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Opportunities and Challenges of AI for Black Workers in the Rural South

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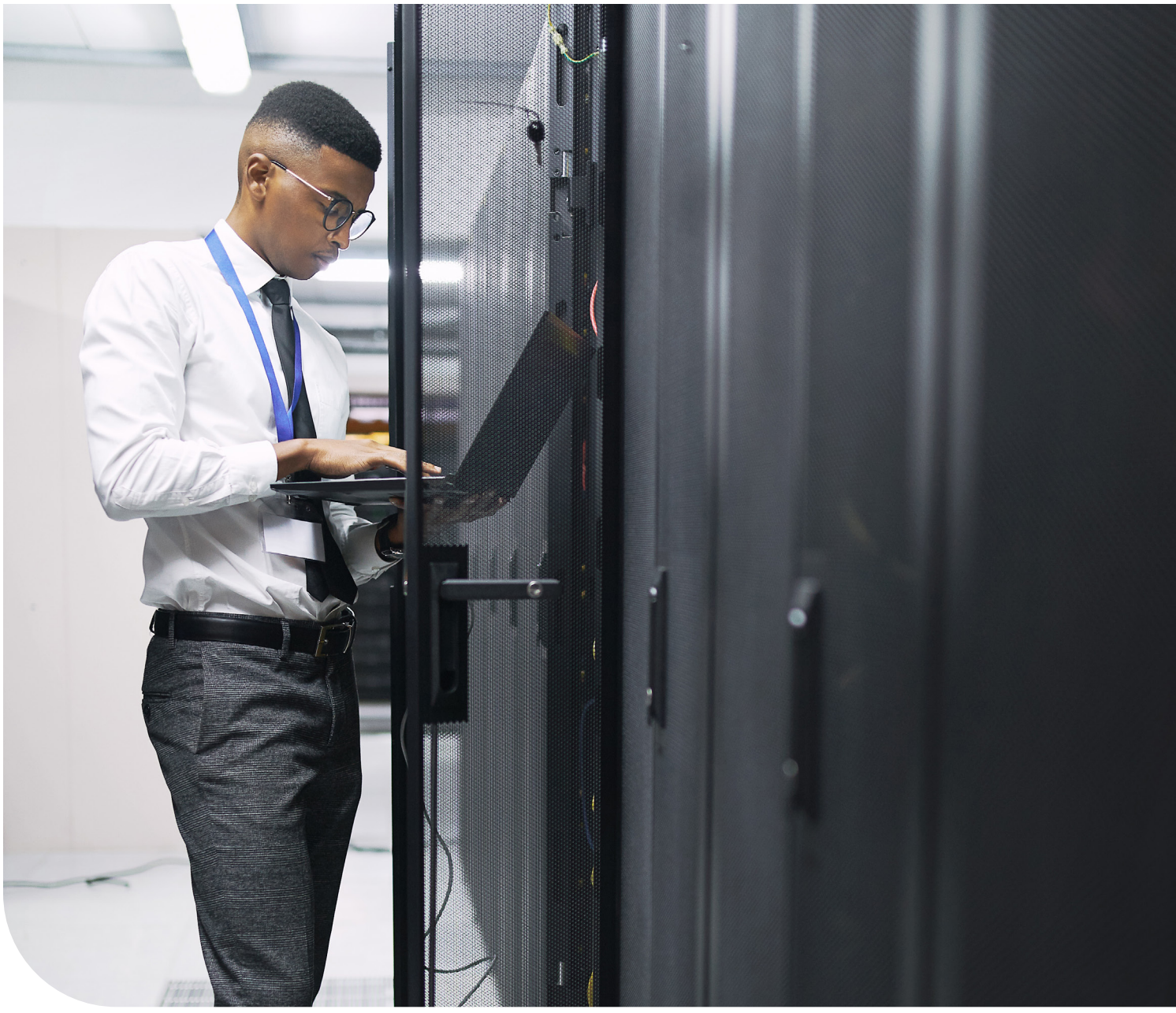
Executive Summary

We are at a critical crossroads, as conversations about how 'rural America' can benefit from the artificial intelligence (AI) revolution taking shape across industries continue to largely ignore the Black rural workforce. Both AI data center growth and Black rural workers are concentrated in the South, making it critical that we understand the issues at the center of the AI and automation revolution unfolding in Black rural communities. Black workers are overrepresented in 17 of the 30 occupations most vulnerable to automation (13.7 percent vs. 12.3 percent of the general population in fields such as manufacturing, food service, and security) while being underrepresented in the lowest-risk careers. The time is now to position municipalities to act in the best interest of Black residents in rural areas to minimize negative impacts of data centers and maximize opportunities for rural residents to reskill and upskill. Opportunities exist for residents and industries to collaborate and create mutually beneficial agreements that consider the cultural, environmental, and economic priorities of rural residents while including them in the AI success story.

