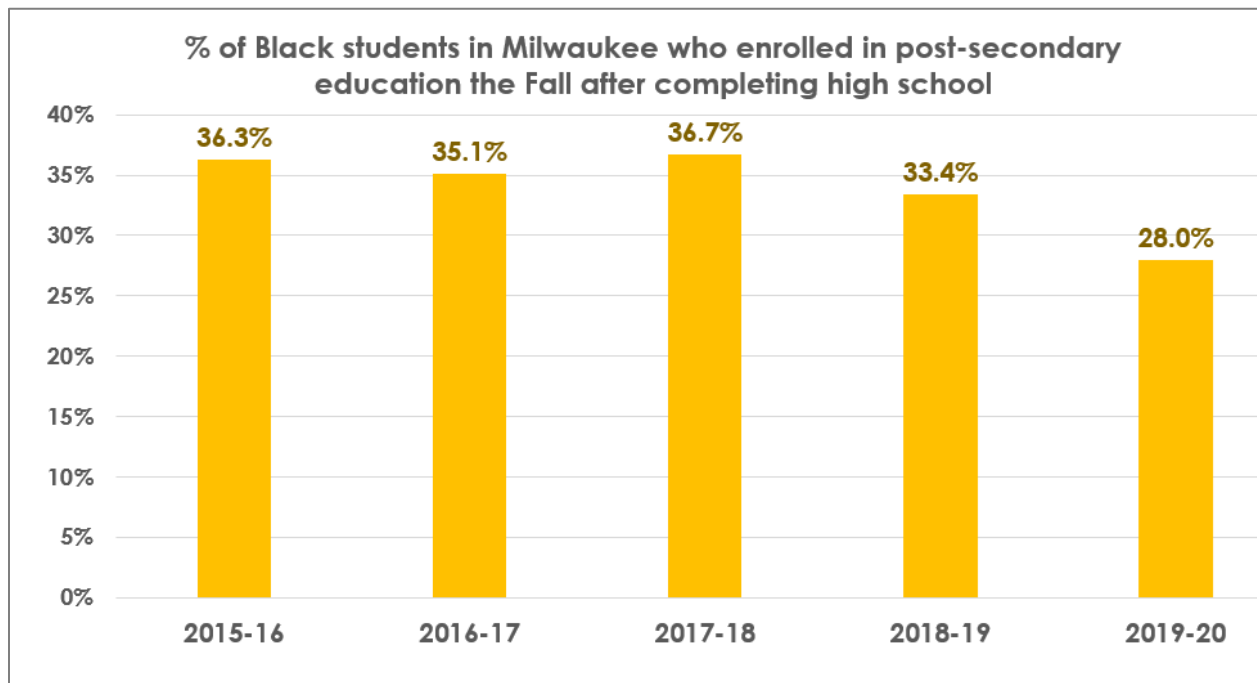
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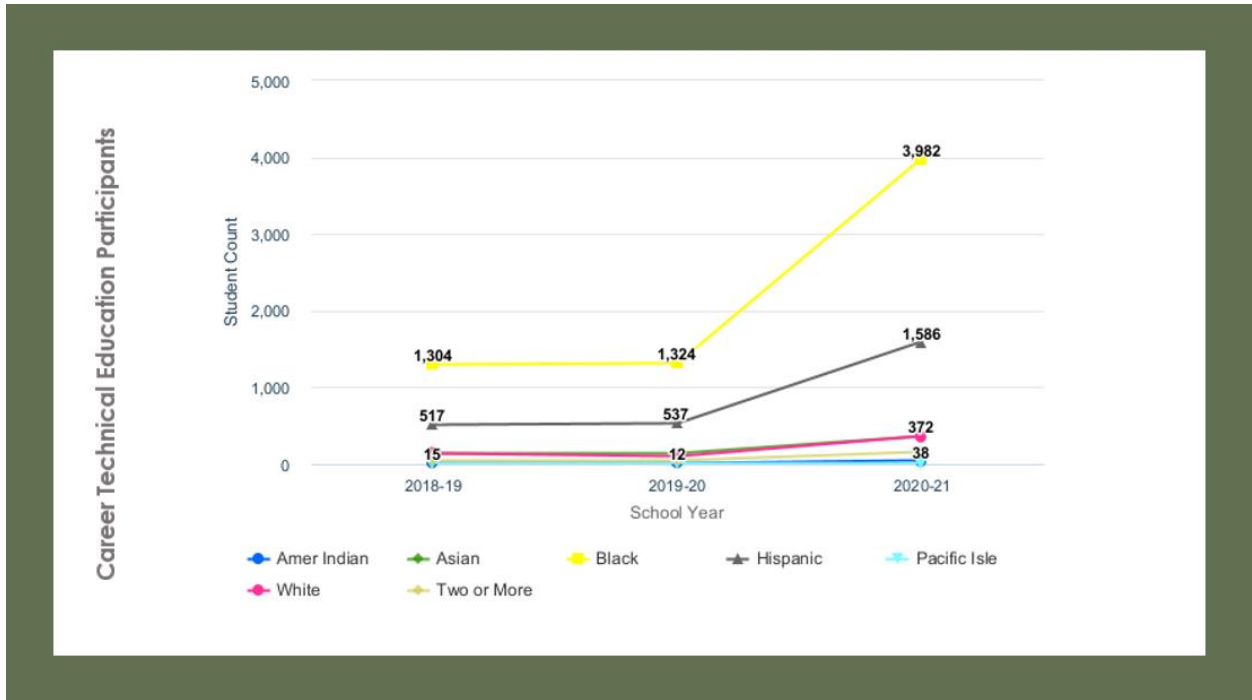
Source: WISEdash public portal, Department of Public Instruction, wisedash.dpi.wi.gov

Slide 10.



Source: WISEdash public portal, Department of Public Instruction, wisedash.dpi.wi.gov

Slide 11.



Source: WISEdash public portal, Department of Public Instruction, wisedash.dpi.wi.gov