



## October 21, 2021

# FOREWORD

*A civic ecosystem has been burgeoning for decades in the South, and it now offers a path to turn the tragedy of this pandemic into an opportunity to build prosperity and progress for all. Data and civic engagement will be critical. Together, the Southern Economic Advancement Project (SEAP), which works to lift up policies that address particular vulnerabilities in the South, and Fair Count, whose work focuses on strengthening pathways to continued civic participation, commissioned the National Conference on Citizenship to document the state of the South during the pandemic.*

**Health.** As of October 7, Southern states led in pediatric Covid case rates, and 9 of the 12 Southern states had some of the highest pediatric Covid case rates in the nation. In September, roughly 1/3 of Americans reported symptoms of anxiety or depressive disorder, nearly triple that reported in 2019. Climate disasters are likely compounding this mental health crisis, particularly in states like Louisiana where nearly 42% report anxiety or depression. Due in part to the lack of Medicaid expansion in most Southern states, there is a troubling South/non-South disparity in health insurance coverage with 16% of working-age Southerners lacking health insurance compared to only 11% in the rest of the country. Taken together, these trends signal a need to invest in health care in Southern states to ensure an equitable recovery.

**Health Systems.** 7 Southern states have refused to expand Medicaid, leaving a disproportionate number of adults without health insurance. This is particularly problematic in rural counties. Of all Southern counties with high uninsurance rates, 2/3 are rural, leading to numerous rural hospital closures across the South. In 2020, rural hospital closures contributed to Covid death rates 1/3 higher than their state average. Covid overwhelmed Southern hospitals this summer, forcing many to postpone life-saving cancer, heart, and other surgeries. Although the current Covid wave is subsiding in the South, hospital bed occupancy rates in 6 states are still higher than in 2019, indicating continued pressure on already fragile Southern health systems.

**Information Access.** Approximately 2/3 of Southern counties are “news deserts.” In addition, since the start of the pandemic, over 100 local newsrooms in Southern states have closed, merged, laid off, or furloughed employees, leaving rural Southerners without trusted sources of information about Covid spread and the

efficacy of Covid vaccines. According to the most recent data (2019), nearly half of Southern counties have poor internet access, compared to only 16% of counties outside the South. 1 in 5 households lack a computer or internet in Mississippi, Louisiana, and Arkansas, significantly limiting access to homework in homes with K-12 students and hindering the ability to combat Covid and vaccine misinformation.

**Employment.** The South has 1.2 million fewer jobs than before the pandemic and 5 Southern states cut off unemployment benefits before the national average (26 weeks). Not surprisingly, in September, Southerners were more likely to report that their families did not have enough to eat compared to other Americans. Stimulus checks were a lifeline but came sporadically. However, monthly Child Tax Credit payments in July and August reduced the child poverty rate from 15.8% to 11.5%, lessening the burden for families experiencing financial hardships.

**Child Care.** 3 in 10 households with young children (<5) had difficulty finding childcare in September. This caused more than 1 million people to leave a job, half a million to lose a job, and nearly 1.2 million were unable to look for work. With more than 3 million employees quitting their jobs each month in 2021, lack of childcare is an obvious contributor to a tight labor market. Investments in childcare at scale will be critical to helping parents, especially women, rejoin the workforce and support their families.

**Housing.** In September, 39% of Southern adults who were late on housing payments feared eviction or foreclosure in the next 2 months, compared to 32% of non-Southerners. Federal Emergency Rental Assistance funds are being distributed more slowly across the South than nationally, with the notable exception of Virginia which has distributed more than half its allotted funding after passing a law requiring landlords to apply for assistance before evicting. Similar models should be investigated by the hundreds of other state and local rental assistance programs to help expedite the distribution of these vital funds.

**Climate Disasters.** Disasters have compounded the nation's misery since the pandemic struck. Disasters are increasing in number and intensity, particularly in the South. Since March 2020, 68% of Southerners live in a county that has had at least one disaster, compared to 55% of non-Southerners. In 2021, there have been 18 climate disasters, causing more than 1 billion dollars in damage. These disasters are compounding housing and food insecurity among marginalized residents who often are hardest hit and receive less recovery aid.

The South is a vital region, and this pandemic is worsening our existing challenges and deepening our inequities. Now, it is our time to stand together and move from pandemic to prosperity. State and local governments prioritizing projects for the American Rescue Plan can use these funds to begin to eliminate structural disparities that ultimately determine health outcomes — such as access to good jobs, quality education, safe/walkable neighborhoods, healthy foods, and quality medical care. Addressing underlying disparities now will help ensure that communities of color are not disproportionately impacted by future health crises, whether they be more aggressive strains of Covid or emerging climate threats.



Dr. Jeanine Abrams McLean  
Vice President, Fair Count



Dr. Sarah Beth Gehl  
Research Director, The Southern Economic Advancement Project

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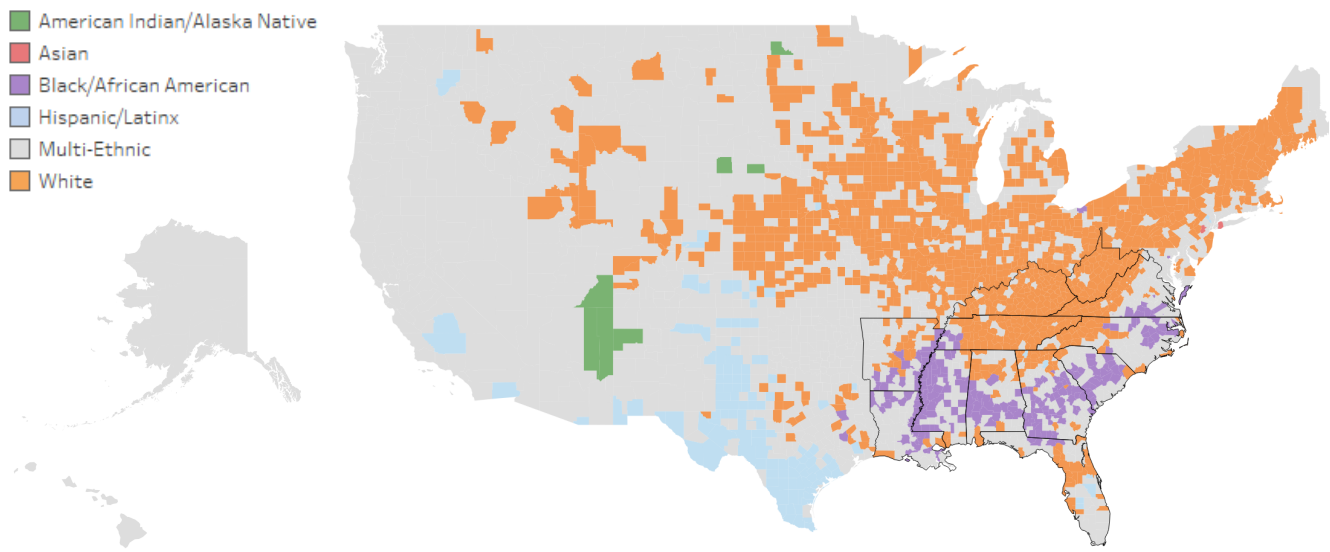
## **AUTHORS AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

# Defining the South

In this report, the South is defined as the 12 states of Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, Virginia, and West Virginia.

**Southern states include 225 of the 229 U.S. counties where the Black population is uniquely greater than the national average.**

**Disproportionate representation of racial/ethnic group by county**  
Population by race/ethnicity, 2019



Source: [Census Bureau](#). Note: Color indicates the race/ethnicity that is higher than the national average in each county. Multi-Ethnic indicates the county has more than one race/ethnicity greater than the national average.

The Black Belt stretches from Virginia to Louisiana and has a unique demographic make-up — vestiges of a violent history of cotton and tobacco plantations and the millions enslaved there. The Appalachian region from northern Alabama to West Virginia has been long dominated by extractive industries such as coal mining. As a whole, these 12 states have struggled from a history of underinvestment in transportation, infrastructure, education, and job training, and still have among the highest poverty rates in the United States today.

# Pandemic Lives and Livelihoods

To recover from any disaster, an assessment of damages is a necessary first step. In the case of Covid, the damage is not related to a single event. Instead, pandemic-related damages will continue to unfold as a portion of our population remains unvaccinated and the Delta variant continues to take its toll. As such, tracking Covid-related damage requires monitoring more than one metric over multiple months. Additionally, shocks and stressors such as extreme weather, fire, crime, racial injustices, and civil unrest continue to compound the impact of the pandemic.

This section tracks a select number of highly-vetted indicators to examine the extent of Covid-related damage to lives and livelihoods in each Southern state. It examines how people's lives are faring, and how this impact differs across different sections of society. It also looks at damage to livelihoods state-by-state across the South.

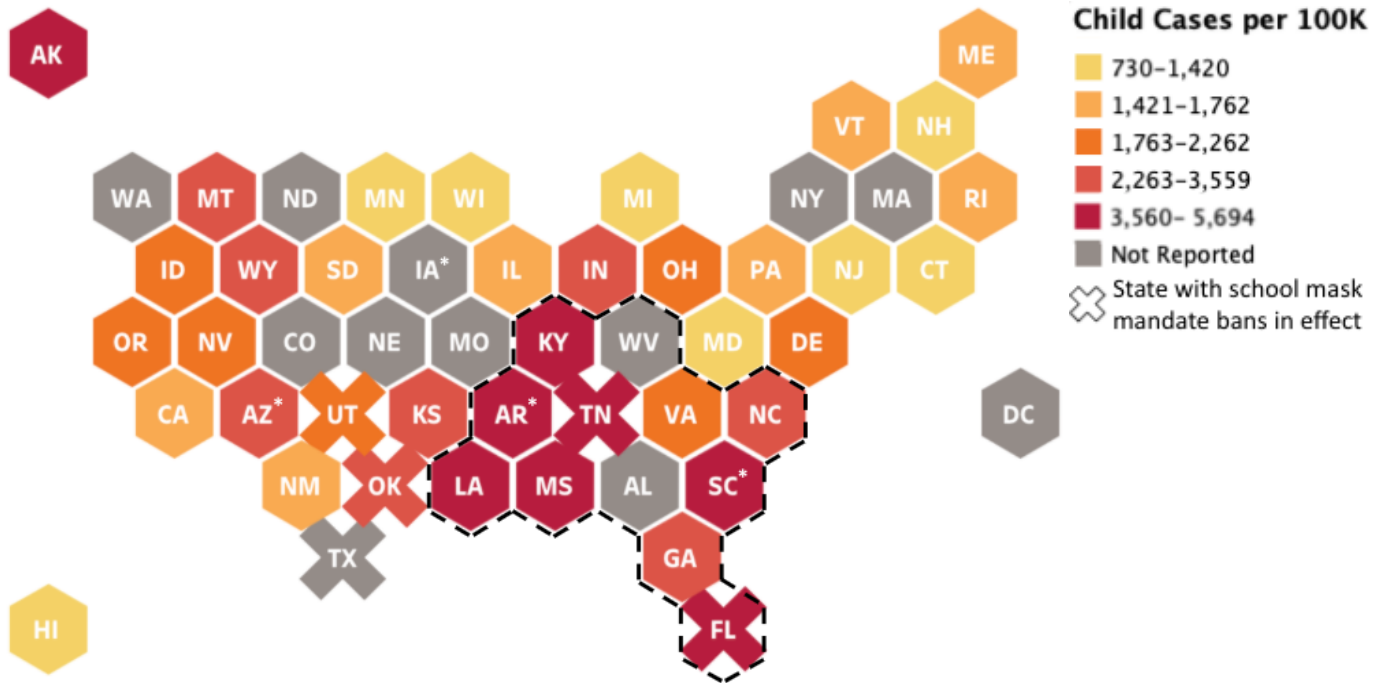
Much of the current discussion about the pandemic is limited to indicators focusing on the health and economic impacts. In later sections of this report, these indicators serve as a backdrop for a unique analysis of the complex interactions between the pandemic and the South's civic health.

## Indicators in this section

- Child Covid cases by state
- Covid hospitalization rates by race/ethnicity, U.S.
- Change in jobs, by state and U.S., and monthly
- Quits rate by industry, U.S.
- Disasters by county

## As child case rates of Covid are increasing across the nation and are highest in Southern states, school mask mandates remain controversial.

Child Covid cases per 100,000 population by state  
Cumulative cases for the period Jul 31 - Sep 24, 2021



Source: [John Hopkins University](#), [Census Bureau](#), and [Education Week](#). Notes: Definition of a child case is age 0-19. Rate is per 100,000 population, age 0-19. \*Mask mandate bans were issued in Arizona, Arkansas, Iowa, and South Carolina, but were later paused, blocked, or suspended by state or federal judges.

In the week ending October 7, children accounted for 1 in 4 new Covid cases across the nation.<sup>1</sup> 9 of the 12 Southern states had among the highest pediatric Covid case rates in the nation, with 2 Southern states not reporting data on children. In fact, the 10 Southern states that do report data include 54% of pediatric Covid cases even though their share of children in the U.S. is only 32%.

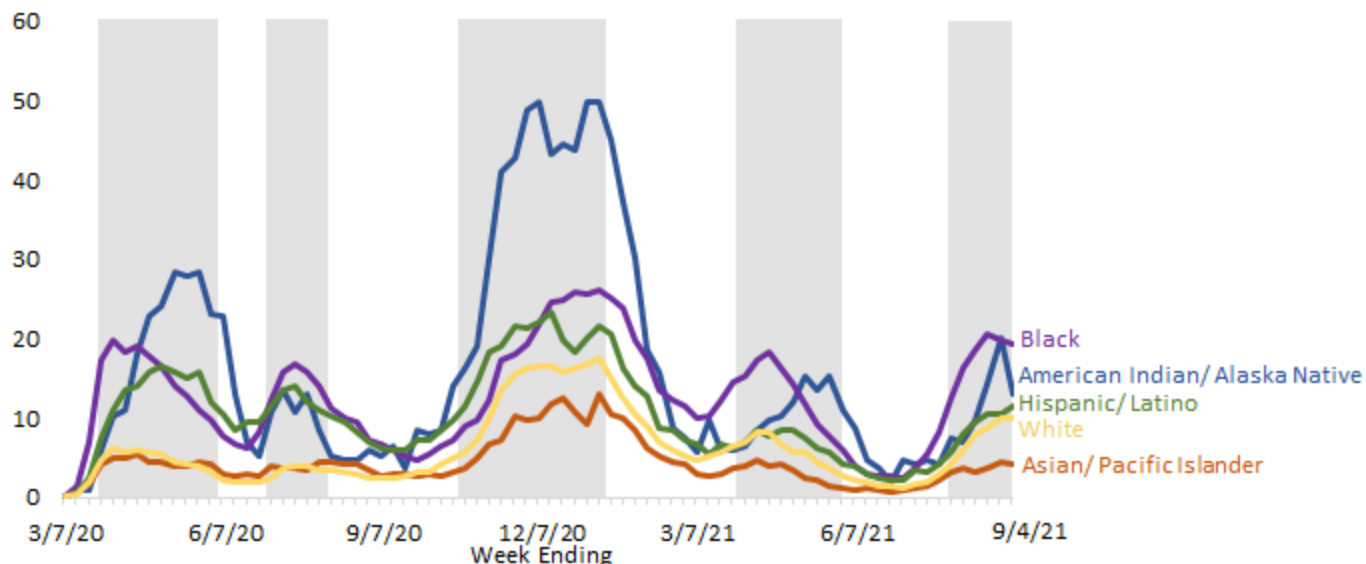
Researchers found that counties without school mask requirements were more than 3 times as likely to have Covid outbreaks than those with mask requirements. Clear and direct school mask requirements were seen as critical in reducing the spread of Covid-19.<sup>2</sup> Despite confirmed effectiveness, 5 states across the nation have enforced bans on mask mandates in schools, 2 of those being in the South.<sup>3</sup> An entire school in Duval County, Florida closed and had to return to online learning less than one month into the start of school after more than 20% of its students and staff had been in close contact with 38 students and 2 staff members confirmed to be Covid positive.<sup>4</sup>

While children tend to avoid the worst outcomes from Covid, they can bring it home to their families, and 140,000 children have lost a parent or caregiver due to Covid since the pandemic began. Children of color are disproportionately affected, making up more than 65% of losses. Hispanic children in border states and Black children in Southeastern states are amongst those with the largest burden.<sup>5</sup>

## As of September 2021, Black individuals are 2x more likely than white individuals to be hospitalized due to Covid.

### Covid-associated hospitalization rates per 100,000 population, U.S.

By race and ethnicity, Mar 7, 2020 - Sep 4, 2021



Source: [CDC](#) Notes: Gray bars represent pandemic peaks.

