

Two years into the pandemic, **Southern families' struggle with housing weighs heavy** as lawmakers begin ARP spending plans



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INTRO.

A survey of more than 3,500 SNAP recipients in AL, GA, MS, and NOLA revealed ongoing pandemic challenges for individuals and communities

The Southern Economic Advancement Project ([SEAP](#)) releases the first phase of results from its American Rescue Plan (ARP) [Community Needs survey](#). The ARP was signed into law in 2021 to assist communities in recovery efforts from the COVID-19 pandemic. Direct community feedback is the crux of ARP funds guidance from the U.S. Department of Treasury, encouraging local leaders to place equity and public engagement at the forefront of spending plans.

Launched in November 2021, the SEAP surveyed more than 3,500 Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) recipients in Alabama, Georgia, Mississippi, and New Orleans, Louisiana, through the Propel application. SEAP's findings revealed challenges for both individual residents and whole communities. Our team also gathered feedback on how respondents would like their local leaders to prioritize ARP funds in their communities.

In conjunction with the publication of this report, SEAP also releases two new dashboards to help with the transparency of ARP spending. Our [Tracking Demographics, Economic Indicators, and the American Rescue Plan](#) dashboard show where the public wants and needs money to be spent, based on our Community Needs survey data. [Our ARP Local Funds Spending Tracker](#), on the other hand, keeps tabs on where local leaders are actually allocating funds.

Click [here](#) for Alabama Survey Results.

Click [here](#) for Georgia Survey Results.

Click [here](#) for Mississippi Survey Results.

CONTENT **INSIDE.**



The Southern Economic Advancement Project (SEAP) partners with policy thinkers and doers to amplify their efforts and bridge gaps in policy infrastructure. We act as a connector, convener, and policy entrepreneur across issues and states, translating good ideas to the Southern context. Our goal is to advance policies that improve economic security, healthcare access, and environmental justice for all Southerners.

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COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT: PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT FALLS FLAT AS ELECTED OFFICIALS BEGIN ARP PLANNING AND SPENDING

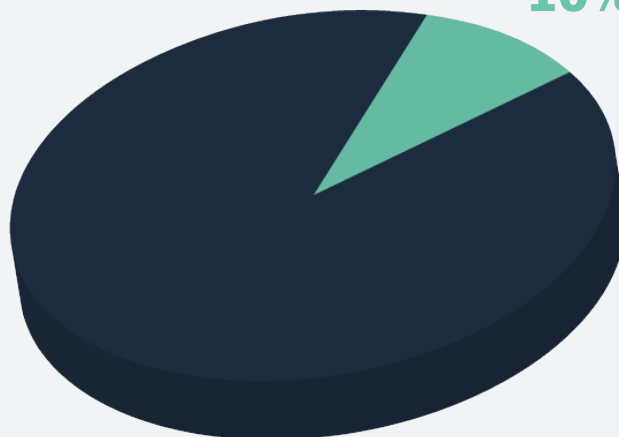
Per US Treasury guidance, equity and community engagement are the cornerstones of the ARP fund programs. However, the data reveals that 90 percent of respondents selected that no elected officials have reached out to them regarding their city or state's ARP planning or spending progress. The data also shows that 77 percent of community members rely on social media to find state or city updates.

Southern respondents are saying **elected officials are not engaging** with them regarding spending.

“Have you had any community or elected official reach out to you about how funding from the American Recovery Plan should be invested?”

Yes - my school board, my city council, my Governor, my US Congressperson, my state legislator, or someone else (clergy/teacher/community leader/other)

