

# Diversity, Equity & Inclusion in the Cannabis Industry

SPECIAL REPORT



*Ulysses  
Youngblood  
Owner-operator  
of Major Bloom*

*Photo by Jared Charney*

**MJ**BizDaily®

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# FROM THE PUBLISHER

## Building Blocks for Change

**L**ots of industries lay claim to diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) work, but no sector more so than cannabis.

A history of racial targeting by law enforcement and the mass incarceration of brown and Black people undergirds the modern, legal industry.

In response, cannabis regulators across the country set aside licenses for social equity applicants.

Cannabis companies invest in and focus on diversity and equity. Equity-focused cannabis associations work tirelessly.

So, why is the industry still so overwhelmingly white—and male—especially at the top levels?

It is not an easy thing to change a culture, a history or the intersecting,



powerful systems of race, class, gender and money.

So, in this, *MJBizDaily's* fourth look at equity in cannabis, we give you the numbers to fuel conversation about what the industry looks like. And we share some of the compelling, human stories behind the statistics.

Shining a light on the topic is our way of lending support and ammunition to all of you working every day to make the industry better.

*Pam Moore*

Pam Moore  
SVP, Content Strategy  
and Audience Acquisition

# STATE OF DIVERSITY IN CANNABIS

It's easy to overlook humanity in the data. Numbers go up, and numbers go down. We often forget that the numbers represent the hopes, dreams and lives of people.

This year, in the fourth edition of *MJBizDaily's* report on diversity in the cannabis industry, we wanted to put some faces to the numbers.

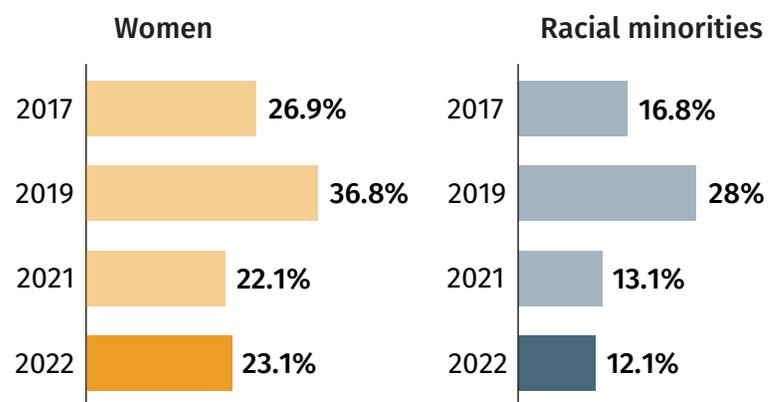
We feel this context is important as we attempt to understand diversity in the cannabis industry.

Throughout this report, we include profiles of the people who make up the numbers.

People such as Rebecca Colett, the Black, female owner of a cultivation and processing company in Detroit, or Aaron Balfour, a licensed pharmacist working for Curaleaf Holdings in Hartford, Connecticut.

## Stagnant growth for minority executives

The percentage of women and non-white executives in the cannabis industry remained stagnant for 2022.



Source: MJBizDaily survey

They, along with others, share their thoughts on the state of diversity in cannabis. That's something that is often hidden in the numbers.

## THE NUMBERS

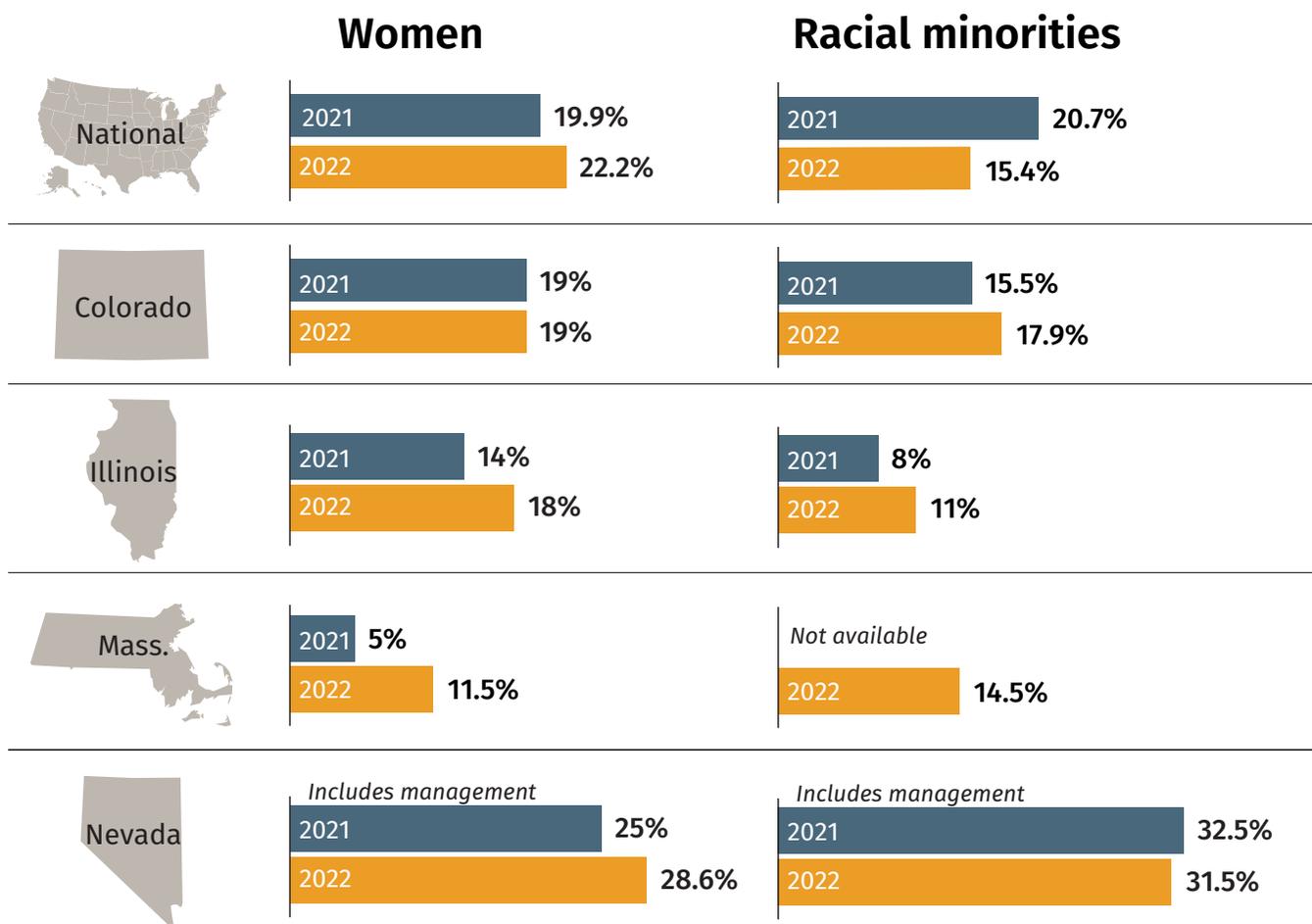
Despite growing interest and investment in cannabis social equity programs around the nation, the industry's growth this year hasn't

translated into gains for marginalized groups.

In general, the percentage of leadership positions held by U.S. women and racial minorities has remained stagnant or declined in the past five years.

People of color suffered the biggest setback. Non-white ownership of cannabis businesses shrank this year to 15.4% from 20.7% in 2021.

# Cannabis ownership by group



Source: State cannabis agencies, MJBizDaily survey

The losses also impacted executive positions held by racial minorities, which declined a little more than a percentage point this year, from 13.1% to 12.1%.

Roles for women in cannabis leadership fared a bit better but couldn't be called a win.

Majority ownership by women in cannabis

businesses gained slightly from last year at 22.2%, with the percentage of executive positions also gaining a percentage point this year at around 23%.

That is below the national average for women in top jobs for all U.S. businesses.

The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) reported that 29.1% of chief executives

in 2021 were women. That share has been rising steadily since the government started tracking the statistic in 2003.

Similarly, at 12.1%, the percentage of non-white executives in cannabis was well below the average for all U.S. businesses, which the BLS estimated at 20.1% last year.

## Profile



**Name:** Troy Datcher

**Position, company and location:**  
CEO, The Parent Co.,  
Oakland, California

**Year entered the regulated  
cannabis industry:** 2021

In summer 2021, Troy Datcher was comfortable in his dream job as chief customer officer with The Clorox Co.

“Candidly, I was good at it and had a lot of success,” Datcher said.

But when he was offered the opportunity to become CEO of The Parent Co., the cannabis business owned by Shawn “Jay-Z” Carter, he took the leap.

Datcher was intrigued by the chance to work in a new industry and with high-profile figures like Jay-Z, but he was also drawn by The Parent Co.’s mission.

“One of the things that was important was this focus on social equity and bringing Black and brown folks to the table as entrepreneurs in the space,” Datcher said.

Now, he’s trying to get other Black executives to enter the cannabis industry.

Datcher penned an op-ed that recently

appeared in Savoy magazine, one of the top Black business magazines in the United States, about the industry’s need for more Black leaders.

“I think part of the challenge is getting especially successful Black executives who are thriving in their current careers to take the leap,” Datcher said. “It’s making sure that people understand that the opportunity is sitting in front of us: the opportunity to make a difference.”

