

Growing

Beyond the bias.

Black Women Entrepreneurs

KANSAS CITY, MISSOURI · LITTLE ROCK, ARKANSAS

SOUTHERN CAPITAL project

About this Report

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Foreword



In recent years, the conversation around entrepreneurship and investing has intensified, with increasing recognition of the unique challenges and barriers faced by women entrepreneurs, especially Black women, in their pursuit of building and growing successful businesses. Yet, despite the growing acknowledgment of these issues, too many women continue to face obstacles in accessing capital and support systems that enable them to thrive.

At Southern Capital Project, we have long believed in the power of women to transform their communities through entrepreneurship and investment. This belief is grounded in the conviction that equitable access to resources is a cornerstone of economic mobility and generational wealth creation. Our mission is clear: to ensure that women in the South have the same opportunities to build wealth as anyone else, regardless of race, background, or geographic location.

This research report sheds light on the experiences of Black women entrepreneurs as they navigate entrepreneurial ecosystems in the cities of Little Rock and Kansas City. Through interviews, focus groups, and candid conversations, these women have shared their journeys, their challenges, and their triumphs. Their stories reveal systemic issues that must be addressed and also highlight the resilience and creativity these entrepreneurs embody. This report serves as both a call to action and a resource for entrepreneurial support organizations (ESOs) that seek to better serve women of color.

We hope this report offers valuable insights and sparks conversations among key stakeholders about how we can all work together to create a more inclusive and supportive entrepreneurial ecosystem. The time to act is now. We envision an economy where women, especially Black women, are no longer on the margins, but at the forefront, building wealth for themselves, their families, and their communities. Together, we can ensure that women have the tools, resources, and opportunities to lead, participate, and thrive in an economy rooted in equity.

Thank you for taking the time to read this report, and for your continued commitment to supporting women entrepreneurs.

Sincerely,

Jensyn Hallett
Executive Director, Southern Capital Project

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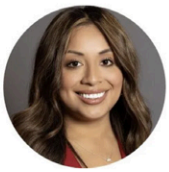


Adriana Fuentes Archila
Board Member

Special thanks to the 44 Black women business owners and entrepreneurs who participated in the study, and to the women who shared their personal stories and interviews to be highlighted in this report.



Introduction: Why Black Women Entrepreneurs Matter

Black women are starting businesses faster than any other group in the United States. They create jobs, develop innovative ideas, break barriers, and strengthen their communities. However, they face significant challenges accessing the resources needed to grow their businesses. This report examines the experiences of Black women entrepreneurs in two cities: Kansas City, Missouri, and Little Rock, Arkansas.

The success of Black women entrepreneurs has far-reaching implications. Their businesses create jobs, stimulate local economies, and inspire other Black women and girls to pursue entrepreneurship. Supporting Black women in business is a matter of equity and a smart economic strategy for communities.

44
Black women entrepreneurs participated in the study

88.6%
of survey participants self-funded their businesses

59%
were dissatisfied with their access to capital

59% · 68%
of the revenue of the average women-owned firm (KC · LR)

Why These Cities?

The Kansas City and Little Rock metropolitan statistical areas were chosen as case studies because they are medium-sized metro areas. By examining these two locations, the research provides insights into how different urban environments support (or fail to support) Black women in business. The goal is to identify what works, what does not, and how conditions could be improved.

KANSAS CITY, MISSOURI

Population (2020 Census)
508,090

Land area
314.7 sq mi

Population density
1,614.5 per sq mi

LITTLE ROCK, ARKANSAS

Population (2020 Census)
202,591

Land area
120.05 sq mi

Population density
1,687.6 per sq mi

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2020 Census. These differences contribute to variations between the two ecosystems. Kansas City's larger population and economic base supports a more

extensive and diverse range of entrepreneurial resources, funding, and technology-focused support, while Little Rock's ecosystem is smaller and built on relationships, and is poised to grow its collective resources to provide more opportunities to owners.

Key Findings

Black women entrepreneurs are emerging as powerful drivers of innovation and economic growth. Despite significant challenges, they demonstrate exceptional resilience and creativity, often developing innovative solutions that address community needs and fill market gaps. They are making notable strides in technology, health, and creative sectors, leveraging strong community ties and peer support networks to overcome barriers. They are not only building thriving enterprises; they also actively mentor others, creating a multiplier effect for economic empowerment in their communities.

- **Access to Capital:** The most significant barrier is limited access to funding. Black women-owned businesses earn substantially less than the average women-owned firm, about 59% in Kansas City and 68% in Little Rock.
- **Lack of Representation:** There is a critical shortage of mentors and leaders who understand the unique experiences of Black women entrepreneurs, including in leadership positions within support organizations.
- **Market Barriers:** Many struggle to break into established markets and business networks, often having to create their own paths in niche industries.
- **Resilience and Innovation:** Black women entrepreneurs show incredible resourcefulness, often leveraging community support and creating innovative solutions to overcome barriers.
- **Emerging Opportunities:** They are finding success in technology, health and wellness, and creative industries, often addressing crucial needs in their communities.
- **Systemic Discrimination:** Black women often face unfair treatment due to both racial and gender biases, which can hinder their ability to enter business networks or attract customers.



About the Research

This report combines quantitative data on business performance and representation with qualitative insights from entrepreneurs.

The research methodology included:

- In-depth interviews with Black women entrepreneurs
- Focus group discussions
- Surveys of local Entrepreneurial Support Organizations (ESOs)
- Analysis of census data and local economic reports

Key areas of focus: motivations for starting businesses; challenges in accessing capital and resources; experiences with local support systems; strategies for overcoming barriers; and impact on local communities and economies.