10%



90%

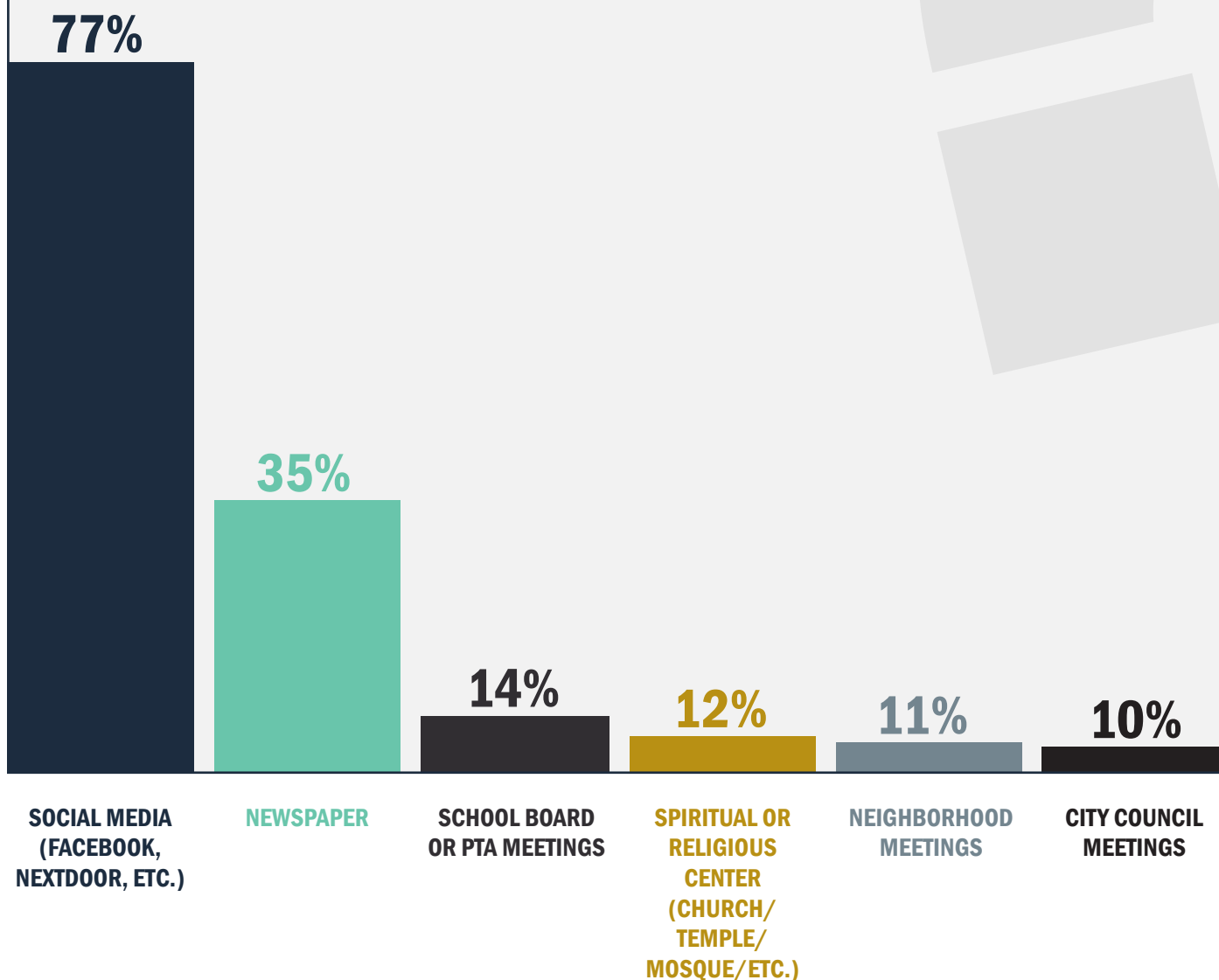
No - no one has reached out to me

Community Members **Rely on Social Media** for Local Government Updates

WHAT WE ASKED

“When asked about avenues they usually receive information about their community, respondents overwhelmingly replied “social media.”

*Responses will total more than 100% because survey participants could select multiple options.



What do you think your community would look like if it built back better from covid-19?

More middle class less low-class

Cleaner, GREENER, and safer

Better PAYING jobs would increase the morale of the town. No one can make a living wage off of \$8/hr, which is the average pay in my county.

Very wonderful & beautiful place to live

Crime down, people working, better health care, better schools, people have the ability and means to purchase homes, cars, etc...

Better paying jobs would allow us the opportunity to pay our utilities, afford decent healthcare, and put food on our tables! pray we can stop pollution

the air-water and land would be free of toxins our community will be able to sustain economic growth and better roads and safer highways less deaths better quality of life.

It would look more prepared for a future that actually cares for the children and their education.

I would hope it would have a lot of social services available and along with easier [avenues] to get through to anyone regarding medical issues or utilities assistance, etc.

A PLACE OF HOPE...

I think my community would be a place where people would be more happier because there are more jobs, a way to get there, and parks and a recreation center for the kids could have something safe and fun to do.

More after-school programs, transportation for daycares and public, affordable bills, access to transportation for low-income families.