We conducted interviews with various workforce, education, and training professionals primarily in Alabama and the following key themes emerged:

1. ***Curiosity:*** Black rural workers are eager to understand AI's potential, driven partly by fear of being left behind, and workforce programs have found that hands-on exposure quickly builds confidence and reveals practical business applications.
2. ***Caution:*** Communities are wary, given histories of broken promises and environmental racism, and have specific concerns about data centers' impact on health, water resources, electricity as well as, and whether promised jobs and economic mobility will actually materialize. There is also concern that rural voices and data are underrepresented in the datasets shaping AI systems.
3. ***Culture:*** AI-driven land acquisition and infrastructure development threaten to erode the cultural fabric of Black rural communities, many of whom have held generational land ties, forcing residents to adapt to disruptive changes in their daily lives and surroundings.
4. ***Collaboration:*** Residents want to be active partners rather than passive recipients in AI's revolution, with transparency and community-driven programming identified as key to reducing hesitancy and ensuring initiatives reflect local needs.

This report recommends Community Benefit Agreements (CBAs), legally binding agreements between communities and private industry, as the central mechanism for protecting Black rural workers while sharing the benefits of technological growth. Economically, CBAs should limit corporate tax breaks and require direct profit-sharing or guaranteed community payouts; on employment, companies should partner with local workforce organizations, build local hiring pipelines, and fund upskilling in AI-economy skills. Environmental provisions should cap water and electricity usage, protect against noise and light pollution, and incentivize renewable energy adoption, while educational commitments should expand AI literacy, fund community training hubs, and integrate AI education into K-12 and higher ed. Finally, the report stresses that these protections are meaningless without enforcement, calling for local advisory boards, penalties for non-compliance, and replicable best-practice templates to hold companies accountable. Policymakers, industry representatives, and community leaders can seize opportunities presented by this new technology for rural residents to become participants and beneficiaries and not another story of gentrification.



Introduction

In many mainstream media conversations about rural communities, the term "rural America" is used synonymously for white people living in rural spaces. Despite this common framing, people of color, including African Americans, are a meaningful portion of the rural population, at 24 percent of the total,[1] and are significant contributors to the fabric of rural areas in the United States. In the same way the racial makeup of the United States is ignored, African Americans are often left out of conversations regarding the rural workforce and how technology, automation, and AI are changing the employment opportunities available to those in rural areas. Given these omissions, this report seeks to understand the landscape for Black rural workers, specifically in the U.S. South, provide recommendations for how organizations, policymakers, and workers can adapt to the shifting technological ecosystem within rural communities, and through these efforts, help Black rural laborers deal with the uncertain future that awaits them.

Defining Rural

Although the term rural is used exhaustively in economic, social, and political contexts, there is no standard definition of the word. In the case of the U.S. Census Bureau, rural is defined as anything that is not urban, and urban areas are those that "encompass at least 5,000 people or at least 2,000 housing units."[2] Based on the Census'[3] definition of rural as non-urban, 20 percent of the U.S. population was rural in 2020, and this metric represented a 0.7 percent increase from the 2010 census. This increase in the rural population was likely attributable to a change from the 2010 to the 2020 census' definition of urban from areas with 2,500 people to 5,000 people instead of actual rural population growth.

Alternatively, the U.S. Office of Management and Budget (OMB) defines rural based on classifications of counties or county equivalents because of the ubiquitous use of county-level data in economic research.[4] The OMB's use of counties aligns with the view of counties as labor markets and creates a lens through which to observe rural and non-rural labor trends. The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) often uses the OMB's definition of rural given the focus on counties. Based on the OMB's definition, 13.8 percent of the U.S. population resided in rural areas in 2020.[5]

There is varied commentary about how to define rural. Many definitions are based on what urban is or is not, and they ignore key dimensions of rurality such as self-classification and cultural belonging.[6] This can be especially problematic for Black rural residents who are largely ignored in rural conversations writ large.