To find a pipeline of talent, executives need to work with recruiting agencies that have a track record of putting diversity and inclusion at the forefront of their efforts.

“That includes where you show up,” Datcher said. “Are you showing up in places where people of color are congregating to talk about their careers?”

## Profile

The Parent Co. also is hiring more BIPOC people to work in its retail stores.

“I see a really great opportunity to make sure that we’re getting diverse from a retail standpoint, by hiring people from those local neighborhoods. I think that’s a great way to show that we are a reflection of the communities that we work in,” Datcher said.

Over the past year, The Parent Co. also invested in the social equity entrepreneurs behind Josephine and Billie’s, a Black female-owned dispensary in Los Angeles, and Green Peakz, a Black-owned cultivation business in Los Angeles.

“Our leadership team is there to support these new entrepreneurs as they enter this really tough, challenging industry,” Datcher said.

He also has pushed his agenda through the Executive Leadership Council, an organization of the top 500 Black executives in the U.S.

“I’ve had lots of conversations with these aspiring C-level executives about the industry,” Datcher said. He noted that one young Black executive recently called him to say he had two executive post offers from cannabis companies, and he asked if Datcher could provide insights about the companies and the industry.

“Sometimes it’s a slow burn, but it’s well worth it. I’m going to make sure that I’m telling my story, sharing my

experience with people, because right now, that’s a pretty rare one. You have the only Black CEO of a publicly traded company in this space, which baffles me. My job is to make sure that I’m successful so I can then show others that there’s a roadmap to be successful in this industry as well,” Datcher said.

He noted that the lack of Black representation in C-suites is not unique to cannabis; it exists in every industry.

“Cannabis is not any different. It’s just an extension of the challenge that we’re seeing across most industries, where diversity has to be a really conscious decision. There has to be someone that is truly committed from the top. And it has to be a priority. And if it’s a priority, then those things happen,” Datcher said.

The cannabis industry has an advantage over other sectors when it comes to Black representation, he said, because it is still in its nascent stage.

“It’s so much easier for us to create an industry at the beginning that we like versus trying to retrofit it. We have a great opportunity here to build something from the ground up,” Datcher said. “It’s a lot of work. But we can make a lot of progress in a short period of time because of the stage of ... the industry.

“But it does take a considerable amount of conscious effort by people at the very top of these organizations to make sure it happens.”

## STATES

Marginalized groups fared better in their respective state-regulated markets this year versus the national numbers we calculated from *MJBizDaily* survey results.

Demographic data for owners and employees in the cannabis industry remains limited. Few states routinely collect demographic data, making it harder to understand issues of diversity, equity and inclusion in the space.

But states such as Colorado, Illinois, Massachusetts and Nevada do collect information on racial and gender demographics in their markets.

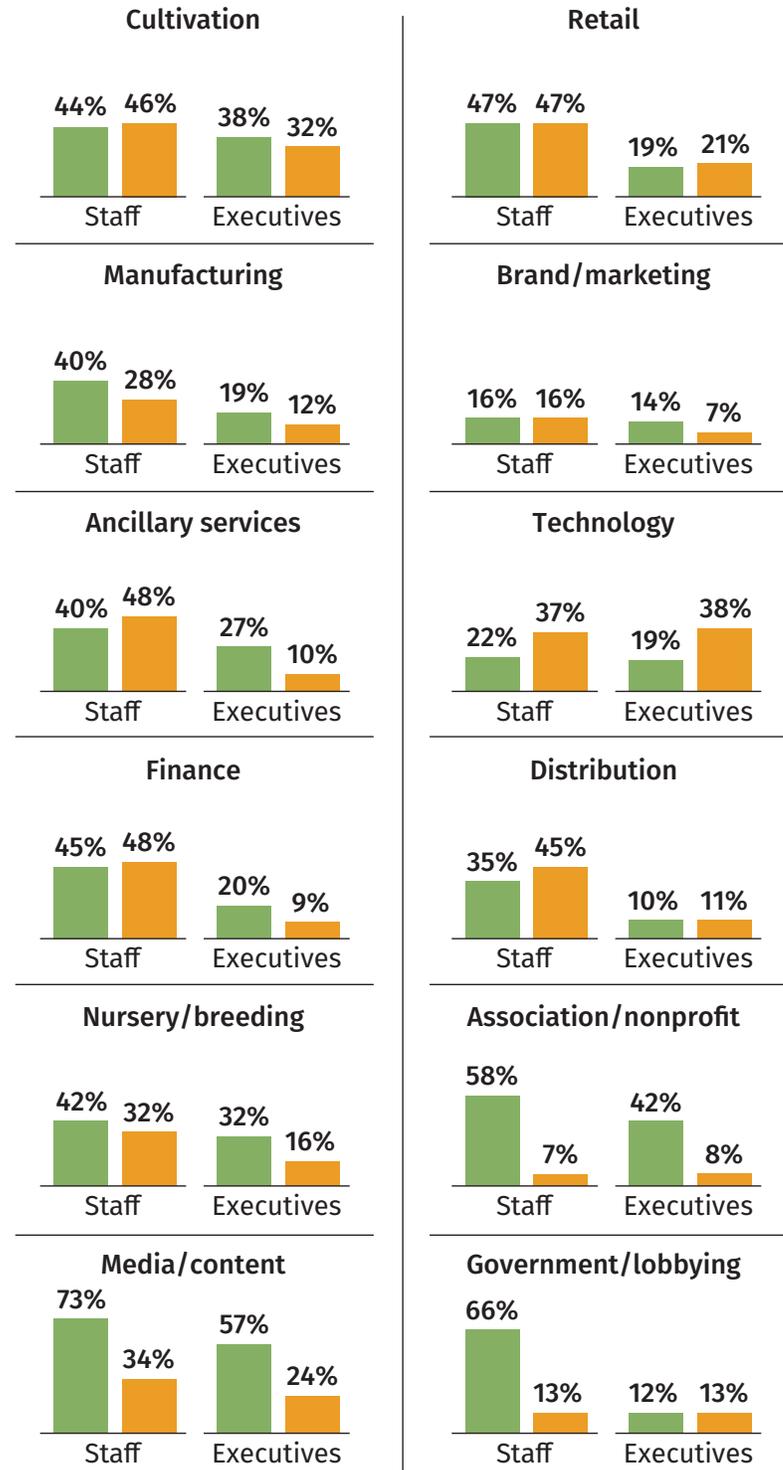
And while comparing surveys with different methods can be problematic, it can still give a good indication of the direction social equity is going.

For the scope of this report, we will look at two states at very different points in their cannabis industry journey: Colorado, a mature market, and Illinois, an upstart.

## Employment by sector

The percentage of women and racial minorities employed in cannabis varies depending on the sector of the industry.

■ Women ■ People of color



Source: MJBizDaily survey



## COLORADO

It's often been said that you can't improve what you don't measure.

Colorado is outperforming other states in this regard by releasing monthly employee and ownership license demographics, something the Colorado Marijuana Enforcement Division has been doing since July 2021.

It was then that the state set a goal to increase racial minority license ownership from 15.2% to 16.8% by the summer of 2022.

Colorado met that goal early in January. And, since then, the number of racial minority ownership licenses has been hovering at or around 18% for most of the year.

As of July, the latest number available, those who described themselves as either Asian, Black, Hispanic/Latino, Native American, Pacific Islander or a mix of those ethnicities accounted for 327 ownership licenses, or roughly 17.9% of the total available.

As we look at these numbers, it is important to note that Colorado's demographic survey is voluntary. The information is requested on applications but not required to process the license. So, from a demographic standpoint, it's a best guess.

For example, the July numbers do not include some 90 license owners, or about 5%, who, for whatever reason, did not disclose their race or ethnicity. This could



Wanda James opened Simply Pure, a Denver-based dispensary, in 2015.

certainly influence the percentages of racial minorities if most of those licenses were issued to people identifying as white.

People of color score higher in non-ownership metrics in Colorado, a pattern we see in other states, such as Illinois. Employee license applicants do more closely match statewide demographics in both markets.

According to 2021 U.S. Census Bureau data, Colorado residents are 65% white, 4% Black, 3% Asian and 25% identifying as Hispanic.

So it is not entirely unexpected that white individuals account for 66% of the almost 30,000 cannabis employee licenses in Colorado, with non-white employees holding the rest. It is good to remember that almost 12,000 applicants, or 28%, didn't disclose their race or ethnicity, so we could expect white employment in Colorado to be a bit higher than stated.

And if we are comparing the industry to state averages, people of Hispanic



**Women make up 49% of the state's residents, but they only hold 19% of the cannabis ownership licenses and 38% of the employee permits.**



or Latino decent are the most underrepresented group in Colorado cannabis.

Almost a quarter of Colorado residents identify as Hispanic/Latino, and yet the group accounts for only 8.6% of license owners and 17.5% of employees.

Women are also underrepresented in Colorado cannabis. They make up 49% of the state's residents, yet women held only 19% of the cannabis ownership licenses and 38%

of the employee permits.

Expect those numbers to decline for women of color, who are often left out more than their white counterparts.

Measuring diversity is a great first step for a mature market such as Colorado. But measurement is only the first step. Improving equity and inclusion, especially for Hispanics or Latinos as well as women in the state, will take considerable effort.