It would look awesome and have more opportunities. Our city could grow.

There would be more opportunities for economic growth in this area, along with a more equitable distribution of wealth and decent lower prices for utilities.

KEY CHALLENGES: PANDEMIC BURDENS CONTINUE TO WEIGH HEAVILY ON SOUTHERNERS

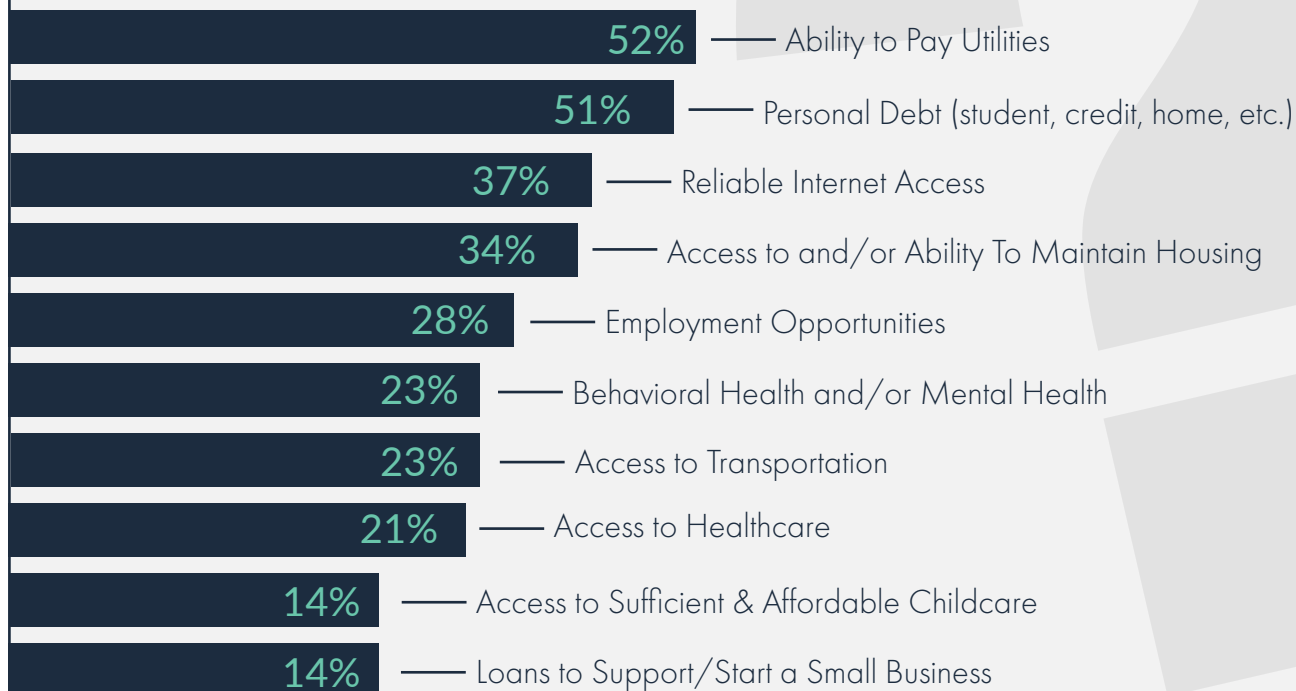
To gain deeper insight into the challenges Southern families face during the pandemic, our team asked respondents about the areas in which they struggled the most. Overall, we find that more than half of the respondents, 52 percent, have struggled to pay utility bills since the start of the pandemic. Following closely behind, the data also shows that personal debt, 51 percent, and reliable internet access, 37 percent, are burdens for participants.

Personal Pandemic Challenges: Lack of Broadband Access Remains an Issue for Most Southern Families

*Responses will total more than 100% because survey participants could select multiple options.

WHAT WE ASKED

“During COVID-19, which of these challenges have you experienced, personally?”



TRACKING THE MONEY

The disproportionate impact of the COVID-19 pandemic is clear for marginalized communities as they list unreliable broadband access as an issue, as many businesses, schools, and workplaces have transitioned to online convenings. So far, the first phase of our ARP Local Funds Spending Tracker (with data from AL, GA and MS) shows us that of the \$515 million already allocated in the listed states, local leaders have allocated only \$3.1 million to broadband.



The biggest community challenges were slightly different from personal challenges but still reflect a dire need for essentials like housing, utilities and jobs.