The report seeks to inform policymakers, support organizations, and community leaders on better assisting Black women entrepreneurs, and to identify concrete ways to create more equitable and supportive entrepreneurial ecosystems in these cities and beyond.

Two Ecosystems: What's Working and Where the Gaps Are

Black women entrepreneurs in Kansas City and Little Rock draw on both formal Entrepreneurial Support Organizations (ESOs) and informal community networks, but the effectiveness of these supports varies by city.

What's Working

- **Kansas City** offers a more developed entrepreneurial ecosystem with numerous incubators, accelerators, and funding opportunities. Organizations include the Kauffman Foundation, the Economic Development Corporation of Kansas City, KC SourceLink, Heartland Black Chamber of Commerce, Prospect Business Associates, the UMKC Innovation Center, the UMKC Small Business Development Center, and the Women's Employment Network. The city reports nearly $1 billion in annual venture capital investment, the KCRise Fund for early-stage technology companies, and KC BizCare, which provides free resources and microgrants. Entrepreneurs highlighted the abundance of resources and pitch competitions available.

> *"We wanted to create a space where black women can come and be their authentic self, learning from each other, and you don't feel like [you] have to voice certain things at times." — Kansas City entrepreneur*

- **Little Rock's** ecosystem is smaller and less developed in funding and technology focus, but it is deeply relational. Support tends to be one-on-one and relationship-driven, and entrepreneurs rely on close-knit relationships and grassroots initiatives. Strong bonds exist not only between entrepreneurs and support organizations but among the organizations themselves. Organizations include the Arkansas Economic Development Commission, the Arkansas Women's Business Center, Little Rock BUILD Academy, ReMix Ideas, the WEM Hub through the Women's Foundation of Arkansas, the Little Rock Regional Chamber of Commerce, and The Venture Center. Entrepreneurs profiled in this report credit ReMix Ideas (through its Imani grant) and the WEM Hub (through no-strings-attached financial support) with meaningful help.
- **In both cities,** informal networks (peer support, community spaces, and personal relationships) play a vital role, creating safe spaces where Black women entrepreneurs can share experiences and strategies.

> *"Relationships were the most important in helping me start my business." — Little Rock entrepreneur*



Where the Gaps Are

- **Representation:** ESOs often lack Black women in leadership. In Kansas City, 38% of ESOs primarily serve Black entrepreneurs, but only 25% have representative leadership; in Little Rock, the gap is larger (30% vs. 15%).
- **Tailored Support:** Many programs follow a "one-size-fits-all" model, leaving niche industries and businesses in the "missing middle" underserved.
- **Capital Access:** ESOs provide training and mentorship but often fall short in connecting entrepreneurs to funding.
- **Sustained Support:** Programs frequently focus on startups, with fewer resources available for businesses ready to scale.

> *"A lot of the information that they were offering, I had already been through that and learned the hard way… my business didn't operate like regular businesses." — Little Rock entrepreneur*

> *"You're not a startup. You don't necessarily need help getting started… You got your license, your groove, and you're making a little money, but you're not second stage. You're not ready to hire… And so you get in this really awkward spot where people just don't know what to do with you." — Kansas City entrepreneur, on the "missing middle"*

When support systems are effective, they can have a significant impact. One Kansas City entrepreneur described the Porter House KC's political sandbox program: "I was selected as one of the five winners out of like 20 some applicants." The program gave her valuable support in developing a pitch deck and securing funding.

The Motivation and Drive of Black Women Entrepreneurs

What motivates Black women to start their businesses? Understanding these motivations can help create better support systems for these business owners.

Community influence and cultural identity. Many Black women start businesses to improve their communities, and their cultural background often plays a significant role. Many view their businesses as income sources and as ways to celebrate their identity and heritage.

> *"My grandparents raised me in the South. I grew up very shy and very introverted around older people. So, I started my business for several reasons. It was for me to open up and embrace who I am, a very gifted and talented person." — Little Rock entrepreneur*

Necessity-driven entrepreneurship. In both cities, many Black women reported starting businesses after facing discrimination or limited opportunities in traditional employment. A Kansas City entrepreneur started her business after repeatedly being overlooked for promotions in her corporate job.



> *"I've been borrowing from my retirement plan for ten years to make this come true, because nobody will give me a chance." — Little Rock entrepreneur*

Economic empowerment and building wealth. Many see business ownership as a path to financial independence and family wealth. They recognize the significant wealth gap between Black and white families in America and want to change it. Many spoke of creating opportunities for their children and future generations; in Little Rock, one business owner started her company to create a legacy for her family and provide jobs in her neighborhood.

Overcoming personal challenges. Many use their businesses to overcome personal difficulties and create positive change.

> *"I was working two jobs seven days a week. And I did it for 15 years… And I wanted to find something that wasn't as taxing as my full time job without having to go and clock in somewhere." — Little Rock entrepreneur, who opened her own business and regained personal agency over her time*

