

COVID-19's Devastating Impact on Youth Throughout the South

Victoria Bowden, Graduate Intern at the Southern Economic Advancement Project
Andrew Young School of Policy Studies - Georgia State University

PROBLEM

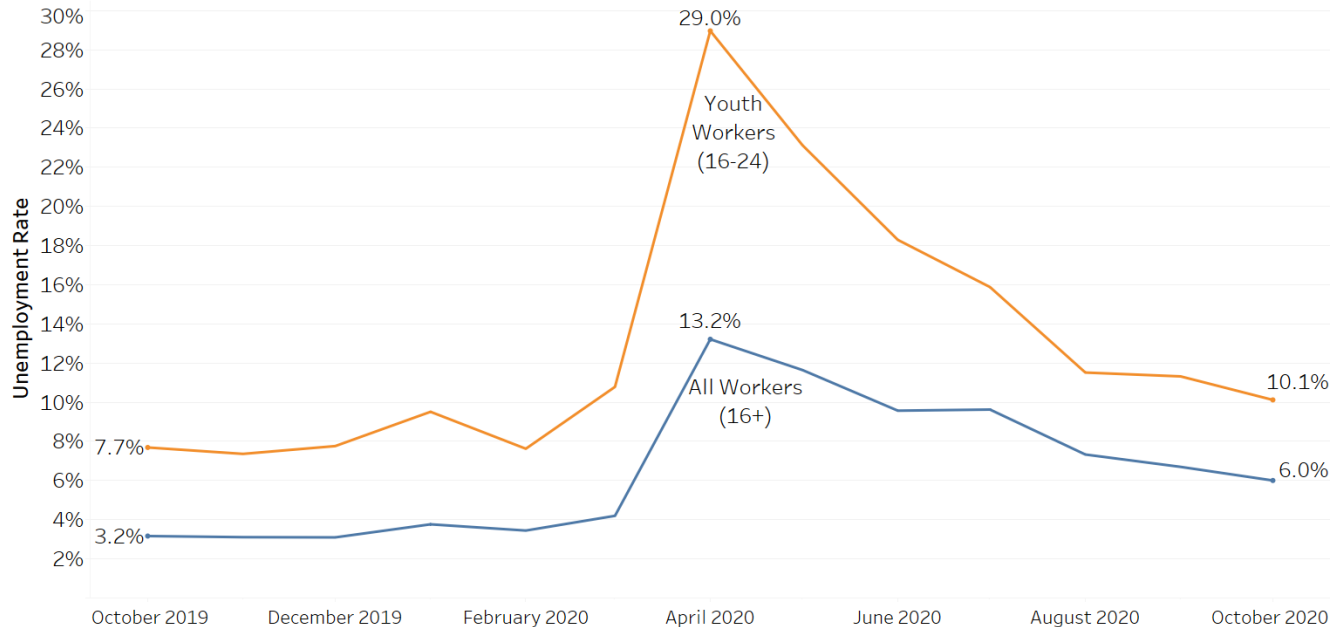
In the South, a microcosm is experiencing the pandemic in a profound and nuanced manner. Young people—aged 16-24—are undergoing immense suffering due to the pandemic's compounding effect on various pre-existing inequities regarding [unemployment](#), [mental health diagnoses](#), [food insecurity](#), and [homelessness](#).¹ Youth across the South are often excluded from conversations and policy proceedings that would provide them with urgent aid. Addressing the explicit harm this virus perpetrates against youth throughout the South is imperative. It requires urgent and direct action from every level of government.

- **Youth in the South experienced dramatic unemployment rates.** Nationally, the COVID-induced economic downturn caused the unemployment rate for young workers to rise from 8.4% to 24.4%, leaving nearly 1 in 4 unemployed. This increase well surpasses the rate for workers 25 and up, which rose from [2.8% to 11.3%](#). Youth in the South experienced even higher rates—reaching 29.0% unemployment rate in April. As of September, [young workers had filed 15.4%](#) of the 2.2 million Unemployment Insurance claims filed in the South.
- **Pandemic unemployment poses a multidimensional threat to young workers.** Many young workers are currently unemployed because they worked within the hard-hit industries by COVID-induced shutdowns. [Workers aged 16-24 overrepresent the market in service occupations \(31.2%\)](#), the leisure and hospitality industry (25.8%), and jobs within the retail trade (18.9%). With teleworking unavailable for these positions, young workers instantaneously became unemployed. Moreover, those who were able to remain employed put aside their health and risk contracting COVID at their workplace. This poses a dire threat to the workers and their families, as more than [64 million](#) Americans reside in multigenerational homes.
- **COVID-induced food insecurity is intensified within the South.** In June, [nearly 14 million children](#) (aged 18 or younger) were residing in food-insecure homes across the U.S. Exacerbated within the South, more than [1 in 5 households](#) in each Southern state reported experiencing COVID-induced food insecurity in April/May 2020—from 22.5% in Virginia to 31.6% in Mississippi. In Georgia, food insecurity surged from [7.9% to 23.6%](#) between December 2018 and the April/May 2020.