Community Pandemic Challenges: Affordable Housing & Reliable Utilities Burden Communities

WHAT WE ASKED

“What are the three greatest challenges for your community right now?”

Housing (affordable housing, proximity to jobs)	55%
Affordable & reliable utilities (water, electricity, etc.)	43%
Economic opportunity (new jobs, competitive wages, job skills training/etc.)	40%
Debt (Student loans/home/etc)	33%
Food (access/affordability/etc.)	26%
Small business support (loan access, capital, investment, supportive srv., paycheck, payroll)	17%
Transportation (public transit/roads/etc.)	15%
Broadband/internet (reliability/affordability/etc.)	14%

*Responses will total more than 100% because survey participants could select multiple options.

What else would you like elected officials and community leaders to know about your concerns or funding requests?

What if it was you or yours?

A community can't be WHOLE when the residents are in debt.

Our schools need help making our students and the parents feel safe about going back to school because they don't have access to the funds needed to make our schools more safe if they were exposed to COVID.

ECONOMIC RECOVERY HAPPENS BY STABILIZING MIDDLE AND LOW-INCOME FAMILIES.

Please just drive around your prospective voting areas and use your phone or use a hot spot on your computer and see how well that works. If you have trouble, then just imagine how these people, your people, have to deal with it. Imagine trying to work or educate from that same area with that particular internet. Unable to watch a video or upload a document or video chat with a client or teacher. Then imagine that the terrible service you must use costs \$100, which is a huge bite out of any budget. Also, there is no local office to that service provider because they are located in LA, not AL.? So if you have an issue it could be days before you get help. The ability to use the internet is going to affect future generations. It must be a priority for the sake of education and work from home, due to Covid.

I'm scared to think about what the future is going to be like when my kids get old enough to go out on their own

Emergency food stamps are a must

If the funds were sent towards affordable homes, there wouldn't be a lot of people seeking help. The minimum wage went up, but that's not enough for a single parent who has to pay 1500 for a two bed and 2 bath and has lights and gas separate.



Businesses are receiving millions of dollars, but the community has no money to purchase products. Brings a decade to supply & demands... How can people afford to live when money is given to businesses who turn around & raise prices? Essential workers, children, & the elderly should be top priority to receive funding. How can we have a better tomorrow if the people don't have the means to survive today? Let's focus on NOW!

There are people, like me, on a fixed income who needs help with housing, utilities, and job training

If you don't give the ones who struggle but want to succeed the opportunity to provide for not only our families but the community and companies that keep our community thriving, then why did you run/sign up to lead us. If you work for us, then we work for you. You're only as good as the community you serve.

Change childcare requirements so I can provide for my children when I'm the only one they have. If you're not a part of the solution, you're a part of the problem!

PRIORITIES FOR FUNDS

To ensure local leaders and government officials received direct ideas and feedback on where their communities would like funds spent, we asked survey participants a round of questions concerning priority spending areas. Affordable housing topped the list - both for the single most important issue, and again when we asked participants about three other issue areas.

Once again, affordable housing is the most important priority, with 32 percent of respondents indicating it as the number one way to spend rescue funds. Affordable utilities and food accessibility were the second and third choices, with 14 percent and 6 percent of responses, respectively. Among the rest of the answers, you'll find everything from child care and early education to behavioral and mental health and job skills training.

ARP Spending Plans: Southern Communities Ask Leaders to Make Affordable Housing a Top Priority



Affordable Housing

32%



Affordable Utilities

14%



Food Accessibility

6%



Job Creation
(Sustainable)

5%



Health Care Insurance

4%



Small Businesses Support

4%



Investment To Promote Equitable Economic Oppr.