Black Rural Workers – A Profile

Black workers have been integral to the success of rural communities, although their overall population is relatively small. In 2019, 7.2 percent of the roughly 46 million rural residents were Black people, as compared to Black urban population of 13.2 percent of the total.[7] Black workers in rural areas are employed in a variety of industries, and in 2019 they represented 9.7 percent of those in manufacturing, 9.4 percent of healthcare and social assistance workers, 9.5 percent of hotel and restaurant employees, and 8.8 percent of government workers.[8] Although rural manufacturing jobs have been in decline, and manufacturing is where the majority of Black rural workers are employed, the fastest growing industries for Black rural workers are in healthcare and administrative services.[9] Despite the prevalence of farming in rural communities, Black workers only represent slightly more than two percent of the agricultural workforce.[10]

Black rural residents live across the U.S., but most of the rural Black population resides in the South where they make up the largest non-white population in virtually every part of the region.[11] For these Black workers, their employment prospects vary greatly from their peers in metropolitan areas.

The employment-to-population rate, which compares the number of employed people in relation to the number of working age people (16 years and older), illustrates the difference between the employment levels in rural versus urban areas. For example, in 2021, Black men in rural communities had employment rates that were 18.1 percent lower than Black men in metropolitan communities.[12] Similarly, Black rural women had employment rates that lag Black urban women by 9.5 percent.[13] The employment divide between urban and rural areas persisted in the rural South for Black men and women, but Black men had the lowest employment-to-population gap in the rural South compared to Black men in other regions of the country.[14]

(Rural) Workforce Trends

AI data center growth is highest in the South, and the South also has the highest concentration of Black rural workers. This puts Black non-urban workers at the center of the AI and automation revolution where they work and live. While the Black rural workforce is contending with the prospect of data center proliferation, they are simultaneously battling a lack of infrastructure in other areas of technology including broadband. In some cases, the access to broadband services is not limited due to availability, but because of exorbitant pricing schemes.[15] In 2021, Black rural southerners (20.8 percent) were two times more likely to lack home and computer access as this country's general population (9.9 percent). Although this metric applies broadly to rural residents, the lack of access can translate to a community's employment prospects and workforce readiness.

Because of the rapid technological changes happening in rural communities, many planners in the rural workforce space are promoting upskilling, the process of acquiring new skills to become competitive in their current fields,[16] to meet the expanding employment demands. The necessity of rural workers to evolve their skillsets is more critical than their counterparts in urban environments because they face the challenges of job loss to automation and resident migration to urban centers with more economic potential.[17] This necessity is also a cultural threat to workers in non-metro areas because they risk losing their ties to community if they migrate for urban employment opportunities that do not require high levels of upskilling to earn a living.

> ***Black workers are underrepresented in the careers with the lowest risk of being automated.[18] Employment prospects are shifting, but it is unclear as to whether these trends will result in unemployment, underemployment, or different employment. Out of the 30 occupations that are most susceptible to elimination from automation, Black workers are overrepresented in 17 of them.[19] In the general population, 12.3 percent of the population work in these industries that include manufacturing, food service, and security, but the figure is 13.7 for Black workers.[20]***

Upskilling can be helpful for workers who see the AI transformation as an opportunity for career pivoting. In other cases, rural workers, especially Black rural workers, face "systemic inequities in the need for re-skilling,"[21] and reskilling is essential a mandate because "workers in small firms, rural markets, and historically marginalized groups face disproportionate demands to adapt."[22] Black rural employees who are unable to afford to acquire new skillsets or do not have the appropriate education available in their communities may become collateral damage.

Methods and Data

To augment the quantitative data and narrative overviews from publicly available datasets, academic articles, and popular media, the Joint Center conducted interviews with a sample of professionals who represent non-profit organizations in higher education, workforce development, and technology with a focus on and/or expertise in connecting with rural communities and their residents. Conversations about Black rural communities often happen from the perspective of outsiders, so it was critical for us to connect with organizations whose mission is to elevate rural voices and advocate for Black rural communities based on what the local needs, challenges, and opportunities are.