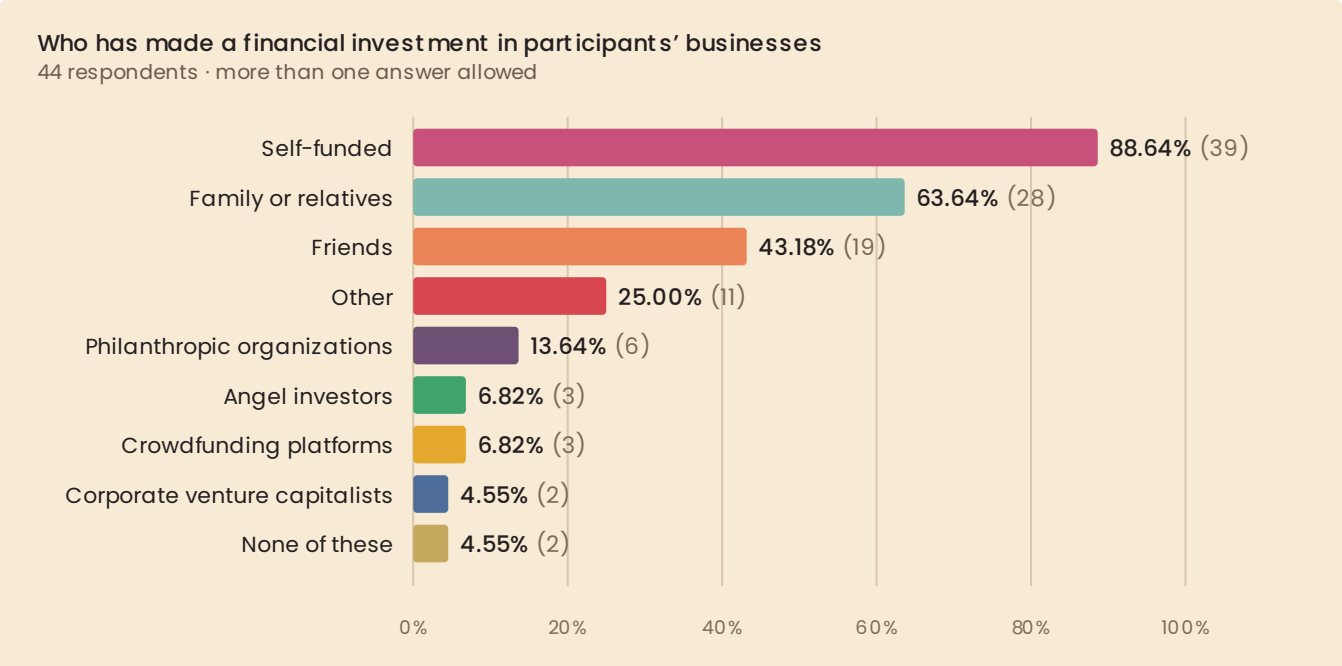
> *"I saw a gap in healthcare services for people like me, so I decided to fill it myself." — Kansas City entrepreneur, who started her business after recovering from a serious illness*

Differences between the cities. Kansas City entrepreneurs placed more emphasis on scaling businesses, entering high-growth industries like tech, and competing nationally or globally. Little Rock entrepreneurs more often spoke about businesses rooted in local culture and community needs, and about serving and uplifting their local Black community. These differences may be attributed to each city's varying resources and opportunities.

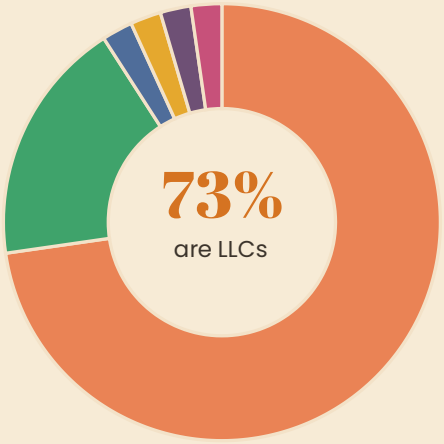
Who the Entrepreneurs Are

Types of businesses. The most common include professional services (consulting, marketing, legal), healthcare and social assistance, beauty and personal care, retail shops, and restaurants and food services. Black women are also entering fields where they have been traditionally underrepresented: in Kansas City, a trend of Black women entering the tech industry was observed, including a software platform built to reduce no-show rates for medical appointments in underserved communities. Little Rock had a strong presence of Black women in the food industry, from catering to specialty food products, often drawing on family recipes and cultural traditions.

How they fund their businesses. Among the 44 survey participants (respondents could select more than one source), 88.6% self-funded, and only small shares reported angel investors or venture capital.



Legal structure of participants' businesses
44 respondents · B Corp: 0%



LLC	**73%** (32)
Sole proprietor	**18%** (8)
S Corp	**2%** (1)
C Corp	**2%** (1)
Partnership	**2%** (1)
Cooperative	**2%** (1)

Strength and creativity. A common theme across all these stories is the strength and creativity of Black women entrepreneurs. They often face significant challenges but find innovative ways to overcome them.



> *"I feel that I was faced with significant challenges… 100%. This time with this business, I spent a lot of extra time going places and meeting people, which worked. The first time I started, it took us a long time to ramp up." — Kansas City entrepreneur*

> *"I couldn't afford traditional advertising, so I started doing live demos at community events. It was exhausting, but it got my product in front of people." — Little Rock entrepreneur*

Systemic Barriers: The Challenge of Scaling and Sustaining

Black women entrepreneurs in Kansas City and Little Rock face four interconnected systemic barriers that shape their ability to scale and sustain their businesses.