3.7%



Childcare & Early Childhood Education

3%



Behavioral Health & Mental Health

3%



Community Organizations Providing Social Support

3%



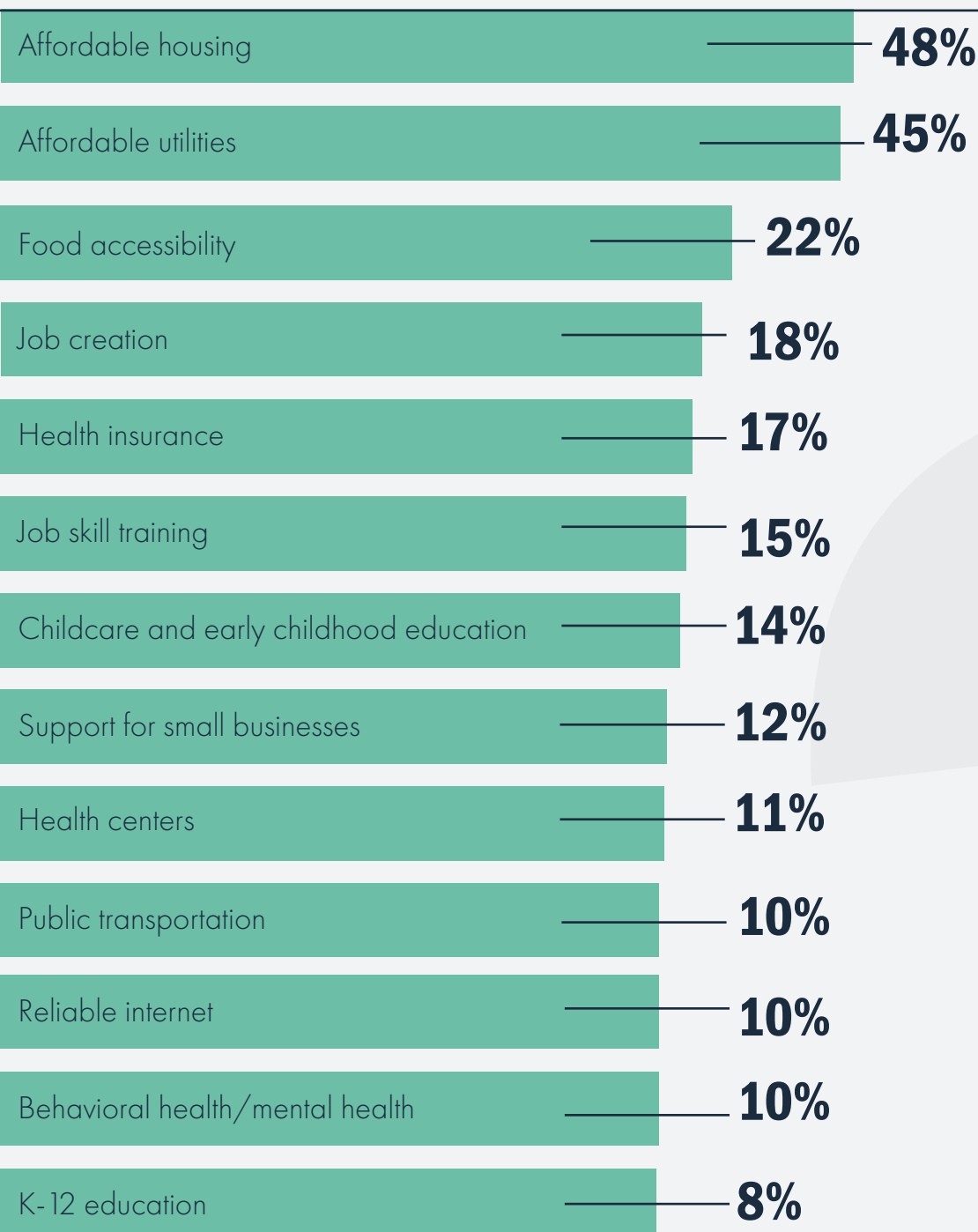
Job Skill Training

3%

What is the most important way you want COVID-19 recovery money spent in your community (pick one)?


ARP Spending Plans: Job Creation, Childcare, and Small Business Support amongst Priorities Listed by Southern Communities for ARP Spending

*Responses will total more than 100% because survey participants could select multiple options.



WHAT WE ASKED

When asked, “What are the three other places you would want COVID relief funding to be spent in your community?”, the top concern was once again Affordable Housing with 48 percent of responses.



Why would you want money invested in these areas?

I live in a rural area, and because of Covid, I would love to work from home. There isn't a good internet service out here, so I could do that. I feel everyone should have access to internet service.

I see a lot of people going through domestic violence. Health centers that include mental health. Drugs are destroying our young people.

Since this pandemic has started finding affordable housing is impossible. Make affordable housing for people not making 100,00[0] a year

Health center for low income, [...], and job skills training for students that don't want to attend 2-4 year colleges.