We targeted our efforts on the state of Alabama. Alabama was selected for study because African Americans comprise a large percentage of the overall population of the state (26.1 percent of the total population[23]) and make up more than 40 percent of the state's total rural population.[24] Alabama is also fertile ground for AI expansion because it houses key industries, such as aerospace, automotive, and advanced manufacturing, combined with a rich agricultural history.[25] The Black rural residents of Alabama sit at the intersection of the country's technological past and future.

All interviews were conducted remotely and recorded via Zoom. The recordings were transcribed using Rev tools and the audio and video files were analyzed using ATLAS.ti software. For the data analysis effort, we used multimodal coding wherein the coding of the interview text happens while watching and rewatching the videos. This method is helpful in highlighting non-verbal communication that adds meaning to conversations and for capturing linguistic nuance.[26] There were four primary themes that illuminated the voice of the community and their views about AI in their local areas. The themes are Curiosity, Caution, Culture, and Collaboration.

Key Themes

1 ***Curiosity***

Artificial intelligence, primarily generative AI, has been a prominent feature in daily news cycles for several years as companies and workers negotiate how to implement and learn about the technology in productive ways. This foregrounding of AI has created a Black rural workforce that is curious about what AI can do for them in their professional and personal lives. Workforce development organizations have helped to address the curiosity with programs that highlight the ease of use of AI. During our interviews, "Jay," an IT consultant with a focus on elevating minority talent declared,

> ***"A lot of people just had a quick perception that it was difficult. It was something that was going to be too hard to understand. And they were blown away by the ease of use and how it took very little for them to not only learn how to operate some of the tools, but to just really see how much time it saved them and how efficient they could be by using it. On the entrepreneurial side, it gave them a good business case and good business sense that they didn't think initially that is what it could provide or how helpful it could be."***

These education programs help employees and other community members see how they can turn ideas they have for business and entrepreneurship into tangible products and services. To aid in this process, training programs are assisting rural residents in their understanding that the human element is still critical. Rural workers and business owners cannot cede their voices to technology but should use it alongside other business-building tools they have. That is why "Helen," who facilitates workforce development initiatives across Alabama, told her clients, "It [generative AI] requires human intervention. You don't want to sound like a machine. You don't want to be sounding like another spam email that somebody sent me, you want to sound like yourself."

By harnessing residents' curiosity related to this novel technology, there is an opportunity to educate rural residents on best practices regarding AI use and build their confidence for how they enhance their work output and ease their workload.

2 *Caution*

Black rural communities want to know more about the innovation that is happening but are proceeding with caution because of the historical disenfranchisement they have faced.[27] There is evidence of weak enforcement of environmental protections and remediation for harm done to Black communities nationwide. The federal government's position on AI infrastructure, which is to proceed full steam ahead in spite of environmental and health concerns,[28]-- adds to the concern expressed by these communities who must negotiate not only powerful industries but sometimes their own state and federal government agencies.

Rural residents are concerned about the possible impact to their utility costs, access to resources, and noise pollution. "Helen's" clients are asking "What are going to be the health risks for my family, for my cattle, for everything in my farm? How much water that it's going to require?" Her concerns are buttressed by reports linking the incessant hum from data centers, and water and light pollution to increased anxiety, cognitive decline in children, and a variety of cardiovascular issues.[29] In addition, Alabama has several zones where natural gas and propane energy are not available, so electricity is the primary power source. Communities are worried that the needs of the technology companies will be met before theirs if there are energy shortages. These prospective environmental harms, combined with the increased environmental racism that Black rural residents have historically faced,[30] adds credibility to these fears.

There is also caution related to the economic promises that AI offers rural communities. The conversations about economic opportunity are alluring to rural communities in search of ways to be competitive with urban centers, but residents have hesitancy around the viability of the claims. "Lisa," an employee from an organization that focuses on tech integration in rural spaces, described how her clients view the economic potential of data centers in this way,

> *"It's [data centers] leaving a lot of gaps when it comes to, yes, you may get 10,000 people to come and build this data center and that increases your economic mobility. But at the same time, those data centers don't employ that many people. So, when they say they're bringing all of these jobs, they [local residents] are starting to witness that it's not bringing all of these jobs. And so, for them, it's like it's not creating any economic mobility for our communities aside from the larger corporations getting some tax write-offs."*

Data is also an area that gives Black rural residents pause related to the AI revolution in their communities. Beyond the questions of how companies plan to use the data to power AI technology, there is a perceived lack of advocacy about how rural people are represented in these datasets engineered by people who have no connections to rural communities. When "Lisa" considers the inevitability of AI today, it is important to her constituents to include rural residents and their data in datasets so that the information represents those local communities in ways that do not typically happen today. Rural communities want inclusion in the technology, not just mentions in the talking points. Today, data sets are not typically trained on rural data because they are such a small subset of the general population. Rural residents want to ensure rural voices are included in AI datasets. Broadly, there are efforts to gather datasets that include rural voices and perspectives.