¹ We define the South as Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, Virginia, and West Virginia.

- Black and Hispanic youth are disproportionately affected by COVID-induced food insecurity.** Historically, communities of color in the South are often the hardest hit with issues of food insecurity. In 2018, compared to 1 in 10 White households, [the rate of food-insecure homes](#) was 1 in 7 within the Hispanic community and 1 in 5 within the Black community. In July, it was reported that [39% of Hispanic families with children and 42% of Black families with children](#) have experienced food insecurity in the pandemic nationally.
- More youth will likely experience homelessness in the South due to COVID-19.** Before the pandemic, it was estimated that 1 in every 10 young adults (aged 18-25) experienced a form of homelessness at some point in the year. That is roughly [3.5 million young individuals without a home](#) in the U.S.
- The Coronavirus pandemic has caused a burgeoning mental health crisis amongst young adults.** According to the CDC, [over 60% of young adults](#) reported [experiencing anxiety or depression related to COVID-19](#), and nearly 11% reported suicidal ideation. This poses a dire threat to young adults within the South as access to mental health services is elusive, and [funding is often cut](#).

Monthly Unemployment Rate for Southern Workers by Age Group: Oct. 2019 - Oct. 2020
(Not Seasonally Adjusted)



Source: Calculations based on U.S. Census and U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics Basic Monthly Current Population Survey. <https://www.census.gov/programs-surveys/cps/data/datasets.html>

SOLUTIONS²

The coronavirus pandemic has illuminated and exacerbated existing inequities that Southern youth experience. Comprehensive policy reform is needed to address the issues that plague young people throughout the South. In doing so, states should:

- **ENGAGEMENT.** [Engage young people](#) in the policymaking process. Engagement allows youth to advocate for more effective and comprehensive solutions to the problems that they face.
 - In [Charleston, South Carolina](#), the mayor held a virtual Youth Commission that gave young people an opportunity to interact with their local representatives and school-board director. This summit provided the opportunity to young people to learn more about civic engagement and how policies affect their lives during the pandemic.
 - In [Savannah, Georgia](#), the Savannah Youth Council allows young people to engage with the city government to learn and actively participate in the local government.
 - In [South Florida](#), there is an annual Youth Summit that empowers young people to engage with community leaders and local organizations to address youth-focused issues (e.g., youth violence and low graduation rates).
 - In [Baton Rouge, Louisiana](#), the East Baton Rouge School District has proposed the creation of a youth advisory council to include young people in the school board's decision-making process.

- **UNEMPLOYMENT INSURANCE.** Reform and modernize the UI system to equate full- and part-time earnings that allow equitable compensation benefits to all claimants.³ Reforms that would be especially beneficial to youth include:
 - Establish a [Job Seeker's Allowance](#) to provide short-term monetary benefits to jobseekers who do not qualify for UI benefits, such as independent contractors, workers with a limited job history, and caregivers who are returning to the workforce.
 - Adjust the Unemployment Insurance (UI) system to allow young and low-wage workers to receive substantial benefits. The South's [\\$232 weekly average](#) payment does not cover basic needs for unemployed youth such as food, housing, and transportation.
 - Establish a [Short-Time Compensation program](#) (STC) to deter layoffs during times of reduced economic activity. Rather than firing, STCs allow employers to reduce workers' hours, which allows them to become eligible to receive a portion of their unemployment compensation to substitute their lost income.
 - Mandate UI eligibility and coverage for [temporary workers](#).
 - Abolish the UI "waiting week" period.

² The proposed solutions rely on interviews conducted with youth-led and youth-focused organizations who discussed the current problems they are experiencing and addressing. The organizations are: [Deep Center](#), [EveryBlackGirl, Inc.](#), and the [Student Basic Needs Coalition](#).