# ILLINOIS

**O**wnership of businesses in the Illinois cannabis market is anything but equitable.

Recently published demographic numbers from the Illinois Department of Financial and Professional Regulation help to illustrate the stark racial and gender divides that exist between cannabis leadership and frontline workers.

White people are majority owners of 88% of cannabis businesses—including stores, cultivation centers and transportation companies—leaving non-white majority ownership at 11%.

And while the U.S. Census Bureau puts the ratio of women in the state at 51% in 2021, only 18% of cannabis businesses have majority owners who are women.

Black and Hispanic owners are even more disproportionately represented, with each group accounting for 1% of majority ownership.

It is hard to explain the deficiency in a state where

## Illinois cannabis industry demographics

Demographic numbers released this year for the cannabis industry in Illinois highlight the lack of people of color in ownership and leadership roles.

■ White ■ Black ■ Hispanic ■ 2+ races ■ Other

Illinois' statewide demographics



### Cannabis industry in Illinois

Majority owners



Other owner



Board of directors



C-suite executives



Senior managers



Middle managers



Frontline employees



Frontline part-time



Source: U.S. Census, Illinois Department of Financial and Professional Regulation

15% of the residents self-identify as Black and 18% as Hispanic.

The number improves a bit for minority ownership—those who own less than 51% of a cannabis business. Non-white minority ownership in 2022 was 28%.

That increase from majority ownership can be attributed to Hispanic owners, who accounted for 13% of those with minority ownership. Black minority ownership was almost nonexistent in 2022.

It's only when we look at past owners, directors and managers and focus on frontline employees—such as budtenders, trimmers and packers—that we get racial and gender demographics that more closely reflect the state's demographic makeup.

For example, women account for 32% of full-time frontline workers and 51% of part-time employees.

More than half of all frontline workers are not white, with people of color filling 51% of full-time positions and 54% of part-time roles.

But that work has not translated into management positions for non-white workers. Senior managers in Illinois cannabis companies are 70% white, and middle management is not far behind at 55%.

White women have fared much better in management but hit a ceiling when trying to enter board and C-suite positions.

But those executive positions are almost nonexistent for Black, Hispanic and mixed-race people in Illinois, given that 80% to 90% of boards and C-suite cannabis jobs in the state are occupied by people identifying as white.

The pipeline for moving up in the cannabis industry is effectively broken for women and people of color. Black, Hispanic and Asian budtenders are less likely to own or run a cannabis business than their white coworkers.

On paper, Illinois wants to make cannabis more equitable for minorities and those living in

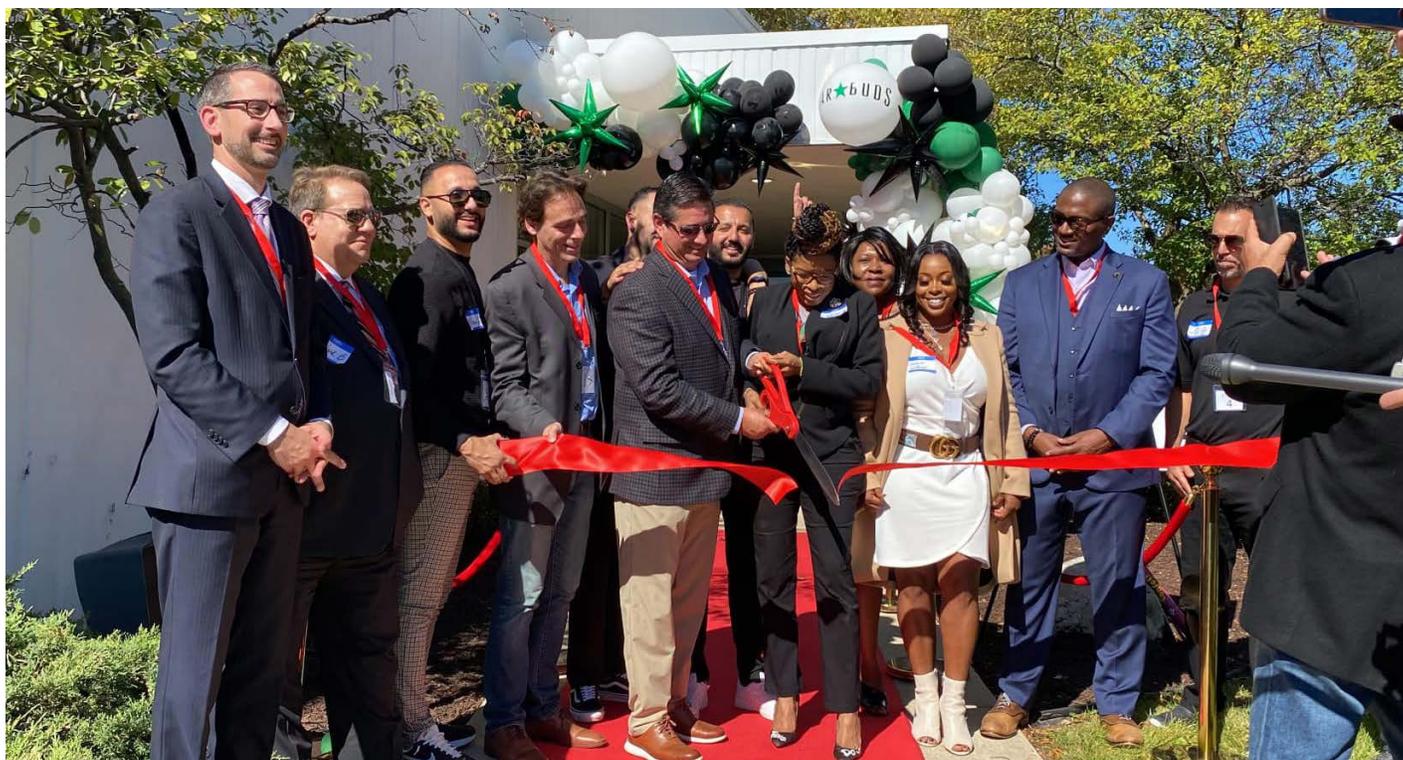
areas disproportionately impacted by the war on drugs. Illinois was the first state to legalize cannabis by legislative action. In the process, the state was the first to include social equity provisions in its laws.

But poorly designed programs, lawsuits and coronavirus-related delays have made access a struggle for social equity applicants in the state. This has given existing white license owners—who account for most license holders—a jump-start in the state's rapidly growing cannabis market.

That could be changing.

The Illinois Department of Agriculture issued 48 craft grower licenses to social equity applicants in June. Of those, 42% are majority Black-owned and 8% Hispanic-owned. The remaining half are either majority white-owned, part of a partnership group or applicants who didn't disclose their race.

To date, the state has awarded a total of 341 adult-use cannabis licenses for craft growers, infusers and transporters.



Craft marijuana cultivator Star Buds IL opened in October.

In October, Rockford-based Star Buds IL, which is 66% Black-owned, opened its doors to become the first predominantly Black-owned cannabis business and the first craft grower in the state. Star Buds is part of the initial 2021 licensing cohort, of which 67% identified as non-white.

The state has also rolled out retail licenses this year. Mario Treto Jr., the secretary of the Illinois Department of Financial and Professional Regulation, said in a news

release that the licenses are “designed to make cannabis dispensaries more inclusive and diverse than ever before.”

And in another major development, after years of legal battles, Illinois regulators in July issued 185 retail cannabis dispensary licenses to social equity applicants. The conditional licenses would more than double the retail market in the state.

Of this group, 41% of businesses are majority Black-owned and 4% are Hispanic-owned, with

only 7% white-owned. But, keep in mind, 38% of the applicants didn’t disclose demographic information.

This round of licenses will increase the diversity of the Illinois cannabis market—provided the new permit holders can meet state requirements within a given time and make their licenses permanent. It’s not an easy task even for people with privilege, access and capital, let alone people from marginalized communities.

## Profile



**Name:** Rebecca Colett

**Position, company and location:**  
Co-founder and CEO, Calyxeum  
cultivation and processing  
company, Detroit

**Year entered the regulated  
cannabis industry:** 2008

**A**s one of the few Black, female owners of a U.S. cannabis cultivation and processing company, Rebecca Colett says accessing start-up capital and competing with large, well-funded rivals are the biggest challenges facing minority entrepreneurs.

Despite these challenges, Colett has built Calyxeum into a growing company with co-founder and Chief Operating Officer Latoyia Rucker. The business where Colett serves as CEO now has about 30 full-time and part-time staff, all but a handful of whom are minorities and/or women.

Colett and Rucker started their cannabis careers in 2008 as caregiver-cultivators in Michigan. They built a reputation and a client base, pursued a cultivation license (which they received in 2019) and launched Calyxeum in early 2020.

Earlier this year, they received a marijuana manufacturing license and added items to their lineup of infused products, including gummies, hard candies, lozenges and capsules as well as concentrates, vape oils and topicals.

“For owners and operators, the barriers to entry are still very high—just as high as they were several years ago, when the market wasn’t as mature,” Colett said.

The biggest barrier to entry is capital. Colett and Rucker sought debt financing and investor capital to launch Calyxeum but were unsuccessful.

Colett believes it was hard to find start-up financing because most finance providers will only extend loans or invest in companies that are already operational, have a proof of concept and ideally a couple years of revenue.