3 *Culture*

Often missing from conversations about Black rural communities and the impact of AI are discussions about how AI has the potential to change the cultural identity of rural spaces. In many cases, Black families have had their land for generations, so technology companies acquiring familial land or moving into areas changes the cultural fabric of the communities. Black rural residents must contend with what it means when the resources they have relied on are no longer available, and they must adjust to new patterns ranging from traffic to shopping. In short, Black rural residents have related to their cultural erasure from the land and their ties to the community.

4 *Collaboration*

From the perspective of Black rural residents, the way to overcome the fears of harm related to inclusion, culture, and the environment is rooted in the idea of collaboration. "Taylor," an educator who works with AI projects in higher education and private industry, said,

> ***"It really does come down to an information sharing thing and are you being transparent with communities? And I think they can be really, I don't want to say easily bought in, but if you keep them in the know, then I think their hesitancy decreases quite a bit."***

Rural communities understand their workforces are transforming, but they want to collaborate with private industry so they can have a part in shaping their futures. It is imperative that the community drives the conversations, instead of being passengers. According to "Dale," a workforce development professional at an organization who builds digital learners, "We really rely on them [the local community] to be the identifier so that we're not labeling what we suspect they need and allowing for them to be the voices in us to support in whatever way possible." Additionally, "Taylor" thinks the deficit framing, assigning negative traits to people from rural communities, is one reason corporations do not want to collaborate. But the educator emphasizes, "People can hold a lot. They [rural residents] are highly intelligent folks, and they want to know the ins and outs and the granularities and the intricacies of everything."

We cannot talk about transforming the workforce if we do not collaborate with the people who comprise the workforce. Organizations that work in introducing AI to communities understand this and are seeking to move forward collaboratively. As "Dale" said, "We're very community driven. We like to understand the communities that we're tapping into, ensuring that what we're providing them as far as our programming matches a community need, and that we're also helping to drive economic mobility."

Key Areas of Focus – Workforce Development Organizations

Workforce transformation organizations have ideas about how AI can shape the future. For many, they have accepted the inevitability of AI in modern society, and seek to help Black rural workers and business owners traverse the evolving workforce. Economic empowerment, including entrepreneurial success, educational integration, and AI literacy are key areas of focus for workforce development organizations.

1 ***Economic Empowerment and Entrepreneurial Success***

Providing pathways for Black rural residents to gain financial resources is a thread across all the people we spoke to. Many people in rural spaces are eager to find ways to build businesses that will help them care for themselves and their families. Understanding how AI can help increase productivity and efficiency is a key focus for many workforce development agencies because it can remove obstacles on the path to entrepreneurship. Integrating tools that help create marketing materials, utilizing AI features that assist with email marketing, content creation and maintenance, and minimizing other administrative tasks are several of the areas where people have found success. Additionally, workforce teams throughout Alabama are hosting pitch competitions that center AI in solving real-world problems in their communities as well as launching new businesses in the digital space.

2 ***Educational Integration and AI Literacy***

Overwhelmingly, the people we interviewed maintained a belief in the importance of education to help communities deal with their curiosities and the hesitancy some have related to AI adoption and use. In Alabama, there are various initiatives across the state to integrate AI into K-12 education to prepare students for the future.[31] These initiatives are also underway in higher education and in workforce development programs.

AI literacy is a combination of the skills required to understand how AI functions, identify AI's strengths (productivity and scale) and weaknesses (e.g., bias and producing false or misleading results due to hallucinating), engage effectively with the technology, and discern the moral implications of AI use. The criticality of AI literacy emerged in several conversations related to workforce upskilling and reskilling, in addition to conversations about AI in education. The prevailing idea is that organizations have a responsibility to teach adults and children how to use AI responsibly and not to outsource thinking to the technology. "Lisa" stated that "it [AI Literacy] includes practical use, it includes prompting, it includes reviewing outputs, editing, summarizing, and all of that is around being AI literate and knowing that not everything that you put into AI, whether it's generative or not, that the information that comes out still needs to be reviewed because there are things that are wrong, things that have bias, things that are incomplete and all of it, there needs to be that judgment behind it." Workforce development organizations have a responsibility to equip their clients with the non-technical skills required in an AI world such as being able to identify source materials, having the background knowledge to know when AI is hallucinating, and infusing the human element into their work so that it is unique to them. In an AI world, Black rural workers must have the skills to identify credible sources from those spreading mis- and dis-information.