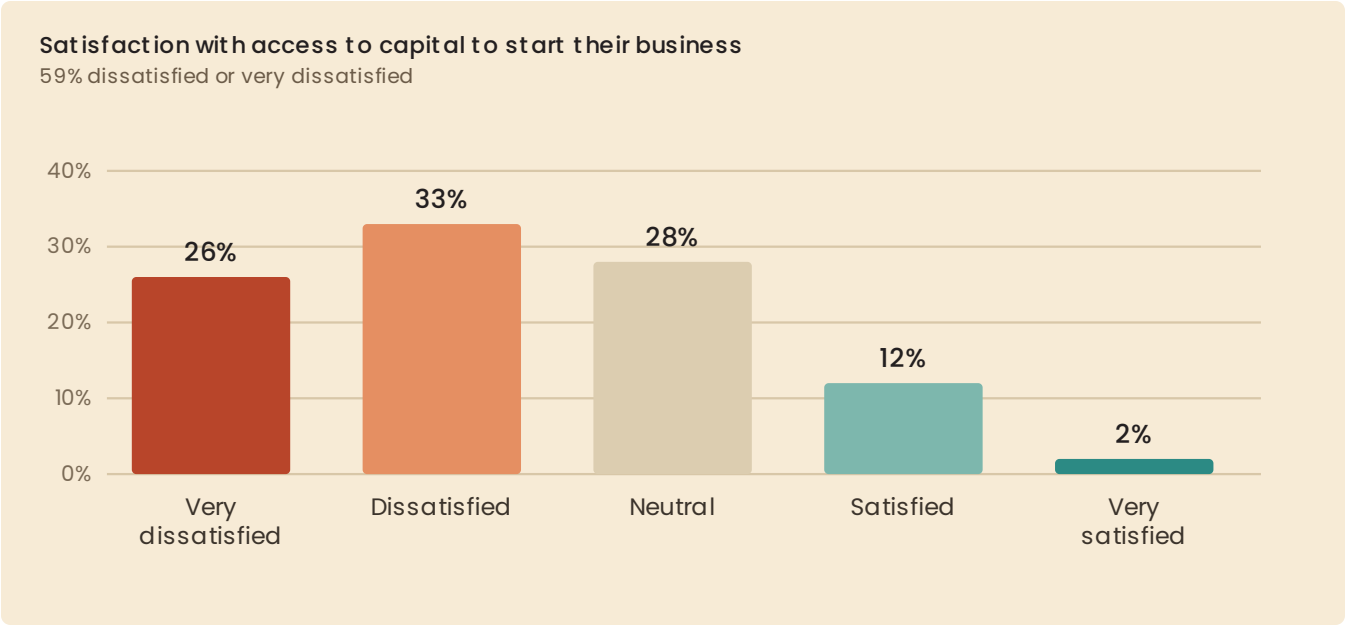
1. *Access to Capital*

The greatest challenge is funding. In both cities, Black women-owned firms earn less than their peers: 59% of the revenue of the average women-owned firm in Kansas City and 68% in Little Rock. This gap is reflected in revenue share as well. Although Black women own 12% of women-owned firms in Kansas City, those firms contribute only 7% of total revenues. In Little Rock, they make up 23.3% of firms but only 15.9% of revenues.

These differences are both a result and a cause of limited access to capital. Many entrepreneurs reported relying on personal savings or retirement funds, creating a "catch-22" where they need funding to grow but cannot qualify without demonstrating higher revenues.

> *"A problem that I run into is when I'm applying for grants, or whatever it may be, a lot of them want you to have more income than I've made. They're like, oh, for those who have made 60 to 100,000 plus, and I haven't gotten there yet." — Kansas City entrepreneur with less than three years of experience*

Satisfaction with access to capital to start their business (survey of participants):



About six in ten participants (59%) were dissatisfied or very dissatisfied with their access to capital.

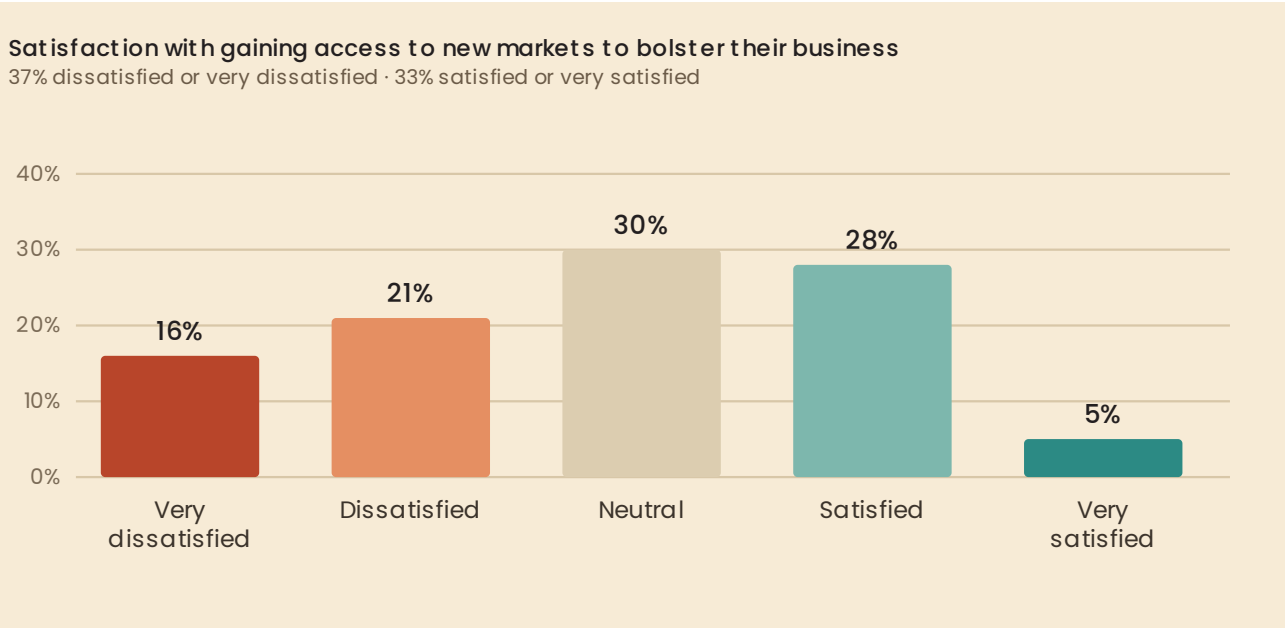
2. *Discrimination and Stereotypes*

Racial and gender biases remain significant hurdles. Entrepreneurs described being underestimated, overlooked in incubators and accelerators, or denied fair lending terms. These experiences often left them feeling isolated in business support settings. Such biases extend beyond personal interactions to systemic lending and investment practices, limiting their opportunities to thrive. Unconscious bias in lending decisions can result in Black women entrepreneurs being denied loans more often or receiving less favorable terms, even when their businesses are just as strong as others.