## Profile

There aren't many options for pre-revenue, start-up companies, Colett said.

"That's the issue for a lot of social equity, start-up founders. I have this idea, this team, but I need money to build this. And it's challenging," she said.

So, they bootstrapped Calyxium, started small, continuously reinvested into the business and grew it "organically."

"Now that we have a proof of concept, I feel like we are getting to a point where we can reach out for funding," Colett said.

But breaking into the cannabis industry is one thing. Staying in is another.

"A concern for minority operators—including us—is we may have started, but how do we build and scale and maintain our businesses while the MSOs are continuously getting bigger and bigger, and they can drive their cost of production down and just offer more economical prices?" Colett said.

"Craft businesses, mom-and-pop growers, social equity businesses, they can open, but they can't build and scale. And therefore, it's hard to compete. ... You can't sustain it, you barely break even."

Colett hopes that Calyxium's existence proves to others that minority cannabis business owners can succeed.

"When they see operators that look like them, it's just like, 'Oh, yeah. I can do that, too,'" Colett said.

As a way of helping fellow minority cannabis entrepreneurs, Colett and Rucker have partnered with the City of Detroit to start an "education incubator" that teaches aspiring cannabis professionals about compliance, 280E, developing SOPs (standard operating procedures) for cultivation facilities, what Metrc is, and more.

"We can't control how expensive it is to be in the cannabis industry, but we *can* control providing education and best practices," Colett said.

Minorities are very underrepresented in C-suite positions at larger cannabis companies, she said.

"I think there's still a lot of myths and misrepresentation in regards to diversity in a lot of these large-scale cannabis companies. I don't see a lot of diversity in upper management," she said.

Things may have started changing, albeit slowly, in 2020, around the time of nationwide protests surrounding the police murder of George Floyd.

"I'm now starting to see, especially bigger corporate cannabis companies that really have benefitted from the legalization of cannabis, create programs of their own to reach back into the community," Colett said.



control of business licenses that were intended for mom-and-pop companies, primarily because artificial license caps at the state level inflated the value of social equity business permits.

In other markets, according to the MCBA, bigger companies have paid individuals who have cannabis convictions to be so-called “front men” in order to win social equity permits—without giving that person any control over the company’s operations.

And in a few instances—such as in Los Angeles—social equity programs were poorly thought out and led to devastating financial consequences for license applicants, according to the report.

“Without immediate action, the promotion of arbitrarily limited markets, high barriers to entry and unearned advantages for existing medical operators entering the adult-use market will continue to undermine the efficacy of social equity programs,” the MCBA concluded.

But faltering social equity programs have



U.S. Sen Cory Booker is an advocate for marijuana reform in Congress.

provided some lessons for regulators.

New York, for example, has earmarked \$200 million to lease up to 150 retail properties for social equity businesses to give them a leg up in that state’s new recreational market.

Real estate was a major hurdle in L.A. for scores of retail license applicants, many of whom have not yet been able to open for business.

On Capitol Hill, meanwhile, social equity has been taken up as a cause by several

members of Congress who have been championing marijuana reform.

All of this means that social equity programs are nearly certain to be introduced in new markets—or launched in long-standing ones.

The main question in the coming years will be how to structure those programs so they are effective at promoting greater participation in the marijuana industry among people of color as well as those affected by the war on drugs.

## Profiles



Photo by Jared Charney

**Name:** Ulysses Youngblood

**Position, company and location:**  
Owner-operator, Major Bloom,  
Worcester, Massachusetts

**Year entered the regulated  
cannabis industry:** 2017



**Name:** Vanessa Gabriel

**Position, company and location:**  
Founder and CEO, Drop Delivery,  
Los Angeles

**Year entered the regulated  
cannabis industry:** 2017

It's well known that BIPOC communities are significantly underrepresented in the cannabis industry's C-suites and as cannabis business owners. But the BIPOC executives and business owners who are out there can make dramatic

differences toward advancing diversity in the sector.

Cannabis business leaders from BIPOC communities have the power to hire BIPOC candidates and do business with other BIPOC businesses.

## Profiles

Consider Ulysses Youngblood, the owner-operator of Major Bloom, a dispensary and product-manufacturing business in Worcester, Massachusetts.

When Major Bloom launches new products, “We do it alongside people who are like us,” Youngblood said.

For example, when the company rolled out new lines of edibles and tinctures earlier this year, they did it with social equity applicants who began working out of their homes, producing batches of a few dozen edibles or few dozen tincture bottles at a time.

Now, Youngblood is helping these entrepreneurs produce quantities in the thousands.

“These are people of color. I’m a black business owner, and I have to be intentional,” Youngblood said.

Vanessa Gabriel, the Filipina founder of Los Angeles-based Drop Delivery, which is used by businesses in seven states, agrees that BIPOC owners have the power to promote diversity in the industry, and it begins at their own companies.

“When you look at our team, we have Filipino, Hispanic and African-American representation. We always try to make it a point to try and work with social equity applicants and try to help them when they’re getting started out, like with special discounts.”



Photo by Jared Charney

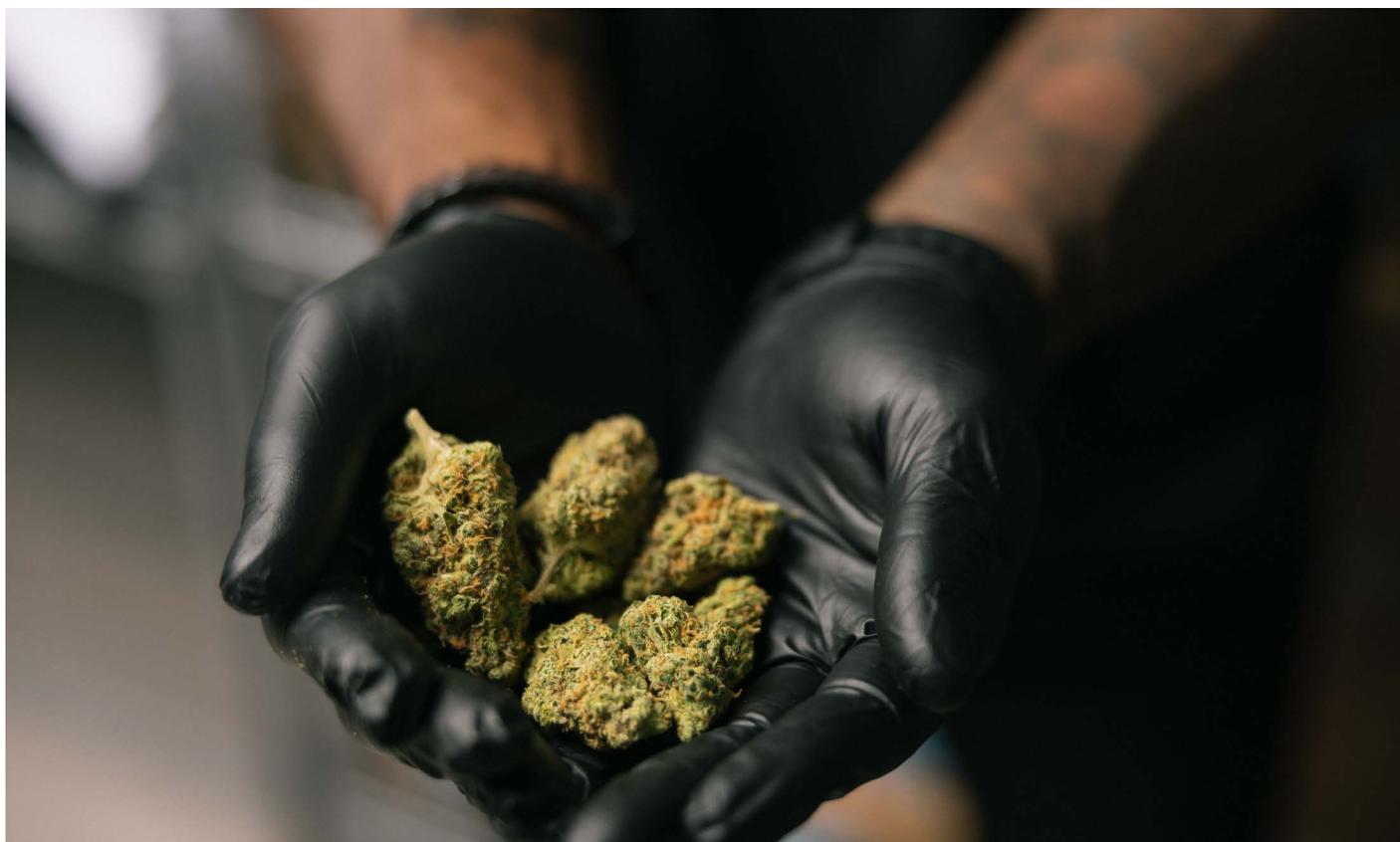


Photo by Jared Charney

# Marijuana social equity applicants face similar challenges nationwide

By Chris Casacchia

**D**espite the promise of social equity leveling the playing field in the marijuana industry, most diversity applicants and license holders believe the cards are stacked against them.

From Boston to Los Angeles, common obstacles

include limited access to capital, complicated application processes, real estate priced well above market rates and bureaucratic logjams.