Rural areas with limited resources need help. To help keep a roof over your head with the proper affordable utilities

I'M A HOMELESS SENIOR BECAUSE OF NO AFFORDABLE HOUSING

Because people need the internet to get access to job availability, food resources for those in need, for applying for help with energy resources, etc.

Energy and the water company's bills are so high that most people in our community can't afford to keep their utilities on, and we need help.

There is a great disparity between socioeconomic classes. The poor remain poor with low possibility of advancement of situation.

ARP SPENDING TRACKER INITIAL REPORT

While we see affordable housing as the number one concern for survey respondents, our [ARP Local Funds Spending Tracker](#) tells a different story about where local leaders are currently allocating funds. Funds allotted to revenue replacement or general government totaled slightly over \$219 million in AL, GA, and MS in the first phase of our results. Housing assistance is only \$10.9 million.

The tracker provides data on spending choices for cities where leaders have made SLFRF decisions. The tracker identifies and groups spending into 12 categories (public health, affordable housing, business support, general government, and others that align with the ARP requirements). Our interactive tool lets viewers see this information at the city and state levels.

From the tracker, SEAP's ARP team has released its first report. The team reviewed cities with populations of more than 20,000 in Alabama, Georgia, Mississippi, North Carolina, and Washington. So far, we have collected data on more than half of these cities. The cities represented in the data are receiving \$2.6 billion in ARP funds. Within those cities, 35% of funds have formal spending plans in place, while the remaining 65% have yet to be allocated. Only 15% of cities have planned for their total allocations.

See ARP Local Funds Spending Tracker 1st Report [here](#).

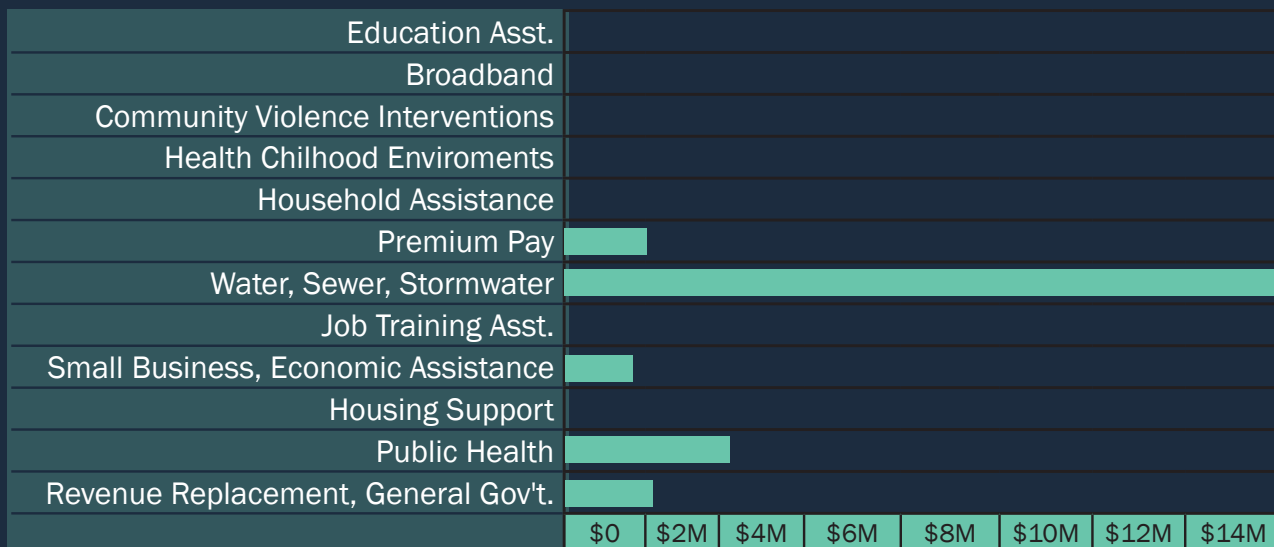
STATE-BY-STATE MATCH UP

(As of February 27, 2022)