> *"I think one of the things I never realized [was] the community is having someone who looks like me come up with an idea that I did, and most times when I would go into different incubator accelerators, they were not populated in that way." — Kansas City entrepreneur*

3. *Market Barriers*

Breaking into new markets and networks is another obstacle. When asked about gaining access to new markets to bolster their business, 37% of participants were dissatisfied or very dissatisfied (21% and 16%), 30% were neutral, and 33% were satisfied or very satisfied (28% and 5%). Those serving predominantly Black communities often had to build their own paths, lacking examples or established models to follow. Many also reported feeling pressure to continually "prove" themselves and their businesses, which slowed growth and market entry.



> *"My business is very much different from other businesses because my business predominantly caters to Black Arkansans. I couldn't find one person who left any breadcrumbs for me to follow when I started this." — Little Rock entrepreneur*

4. Lack of Mentorship and Representation

Mentorship that reflects Black women's lived experiences is scarce. Representation is also limited within ESOs: in Kansas City, 38% of ESOs primarily served Black entrepreneurs, yet only 25% had representative leadership; in Little Rock, 30% served Black entrepreneurs, but just 15% had leadership teams that reflected them. This gap means support programs and funding decisions may not fully address the specific needs of Black women entrepreneurs.

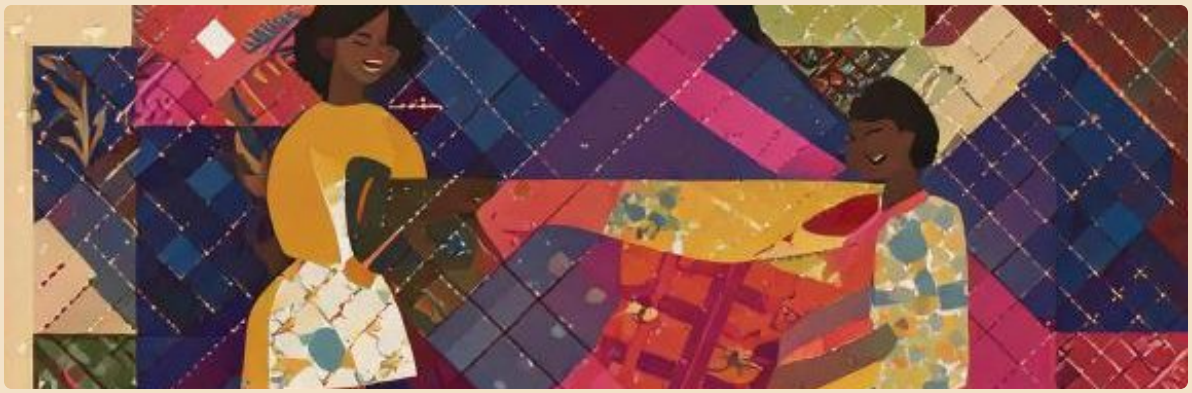
> *"There are very few mentors that look like me, and so I had to go outside of the comfort zone, seek out those mentors that were willing to take the time and expend the energy into me." — Kansas City entrepreneur*

Overall, these barriers are deeply rooted in long-standing inequities. Despite systemic challenges, Black women entrepreneurs continue to innovate, build networks where none exist, and create businesses that strengthen their local economies. By addressing these barriers directly, stakeholders have the opportunity to unlock even greater economic growth and ensure more inclusive entrepreneurial ecosystems.



Success Stories: Resilience and Creativity in Action

The women profiled here shared their journeys through interviews. Their stories show what is possible, and what it takes.





Meet the entrepreneurs

- **Dianna Holley**
  Breaking the Mold in Publishing
- **Victoria Mays**
  Empowering Entrepreneurs Through Publishing and Technical Services
- **Allicia Talbert**
  Talbert's Lawn Service, Little Rock
- **Serreta "Mizz PickleLady" Boson**
  A Journey of Growth and Resilience
- **Dr. Shelley Cooper**
  Transforming Healthcare through Telehealth
- **Remy Wharry**
  Painting Kansas City with Passion and Purpose
- **Jonaie Johnson**
  Leveraging the Kansas City Ecosystem
- **Arvelisha and India Woods**
  Mattie's Foods, Kansas City



Dianna Holley:

Breaking the Mold in Publishing

Dianna Holley stands out as a leader in the niche world of Black-owned publishing in Little Rock. Despite challenges in balancing multiple jobs and navigating an industry where few women of color exist, this Editor-in-Chief has built a thriving business. As the founder of Urbane Magazine, Dianna has persevered through personal and professional hurdles. “It’s hard because I don’t have the same formulas and operational methods that other businesses do,” she says, reflecting on her unique path.