“If you’ve never operated a licensed facility before, you probably don’t really know where to start,” said

Juan Aguirre, who was a nurse manager and medical marijuana caregiver in Michigan before he started making the right industry connections.

The entrepreneur was one of four social equity retail operators who shared with *MJBizDaily*

their frustrations, disappointments and setbacks while trying to navigate government-run programs specifically created to help them succeed.

### LOCATION IS KEY

Aguirre submitted 10 applications at \$2,500 apiece to enter Illinois' lottery system for cannabis business licenses in December 2019.

The state finally issued its first 185 licenses to social equity applicants this summer, after years of legal battles, administrative clogs and pandemic-related delays.

Aguirre qualified for social equity status after his venture, Illinois Kindness, hired 10 employees, half of whom had to meet one of the following criteria:

- Lived in areas with high marijuana arrest rates.
- Was arrested for or convicted of a marijuana-related offense.
- Had an immediate family member with an arrest or conviction for a marijuana offense.

In late July, his company was issued a conditional license for a store in the Chicagoland region, one of 17 state jurisdictions earmarked for cannabis businesses.

Securing real estate—a top concern for most marijuana business operators—is Aguirre's next challenge.

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*“Many professional service providers do not offer discounts to social equity applicants, and it’s disheartening.”*

*– Chirali Patel,  
Blaze Law Firm*

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“We’re still searching for a location that will be suitable for our buyer,” he said. “We do plan to sell the license to a buyer right after finishing building out.”

Investor fallout prompted the decision to sell, he added.

The retailer is scouting potential locations in Chicago’s Pilsen neighborhood, a Latino and arts enclave on the Lower West Side that’s undergone massive changes in the past few years to become one of the city’s trendiest communities.

The problem is there aren’t many real estate options there, considering all the zoning restrictions near churches, schools and other dispensaries—both operational and planned. Multistate operators, according to Aguirre, also have claimed many top-tier areas, shrinking the map even further in the densely packed city.

“You have these MSOs that have kind of put their stake in the locations that they think are prime real estate,” Aguirre said.

### NO PROTECTION

Ryan Brown, a social equity applicant, struck a deal with a landlord to hold a property in Central Los Angeles as he worked through the approval process of obtaining a delivery license.

He said processing delays with the city's Department of Cannabis Regulation (DCR) and months' worth of bureaucratic runaround ultimately derailed the deal.

When Brown was finally ready to pay the first month's rent of \$1,500, the landlord doubled the price before leasing it to another proprietor.

"I ended up losing the property," said Brown, who's been trying to earn a cannabis license under L.A.'s social equity program for more than two years.

In that time, he's spent more than \$15,000 on various application and city fees. And he has nothing to show for it.

"My money that I invested with DCR and everything else pretty much went down the drain," he said. "DCR didn't protect me at all. I didn't operate one day of business."

## LAW AND DISORDER

High application fees, which dog operators in marijuana markets nationwide, aren't as

problematic for New Jersey social equity applicants, who pay less than \$1,000 all-in.

Beyond real estate and capital, top concerns include finding affordable and reliable legal help to guide license applicants through the state's complicated maze of forms and other requirements.

"The problem that you may run into is the legal side of it," said Justin Crosgile, who received conditional approval this past summer for a recreational retail license from New Jersey's Cannabis Regulatory Commission.

Crosgile, whose Jamaican citizenship helped qualify him for a social equity license, provided *MJBizDaily* with an engagement letter from one law firm, outlying legal services for the conditional application only. The firm's flat fee was \$100,000.

Instead, a friend introduced him to Chirali Patel, founder of the Blaze Law Firm, who steered Crosgile away from a bad



equity deal proposed by an MSO and, ultimately, toward that conditional license.

"Prior to entering the cannabis industry, I'd seen quotes for \$5,000 for a business plan. But now, some of my social equity clients get quoted \$20,000 just for a 20-page streamlined business plan," Patel told *MJBizDaily* via email.

"Many professional service providers do not offer discounts to social equity applicants, and it's disheartening," Patel said.

After signing a lease for a Newark dispensary, Crosgile will begin the steps of converting that conditional license into an annual permit.

"We're trying to get over that hump ... get some capital to get open," he said.

## Profile



**Name:** Natasha Bowman

**Position, company and location:** Founder and CEO, Performance-ReNEW, a DEI-consulting firm in New York City

**Year entered the regulated cannabis industry:** N/A

Increasing diversity at your cannabis company is hard work. But it's more than possible, and it starts with trying to eliminate bias in the recruitment process.

"Eliminating bias begins with being conscious of your own unconscious biases—having training around them and understanding the perspectives of other people. It's about being aware," said Natasha Bowman, president of Performance-ReNEW, a New York consulting firm focused on diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI).

A company needs to first determine if it is getting diverse applicants; if it isn't, then it needs to figure out why, Bowman said. Is the company not reaching out to diverse organizations? Is there something about the company's reputation or its website that is repelling candidates of color?

"You've got to do some digging. Once you get those numbers to see what your applicant demographics look like, then determine ... 'Well, what's our issue?'"

"If you increase the number of diverse people that are actually applying," Bowman said, the number of diverse hires "will get higher."

Things that could turn off candidates of color and dissuade them from applying to your company include a website that doesn't have people of color in photos, leaders who all went to the same school or the same type of school, and a failure to speak out on important national issues.

"It used to be that we separated work and politics, but now (diverse candidates) have an expectation that there are certain issues that organizations are taking on," Bowman said.

## Profile

As an example, she pointed to Disney in Florida, where some employees walked out after the company didn't condemn the state's so-called "Don't Say Gay" bill.

"That's something that applicants look for as well. Are you a company culture that supports social justice and diverse communities?"

Companies can also bolster their credibility by donating to philanthropic DEI causes.

While these measures can boost the diversity of an applicant pool, companies can't just sit back and expect a certain portion of resumes to be from candidates of color and women. Rather, it's incumbent on companies to go out into the community—particularly communities of color—and to entities that could be sources of BIPOC candidates.

These entities can include professional groups such as the Minority Cannabis Business Association and local chambers of commerce as well as Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs).

"Those career offices (at HBCUs) know what their alumni are doing, who's looking for work, what kind of work, who can move, etc. They have a lot of information," Bowman said.

For example, Curaleaf has partnerships with Alcorn State and Southern

University in Louisiana, which facilitate internships at the multistate operator.

### **Interviews and accountability**

In addition to being intentional about where and how you seek talent, there are some tools and strategies that can reduce bias in the resume-review and interview processes, Bowman said.

One such tool is a "blind resume," or a resume that excludes any information that could give away an applicant's gender, race, ethnicity and the like.

It's also critical to eliminate bias during the interview stage. One way to do that is to have a diverse panel of interviewers who can check each other's biases.

For example, the phrase "I don't think this person is a good fit" is often code for: "Something about this person makes me uncomfortable."

It's also important keep questions job-related. This is not just to eliminate inappropriate questions, but also questions that could reveal something that the interviewer and interviewee have in common that could skew an interviewers' judgment in favor of a candidate who may not be as qualified.

After the interview process, it's wise to have a second group of people look at the interviewers' feedback to ensure there is no bias.



# Access to capital and pandemic fallout among biggest challenges

**I**n this year's diversity survey, cannabis business owners and professionals overwhelmingly said access to capital remains their biggest challenge.

Capital is a common challenge for many young cannabis businesses, no matter the race, ethnicity or gender of the owner. License fees, equipment, leases and other

requirements are among the many costs upstart companies face.

The difference for non-white and female owners is access to funding.

Most financial institutions continue to be run by white men, and their business networks often reflect those in positions of leadership.

The top 100 venture-

capital backers in 2018 and 2019 were almost 90% male and 71.6% white, according to the "2020 Diversity in U.S. Startups" report by RateMyInvestory and Diversity VC.

Those backers disproportionately gave money to businesses started by white men.

Traditional bank funding remains complicated in

cannabis, given the federal government’s prohibition on marijuana.

But an analysis of bank-diversity data in 2020 by the U.S. House Financial Services Committee found that 80% of bank board seats were occupied by white members. Total bank workforce was more diverse, with 58% of employees identifying as white.