As shocking as nationwide case rates have been, with 45 million confirmed cases to date, hospitalizations continue to reveal concerning disparities between racial groups.<sup>1</sup> As case rates from the Delta variant decline, hospitalizations remain high, stressing health care systems.

The most recent data on hospitalizations shows that Black individuals are 2 times more likely than white individuals to be hospitalized due to Covid. This is down from the disparity during the first wave of the pandemic when Black patients were being hospitalized at 3 to 5 times the rate of white patients. American Indian and Hispanic individuals are also more likely to be hospitalized due to Covid compared to white individuals. Asian individuals have the lowest rate of hospitalization, which is seemingly due to having the highest rate of vaccination. 69% of Asian individuals have received at least one dose of the vaccine, compared to 54% of white individuals with the second-highest rates.<sup>2</sup> Within the Asian/Pacific Islander population, however, the Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander (NHPI) subgroup has been devastated by Covid-19. Data from earlier this year shows that Louisiana had the highest NHPI mortality rates, with 1,334 per 100,000.<sup>3</sup>

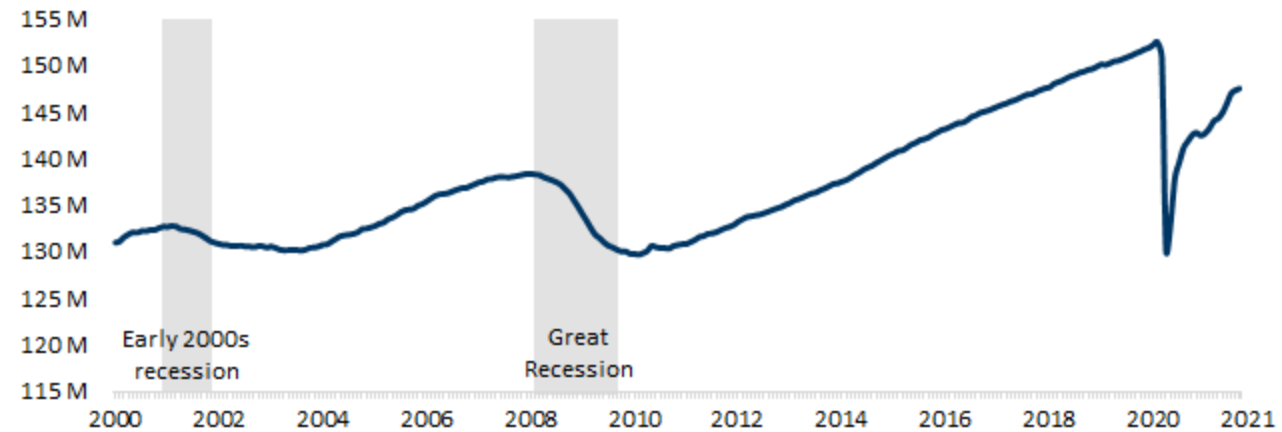
This graph reflects the truism that crises exacerbate disparities — the gap between racial outcomes increases during the peak pandemic waves, and then the lines coalesce when overall rates are lower.

State and local governments prioritizing projects for the American Rescue Plan could use these funds to begin to eliminate structural disparities that ultimately determine health outcomes — such as access to good jobs, quality education, safe/walkable neighborhoods, healthy foods, and quality medical care. Addressing underlying disparities now will help ensure that communities of color are not once again disproportionately impacted by future health crises, whether they be more aggressive strains of Covid or emerging climate threats such as extreme heat.

# Job growth was tepid in September. The nation still has 5 million fewer jobs than in Feb 2020, and the South has 1.2 million fewer.

## Total jobs by month, U.S.

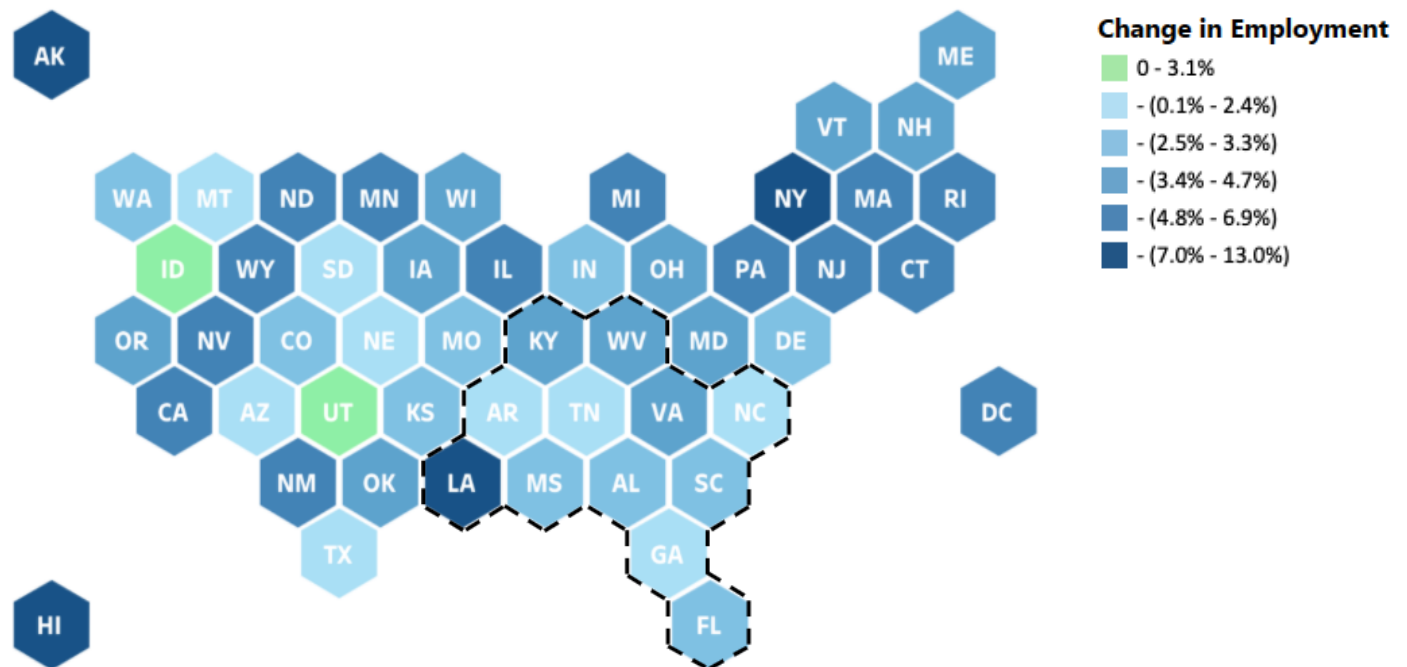
Jan 2000 - Sep 2021



Source: [Bureau of Labor Statistics](#) Note: Seasonally adjusted. Data for Aug 2021 and Sep 2021 are preliminary.

## Change in jobs by state

August 2021 compared to February 2020



Source: [Bureau of Labor Statistics](#) Note: Seasonally adjusted. Data for Aug 2021 are preliminary.

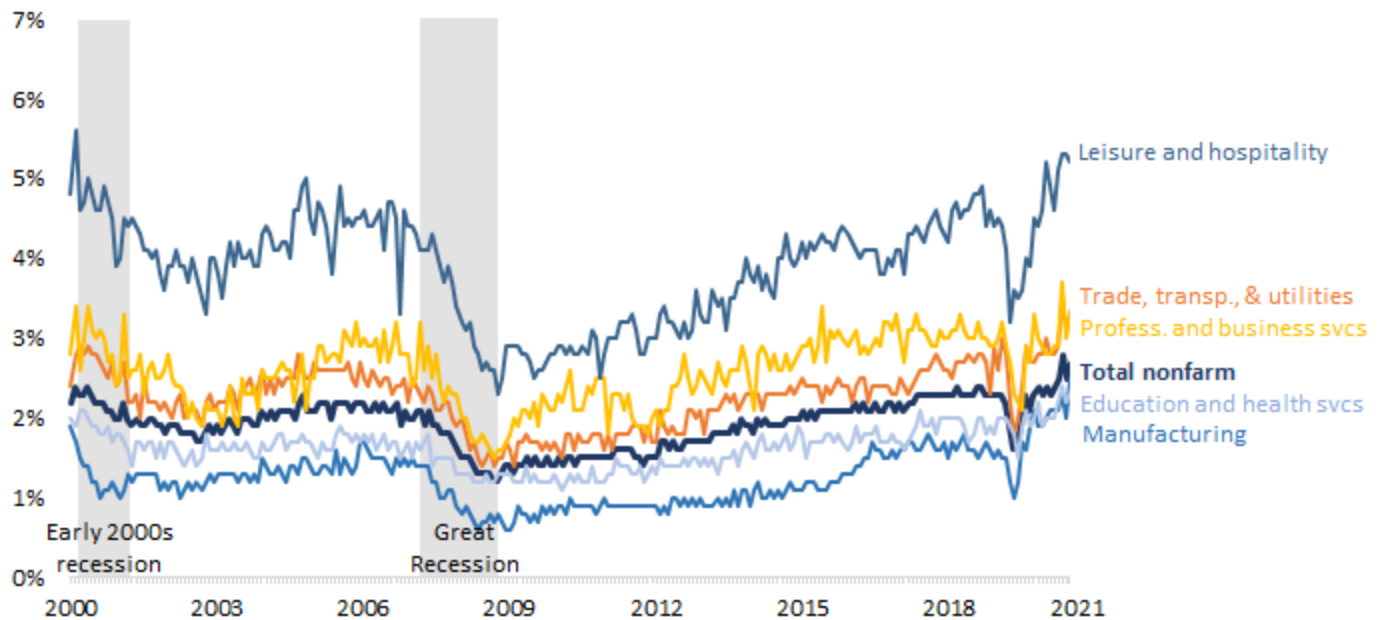
The nation gained a meager 194,000 jobs in September — the weakest employment gain all year — as the labor market tightened ([Quits Rate by Industry](#)). Across the South, 1.2 million jobs have disappeared since February 2020. Louisiana is down 7.2% compared to its February 2020 jobs level.



## Workers quit their jobs at record levels in August. Since January 2021, 30 million workers have quit their jobs.

### Quits rate by industry

Dec 2000 - Aug 2021



Source: [Bureau of Labor Statistics](#) Notes: The quits rate is the number of quits during the entire month as a percent of total employment. Quits include employees who left voluntarily with the exception of retirements or transfers to other locations. Data is seasonally adjusted. Aug 2021 data is preliminary.

During 2021, more than 3 million employees have quit their jobs each month. August reached an all-time high of 4.3 million quits. The quits rate is highest in accommodation and food services (part of Leisure and hospitality) and retail trade (part of Trade, transportation & utilities) where wages are low and churn has historically been high.<sup>1</sup>

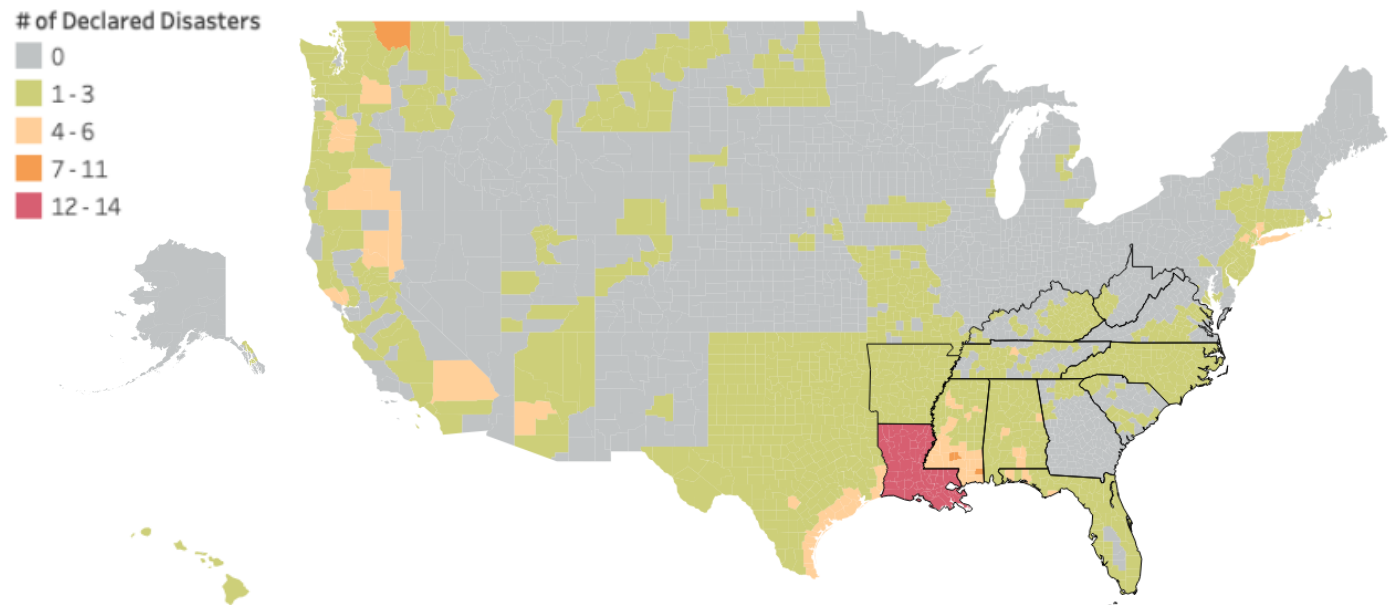
The pandemic caused workers to rethink their options, with some upskilling to transition to higher-paying occupations. Generally speaking, workers are demanding higher wages and better working conditions.<sup>2,3,4</sup> The most challenging issue for employers is the overall drop in labor force participation since the pandemic (63.4% in Jan 2020 to 61.6% in Sept 2021). The ratio of people seeking employment per job opening fell to 0.8 in August 2021 — suggesting a labor market as tight as in January 2020.<sup>5,6</sup> This tight labor market is partly due to workers retiring early in larger numbers.<sup>7,8</sup> In addition, nearly 1.2 million parents reported being unable to look for a job due to disruption in childcare as recently as September 2021. Increasing the availability of quality, affordable childcare will be key to boosting the supply of workers ([Child Care Disruptions](#)).