Policy Recommendations

Policy, at all levels, should protect Black workers and allow them to benefit from the changing technological landscape.

At the federal level, the government should:

- **Require companies with an employment base higher than an established threshold to submit job impact assessments to the Department of Labor** (DOL), similar to proposed actions in New York state.[32]
- **Expand the enforcement of the WARN Act**, which was created to "provide workers with sufficient time to prepare for the transition between the jobs they currently hold and new jobs,"[33] to highlight employment displacement specifically due to AI.
- **Strengthen environment protections and standards for data centers**.[34]
- **Implement AI enforcement mechanisms at the DOL and at the Environmental Protection Agency** (EPA) to support employment and environmental safeguards to protect rural residents who are disproportionately affected by ecological impacts of data centers.

Additionally, community benefit agreements (CBAs) are one way to manage the varying concerns of Black rural workers. CBAs are legally binding agreements between local communities and private entities including data center developers and AI technology companies meant to guide the economic, employment, environmental, educational, and enforcement protocols for development projects in mutually advantageous ways.[35]

Economic

States and municipalities often seek the favor of data centers and other AI companies to their areas through tax incentives that significantly lower or eliminate their tax burdens. Although towns and other small communities typically rely on tax revenue as the main driver of their economic base, the idea is that the employment benefits, sales tax revenue, and other development the companies will bring will offset the loss in tax revenue. To mitigate the potential tax losses,

- **Eliminate or limit tax write-offs** offered by municipalities to AI companies and data centers.
- **Introduce direct payment community profit sharing models** wherein the residents receive a percentage or portion of the profits generated from corporate operations and sales.
- **Require minimum community payouts** from companies to ensure local residents do not compensate for lost corporate revenue.

Employment and Workforce Development

Workforce development requires investment in local communities and people. Private companies should demonstrate their commitments to the communities they enter by:

- **Partnering with local non-profits** who are already delivering workforce training and education to ensure the face of workforce development is local and includes financial and resource support from corporations.
- **Building a pipeline of potential employees** who have the skills necessary to supplement the local employment pool and backfill open corporate roles.
- **Delivering opportunities for reskilling and upskilling with AI-economy competencies** like prompt engineering, critical thinking, and problem solving.

Environmental

The environmental impact of AI extends to all residents of Black rural communities. The environmental components of CBAs should:

- **Implement water and electricity limits** on companies and ensure local communities do not bear the burden of cost increases due to corporate resources utilization.
- **Introduce local environmental protections** against noise and light pollution.
- **Incentivize companies** that pursue opportunities to utilize renewable energy.

Educational

For many people, AI, especially generative AI, is a novel technology that will require access to training and educational programs. Black rural workers will benefit from companies that:

- **Build AI literacy**, described earlier in this report, so Black rural workers can understand AI's potential, biases, and limitations and use the technology in responsible and helpful ways.
- **Invest in training hubs that have job placement opportunities** and allow the community to learn about and adopt AI at a pace that is comfortable for them.
- **Integrate AI training, development programs**, and job placement into K-12 schools and with colleges and universities.

Enforcement

Black rural residents must advocate for themselves and their communities through the establishment of CBAs. It is incumbent upon community groups to:

- **Create local advisory boards** that will negotiate changes to CBAs and offer policy monitoring.
- **Levy penalties against companies and organizations** that are not in compliance.
- **Institute best practices** that can operate as templates for future collaborative efforts.



Conclusion

African Americans, who have decades of evidence of environmental racism and economic disenfranchisement, cannot afford to be left out of the AI conversation, present and future. Legally binding CBAs are a powerful tool that ensures rural communities do not have to choose between employment and quality of life. Integrating rural communities, on every level, from app development, reskilling and upskilling, and Large Language Model development, is essential. Otherwise, this AI revolution will be just another story of gentrification where residents are left behind and not able to participate in its growth or derive its benefits.





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