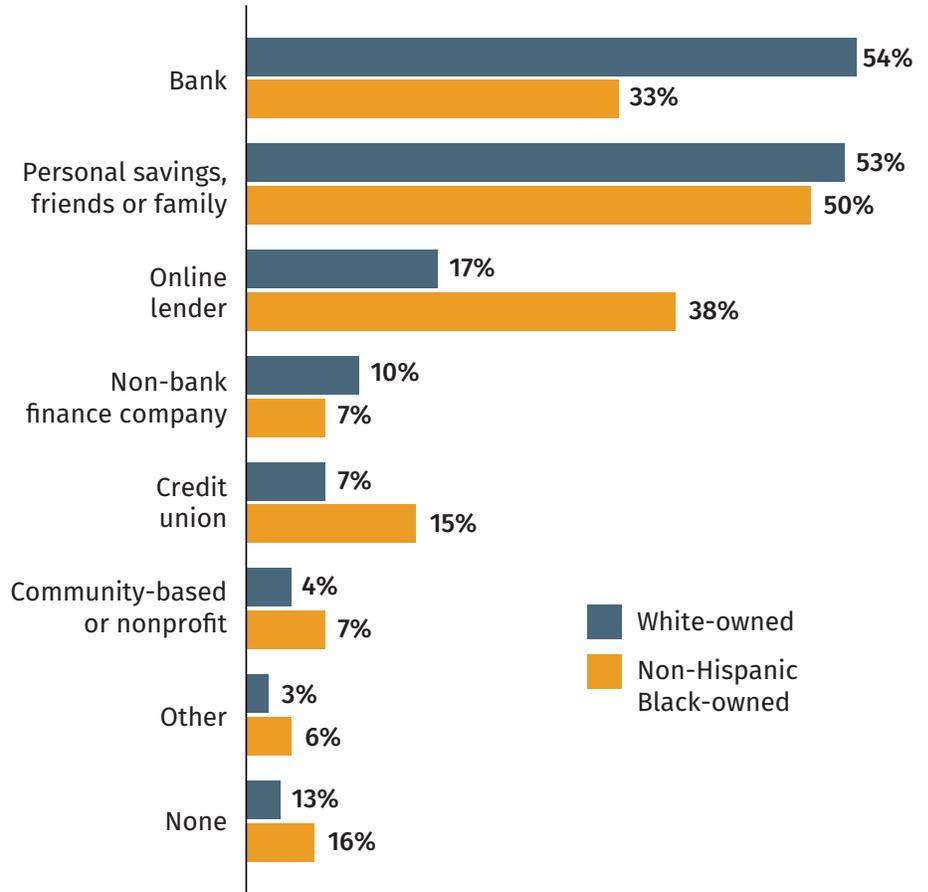
Breaking into financial networks can be a huge barrier to overcome, especially for entrepreneurs starting with fewer resources or tarnished personal or financial records.

Black Americans also can’t leverage business ownership like their white counterparts. A 2020 McKinsey & Co. survey found that only 5% of Black Americans hold some business ownership or equity, compared with 15% of white Americans. And the average Black American’s business equity is worth about one-third of the white American’s average.

According to the report, 20% of Black Americans

## Funding sources

The sources of pre-pandemic funding for healthy businesses spotlights the differences between Black and white owners.



Source: Federal Reserve Banks, 2019 Small Business Credit Survey

will start a business, but only 4% of those businesses will survive. Those that do survive struggle disproportionately with debt and capital.

### PANDEMIC

While the COVID-19 pandemic was beyond the scope of the *MJBizDaily* diversity survey, overall

business trends during and after the pandemic’s onset have impacted diversity in the cannabis industry.

The fallout from the pandemic hit female and non-white business owners harder than it did white men.

According to a 2020 report from the Federal Reserve Bank of New York, the

number of active business owners fell 22% that year from February to April, the largest drop on record.

Black business ownership dropped 41% during that period, while Latino ownership fell 32% and Asian ownership decreased 26%.

By comparison, white business ownership fell 17%.

The report says much of the decline can be attributed to the state of non-white business ownership in America.

Many non-white businesses already were suffering from weak cash positions and lacked banking relationships that could have provided the financial cushion needed to survive pandemic shutdowns.

The authors note that even the healthiest Black businesses were financially disadvantaged compared to their white counterparts at the start of COVID-19.

Those businesses might also have not gotten the support they needed from the federal government.

An analysis of the Paycheck Protection



Gene Ray, vice president of laboratory operations at woman-owned cannabis firm Garden Remedies, produces batches of hand sanitizer to deliver to local hospitals in 2020.

Program (PPP) by the New York Fed and the University of Chicago found that most PPP loans went to businesses with banking relationships, which non-white business owners often lack.

The PPP program provided what amounts to a free loan to help small businesses weather the pandemic and retain their employees.

Women business owners also were impacted differently than men. Closures of schools and child care facilities during the pandemic forced many women to leave entrepreneurship and the workforce in general.

According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, those women are just now returning to their pre-pandemic lives.

# METHODOLOGY

MJBizDaily gathered data for this report through an industrywide, anonymous online survey of cannabis business owners and professionals.

This is the fourth year the report has been published with previous editions released in 2017, 2019 and 2021.

This year’s survey took place from Sept. 23 to Oct. 17 and included roughly 25 questions relevant to diversity and gender in the cannabis industry.

Qualified responses from 236 self-identified marijuana industry owners and professionals across a variety of sectors were collected.

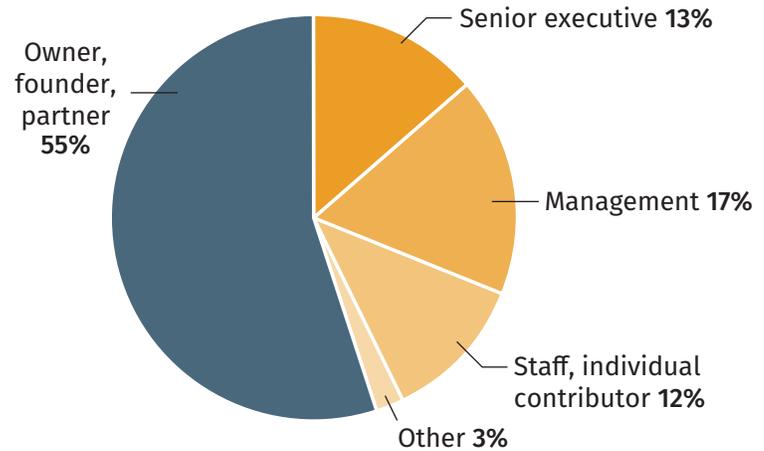
These figures represent responses from individuals who are operating in a regulated capacity in the U.S. cannabis industry.

Demographic data was also collected from state cannabis programs in Colorado, Illinois and Massachusetts.

## Survey demographics

MJBizDaily collected responses from an anonymous online survey. More than half of the responses were from those who self-identified as owners of a cannabis business.

### By ownership



### By sector

The survey collected responses from a wide variety of sectors in the cannabis industry.

Retail/dispensary/e-commerce	15.38%
Cultivation	14.96%
Manufacturing/extraction (plant products)	11.54%
Ancillary service provider	8.55%
Other	8.55%
Branding/marketing/public relations	6.84%
Technology/software/data	5.56%
Ancillary products	5.13%
Finance/capital/investment	4.70%
Government/lobbying	3.85%
Media/content creator/social media	3.42%
Nursery/plant breeding	2.99%
Distribution/transportation	2.99%
Association/nonprofit/education	2.56%
Testing	1.28%
Events/tourism	1.28%
Social consumption (lounges)	0.43%

Source: MJBizDaily survey

## Profile



Photo by Greg Doherty

**Name:** Christine De La Rosa

**Position, company and location:** Founder and CEO, The People's Ecosystem, Oakland, California

**Year entered the regulated cannabis industry:** 2016

**W**hen they were young entrepreneurs still struggling to get their first businesses off the ground, Christine De La Rosa and Charleen Caabay, the co-founders of The People's Ecosystem, an Oakland-based cannabis company, vowed to each other that when they could hire help, they'd hire people from the BIPOC and LGBTQ communities, like themselves.

Since then, the former legacy market veterans have opened restaurants, an art gallery, a retail store and, most recently, The People's Ecosystem, which buys cannabis wholesale from BIPOC and female cultivators and manufactures pre-rolls, edibles and other products under its own brands while also white-labeling products for other companies. In every case, the Latina and Filipina co-founders made

good on their promise. In fact, nine of TPE's 10 executives are people of color.

How did they do it?

"By not doing anything that most of the hiring companies would tell you to do. Because those (businesses) are not built to look at the promise, the expectation and the beauty of women or people of color. We measure different things. I'm not going to measure, 'Did you get an MBA here?' I'm going to measure something else, so I can have a diverse team. Because it's not just about having experience, it's about having *different* experience," De La Rosa said.

The entrepreneur said she built a diverse staff by valuing experience that other companies might not.

"We always look to people from the legacy market," she said, adding that industry observers shouldn't be

## Profile

surprised when legacy markets still dominate regulated markets.

“The entire market of cannabis comes from the legacy market. There was already an entire culture, an entire customer base,” De La Rosa said. “I find a lot of value in having people on my team that are from the legacy market.”

Consider TPE Chief Operating Officer Melanie Davis, who was a legacy market grower in Oregon and New Mexico.

“These are folks that in traditional companies ... wouldn’t be seen as making a successful transition into a C-suite or director position. But we did, because we knew they knew how to work with legacy markets and help them move forward into legal. They understood the barriers for entry, so they could help us figure out how not to have those barriers,” De La Rosa said. “A regular hiring company would ask, ‘Where did you go to school, what’s your degree in, etc.’ Those are great, but many qualified women and people of color don’t have those things.”

De La Rosa said a good first step for companies aiming to increase the diversity of their staff is to engage a diversity, equity and inclusion advisory firm that can help determine where the company and its executives score on diversity hiring. She recommends Cannabis Doing Good, whose training begins with a guided self-assessment.

“You can’t just be like, ‘I want to hire people of color,’ and then put out a job description. You have to understand the culture of your own company,” De La Rosa said. “It’s not just hiring somebody who’s of color or a woman, it’s about understanding how they’re going to be part of your team and what you can do to make sure that they have the best experience.”

While some cannabis companies have begun to show more awareness about diversity issues, many diverse workers are not hired for the most powerful positions in a company—in other words, positions that decide how the company operates and will spend its money.