Over the medium and long term, training and apprenticeships for increasingly digitized jobs will be essential as labor demand shifts away from high-contact, low-wage service jobs. Worker shortages have been particularly severe in some industries where substantial training is required, including health care and professional business services.

## 68% of Southerners have experienced a climate-related disaster since March 2020 compared to 55% of non-Southerners.

### Number of FEMA disaster declarations by county

Mar 1, 2020 - Sep 14, 2021



Source: [FEMA](#). Notes: Excludes COVID declarations.

Climate disasters have compounded the nation's misery since the pandemic struck. 58% of Americans live in a county that has had a disaster since March 2020. Disasters have been most frequent in the South such that 68% of Southerners have experienced a disaster over the last 18 months compared to 55% of non-Southerners.

Moreover, many Southern counties have experienced more than one disaster. Louisiana has experienced the most disasters with every county in the state having more than 10 FEMA disaster declarations since March 2020.

The map above depicts the number of disaster declarations per county that include hurricanes, severe ice storms, other severe storms, fires, floods, tornadoes, levee breaks, landslides, and earthquakes. (Although Covid was a declared FEMA disaster, it is excluded from this analysis.)

As of October 8, there have been 18 climate disasters causing at least a billion dollars in damages in 2021, up from an average of 7.1 events annually from 1980 to 2020.<sup>1</sup> Local governments are rarely well-equipped to respond to human needs for housing, transportation, and mental health services that last for months after such large scale disasters.<sup>2</sup> Disasters have been shown to increase inequity: low-income housing is more likely to be located in vulnerable areas and may be less well constructed; people in low-income jobs often don't have the savings needed to evacuate or rebuild; and the time- and document-intensive FEMA application process can be too burdensome for smaller/rural municipalities and people with low-incomes.<sup>3</sup> At the same time, federal disaster bailouts disincentivize financial markets from investing in resilient infrastructure and housing.<sup>4</sup> Strategic investments in climate resilience will be needed to keep state economies moving forward.

# Prosperity

The previous section examined how the pandemic has affected the lives and livelihoods of people across the South. The next section moves on from the “damage assessment” to track measures that will be important as we move to recovery from the Covid crisis.

This Prosperity section examines measures of high-functioning governments and civic institutions that are essential for community well-being and prosperity. Importantly, this section ends with metrics that assess how people are doing during the pandemic across geography, race, and gender.

# Government

Governments — local, state, and federal — are being asked to do a lot during the Covid crisis. We start with metrics that assess state readiness for new outbreaks, Covid-related funding, elections access, and protests happening state-by-state. For each indicator, we provide a brief, evidence-based set of findings and implications to help readers quickly grasp a top-level overview of how each state is doing.

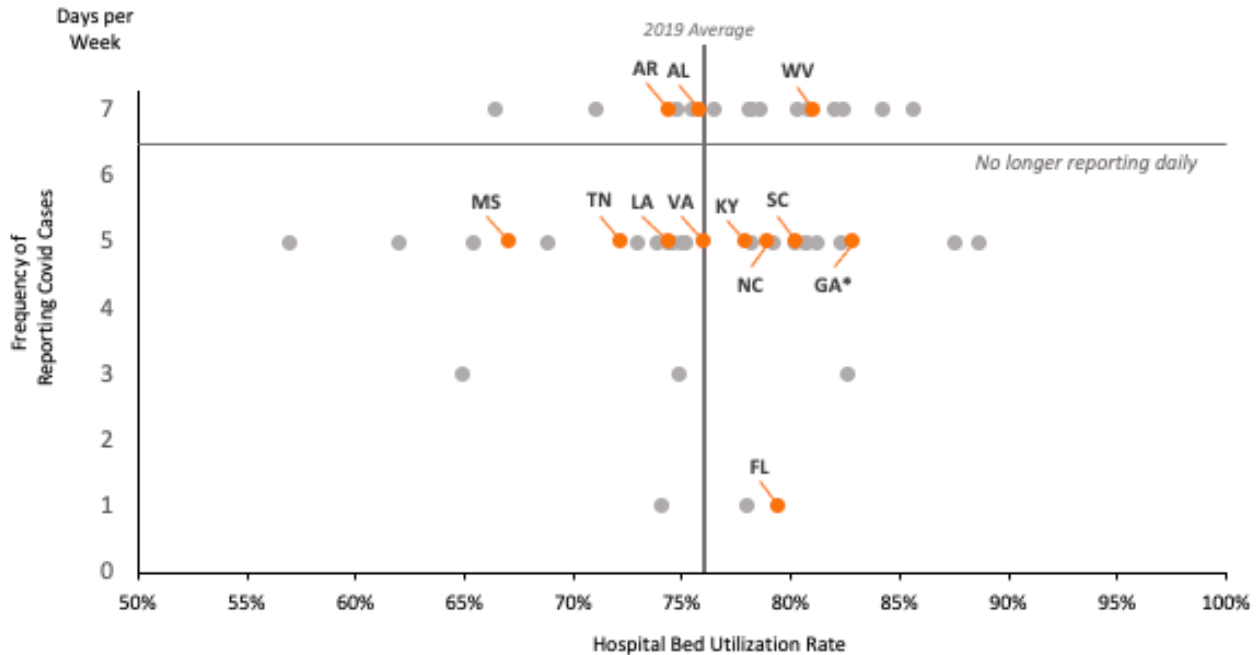
## Indicators in this section

- Hospital utilization rates and frequency of reporting new Covid cases
- Emergency Rental Assistance distribution
- New restrictive voting laws
- Civil unrest instances

**Although hospitals in 6 Southern states are already more full than the 2019 national average, 5 of those states have decreased the frequency at which they alert the public of new cases.**

**State frequency of reporting new Covid cases by hospital capacity**

As of October 15, 2021



Sources: [HealthData.gov COVID-19 Reported Patient Impact and Hospital Capacity by State](#) and [Johns Hopkins Center for Systems Science and Engineering \(CSSE\) GitHub](#) \*GA is also no longer reporting on official holidays.

Note: The average hospital occupancy rate in 2019, pre-pandemic, was 76%.<sup>1</sup>

A critical reason for Americans to get vaccinated and wear masks is to prevent hospitalizations, and by extension keep local hospitals from being overwhelmed. This is especially important heading into what may be an active season for other respiratory illnesses such as the flu and RSV whose rates were down in 2020 due to public health measures to reduce Covid exposures.<sup>2</sup> 8 Southern states (AL, FL, GA, KY, NC, SC, VA, and WV) are entering this season with occupancy rates at or above the 2019 average. The intensive care unit (ICU) in Grady Memorial Hospital in Atlanta, Georgia, has been at 100% capacity over the last 12 months, compared to about 70% prior to the pandemic.<sup>3</sup>

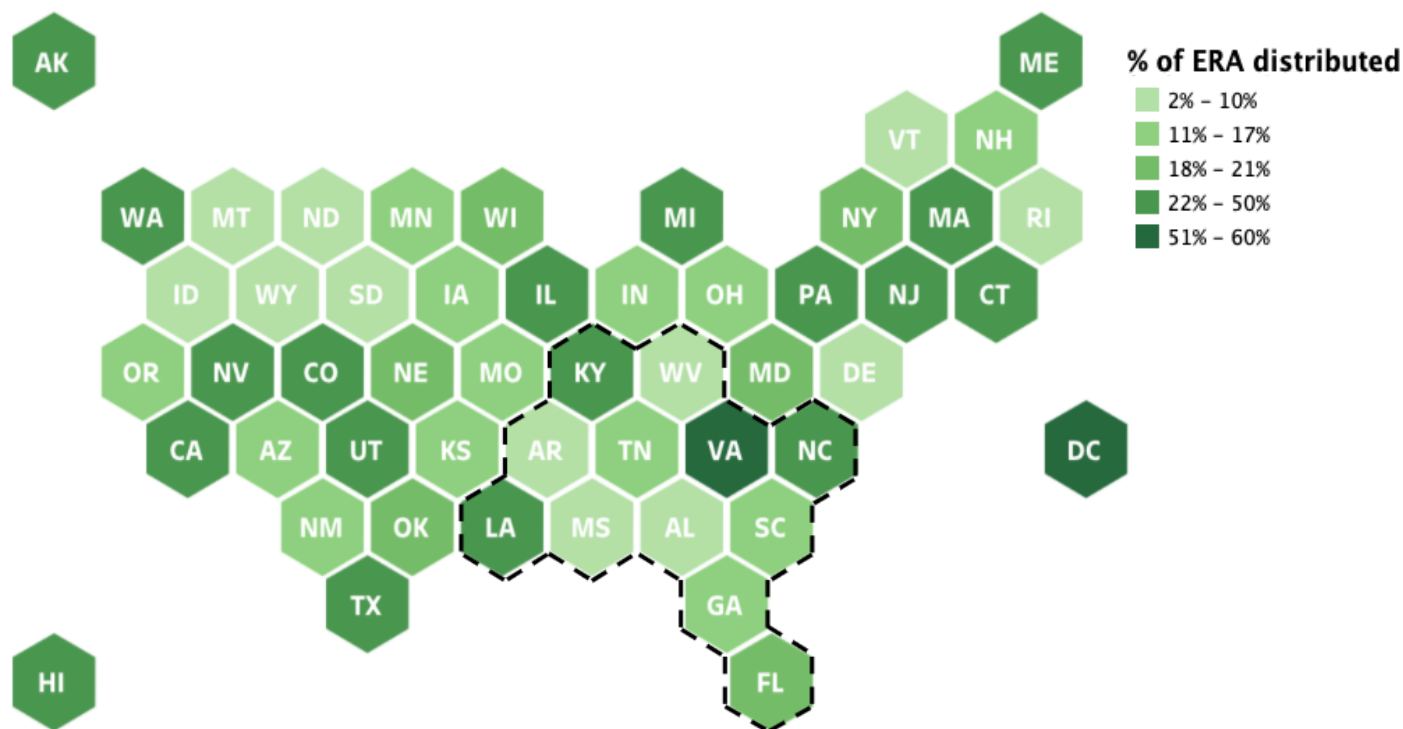
As hospitals approach maximum capacity, communities should carefully monitor Covid case rates and implement policies to reduce transmission to avoid having to make the hard choices of rationing care. In Alabama, a patient with a heart condition died because he was unable to receive medical care, even after the hospital contacted 43 other hospitals nearby.<sup>3</sup>

Fortunately, AR, AL, and WV are all once again publishing data on Covid case rates daily. GA, KY, NC, and SC are down to publishing only on weekdays and most concerning is Florida, which is publishing only once a week. Given the high infectivity rate of the Delta variant, case rates could easily get out of hand within two reporting cycles, resulting in overwhelmed hospitals and excess deaths. With a deadly race between viral variants and hospitalization capacity, timely data-tracking and transparency by local governments will be crucial to support mid-course corrections in public health responses as conditions continue to rapidly change.

**Virginia has distributed 53% of Emergency Rental Assistance after requiring landlords to apply for the aid before evicting. As a whole, the South is lagging with only 22% of funds distributed compared to 26% outside the South.**

**Percent of Emergency Rental Assistance funds distributed**

Jan 1 - Aug 31, 2021



Source: [U.S. Department of the Treasury](#). Notes: Assistance to households is the total dollar amount of ERA1 and ERA2 award funds paid to or for households including payments for rent, rental arrears, utility/home energy costs, utility/home energy arrears, and other eligible expenses. This does not include funds paid for Housing Stability Services. "Percent distributed" is calculated as the sum of assistance to households divided by 90% of the ERA1 and ERA2 allocation amount.

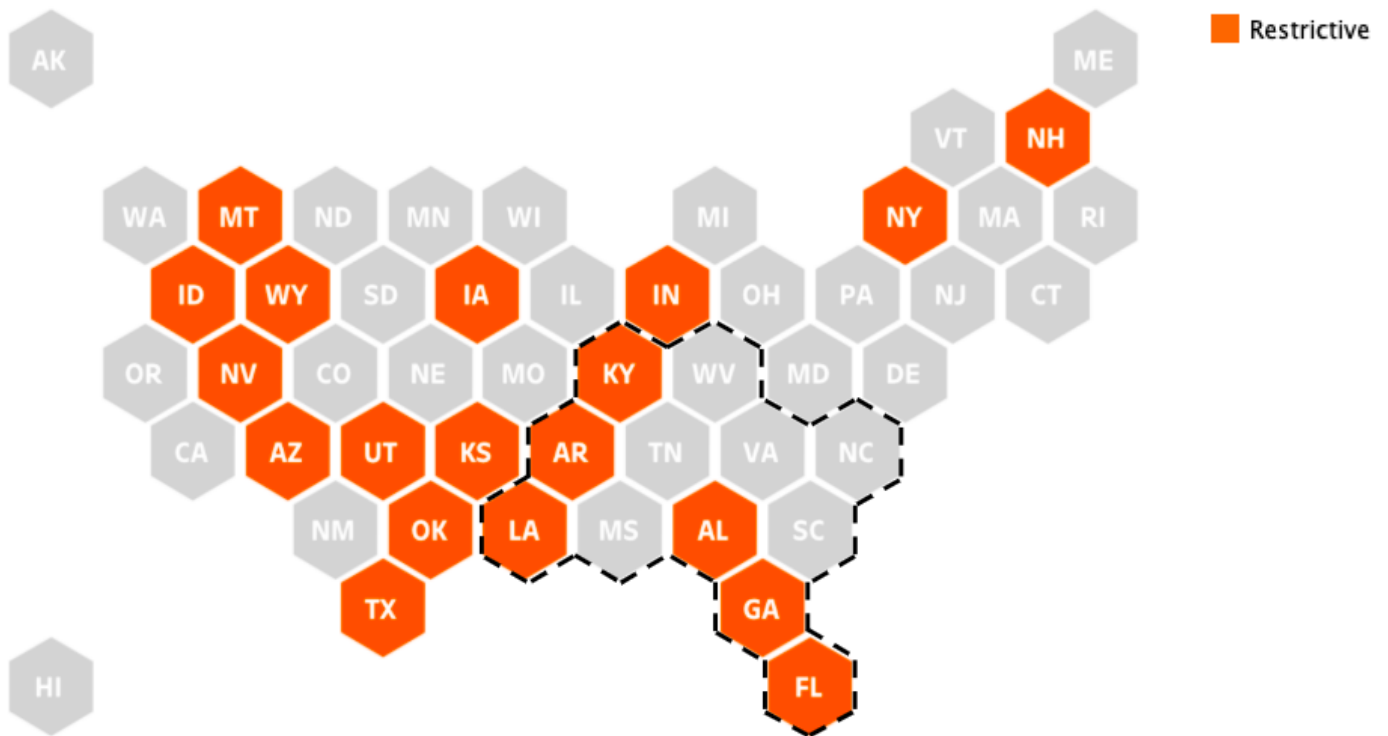
The December Stimulus bill (ERA) and the March American Rescue Plan (ERA2) include a combined \$45 billion in rental assistance. But this assistance is being doled out through hundreds of state and local emergency rental assistance programs that vary greatly. Many places have been slow to distribute this critical aid.