Despite participating in several entrepreneurial programs, Dianna found that many did not meet her specific needs. She acknowledges the value of the WEM Hub through the Women’s Foundation of Arkansas, which provided her with no-strings-attached financial support. However, she expresses frustration with programs that enforced rigid guidelines, often irrelevant to her online and niche business. “Not every business has mass retail or a brick-and-mortar inventory,” she explains, emphasizing that her publishing model requires different forms of support. Dianna continues to push boundaries, not only within her business but also in advocating for improvements in entrepreneurial support systems. She remains determined to make her business a full-time endeavor, working to create a lasting legacy for her family. “I want to leave something for my children,” she says.

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Dr. Shelley Cooper:

Transforming Healthcare through Telehealth



A deep personal loss and a commitment to closing healthcare gaps drive Dr. Shelley Cooper's journey into entrepreneurship. As the founder of Diversity Telehealth, Shelley uses HIPAA-compliant virtual tools to serve underserved communities. Her inspiration came after her father's unexpected passing in 2018, an avoidable loss that could have been prevented with better healthcare access. "He could still be here now," she reflects.

Shelley's work centers on reducing no-show rates at clinics serving low-income patients with chronic diseases. Her software platform, Come On Now, connects patients and doctors via telehealth, ensuring timely medical visits without the barriers of transportation, weather, or work commitments. "I look back and think of the things I never realized, which was how unusual it was for someone who looks like me to create something like this," she says, recognizing the rarity of a Black woman leading such an initiative in healthcare.

Dr. Cooper's entrepreneurial spirit doesn't stop with telehealth; she has also created Remodel Relief, an AI-supported home maintenance platform. Balancing multiple businesses, she remains focused on making a positive impact in her community and beyond.

In her own words on building a tech business as a clinician: "I had started a previous business that was in person, but this business is a tech business. And as a person who is a clinician first and occupational therapist, I was trying to build an app I didn't know where to start. And so I, you know, found my resources and got education from the Small Business Development Center. UMKC tech venture studio was super helpful and then spread me into all other kinds of things."

Diversity Telehealth, LLC · 800 East 18th Street, Kansas City, MO · (913) 710-3818 · scooper@diversitytelehealth.com · diversitytelehealth.com · https://www.facebook.com/DiversityTelehealth



Victoria Mays:

Empowering Entrepreneurs Through Publishing and Technical Services

Victoria Mays has carved out a unique space in the entrepreneurial ecosystem as the founder of Pen to Print Editing & Publishing, a Black woman-owned business offering a range of services from editing to grant writing. Initially focused on helping individuals publish "legacy texts," Victoria quickly realized that the market she wanted to serve could not afford the quality of services she aimed to provide. "There was a huge gap between what they could afford and the quality that could be rendered," she explains.

Victoria's ability to pivot has been key to her success. She moved into federal grant writing, eventually taking on a leadership role in a large organization. This experience expanded her skills in both grant writing and business development. "I haven't had to ask for contracts—they come through referrals," she says, highlighting the importance of relationships and doing quality work.

Victoria's journey hasn't been without challenges. She describes the struggle of balancing work with caregiving responsibilities for her young child. However, her daughter is now older and ready to engage with growth opportunities fully. "Now I'm ready for those types of opportunities," she says, reflecting on her future goals.

Pen to Print Editing & Publishing LLC ·
pen2printep@gmail.com

Remy Wharry:

Painting Kansas City with Passion and Purpose









Kansas City-based artist and entrepreneur Remy Wharry is using her art to uplift the Black community while building a unique business in the process. Specializing in large-scale murals and custom paint parties, Remy sets herself apart using her own acrylic paint line. “There are very few Black women with their own paint lines—maybe two or three of us in the country,” she explains. This distinction has garnered her strong support from fellow Black women artists, who use her paints in their own work. As she puts it: “I paint a lot of Black lives, Black people… I also paint large-scale murals as well.”

Remy has frequently participated in Kansas City’s entrepreneurial support programs, receiving guidance and resources from organizations like the Porter House KC, The Gift KC, and most recently The Zhou Brothers Art Center. Although funding has been sporadic, these programs have helped her refine her business pitch and grow her network. “Some months are good, and others are a struggle,” she admits, describing the unpredictable nature of running an art-based business.

Despite the ups and downs, Remy remains committed to expanding her business and supporting other Black women in the arts. She continues to utilize local resources, driven by her passion for art and the community. “I want people to fall in love with my passion,” she says, reflecting on her approach to engaging customers and supporters.

RAW Art Acrylic Paint · (816) 237-0079 · Hello@rawartpaint.com · rawartpaint.com



Allicia Talbert:

Talbert's Lawn Service, Little Rock

In 2015, Allicia Talbert confronted a daunting obstacle that would fuel an unexpected entrepreneurial fire. When her husband's criminal record became a barrier to employment, Allicia refused to accept defeat. Armed with nothing but a push mower and an unyielding spirit, she launched Talbert's Lawn Service, a venture committed to offering second chances to formerly incarcerated individuals through meaningful work.

In its infancy, the business demanded every ounce of Allicia's resourcefulness. She poured her 401(k) savings into the company, allocated her paychecks to fuel growth, and stretched every available dollar to its limit. Each penny earned found its way back into expanding their fleet of equipment. Despite the financial tightrope walk, Allicia remained steadfast, propelled by her vision of creating opportunities for those often sidelined by society.

Today, Talbert's Lawn Service stands as a testament to Allicia's grit and ingenuity. From humble beginnings with a single mower, the company now boasts a fleet of lawn care equipment with a host of happy customers. It has blossomed into a symbol of hope for second-chance employment in Little Rock, Arkansas. Allicia's story is a powerful reminder that with determination, community support, and a proactive approach to seeking opportunities, it's possible to cultivate a thriving business that not only achieves financial success but also elevates others along the path to prosperity.