“There’s nobody in the C-suite to say, ‘The way you’re about to position this product in your market for Latinos is not going to work.’ Because there are no Latinos in that C-suite that they’re interacting with,” De La Rosa said.

The People’s Ecosystem staffs its stores predominantly with BIPOC staff. “We center people of color, critically disabled people, chronically ill people, veterans,” she said.

The company also tries to support BIPOC and female growers by buying their flower to use for manufactured products.

“We’ve tried very hard to always use women-owned or people-of-color-owned” products, De La Rosa said.

# RESOURCES

## IMPROVING ACCESS

Without federal action, access to traditional funding mechanisms likely will not improve. However, several organizations have appeared on the scene looking to fill the funding gap. Often, they also provide additional mentoring or training resources to help women and minorities get their feet in the door.

### FLURESH FIVE ACCELERATOR PROGRAM

[fluresh.com/about/community-impact/](https://fluresh.com/about/community-impact/)

Fluresh is a cannabis brand that launched a Michigan-based accelerator in conjunction with community partners, intending to increase access and equity in the cannabis industry.

While it is open to any individual who is a legal resident of Michigan 21 or older, the program strongly places emphasis on social equity applicants and women.

### THE INITIATIVE

[intheinitiative.com](https://intheinitiative.com)

One of the original cannabis accelerators for women, this Oregon program holds a business boot camp, providing funding resources for female-founded cannabis businesses.

While this accelerator has not been active during the COVID-19 pandemic, it is expected to accept applications for new cohorts.

### NUPROJECT

[nuproject.org](https://nuproject.org)

NuProject invests cannabis tax and corporate revenue into Oregon-based businesses owned by people of color. The program's work is specifically designed to address the capital, education and connection hurdles that people of color face when entering the cannabis industry.

### TREEHOUSE GLOBAL VENTURES

[treehouseglobalventures.com](https://treehouseglobalventures.com)

Treehouse is a venture-capital fund comprised of a group of female investors with more than 10 years of experience in the legal cannabis space. It focuses on companies that are led by women and minorities—and/or male-led companies that have strong diversity and leadership for women and minorities in their C-suites and on their boards.

### CANOPY BOULDER

[canopyboulder.com/about](https://canopyboulder.com/about)

Canopy Boulder has traditionally invested in seed and growth-stage ancillary cannabis and hemp/CBD businesses. Since its founding in 2014, Canopy Boulder has invested in more than 115 companies.

## TRADE GROUPS AND NONPROFITS

While trade groups and nonprofits often don't provide direct funding, they can be a great resource and support network to help get your business on the right track.

### MINORITY CANNABIS BUSINESS ASSOCIATION

[minoritycannabis.org](http://minoritycannabis.org)

The Minority Cannabis Business Association (MCBA) was created to help increase diversity of owners, employees and consumers in the cannabis industry. Its mission is to create equal access for cannabis businesses and promote economic empowerment for communities of color by creating policy considerations, social programming and outreach initiatives to achieve equity for the communities most affected by the war on drugs.

### MINORITIES FOR MEDICAL MARIJUANA

[minorities4medicalmarijuana.org](http://minorities4medicalmarijuana.org)

Minorities for Medical Marijuana is committed to cultivating a culturally inclusive environment where diversity of thought, experience and opportunities are valued, respected, appreciated and celebrated. The organization will serve as a resource to the community by providing information, referrals, advocacy, coordination and education regarding cannabis legislation, events, activities, initiatives and discussion.

### SUPERNOVA WOMEN

[supernovawomen.com](http://supernovawomen.com)

Supernova Women was founded in 2015 to empower Black and brown people to become self-sufficient shareholders in the cannabis and natural plant medicine space through education, advocacy and network building.

### TOKETIVITY

[tokeativity.com/about](http://tokeativity.com/about)

Toketivity is a global community of active cannabis consumers and business owners that connect through creative, social and political, intersectional feminist-forward activities and marketing campaigns that work to create radical, positive change within the cannabis industry.

### WOMEN GROW

[womengrow.com](http://womengrow.com)

Women Grow produces professional networking events, local social events, regional education symposiums and national speaking circuits where aspiring professionals can connect with current cannabis business leaders.

### WOMEN'S BUSINESS ENTERPRISE NATIONAL COUNCIL (WBENC)

[wbenc.org](http://wbenc.org)

WBENC's main goals are increasing supplier diversity and investing in the development of female-owned businesses as suppliers. The group provides educational content, programs about potential microloans, networking, certifications and more.

## Profile



**Name:** Alexis Isaacs

**Position, company and location:**  
Account supervisor, Mattio  
Communications, New York City

**Year entered the regulated  
cannabis industry:** 2020

Since breaking into the cannabis industry in 2020 with Mattio Communications—a cannabis-focused marketing agency that ranked 69th on the Inc. magazine 5000 list of fastest-growing private companies—Alexis Isaacs has worked with dozens of marijuana businesses.

What impressions has Isaac developed about the state of diversity in the cannabis industry and how BIPOC workers and professionals are represented?

It's "not very diverse ethnically or gender-wise. I assume 90% of the industry is white male-dominated, and maybe 80% of those men are cis, straight men," Isaacs said via email.

That lack of diversity is especially evident at national cannabis trade shows, but less so at local trade shows

in markets where the population is more diverse, Isaacs said.

"I mainly feel like a minority when I go to large shows like MJBizCon. Most of the industry events I go to are in NYC, and they are on a much smaller scale with a good mix of people from all backgrounds," Isaacs said.

The lack of BIPOC representation in the industry can be attributed to cannabis companies not doing a good job of finding and hiring BIPOC candidates in the first place, Isaacs said.

"My company makes it a point to search for candidates of color," she said, but the broader cannabis industry is doing a poor job of recruiting BIPOC candidates because the regulated industry "hasn't gotten that much more diverse since its inception."

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Isaacs, who was recruited through LinkedIn, added: “Businesses are doing a good job when most of them have at least 20% BIPOC on staff with a majority of those positions in upper management.”

She also believes BIPOC cannabis workers are falling behind when it comes to being paid and promoted on par with their white peers.

“I’ve never talked about my salaries with other BIPOC in the industry,” she said, “but I would not be surprised if I wasn’t compensated the same as white employees since that is a trend across most industries. I don’t see why

cannabis would be excluded.”

Isaacs said that while she feels she has been recognized and promoted fairly in comparison to her white cannabis industry peers, she believes BIPOC candidates generally don’t get the recognition and promotions they deserve. “Especially at the larger cannabis companies,” she added.

As for her own work advancing diversity in the cannabis industry, Isaacs started a podcast called “High Priority,” which is centered around social equity in cannabis. She said the podcast “makes me feel like I’m doing a good deed.”

# SCHOLARSHIPS

## MJBIZ INTRODUCES SCHOLARSHIP PROGRAM

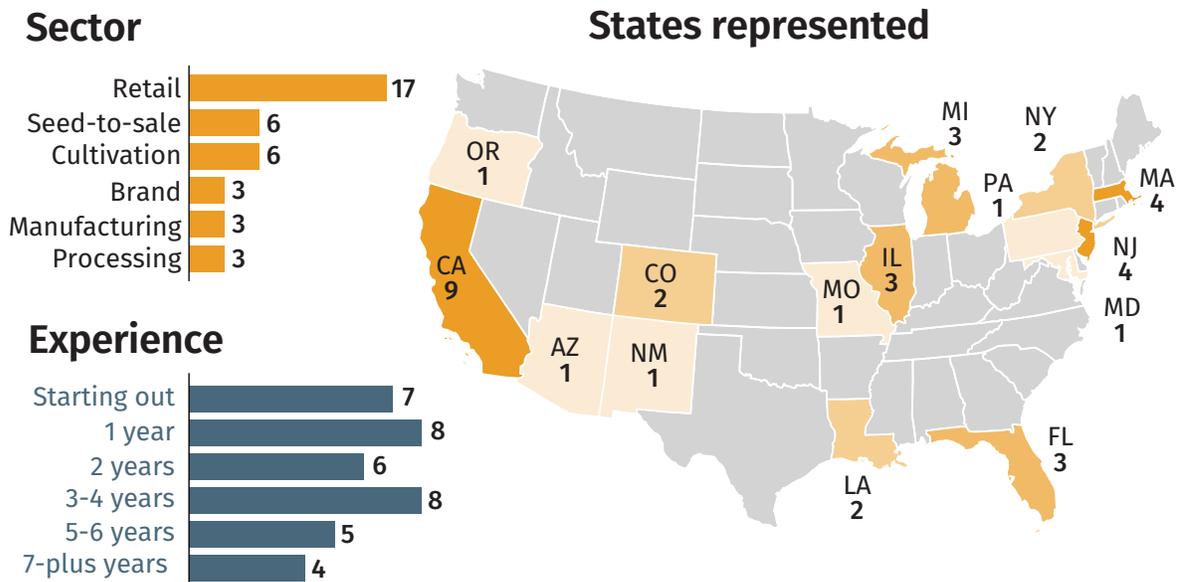
**M**JBiz established the MJBizCon Social Equity Scholarship Program this year to offer successful applicants access to MJBizCon, where they will make valuable connections, gain insights at the conference and find solution providers in the expo hall. Nearly 80 exhibitors on the Expo Floor have self-identified as being woman- or BIPOC-owned.