Some states and localities have increased their distribution rate by reducing documentation burdens for accessing this aid. In August, 420,600 households received ERA funding, up from just 157,400 households in May.<sup>1</sup> But by the end of August, when the Supreme Court allowed evictions to resume, only 25% of the funding had been distributed nationwide.<sup>2</sup> Virginia had distributed more than half its ERA and ERA2 funding, in part due to a law that requires landlords to first apply for the aid before evicting renters.<sup>3</sup> As a region, Southern states have lagged the rest of the nation with only 22% of funds distributed compared to 26% elsewhere. In late September, more than 1 in 3 Southerners late on rent or mortgage were concerned about losing their homes ([Likelihood of Eviction or Foreclosure](#)).

## Despite gains made in voter turnout during the pandemic, 19 states — including 6 in the South — have passed laws restricting voter access.

### States with new restrictive voting laws

January 1 - September 27, 2021



Source: [Brennan Center for Justice](#)

Despite concerns that the pandemic might depress voting rates, voter turnout was at a record high in the 2020 presidential election. National voter participation jumped to about 67% and voter participation in the South neared 65%.<sup>1</sup> In anticipation of the 2020 election and in response to the pandemic, nearly every state did something to make voting easier, such as temporarily expanding access to mail-in voting, establishing ballot drop-boxes, or increasing availability of early voting.<sup>2</sup>

However, since the 2020 election, there has been a series of restrictive voting laws introduced across the country. Between January 1 and September 27, 2021, at least 19 states have enacted 33 laws that make it harder for Americans to vote.<sup>3</sup> Half of Southern states have passed restrictive voting laws.

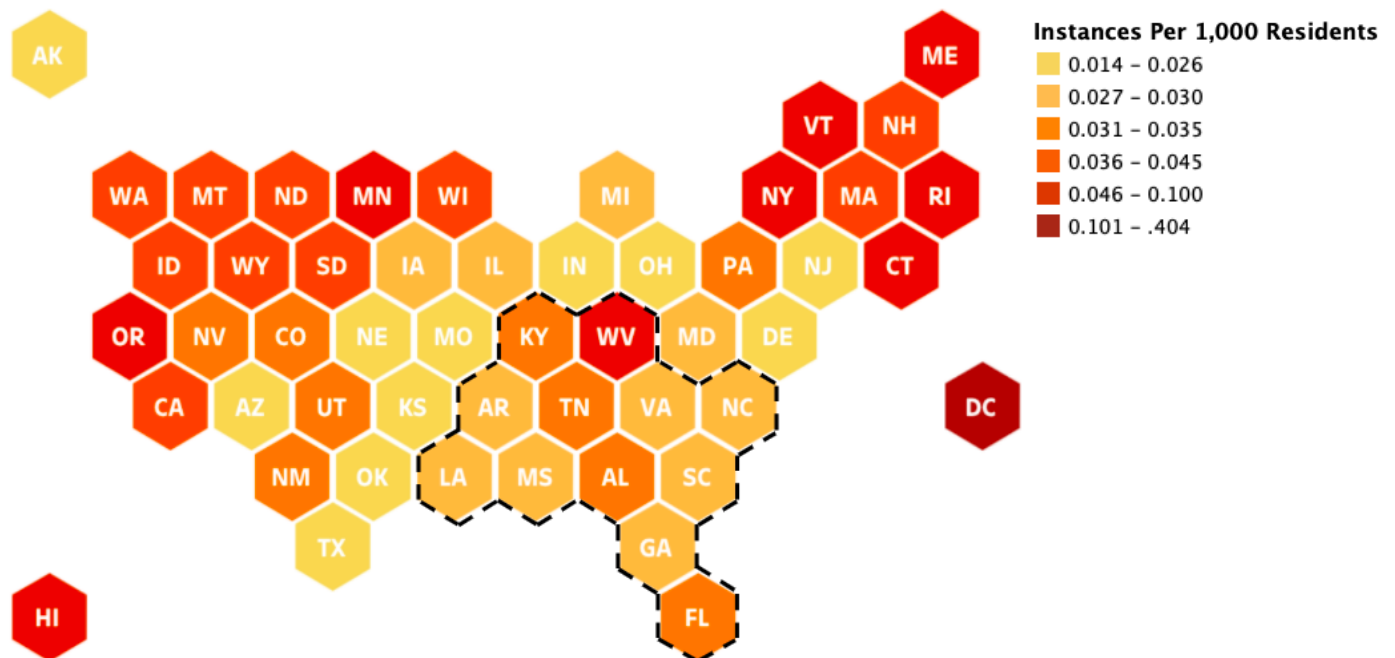
Lawmakers in these states often cited fraud as a reason for curtailing expansions made during the pandemic despite expert consensus that there was no evidence of widespread fraud and that the 2020 election was “the most secure in American history.”<sup>4</sup>

Among the 1/3 of voters who did not participate in the 2020 election, the Current Population Survey found that 8% did not vote because of structural barriers such as polling place hours, long lines, registration problems, or not being near polls on voting day. Rather than building on the progress made in 2020 by focusing on ways to reduce barriers to voting, many states have moved to further restrict voting access, an effort that could have a significant impact on voter participation in future elections.

## The number of demonstrations across the South has ranged from 74 in Mississippi to 673 in Florida — 99% of which were peaceful.

### Civil unrest instances per 1,000 residents

January 1, 2021 - October 1, 2021



Source: [Armed Conflict Location & Event Data \(ACLED\)](#)

Nearly 2,500 protests have taken place across the South since January 1, 2021 — occurring across every state. While violent protests commanded the most media attention, 99% of all protests across the South since January 1, 2021 were peaceful. The United States has a long history of protests as an important and effective form of civic activism.<sup>1</sup> Research on Civil Rights era peaceful protests revealed that those demonstrations were effective in swaying public sympathy toward the protestors and yielded substantive policy reforms.<sup>2,3</sup> In 2009, Tea Party demonstrations generated additional support for Republican candidates and yielded more conservative policymaking.<sup>4</sup>

From July through September, the largest number of demonstrations (113) across the South were in solidarity with Cuba where protests in July were triggered by severe food and medicine shortages. Mask mandates, particularly for school children, catalyzed about 100 anti-mask protests. However, 56 demonstrations in support of mask mandates and stronger Covid protections took place as well, largely on college campuses. Employer vaccine mandates also prompted 79 protests, many among hospital workers. Nearly 80 demonstrations protested police brutality and bias in the justice system. 46 protests were in support of worker rights — primarily for miners, food workers, firefighters, and nurses — demanding an increase in the minimum wage and better working conditions as a whole. Southerners expressed concern about gun violence through 44 demonstrations. 32 demonstrations took place in support of voting rights, and 21 demonstrations for environmental justice. About 18 protests took place against evictions and substandard housing.

# Prosperity Institutions

Beyond governments, American society has always depended on a wide array of civic institutions to provide critical information to constituents, hold governments accountable, and offer support to families and workers to be healthy, educated, and productive. This section examines civic institutions and whether they are fair, effective, and healthy.

This issue of *Pandemic to Prosperity: South* examines the ability of Southerners to access information they need to make informed decisions during a pandemic. We examine local news and internet access to assess communities' ability to receive critical information and remain connected in a world that is dramatically more digital than just a few months ago. We also examine child care disruptions, health insurance availability, and vaccine requirements.

## Indicators in this section

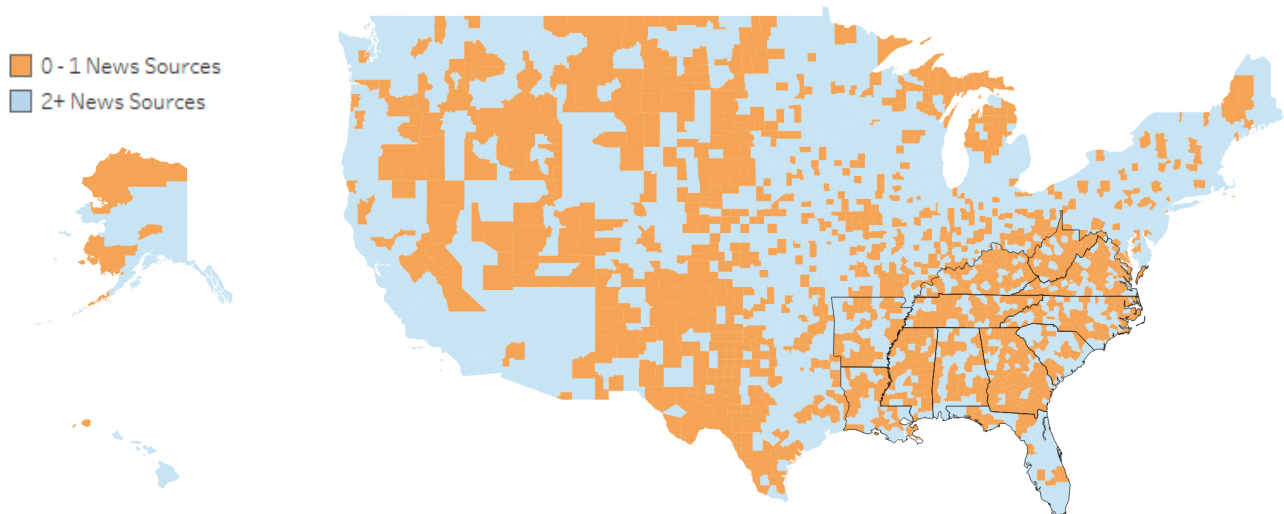
- News deserts
- Lack of internet access by county
- Child care disruptions
- Health insurance coverage by county and by employment status
- Small business Covid vaccine requirements



## Southern counties are more likely to be news deserts than the national average. 2/3 of Southern counties have 1 or no newspaper, meaning a critical vehicle for informing the public about local Covid policies is absent.

### Counties with no or only one newspaper (“news deserts”)

News deserts as of 2020



Source: [UNC Hussman School of Journalism and Media](#), inspired by [Brookings research](#)

With many upcoming local elections covering important and rapidly-changing policy decisions regarding Covid, local news sources are an essential platform for both transparency and public understanding of proposed policy measures. However, more than half of counties nationwide are what experts describe as “local news deserts” that have either no newspaper or only one (often a weekly or a thinly staffed daily).<sup>1</sup> 2 out of every 3 Southern counties are news deserts, meaning a critical vehicle for trusted information during the recovery is absent. Since the pandemic, over 100 local newsrooms in Southern states have closed, merged, or laid off/furloughed employees.<sup>2</sup>

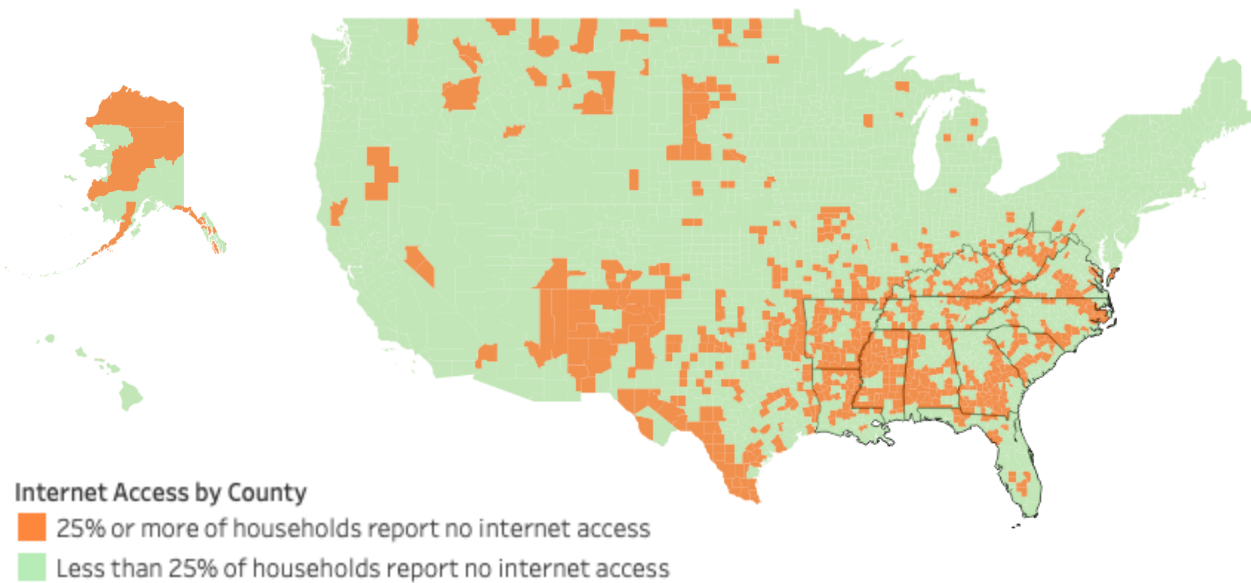
Across the South, remaining local news sources continue to inform the public of local issues and related policy measures that affect their community. In New Orleans, LA, *The Lens* reports on the tension between the state Department of Education and the NOLA Public Schools district regarding the state’s decision to remove quarantine requirements for asymptomatic school children, highlighting that the state has not released any data to validate their claims.<sup>3</sup> A Fluvanna County local newspaper in VA, the *Fluvanna Review*, engaged school board candidates and shared their respective platforms in an effort to inform and educate voters.<sup>4</sup>

Local news deserts tend to be more common in rural areas, ultimately priming the atmosphere for misinformation to spread rapidly.<sup>5</sup> As the need for local news sources remains critical, many are finding new and unique ways to strengthen their relationships and build trust with the communities they serve. Canopy Atlanta, a nonprofit journalism program in Atlanta, GA partners journalists with local community members to develop and publish stories together — allowing journalists to understand what matters to the community, and allowing community members to take ownership of the information consumed.<sup>6</sup> The *South Florida Sun Sentinel* developed a “Coronavirus” section that includes daily Covid-19 reports and a Covid-19 Vaccine Q&A column that rounds up expert knowledge for the South Florida community.<sup>7</sup> Revitalizing local news sources and rebuilding trust are vital for public participation in recovery efforts.