Jonaie Johnson:

Leveraging the Kansas City Ecosystem

From being a student greeter at an entrepreneurship award ceremony to being named the 2020 Student Entrepreneur of the Year and now leading Interplay, an innovative pet tech startup, Jonaie Johnson is a champion for leveraging the entrepreneurial ecosystem in Kansas City. As the founder and CEO, Johnson has leveraged local resources to transform her vision into a promising business.

A graduate of the University of Missouri-Kansas City (UMKC), Johnson credits the university's E Scholars Program for laying the groundwork for Interplay's success. The company is developing "one of the world's first interactive dog crates," aiming to revolutionize pet care for busy owners. In August 2024, the company was accepted into the Techstars Atlanta & New Orleans accelerator program, securing a $120,000 investment. Johnson sees this as pivotal: "With the $120,000 investment and world-class mentorship, we now have the funding and resources to scale the company and get our product in the hands of customers." Jonaie's relationships with local ESOs throughout her journey, like the Small Business Development Center and Digital Sandbox, have propelled her business. Her story highlights the strength of Kansas City's startup ecosystem and its capacity to nurture ambitious entrepreneurs.

https://www.instagram.com/gointerplay/ · https://www.linkedin.com/in/jonaie-johnson/ · https://gointerplay.com/



Serreta "Mizz PickleLady" Boson:

A Journey of Growth and Resilience



Serreta Boson's entrepreneurial journey began with a personal challenge that she transformed into a thriving business. In 2016, she faced a serious health scare that left her uncertain about her future. Inspired by a family recipe passed down from her father, she started her pickle business, Sarge's Famous Pickles, to support herself. "It wasn't until my lowest point that I realized my talents could create space for me," she shared, reflecting on her recovery and the launch of her company.

As Serreta navigated the challenges of starting a business, she sought support from various local programs, gaining knowledge and resources to grow. However, the journey was not without obstacles. "Other programs were helpful but were not always the right fit for me," she said, explaining that although they emphasized good credit, her circumstances at the time made it difficult to meet their criteria.

Despite these setbacks, Serreta persevered, ultimately securing a $25,000 Imani grant through ReMix Ideas, which allowed her to purchase a food trailer and expand her offerings. With her pickles available in multiple states and a growing business, Serreta looks forward to new opportunities. "I know that once I get the food trucks up, that's our turning point," she remarked, confident about the future. In her words: "We are in the process of opening our new pickle production facility and I can't believe that our pickles are now available in three states!" The Grand Opening of the Food Truck and Production Facility was August 2024. Her story shows how product development and marketing innovation can lead to significant growth opportunities.

Sarge's Famous Pickles · 2915 E Kiehl Avenue, Sherwood, AR · (931) 698-0210 · sargesfamouspickles.com · https://www.facebook.com/SargesFamousPickles

Photo credit: Happy Moments, LLC.



Arvelisha and India Woods:

Mattie's Foods, Kansas City

The health and wellness sector presents significant opportunities for Black women entrepreneurs, often through holistic and community-centered approaches to health. One model to highlight is Mattie's Foods in Kansas City.

In 2015, sisters Arvelisha and India embarked on a fast that unexpectedly changed their lives and led to the creation of Kansas City's first Black-owned vegan restaurant. Emerging from their fast with a newfound vegan lifestyle, the sisters found themselves craving the comfort foods they once enjoyed. Faced with limited vegan options in their meat-centric city, they took matters into their own hands. What began as a quest to satisfy their craving for cheese and nachos evolved into a mission to provide delicious, plant-based alternatives to traditional comfort foods.

They named their venture after their grandmother Mattie, who passed away in 2001 from preventable ailments, to honor her memory and potentially save lives. They recognized that many in their community were battling diseases like diabetes and certain cancers, which could be prevented or managed through healthier dietary choices. Mattie's Foods became their platform to introduce smarter, plant-based versions of beloved comfort foods, ensuring that going vegan didn't mean missing out on favorite dishes.

Mattie's Foods has grown from a food truck to a full-fledged restaurant in Brookside, Kansas City. The sisters have expanded their offerings to include vegan versions of soul food staples like greens, mac and cheese, cornbread, yams, and even barbecue "chicks." Their commitment to offering diverse milk alternatives and accommodating various dietary restrictions further underscores their mission to make healthy, comforting food accessible to everyone. Mattie's Foods is a real story of how Black women entrepreneurs identify and fill crucial gaps in their communities, creating businesses that address specific health needs.

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Source: Arvelisha and India Woods, owners of Mattie's Foods, personal video, August 24, 2024. YouTube: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g17qIDwKPcc

Opportunities for Growth and Success

Growth indicators. While specific data on the growth of Black women-owned businesses in these cities is limited, some indicators suggest positive trends. In Kansas City, Black women-owned firms increased their share of all women-owned businesses from 10.5% in 2018 to 12% in 2021. In Little Rock, the revenue share of Black women-owned firms relative to all women-owned firms grew from 13.2% in 2018 to 15.9% in 2021.

Factors contributing to success. Several key factors appear to contribute to the success of Black women entrepreneurs in Kansas City and Little Rock:

- **Resilience and adaptability:** a remarkable ability to pivot and adapt business models in response to challenges.
- **Community focus:** a strong connection to their communities, addressing specific needs or gaps in the market.
- **Innovation:** whether in tech or traditional industries, bringing new ideas or approaches to their fields.
- **Networking and relationship building:** building strong networks and relationships within their communities and industries.
- **Leveraging support systems:** while support systems may be imperfect, finding ways to maximize available resources.