The application period was Aug. 31–Sept. 30. Funds for the program came from donations from MJBiz and MJBizCon conference attendees. Winners, who are still being notified, receive a complimentary three-day conference + expo ticket and a choice of attending the “Achieving Equity in Cannabis Networking” event or the “Empowering Women in Cannabis Networking” event.

Additional scholarships are being added as the MJBizCon Social Equity Scholarship Program fund grows.

## Scholarship winners summary

The winners of the MJBizCon scholarship program come from all over the U.S., have a range of experience and work in several different sectors within cannabis.



## SCHOLARSHIP WINNERS

To be selected, applicants had to be an executive in a minority-owned business in one of these plant-touching categories: cultivation, extraction/processing, retail, manufacturing/brand.

Students could also be considered if they are actively enrolled in a cannabis-related field/program at an accredited university or college.

Scholarship recipients to date include:

Name	State	Sector
Loriel Alegrete	California	Cannabis Brand
Tamika Boyce	California	Cultivation
Alyza Brevard-Rodriguez	New Jersey	Retail/Dispensary
Joyce Chong	California	Cultivation
Melinda Cooksey	Louisiana	Retail/Dispensary
Alicia Deals	Arizona	Seed-to-Sale
Michael Diaz-Rivera	Colorado	Retail/Dispensary
Chaunce Dunbar	Florida	Cultivation
Tyrea Duncan	Michigan	Cultivation
Brandi Duplissey	Louisiana	Processing
Brennan England	Missouri	Cannabis Brand
Kizuwanda Evans	Massachusetts	Manufacturing
Desiree Franjul	Massachusetts	Retail/Dispensary
Colin Fraser	Maryland	Retail/Dispensary
Kendra Freeman	Oregon	Manufacturing
Ramon Garcia	California	Seed-to-Sale
Raheem Giddens	California	Retail/Dispensary
Quintin Glover	California	Retail/Dispensary
Geneise Israel	Massachusetts	Retail/Dispensary

Name	State	Sector
Tahir H. Johnson	New Jersey	Retail/Dispensary
Lakeisha Jones	Massachusetts	Retail/Dispensary
Armond June	New York	Seed-to-Sale
Roxanne Lockett	Florida	Seed-to-Sale
Terry Lockett	Florida	Seed-to-Sale
Marshaun Marsh	California	Retail/Dispensary
Bryan Neis	New Jersey	Retail/Dispensary
Justin Neis	New Jersey	Retail/Dispensary
Osagyefo Oyadeye	California	Retail/Dispensary
Christian Perine	Michigan	Cannabis Brand
Taronda Ransom	Illinois	Retail/Dispensary
Cory Roberts	Michigan	Seed-to-Sale
Xavier Roberts	New Mexico	Cultivation
Kenneth Saffold Jr.	Illinois	Retail/Dispensary
Kelly Smack	Pennsylvania	Retail/Dispensary
Angenee Tenette	California	Manufacturing
Collins Thomas-Buckner	Colorado	Processing
Christian Torres	New York	Cultivation
Lisbeth Vargas Jaimes	Illinois	Processing

## Profile



**Name:** Aaron Balfour

**Position, company and location:**  
Pharmacist, Curaleaf,  
Hartford, Connecticut

**Year entered the regulated  
cannabis industry:** 2016

**A**aron Balfour is a licensed pharmacist who has worked with three different cannabis companies.

His cannabis career started in 2016 with Pride Wellness of Connecticut, a single-state operator that was acquired in 2020 by Acreage Holdings and is now operating under The Botanist brand.

After a colleague who was already working at Pride told him about an opening at the dispensary, Balfour applied online and was invited for an interview within 24 hours. After two more interviews, he was offered the position.

Balfour said he felt the fact that he went through three interviews “showed that the company valued hiring the right people for the job.”

He spent 4½ years as a “dispensary technician” at Pride, until the dispensary was acquired in late 2020 by Acreage,

where he spent another year as a pharmacist. He joined Curaleaf in September 2021.

“Diversity in the cannabis industry needs major work,” Balfour said.

He noted that in some of the cannabis businesses he’s worked at, he’s been the only person or one of two people of color on staff.

“It’s discouraging, just because of the effect that (marijuana prohibition has) had on minority families and communities,” Balfour said. “Not only is there lack of diversity in ownership in the cannabis industry, but also in employment. With (federal) legalization, this industry is going to be able to create hundreds of thousands of jobs in the coming years, yet I still see a lack of diversity in all aspects of retail establishments, cultivation

## Profile

and manufacturing businesses, corporations and ancillary services.

“There’s still a ton of work that needs to be done,” he said, adding that diversity is an “afterthought” for 90% of companies.

Balfour said that in his own experience, “there wasn’t any unfair treatment because I’m a person of color, but there’s a need to have someone else that looks like you at your place of business and in leadership.”

He also said that cannabis businesses need to be more “intentional” about identifying, recruiting and hiring BIPOC candidates.

Balfour believes BIPOC candidates can help increase representation by networking and attending industry events, especially those geared toward diverse cannabis professionals. He also believes cannabis industry professionals should recruit BIPOC colleagues from other industries into cannabis.

“I also feel like it’s my responsibility, and the responsibility of people in the industry who look like me, to try

to get as many of us into the industry as possible, because there’re so many opportunities that lie in this industry,” he said. “And you don’t know until you’re inside of it. I didn’t realize it until I was inside of it that the opportunities are endless with research and education and technology and so on.”

As for his professional aspirations, Balfour hopes to use his doctor of pharmacy degree to forge a more research-focused path in the industry.

“My professional aspiration is to eventually run clinical trials and try to figure out what cannabinoids work best for different diseases,” Balfour said. “It’s the opportune time to get into the industry, before things are federally legal.

“Do your research, do your due diligence about how the plant works, how the endocannabinoid system works. And then, when the opportunities present themselves, you can put yourself into a position where you’re familiar with the medicine, you can research certain things, certain trials. And just continue to explore the medicine.”

## Profile



**Name:** Dequan Taylor

**Position, company and location:**  
Harvest specialist, Verano,  
Phoenix metro area

**Year entered the regulated  
cannabis industry:** 2019

**D**equan Taylor started his cannabis career as a dispensary technician with Harvest Health and Recreation in Casa Grande, Arizona, before moving to Fire Dispensary in Coolidge, Arizona.

Taylor said his experience with diversity in the cannabis industry has been positive.

“It’s probably one of the most diverse groups of people I’ve seen at any workplace. All colors, ages, genders, sexualities all working together. It’s good. The worst thing a company can do to itself is do anything to provoke the thought of it as prejudiced to any BIPOC,” Taylor said, noting that he hasn’t personally experienced prejudice in the industry. “But like in the rest of the world, I’m sure it exists.”

“It’s a learn-as-you-go process,” Taylor said of starting a new cannabis job. “They start you on something small, then they work you up to bigger tasks. It’s not rocket science, but the training process can be improved overall in the industry.”

He added: “The industry needs to give workers a big pay raise. All of them. In Arizona alone, last year this industry made over \$1 billion. It’s upsetting that with rising profits, most companies start (employees) out at \$15 per hour. I know two that are at \$20. There are no sales bonuses or production bonuses,” he said. “The industry is very underpaid.”

# ABOUT THE AUTHORS

## CHRIS CASACCHIA, REPORTER

Chris is an award-winning journalist, editor and media consultant based in Los Angeles. As technology editor of the Orange County Business Journal, he profiled some of the most influential executives and companies in the world. Before moving to California, he served as a staff writer at the Phoenix Business Journal, where he chronicled the subprime mortgage meltdown and global financial crises in one of the hardest-hit markets in the nation. His newspaper career began in his native Chicago, covering everything from wrongful convictions to the aftermath of the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks. His work has appeared in MSN Money, Los Angeles Business Journal, California Business Journal, The Sporting News and other major outlets. He earned a master's from Arizona State University's Walter Cronkite School of Journalism and Mass Communication, where he served as an adjunct professor.

## ANDREW LONG, DATA REPORTER

Andrew is a visual and data journalist based in Mesa, Arizona. He previously worked as a news artist at the Arizona Republic, where he developed informational graphics for the newspaper's front-page team. During that time, he was an adjunct professor

at Arizona State University's Walter Cronkite School of Journalism and Mass Communication. In 2012, Andrew co-founded the Arizona Center for Investigative Reporting.

## OMAR SACIRBEY, REPORTER

Omar has been a professional journalist since 1998, covering everything from international business and Wall Street to politics and religion. His stories have appeared in Newsweek International, The New York Times, The Washington Post, USA Today and other major outlets. Omar graduated from the Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism in 1998, and before that, he was a Bosnian diplomat. He is based in Boston.

## JOHN SCHROYER

A Denver-based journalist, John was a reporter for *MJBizDaily* from 2014 to 2022. He previously focused on Colorado politics for most of his career, which included covering the 2008 Democratic National Convention in Denver. In 2012, he covered the Amendment 64 campaign to legalize recreational marijuana for The Gazette in Colorado Springs. As then-video editor for The Gazette, he was on hand for the first legal recreational marijuana sale in Denver on Jan. 1, 2014.