## Nearly half of Southern counties have poor internet access, compared to only 16% of counties outside the South.

### Lack of internet access by county, 2015-19

Counties where 25% or more of households report no internet access



Source: [U.S. Dept of Commerce NTIA/ Census Bureau's American Community Survey](#)

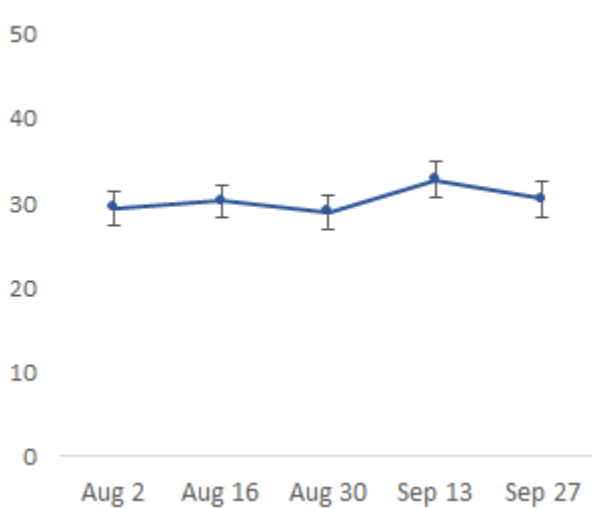
Broadband internet access has become an essential utility for every American family. It is particularly important for school children to support homework and education. A majority of eighth-graders reported using the internet to do homework in 2018, but this was most common among suburban students (65%) and least common among rural students (44%).<sup>1</sup>

Indeed, lack of internet is particularly a problem in rural America. The majority of rural residents in the U.S. felt access to high-speed internet was a significant problem in 2018.<sup>2</sup> According to the most recent data (2019), 46% of Southern counties have poor internet access, whereas only 16% of counties outside the South have poor access. 1 in 5 households lacks a computer or internet in Mississippi, Louisiana, and Arkansas.<sup>3</sup> An October 2020 analysis by Microsoft found that 1 in 3 (or 19.4 million) K-12 students were not accessing the internet at broadband speeds.<sup>4</sup>

During the pandemic, Congress approved funding for subsidies for devices and broadband service but the funding was limited and only served roughly 6 million households.<sup>5</sup> Just as investments in the U.S. Interstate Highway System laid the foundation for the American economy from 1960 onward, additional investments in broadband will be needed to lay a solid foundation for America's economy for the 21st century.

### 3 in 10 households with children under 5 continue to experience child care disruptions, forcing them to make difficult choices.

Percent of households where children under 5 were unable to attend child care in last 4 weeks  
United States



How families responded to childcare disruption:	Number of families impacted:
Took unpaid leave to care for children	1,580,647
Used vacation or sick days, or other paid leave to care for children	2,188,648
Cut work hours to care for children	2,302,099
Left a job in order to care for children	1,031,239
Lost a job because of time away to care for children	482,432
Did not look for a job in order to care for children	1,172,853
Supervised one or more children while working	1,795,780

Source: [Census Bureau’s Household Pulse Survey](#). Note: Universe is population 18+ years in households with children under 5 years of age.

With the reopening of in-person schools nationwide, many were hoping that parents would be able to pivot back to the workforce.<sup>1</sup> However, child care disruptions continue to leave families with children under 5 in a lurch. 3 in 10 adults still experienced a child care disruption in the 4 weeks ending September 27, 2021.

The impact on both careers and workplaces is not trivial. More than 2.3 million parents cut their work hours to care for children, and 1.6 million parents took unpaid leave to care for children. More than 1 million left a job, half a million lost a job, and nearly 1.2 million didn’t look for a job because of child care disruptions — all of which mean reduced income that can cause a family to skip a rent or mortgage payment, delay seeking needed health care, and struggle to put food on the table. Not surprisingly, this all coincides with a drop in women in the workforce ([Employment Rate by Gender](#)).

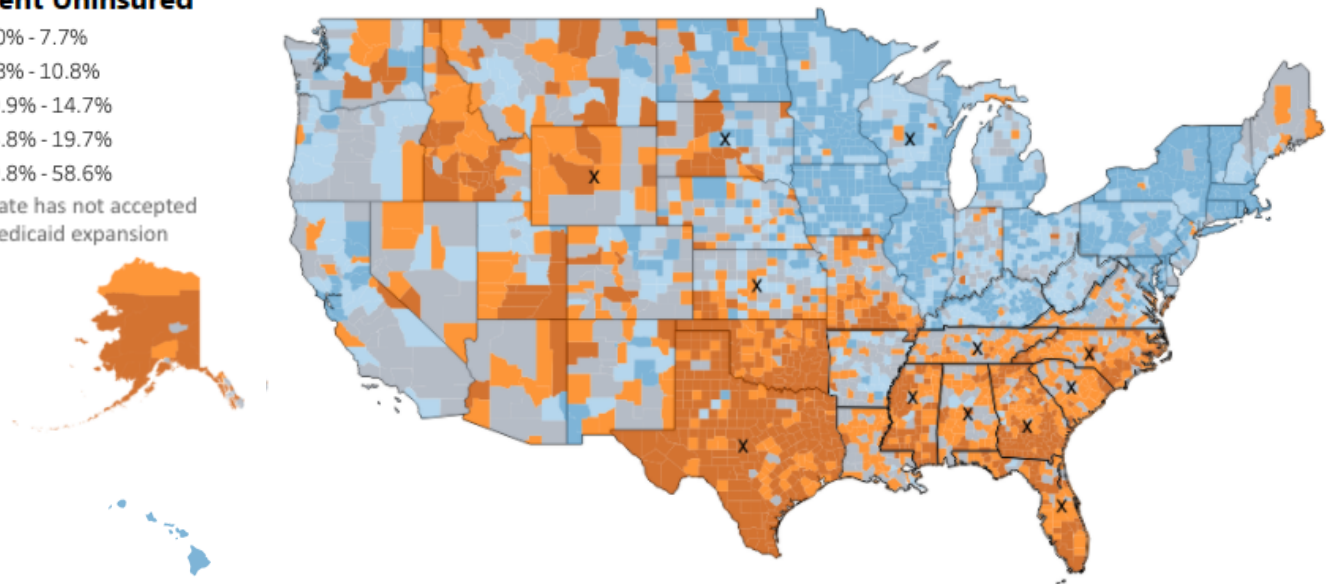
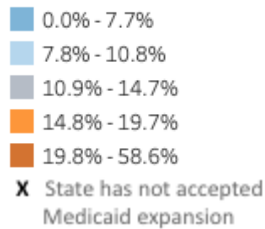
Comprehensive data on child care closures is hard to come by because the sector is so much more decentralized than K-12 education. What little data exists is concerning. An analysis by southern regional newsroom Reckon found that at least 282 child care centers in GA, 57 in TN, and 136 in AL closed for good during 2020.<sup>2</sup> Those losses do not appear to be impacting populations equally. In Jackson, MS, the five zip codes that lost the most child care centers were all majority-Black with high poverty rates. Cassandra Welchlin of the Mississippi Black Women’s Roundtable notes the impact is broader than just employment, “because child care centers are the centers of our communities. When you take them out, you really disrupt the system.”

The common thread behind closures is a mismatch between what families can afford to pay for child care versus what constitutes a competitive, livable wage for qualified workers.<sup>3</sup> Before the pandemic, child care professionals in LA, MS, AL, and GA all earned around \$9/hour.<sup>4</sup> With American Rescue Plan dollars available to shore up the sector, the challenge will be how to leverage these one-time investments into long-term investment in early childhood education.<sup>5</sup>

## States refusing Medicaid expansion contributed to 16% of working-age Southerners lacking health insurance compared to 11% outside the South.

Lack of health insurance coverage by county, 2015-19  
Population age 19-64

### Percent Uninsured



Source: [Census Bureau's American Community Survey](#). Note: WI has partially expanded Medicaid (under a Medicaid waiver) to include all adults under 100 percent federal poverty level.

Seven Southern states have not adopted Medicaid expansion (MS, AL, GA, FL, SC, NC, and TN). And according to the most recent data (2015-19), this contributed to a troubling South/non-South disparity in health insurance coverage with 16% of working-age Southerners lacking health insurance compared to only 11% in the rest of the United States.<sup>1</sup> This is particularly true in rural counties in the South. Looking at Southern counties with particularly high rates of uninsurance (15% or more of all working-age adults lacking health insurance), 2/3 of these counties were completely or mostly rural.

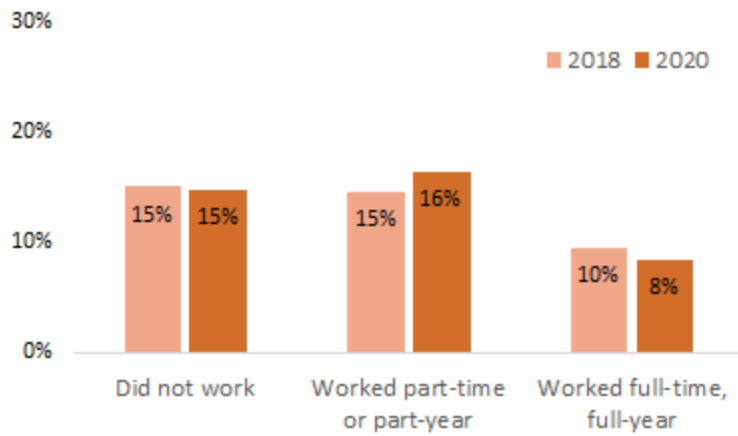
The implications of not expanding Medicaid are particularly hard on rural communities. Without Medicaid expansion, hospitals don't receive sufficient reimbursement for the care they provide to an increased number of uninsured patients and, as a result, oftentimes must close for financial reasons. Data from 2011 to 2017 reveals that the rural hospitals most likely to shutter were in the South.<sup>2</sup> During Covid, without a hospital, many rural residents were unable to get tested and then delayed getting care. One study found that in rural counties where a hospital closed in 2020, Covid death rates were 39% higher than in their state overall.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, when rural hospitals close, a key job center is lost, making it hard to attract new residents and thus new businesses — contributing to a downward spiral for rural communities.

Lack of health insurance also means many people incur medical debt. Nearly 1 in 5 American households have medical debt. Black households are more likely to have medical debt (27%) than non-Black households (17%) and medical debt accounts for about half of all delinquencies reported to collections agencies.<sup>4,5</sup>

## Workers who didn't have full-time, year-round jobs were less likely to have health insurance coverage in 2020. Lack of health insurance rates were 3x higher among Hispanic and 2x higher for Black adults than white adults.

Percent of working-age population (age 19-64) without health insurance coverage

By work status



Source: [Census Bureau's Current Population Survey](#).

The pandemic accelerated changes in U.S. employment, with part-time workers increasingly lacking health insurance and full-time workers increasingly securing this life-saving benefit. Workers who worked part-time or part-year were twice as likely as full-time, year-round workers to lack health insurance in 2020. Part-time workers were as likely to be uninsured as those who did not work at all in 2020.

From 2019 to 2020, the economy shed 13.7 million full-time, year-round jobs, meaning that fewer and fewer workers are in positions likely to offer health insurance. Loss of full-time, year-round jobs were concentrated in jobs paying less than \$25,000. In the leisure and hospitality industry, 1 in 4 full-time year-round jobs was lost.<sup>1</sup> Black and Hispanic workers have been hit particularly hard with employment rates down 3 to 4 percentage points in Sept 2021 compared to Feb 2020, while employment rates for white workers have declined 2 percentage points ([Employment Rate by Race/Ethnicity](#)).

Even before the pandemic, Black and Hispanic workers were more likely to be working part-time jobs but wanting full-time work. In February 2020, 14 percent of Hispanic workers and 12 percent of Black workers compared to 7 percent of white workers were underemployed — that is, working part-time but preferring more work hours.<sup>2</sup>

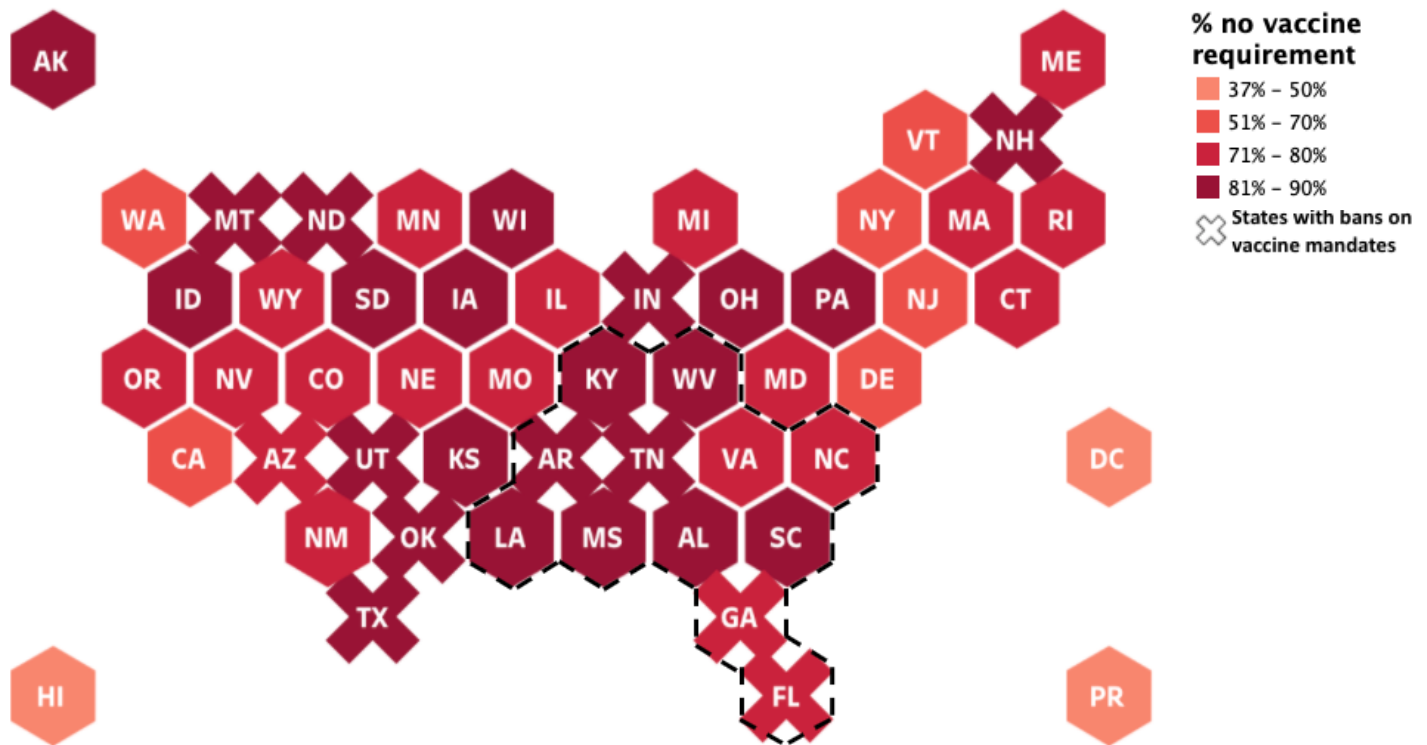
Not surprisingly then, in 2020, Hispanic working-age adults were 3 times more likely than white adults to lack health insurance, and Black adults were nearly 2 times more likely than white adults to lack health insurance.<sup>4</sup> With the compounding impact of job loss, lack of access to healthy foods, and exposure to pollution, the racial and ethnic groups with the highest exposure to Covid were even more vulnerable because of lack of health insurance.<sup>4</sup>

With scientists predicting more frequent pandemics in the future, access to health insurance will be critical to ensure adults can withstand health crises and continue to provide for their families.<sup>5</sup>

### 3 out of 4 small businesses in the U.S. do not require employees to have proof of vaccination.

#### Percent of small businesses not requiring employees to have proof of vaccination

Sept 27- Oct 3, 2021



Source: [Census Bureau Small Business Pulse Survey](#). Note: Questionnaire wording is “In the last week, did this business require employees to have proof of COVID-19 vaccination before physically coming to work.”