Opportunities for future growth.

- **E-commerce and digital marketing:** as more businesses move online, there are growing opportunities for entrepreneurs who can effectively leverage digital platforms.
- **Green and sustainable businesses:** an increasing focus on sustainability may create new growth opportunities in eco-friendly industries.
- **Education and training services:** as workforce needs evolve, there are opportunities to provide specialized training and education.
- **Supplier diversity programs:** as more corporations commit to supplier diversity, Black women-owned businesses may find new opportunities in B2B markets.
- **Social impact ventures:** businesses that combine profitability with positive social impact will likely find growing support and opportunities.

The success stories in this report demonstrate that with the right support, resources, and opportunities, Black women entrepreneurs have the potential to be powerful drivers of economic growth and innovation in their cities and beyond.

Recommendations for Policymakers and Support Organizations

Based on the research findings, this report outlines a set of actionable strategies to strengthen entrepreneurial ecosystems for Black women in Kansas City and Little Rock. These recommendations address systemic inequities while building on opportunities for inclusive growth.

1. *Enhance Access to Capital*

- Establish low-interest loan programs tailored to Black women entrepreneurs.
- Develop grant programs in industries where Black women are underrepresented.
- Improve lending practices by implementing bias training for loan officers and investment committees and revising lending criteria to eliminate discriminatory practices.
- Support alternative models such as community investment funds and crowdfunding platforms designed for minority-owned businesses.

2. *Strengthen Mentorship and Networking Opportunities*

- Create mentorship programs tailored to the needs of Black women entrepreneurs.
- Build a database of experienced Black women business owners willing to serve as mentors.
- Ensure structured mentorship programs match mentees with mentors based on industry, goals, and professional needs.
- Organize regular networking events designed for Black women entrepreneurs, as well as online platforms for ongoing engagement.
- Promote cross-industry connections, including partnerships between established businesses and Black women-owned startups.



3. *Tailor Support Programs to Specific Needs*

- Develop stage-appropriate support for businesses at different phases, especially those in the “missing middle” (beyond startup but not yet advanced growth).
- Provide industry-specific training where Black women are concentrated or emerging.
- Offer holistic support, including resources for balancing work-life demands and supporting mental health.

4. *Increase Representation in Leadership and Decision-Making Roles*

- Implement diversity initiatives within ESOs, with clear targets for increasing the representation of Black women in leadership.
- Create leadership development programs specifically for Black women entrepreneurs.

- Ensure Black women are included on boards and committees shaping entrepreneurship policies and programs.
- Provide funding and resources to Black women-led support organizations so they can expand reach and impact.



5. *Address Market Access Barriers*

- Develop supplier diversity initiatives with corporations and government agencies that prioritize contracts with Black women-owned businesses, with training to help them qualify.
- Organize trade shows and expos featuring Black women-owned businesses.
- Build online platforms to increase visibility and connect entrepreneurs with markets.
- Provide market research and intelligence resources to help identify trends and untapped markets.

6. *Improve Data Collection and Reporting*

- Conduct regular surveys and longitudinal studies focused on Black women entrepreneurs.
- Partner with local universities for deeper, long-term data collection.
- Publish annual reports on the state of Black women's entrepreneurship at the city level.
- Use data to track the effectiveness of support programs and refine initiatives.



7. *Foster a Culture of Inclusive Entrepreneurship*

- Promote success stories of Black women entrepreneurs through media campaigns and awards.
- Educate investors, banks, and ESOs on the unique challenges and opportunities involved in supporting Black women entrepreneurs.
- Create inclusive co-working spaces and incubators that center mentorship, resources, and community in culturally supportive environments.
- Encourage collaboration between policymakers, ESOs, the private sector, and entrepreneurs to build inclusive ecosystems.

Call to Action

To create more inclusive and supportive entrepreneurial ecosystems in Kansas City and Little Rock, stakeholders must:

- Develop targeted funding programs that address the unique capital needs of Black women entrepreneurs.
- Increase representation of Black women in leadership positions within support organizations and funding bodies.
- Create mentorship and networking programs that connect Black women entrepreneurs with culturally relevant guidance and support.
- Tailor support services to address the specific challenges faced by Black women entrepreneurs at different stages of business growth.
- Implement supplier diversity initiatives and market access programs to help Black women-owned businesses expand their reach.
- Improve data collection and reporting to track progress and inform evidence-based policies and programs.
- Foster a culture of inclusive entrepreneurship through education, media representation, and community engagement.

These recommendations can provide starting points for Kansas City and Little Rock to enhance their entrepreneurial environments to drive greater economic growth and community development.

Final Thoughts

Black women entrepreneurs in Kansas City and Little Rock are powerful drivers of innovation, economic growth, and community development. Despite facing significant challenges, these business owners demonstrate remarkable resilience, creativity, and determination. This report has highlighted their experiences, challenges, and opportunities, revealing both the untapped potential of Black women entrepreneurs and the urgent need for systemic change in the entrepreneurial ecosystem.

The importance of supporting Black women entrepreneurs cannot be overstated. Their success contributes not only to their economic empowerment but also to job creation, economic diversification, and the overall vitality of their communities. While individual success stories are inspiring, they highlight the extraordinary effort required to overcome persistent barriers. True progress will require coordinated action from policymakers, support organizations, financial institutions, and the broader business community.

As this report demonstrates, the potential of Black women entrepreneurs is vast and largely under-optimized. ESOs can harness this potential by addressing the systemic barriers entrepreneurs face and providing targeted, effective support, creating more equitable and prosperous communities for everyone.

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Colophon

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