³ This, and other UI modernization recommendations, are available from the [National Employment Law Project](#).

- Make the benefit timeline a minimum of 26 weeks to allow workers to be adequately compensated and supported. This lengthening will greatly benefit Black workers whose duration of unemployment is an average of [26 weeks](#) in comparison to the average [20 weeks](#) for white workers.
- Develop unemployment assistance programs that specifically provide Black and Hispanic workers with aid to alleviate the [disproportionate effects](#) of [systemic racism within the UI system](#), which has intensified the pandemic-induced unemployment.
- **WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT.** Expand youth-focused workforce systems through Title I of the [Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act \(WIOA\)](#) to provide young people with workforce training, employment opportunities, and supportive services. In 2019, the national average for young workers having [gainful employment](#) after completing the program was [72%](#).
 - The [Solutions for Youth Employment Youth Advisory Group](#) are providing free, virtual workforce training courses for young people who are new to the workforce.
 - In [DeKalb County, Georgia](#), the DeKalb Summer Youth Employment Program has developed a virtual career academy to offer workforce trainings, skill development, as well as GED and credentialing credit acquisition opportunities.
 - In [Savannah, Georgia](#), the Work Readiness Enrichment Program comprehensively prepares opportunity youth for the workforce by utilizing education, core skill-building, behavioral health services, and financial literacy.
- **FOOD ASSISTANCE.** Engage with local nonprofits, community leaders, and faith-based organizations to create various mutual aid networks to address, alleviate, and eradicate food insecurity. Further, develop mutual-benefit societies for Black and Hispanic communities to address the [disproportionate effect](#) of COVID-induced food insecurity.
 - [NPower](#), a national youth workforce program, created a Student Emergency Success Fund which provides financial assistance to young people experiencing food insecurity.
- **HOUSING AND MENTAL HEALTH.** Implement transitional programs to aid homeless individuals in receiving health and supportive services while also assisting them in obtaining secure housing. Rehabilitate and strengthen state-wide mental and behavioral health services to extend access to every individual. Designing comprehensive mental health and school-based services to be implemented within school systems will better young people's mental- and emotional health.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

[Youth and COVID-19: Response, Recovery, and Resilience](#)
[Opportunity Youth & COVID-19 Resources and Support](#)
[The State of Young People during COVID-19](#)
[100-Day Plan for Young America](#)

Youth Engagement

- [How Youth Can Help](#)
- [Youth Justice Under Coronavirus \(The Sentencing Project\)](#)
- [“Are the Kids Alright? COVID-19 and Youth Forum \(University at Albany, State University of New York\)](#)
- [Policy Responses to the Coronavirus Pandemic \(Our World in Data\)](#)
- [Deep Center — Action Research Team](#)
- [Center for Information & Research on Civic Learning and Engagement \(Youth\)](#)

Food Insecurity

- [Emerging adults are struggling with food insecurity during the COVID-19 pandemic](#)
- [What is Food Insecurity?](#)
- [The rise in Americans’ food insecurity](#)
- [Resources & Support to Promote Food Security](#)

Mental/Behavioral Health

- [Double Jeopardy: COVID-19 and Behavioral Health Disparities for Black and Latino Communities in the U.S.](#)
- [Bridging The Black Mental Health Access Gap](#)
- [Hard-hit by Covid-19, Latinos bear mental health burden 8 months into pandemic](#)
- [Innovative solutions to address the mental health crisis](#)

Mutual Aid

- [Metro Atlanta Mutual Aid Fund](#)
- [How the Coronavirus Pandemic is Changing Philanthropy](#)
- [How College Students Are Helping Each Other Survive](#)
- [What is a Mutual Aid Network?](#)
- [So You Want to Get Involved in Mutual Aid](#)

Unemployment

- [CARES Act Employment Application for 18-24 year old’s](#)
- [National Conference of State Legislatures – State Unemployment Rates](#)
- [United States Youth Unemployment Rate \(Trading Economics\)](#)
- [College-Age Americans Face Permanent Hit with Few Job Prospects \(Bloomberg/Economics\)](#)
- [Racial Disparity in Unemployment Benefits \(RAND Corporation\)](#)
- [Local and Federal COVID Relief Assistance Programs](#)
- [Strengthening Unemployment Protections in America](#)