This summer, the Biden administration began announcing vaccine mandates for the federal government employees and contractors, and announced that similar mandates for companies with more than 100 employees would be forthcoming.<sup>1</sup> Before and after these announcements, many large corporations announced vaccine mandates for new hires, employees interfacing with customers, and employees returning to offices.<sup>2,3</sup> Vaccine mandates for employees of New York City public schools, while contentious, pushed vaccination rates above 95%.<sup>4</sup> A vaccine mandate for health care workers in New York state yielded similar results. While a relatively small fraction of employees has refused to comply, these mandates have led to some reduction in workforce. About 34,000 health care workers and 20,500 home health workers in New York state lost their jobs or were put on leave for refusing the vaccine.<sup>5</sup> Given the tight labor market, these losses are difficult for employers who are already struggling to find employees ([Quits Rate by Industry](#)).

In contrast, 75% of small businesses in the U.S. do not require employees to have proof of vaccination — possibly for ideological reasons, and possibly due to challenges finding workers. 12 states have banned vaccine mandates, making it more difficult for smaller businesses to institute vaccine requirements. Meanwhile, the majority of small businesses in Puerto Rico are already requiring vaccines — a level exceeding all U.S. states.<sup>6</sup>

# Prosperity People

At the end of the day, governments and institutions are responsible for ensuring the well-being of the communities they serve. This section examines outcomes for people since the onset of the Covid crisis.

This section examines key economic metrics from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, as well as a timely survey from the U.S. Census Bureau (the Household Pulse Survey) that assesses the human impact of the Covid crisis across America. It includes an analysis of unemployment benefits relative to basic costs in each county, and the effects of stimulus payment and safety nets on personal income and monthly poverty rates. For each indicator, we provide a brief explanation of findings to weave together an overview of how Americans are faring since the pandemic struck.

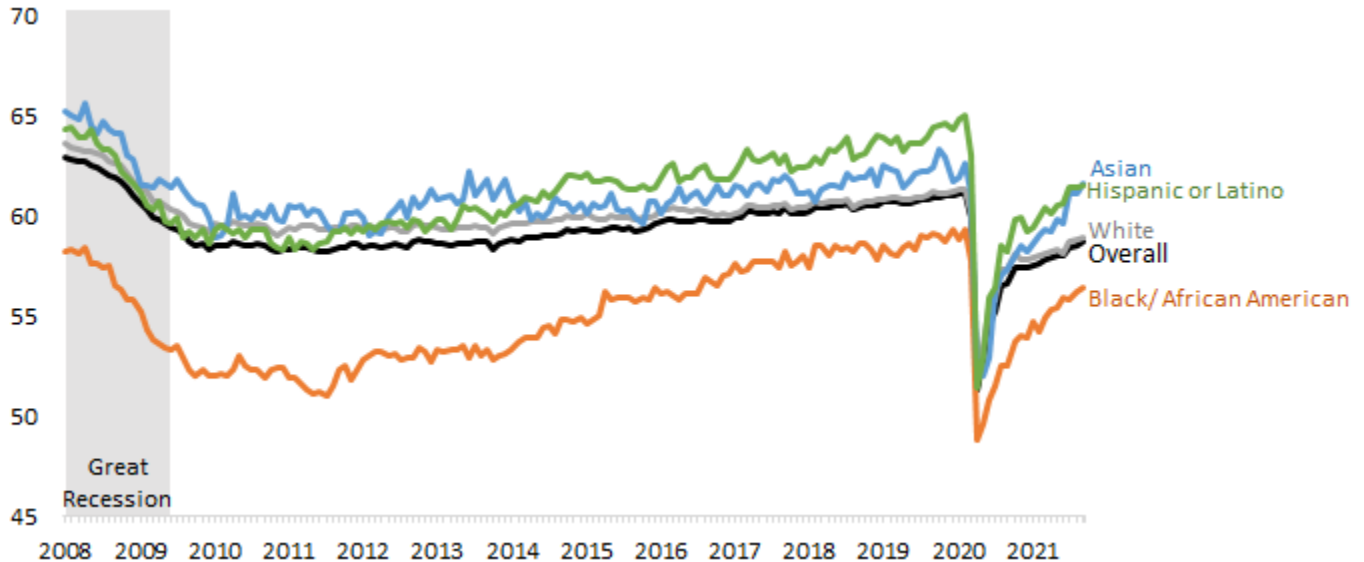
## Indicators in this section

- Employment rate by race/ethnicity
- Employment rate by gender
- Counties where state unemployment insurance fails to cover basic costs
- Food insecurity by state
- Likelihood of eviction or foreclosure by state
- Symptoms of anxiety or depressive disorder by state
- Well-being of LGBT population
- Estimated monthly poverty rate by age

**The nationwide employment rate of 58.7% is 2 percentage points lower than Feb 2020. Black and Hispanic workers have been hit particularly hard with employment rates down 3 to 4 percentage points.**

**Employment rate by race/ethnicity, U.S.**

Jan 2008 - Sep 2021



Source: [Bureau of Labor Statistics](#). Note: The employment rate is officially known as the “employment-population ratio.” Here it is calculated for the population 16 years and older. Data is seasonally adjusted.

The nation gained only 194,000 jobs in September and the employment rate remained at 58.7% — well below February 2020 when 61.1% of all people aged 16+ had employment. In September 2021, only 56% of Black people aged 16+ nationwide were employed. White, Hispanic, and Asian persons aged 16+ had employment rates of 59%, 62%, and 62%, respectively.

While many employers report difficulty finding workers, jobs have still not rebounded to pre-pandemic levels. Instead, workers are quitting at record levels, driven to some extent by the desire to keep working remotely.<sup>1</sup> Overall, potential hirees are demanding higher wages and better working conditions — including livable wages and work schedules, flexibility, and remote work.<sup>2,3,4</sup> Once the shake-up in the labor market settles down, many Americans will still lack employment.

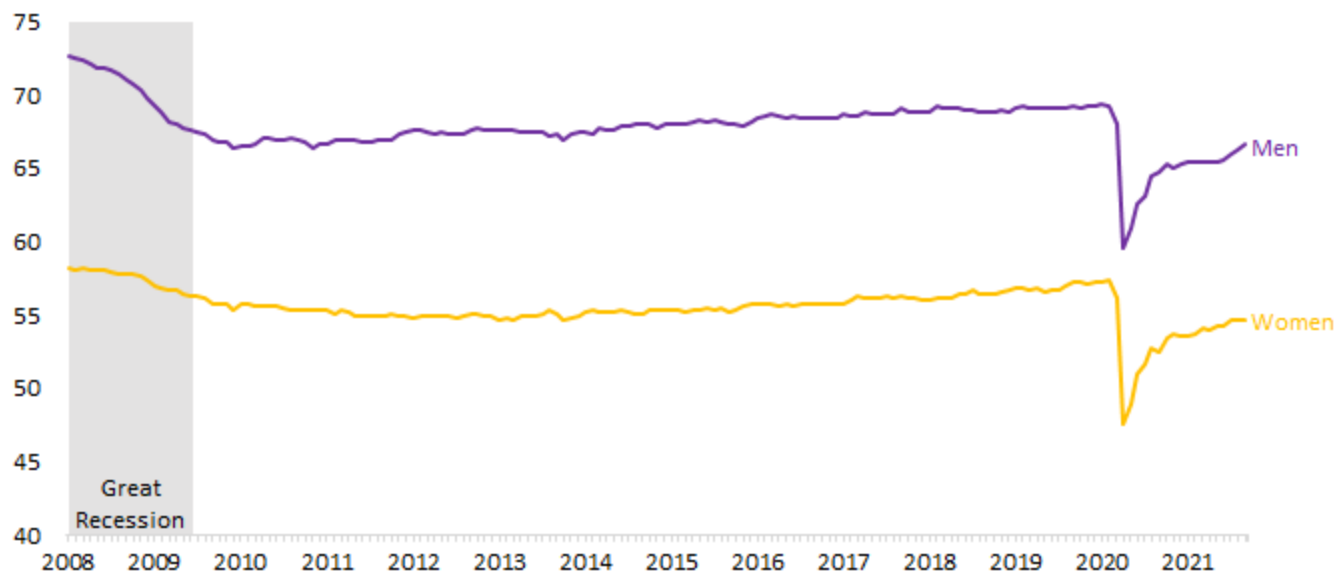
Unless and until jobs fully rebound and eventually exceed pre-pandemic levels, many workers may return to freelance and gig work that offers fewer benefits — leaving them vulnerable to future shocks. Indeed, each recession since the 2000 dot-com bust has hammered away at employment rates, leaving many people without stable employment — particularly Black/African Americans.<sup>5</sup>



## Men's employment rates have grown 3x as fast as women's employment rates since the summer. Employment rates for both men and women are now similar to low points following the Great Recession.

### Employment rate by gender, U.S.

Jan 2008 - Sep 2021



Source: [Bureau of Labor Statistics](#). Note: The employment rate is officially known as the “employment-population ratio.” Here it is calculated for the population 20 years and older. Data is seasonally adjusted.

Nationally, in September 2021, the employment rate for men inched up to 66.7%, while the employment rate for women was stagnant at 54.7%. Child care and elder care remain significant impediments to women's ability to return to work. In September, nearly 1.2 million parents reported being unable to look for a job due to disruption in child care. Mothers with children younger than 13 years have experienced a 4 percentage point decline in labor force participation since January 2020. And mothers of children under 6 have been most likely to consider leaving their job or cutting back on hours.<sup>1</sup>

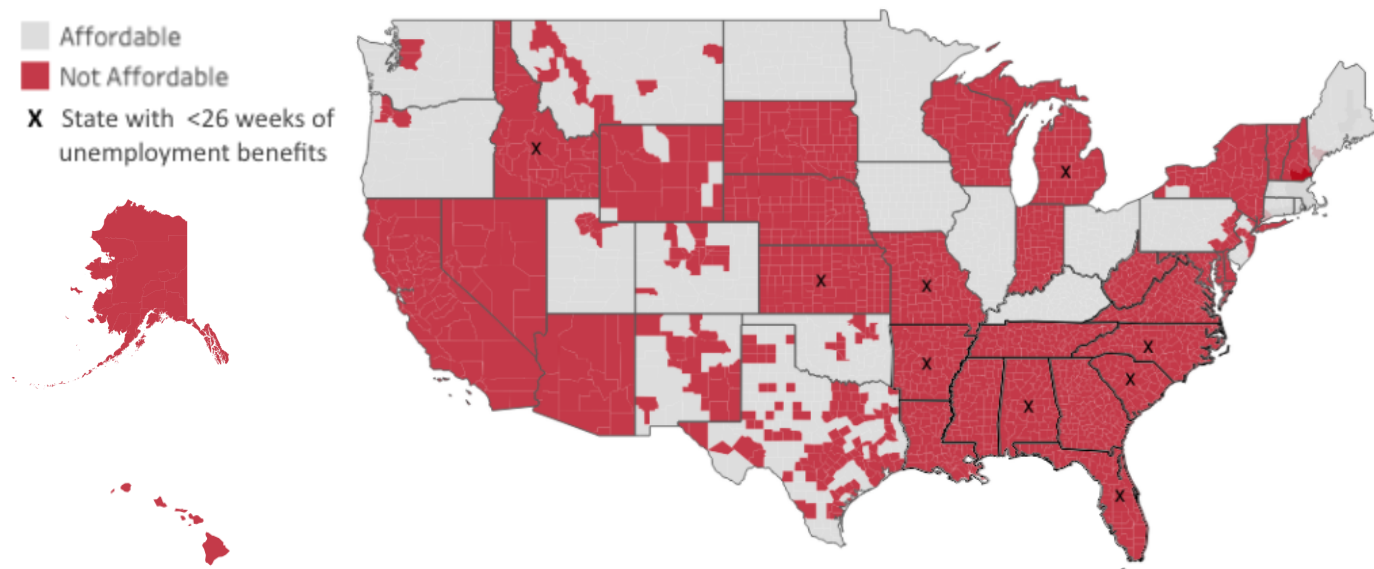
Even before the pandemic forced child care centers to close, 83% of parents with a child under 5 reported extreme difficulty finding quality, affordable child care.<sup>2</sup> While metrics of child care supply versus demand are scant, one online platform, Sittercity.com, found the ratio of families seeking babysitters to babysitters grew from 5 to 1 before the pandemic to 14 to 1 in July 2021.<sup>3</sup>

In addition, demand for home health aides hit a high point in 2020 as families aimed to keep elderly and disabled family members out of nursing homes where the virus circulated widely.<sup>4</sup> But many women had to provide elder care themselves, making a return to work more difficult. Lack of child care and home health care will be a roadblock to many women's ability to return to work and will continue to contribute to employers' challenges in finding workers.

## State unemployment benefits in Southern states are insufficient to cover basic household expenses, except in Kentucky. Moreover, 5 Southern states cut off benefits sooner than the national average.

### Counties where state unemployment insurance fails to cover basic costs

Includes costs for a two-bedroom home, food, and transportation



Source: [USAfacts](#), [HUD](#),  
[Department of Labor](#), [Center on Budget and Policy Priorities](#)

In September, 7.7 million people remained unemployed nationwide. That's 2 million more than in February 2020.<sup>1</sup> In every Southern state except Kentucky, monthly state unemployment benefits are insufficient to cover basic household expenses. In addition, Southern states tend to offer state unemployment benefits for fewer weeks than other states. While most states nationwide offer unemployment benefits for 26 weeks, 9 states offer benefits for fewer than 26 weeks. Of these, 5 are in the South: Arkansas, Alabama, Florida, South Carolina, and North Carolina.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, unemployment benefits have not reached all eligible individuals — likely because states did not have the technological and administrative capacity to process a huge increase in claims when the pandemic struck.<sup>3,4</sup>

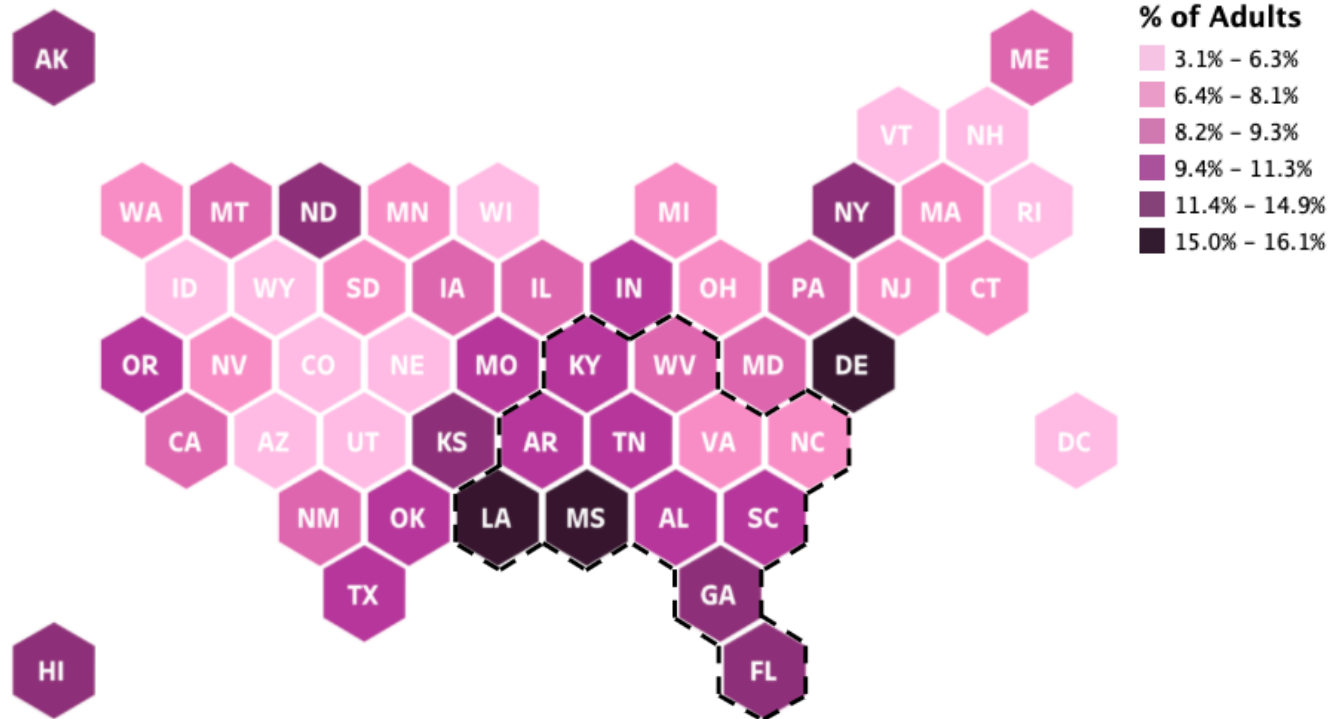
Not surprisingly, Southerners were more likely to struggle to put food on the table in September, with 11% of adults reporting their household sometimes or often went hungry compared to 8.9% of non-Southern adults ([Food Insecurity](#)). Southerners were also more likely to fear impending eviction or foreclosure ([Likelihood of Eviction or Foreclosure](#)).

As long as affordable child care options remain unavailable, employers will struggle to attract sufficient workers. In Louisiana, where the unemployment rate was the highest of all Southern states in August (6.2%), the maximum unemployment benefit is \$247/wk (equivalent to \$6.88/hour) and the minimum wage is only \$7.25/hour.<sup>5</sup> Though unemployment benefits are low, employers will be hard-pressed to attract workers at wages less than \$15/hour, with babysitters averaging \$13.10/hour.<sup>6</sup>

## Across the South, 11% of adults reported their households went hungry in September. In LA and MS, it was 15%.

### Food insecurity

Percentage of adults who report their household sometimes or often went hungry in the last 7 days  
Sep 15 - 27, 2021



Source: [Census Bureau's Household Pulse Survey](#)

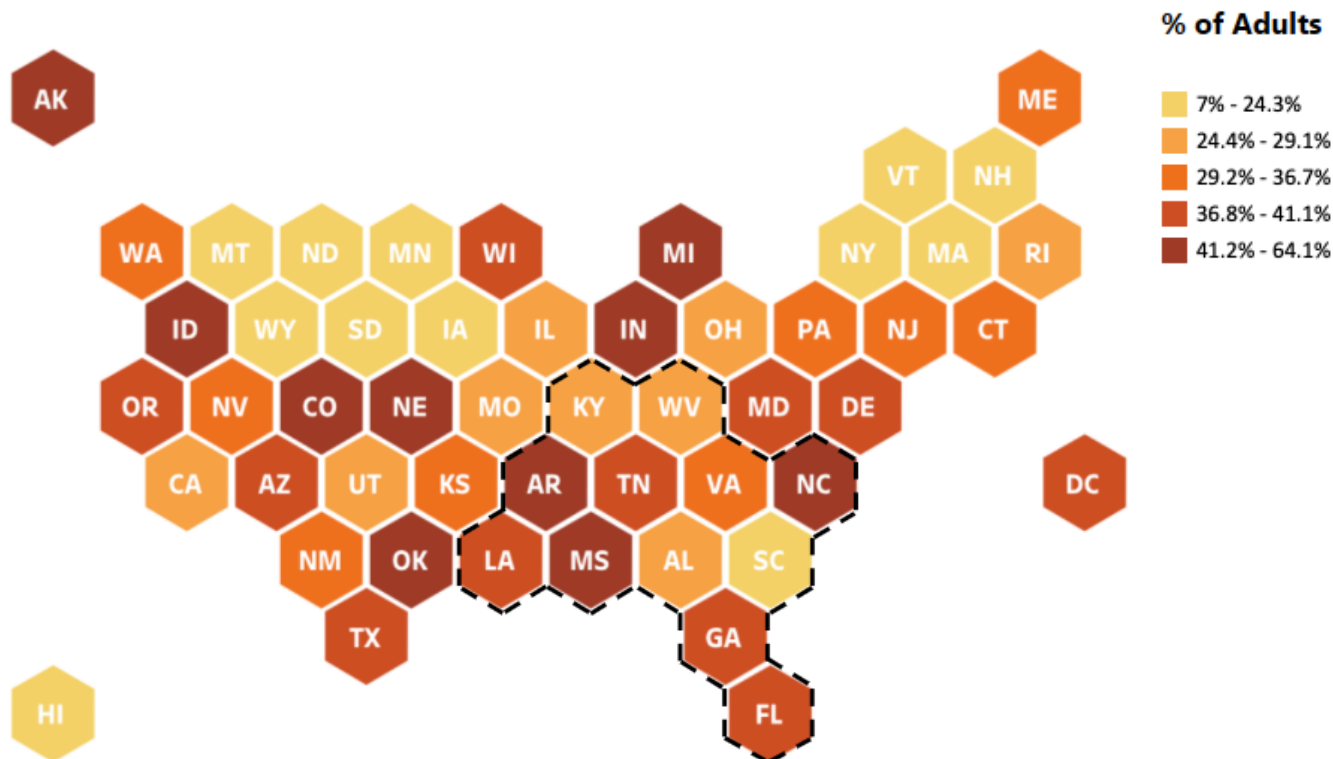
Putting food on the table has been a problem throughout the pandemic as low-wage workers suffered heavy job losses.<sup>1</sup> In addition, grocery prices rose 4.5% over the last year (Sept 2020 to Sept 2021), with the largest increase in meat, poultry, fish, and eggs (10.5%).<sup>2</sup> Food prices are expected to continue to rise through the end of 2021 due to supply chain breakdowns.<sup>3</sup>

More than 1 in 10 Southern adults reported their families didn't have enough to eat in September. In Louisiana and Mississippi, nearly 1 in 5 adults reported their families went hungry. Historical data shows a persistent racial disparity, with Black and Hispanic households going hungry at rates twice that of white households.<sup>4</sup>

## Of the adults in North Carolina who are late on rent/mortgage, 2 out of 3 expect to be evicted or foreclosed upon in the next two months. Southerners are more at risk of losing their home than residents outside the South.

### Likelihood of eviction or foreclosure

Percentage of adults living in households not current on rent or mortgage where eviction or foreclosure in the next two months is “very likely” or “somewhat likely,” Sep 15 - 27, 2021



Source: [Census Bureau's Household Pulse Survey](#)

In North Carolina, 64% of adults who are late on their rent or mortgage fear they are likely to be evicted or foreclosed upon in the next two months. Some localities in North Carolina have proceeded with evictions, despite eviction moratoria, and some North Carolina landlords have forced tenants out without filing for an eviction.<sup>1</sup> As of the end of August, when the Supreme Court struck down the CDC's most recent eviction moratorium, North Carolina had distributed only 40% of the federal Emergency Rental Assistance funds — even after making efforts to streamline the application burden in recent months.<sup>2</sup>

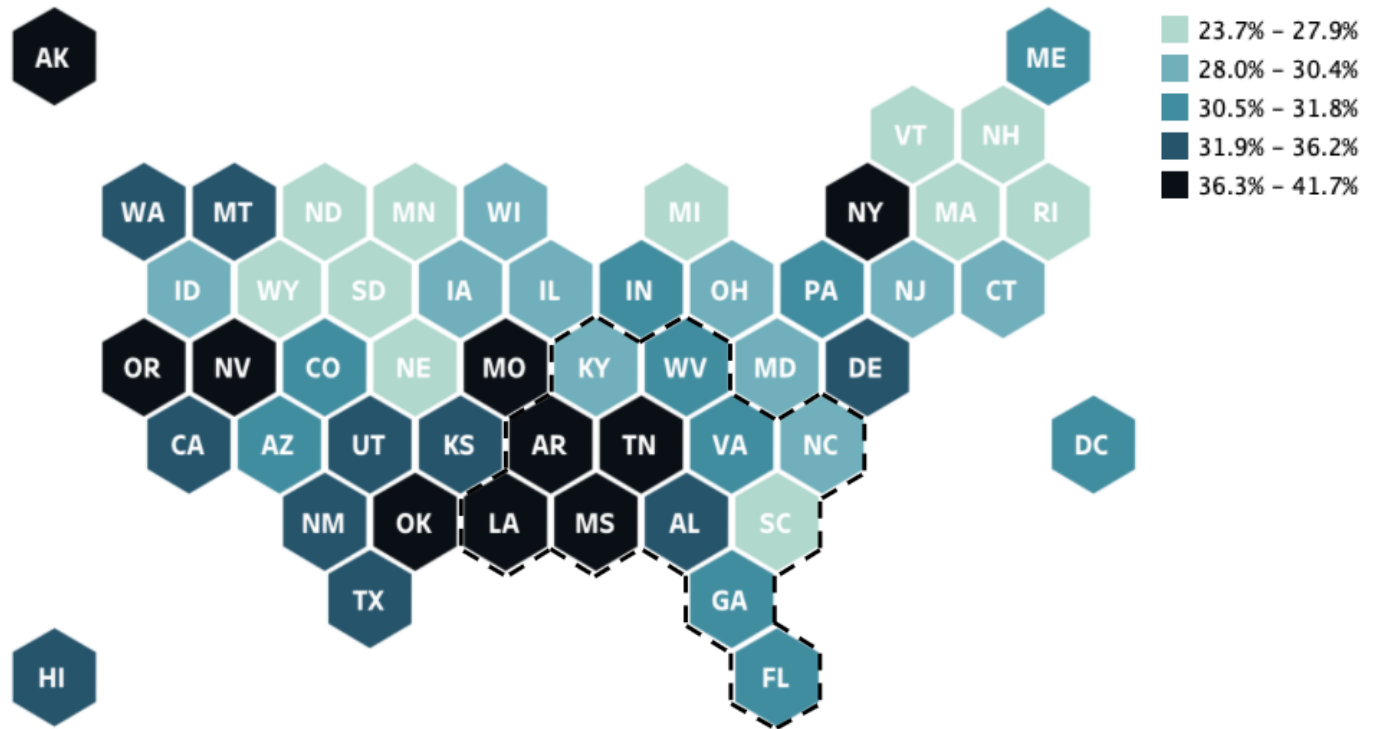
39% of Southern adults who are late on housing payments are afraid they will be evicted or foreclosed upon in the next 2 months compared to 32% of non-Southerners. More rapid dissemination of federal Emergency Rental Assistance funds might be executed if states provide aid directly to tenants or require landlords to apply for aid before filing for eviction.<sup>3,4</sup> At the end of the day, landlords' interests would more likely be served by aid rather than eviction — the latter of which is less likely to result in payment of back rent. With 1.2 million fewer jobs across the South, new renters may be as unable to pay as previous renters.

Cities and counties can mitigate a wave of homelessness and instability by enacting one or more ordinances that hold landlords accountable for unjust evictions, and stop eviction processes when past due rent is paid with reasonable late fees.<sup>5</sup>

**The share of adults with symptoms of anxiety or depression has spiked nationwide, almost triple the level of 11% in 2019. In Louisiana, 42% of adults report symptoms.**

Percent of adults with symptoms of anxiety or depression, U.S.

Sep 15 - Sep 27, 2021



Source: [CDC](#) and [Census Bureau’s Household Pulse Survey](#). Notes: This indicator is based on self-report of the frequency of anxiety and depression symptoms, derived from responses to the first two questions of the eight-item Patient Health Questionnaire (PHQ-2) and the seven-item Generalized Anxiety Disorder (GAD-2) scale.

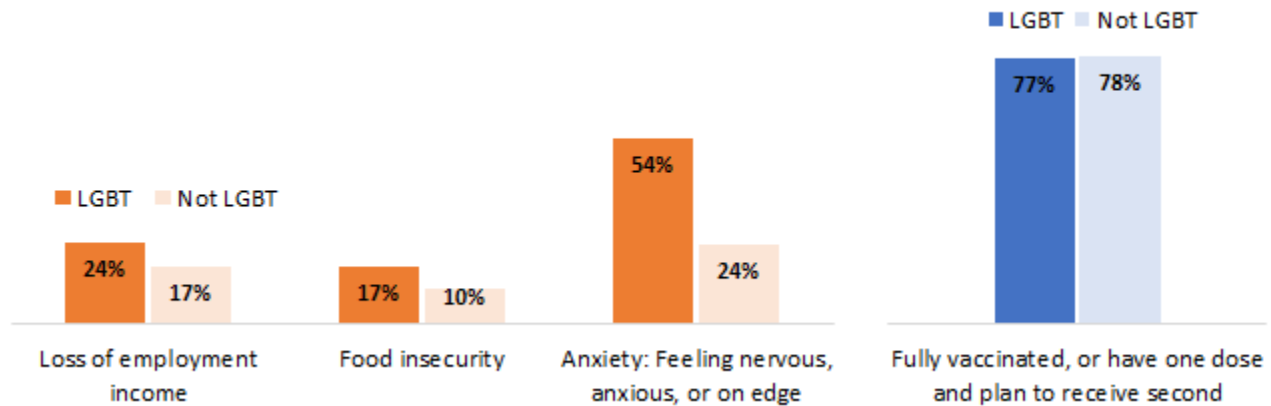
Before Covid, the United States was experiencing a mental health epidemic with higher rates of depression, anxiety, and other mental health diagnoses than any other high-income country.<sup>1</sup> Anxiety and depression are often associated with economic worries and social isolation. Despite the fact that growing GDP and low unemployment rates implied the U.S. economy was strong before Covid, these indicators were deceptive because a large share of adults had simply given up looking for work. As good-paying manufacturing jobs disappeared, white men with only a high school degree were particularly affected and suddenly found it difficult to earn family-sustaining wages. An increasing number died of suicide, drug overdose, and alcohol poisoning.<sup>2</sup>

When Covid struck, social isolation hit nearly every sector of society, and economic woes deepened particularly for low-wage workers. It is not surprising then that the share of adults experiencing anxiety or depression roughly tripled when the Covid crisis hit. As of September, 32% of Americans reported symptoms of anxiety or depressive disorder, up from 11% in 2019.<sup>3</sup> Climate disasters are likely compounding the crisis particularly in states like Louisiana where nearly 42% report anxiety or depression. The U.S. has a relatively low supply of mental health workers, yet tackling the country’s mental health crisis will be key to ensuring all Americans’ right to “life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.”

## LGBT adults were more likely to have lost income and to have experienced anxiety and food insufficiency during the pandemic than non-LGBT adults and were on par for vaccination rates.

### Indicators of well-being for adult LGBT population, South

Sep 15 - Sep 27, 2021



Source: [Census Bureau's Household Pulse Survey](#). Notes: Loss of employment income is % reporting a loss of employment income in the last 4 weeks for self or household member. Food insecurity is % of persons reporting "sometimes not enough to eat" or "often not enough to eat" in the last 7 days. Anxiety is % reporting frequency of symptoms is "more than half the days" or "nearly every day" in the last 2 weeks.

While LGBTQIA+ people remain unseen in many official statistics, the Census Bureau, through its Household Pulse Survey, is providing needed visibility on the experience of lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans people in America during the pandemic.

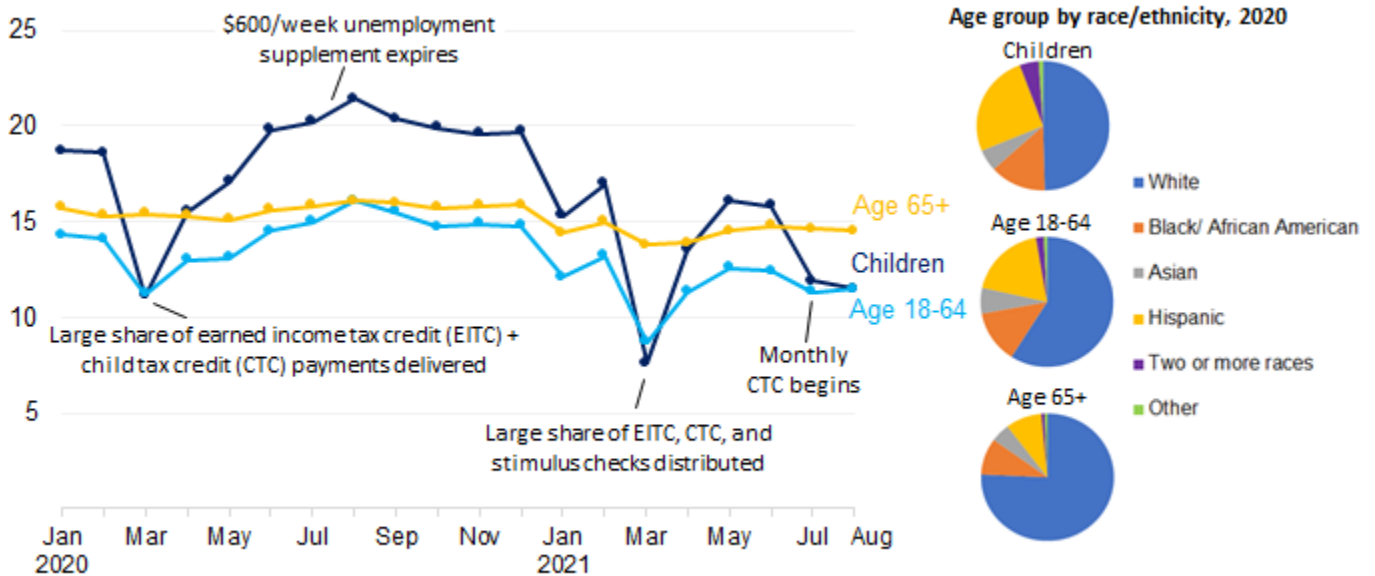
More than half of Southern LGBT adults surveyed experienced anxiety last month — more than twice the rate of non-LGBT adults in the region. In the South, we can also see clearly that LGBT adults were more likely to have lost employment income, and more likely to have experienced food insecurity than non-LGBT adults.

While pre-pandemic research shows that LGBTQ people are more likely than non-LGBTQ people to delay seeking medical care because of out-of-pocket costs,<sup>1</sup> the recent Census Pulse Survey found that LGBT adults in the South chose vaccination at a nearly identical rate as non-LGBT people. Several factors may have influenced this, including previous experience organizing community care as a response to the HIV/AIDS epidemic,<sup>2</sup> as well as government efforts to make Covid vaccination free and accessible.

## Child poverty rate declined to 11.5% in August as newly expanded child tax credit payments begin to be paid monthly.

### Estimated monthly poverty rates by age group, U.S.

Supplemental poverty rate (all taxes and transfers included)



Source: [Center on Poverty and Social Policy at Columbia University](#) and [Census Bureau, PEP](#). Notes: These monthly estimates are based on the [supplemental poverty rate](#), which includes after-tax income and in-kind benefits. These estimates also include the impact of economic impact payments (stimulus checks), as well as expanded unemployment, SNAP, and other benefits.

Estimates of monthly poverty rates during the pandemic highlight the benefit of annual Child Tax Credit (CTC) and Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC) payments for children and working-age adults. They also illustrate how stimulus and expanded unemployment payments reduced financial hardships, particularly for children. But these payments were sporadic, such that the child poverty rate increased to above pre-pandemic levels throughout the latter half of 2020. The 2021 American Rescue Plan includes new monthly CTC payments starting in July 2021. CTC payments reduced child poverty to 11.9% in July, and 11.5% in August. CTC payments will continue through December 2021.

Social Security, by far the largest American safety net program, was enacted after the Great Depression to stabilize the financial well-being of the elderly. But the program originally excluded domestic and agricultural workers — a large share of whom were Black.<sup>1</sup> Unemployment insurance and Aid to Families with Dependent Children (commonly called “welfare”) programs were also enacted in 1935. Programs designed to provide assistance to non-elderly low-income Americans, including Head Start, food assistance programs, and the EITC were instituted in the 1960s and 70s.<sup>2</sup> Welfare was reformed in 1996 to include work requirements but CTC provided some support to families with children starting in 1998 regardless of work status.<sup>3</sup> For 20 years, the CTC received strong bipartisan support and was increased several times, most recently in 2018.<sup>4</sup> Studies of CTC’s impact found that this financial support for children helped increase student test scores, reduce teen birth rates, and yield higher earnings in adulthood.<sup>5</sup>

In 2019, \$1 trillion was spent on Social Security. In contrast, \$360 billion was spent on safety net programs such as the EITC, CTC, unemployment insurance, food assistance and child care.<sup>6</sup> Still, these later programs are credited with reducing the poverty rate from 26% in 1967 to 14% by 2017 (once all such transfers are included).<sup>7</sup>

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# About this series

History has shown that large-scale crises accelerate pre-existing trends, exacerbate inequities, and permanently change societies and civic life. Large-scale disasters produce an enormous break in the status quo followed by continuous change. Recovery from the pandemic and deep economic crisis will vary across communities, and different populations will face various barriers to achieving shared prosperity. For decades, the American South has lagged on nearly every indicator of prosperity and equity, and similar patterns are emerging with the current crisis. But a closer look at the region yields stories of local solutions to entrenched problems that could lead the way for the entire nation.

*Pandemic to Prosperity: South* offers a comprehensive overview of the Covid-related impacts on our lives and livelihoods, governments, civic institutions, and overall well being, with a focus on the states of **Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, Virginia, and West Virginia**. This report series analyzes disparate data, adding top-level insights about the implications of each indicator, what each indicator reveals, and how the indicators are interrelated. It highlights mostly state-level metrics with breakdowns by race, gender, age, and income where available, relying on both public and private data sources.

*Pandemic to Prosperity: South's* thoughtfully curated data serves to illuminate the challenges facing the South's most vulnerable. In addition, this reliable source of wide-ranging, impartial information will be valuable in aligning public and private sector efforts and reflect progress made, or the lack thereof, over time. The report will be updated quarterly throughout 2021.

The National Conference on Citizenship (NCoC) launched the *Pandemic to Prosperity* series in July 2020 to look at the nation as a whole, and this is the fourth edition of *Pandemic to Prosperity: South*. The *Pandemic to Prosperity* series is designed to enable a solid understanding of the damage to lives and livelihoods as the pandemic continues to unfold, especially as we enter the era of genetic variants and the plateau of vaccinations and as the nation grapples with new shocks and stressors such as disasters and civil unrest; it examines aspirational goals around strong and accountable government, functioning institutions from child care to internet access to local news availability, effective civic participation, and outcomes for people by race and income regarding employment, health, housing, and more. With each new report in the series, indicators change as the recovery transitions.

**About Fair Count** ([FairCount.org](https://FairCount.org)) Founded by Stacey Abrams in 2019 and anchored in Georgia, Fair Count works to build long-term power in communities that have been historically undercounted in the decennial census, underrepresented at the polls, and whose communities are often torn apart in redistricting.

**About the Southern Economic Advancement Project** ([TheSEAP.org](https://TheSEAP.org)) SEAP works to broaden economic power and build a more equitable future in the South through research, policy, and network-building. Focused on 12 Southern states and marginalized/vulnerable populations within the region, SEAP amplifies the efforts of existing organizations and networks that work toward similar goals. The organization was founded by Stacey Abrams in 2019 and is a fiscally sponsored project of the Roosevelt Institute.

**About the National Conference on Citizenship** ([NCoC.org](https://NCoC.org)) NCoC is committed to strengthening democracy by supporting local leaders and nonpartisan projects dedicated to citizen engagement and public service. Our vision is one of full participation in our democracy, and that in doing so our democracy equitably and inclusively reflects the combined voices, dreams, and actions of all who call our country home.

# Authors

**Allison Plyer** is the Chief Demographer for The Data Center of Southeast Louisiana and a co-author of *The New Orleans Prosperity Index* which examines the extent to which economic outcomes have improved for black New Orleanians since the end of the Civil Rights era. She is also author of *The New Orleans Index* series, developed in collaboration with Brookings to analyze the state of the recovery post-Katrina and later to track the region's progress toward prosperity. She served as an editor for the Brookings Institution Press volume entitled *Resilience and Opportunity: Lessons from the U.S. Gulf Coast after Katrina and Rita*. Allison is an international expert in post-Katrina demographics and disaster recovery trends and frequently provides commentary on recovery and development to media such as NPR, the Associated Press, the New York Times, and USA Today. Allison received her Doctorate in Science from Tulane University and has an MBA from the Kellogg Graduate School of Management at Northwestern University.

**Alysha Rashid** is a policy and data consultant with a focus on building a more equitable society. She recently received her MPP with a certificate in Data Analytics from the University of Chicago. Prior to graduate school, Alysha's focus was on increasing college access and success for under-represented populations as the Director of Program and Operations for America Achieves and Bloomberg Philanthropies' CollegePoint initiative. In that capacity, she oversaw day-to-day programming and led the data operations, working closely with the research and evaluation team. She started her career as a college admissions counselor and subsequently developed a strong interest in supporting underrepresented students and populations. Alysha also currently leads an Anti-Racism Discussion Series that she co-developed for Outer Coast, a postsecondary institution in Sitka, Alaska.

**Elaine Ortiz** is the Lead Data Analyst for Pandemic to Prosperity. Elaine is an expert in economic and demographic data for applied research to support informed decision-making and more resilient communities. She has nearly 20 years experience in research design, implementation, data analysis, statistical methods, and writing on complex and technical topics for a lay audience. Elaine's work in data dissemination is grounded in the importance of user-centered design and strategic communications for reaching targeted audiences. She is an expert in federal statistics (e.g. ACS, Census) and private sources of data (e.g. EMSI, Moody's). Elaine has an MS in urban and regional planning from University of Iowa and a BA in economics from Hanover College.

**Denice Ross** is a Director at the National Conference on Citizenship and a Fellow at Georgetown's Beeck Center. Her recent focus is on data quality and the 2020 Census. As a Presidential Innovation Fellow (2014-5), she co-founded the White House Police Data Initiative to increase transparency and accountability and worked with the Department of Energy to improve community resilience in disaster-impacted areas. Earlier, she served as Director of Enterprise Information for the City of New Orleans, establishing their open data initiative, now recognized as one of the most successful in the country. Prior to government, Denice co-directed The Data Center of Southeast Louisiana, a non-profit data intermediary. She brought a data-driven approach to numerous post-Katrina community planning initiatives and co-founded the first new child care center after the storm.

**Taylor Savell** is a Policy and Research Analyst at the National Conference on Citizenship, where she focuses on 2020 Census issues such as data quality, and the use of census data for redistricting and federal funding. Prior to NCoC, Taylor worked at the Beeck Center for Social Impact and Innovation and co-authored the website [USApportionment.org](http://USApportionment.org), which was the go-to resource for census watchers and journalists in the lead up to the release of the 2020 Census data for congressional apportionment. Taylor is a graduate of the Walsh School of Foreign Service at Georgetown University where she received her BS in International Politics.



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# For More Information

**Allison Plyer**, Chief Demographer, The Data Center, [allisonp@datacenterresearch.org](mailto:allisonp@datacenterresearch.org)  
**Jeanine Abrams McLean**, Vice President, Fair Count, [jeanine@faircount.org](mailto:jeanine@faircount.org)

*This report is dedicated to all of the data heroes — in state, local, federal government, institutions, nonprofits, and volunteer organizations — who make these types of analyses possible.*



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