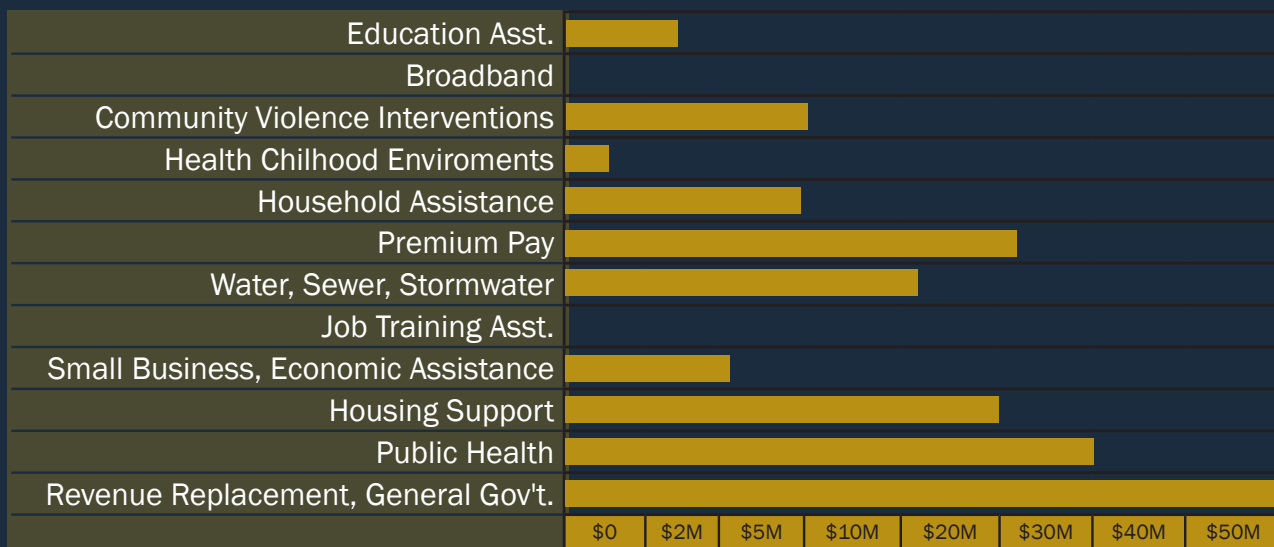
Note: Total (\$) number changes for each graph.

FUNDS DECISIONS BY CATEGORY

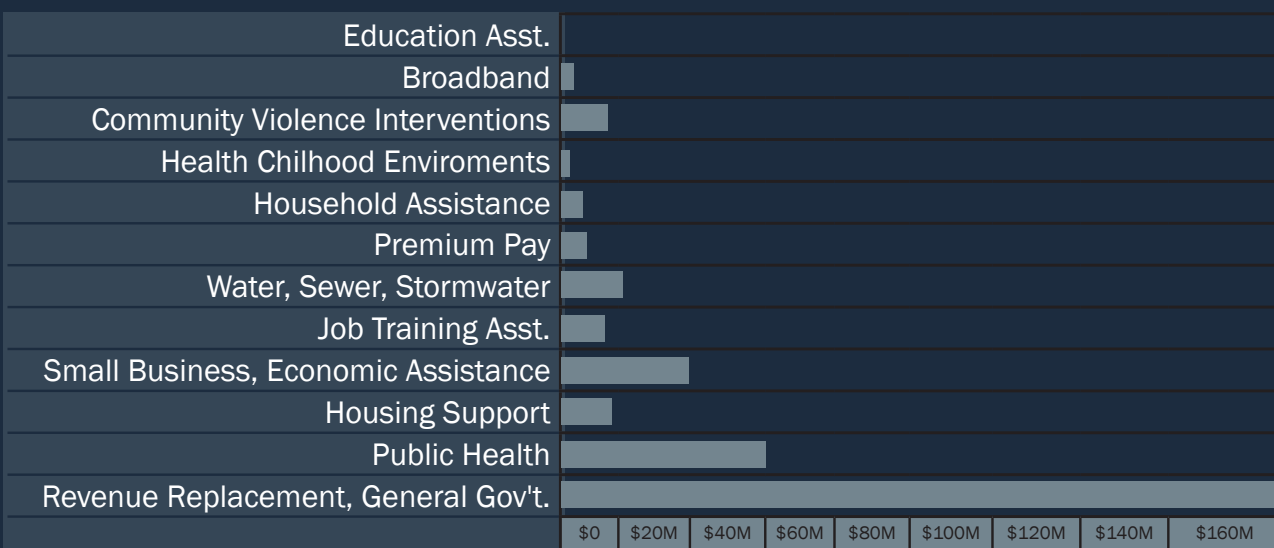
MISSISSIPPI



ALABAMA



GEORGIA



CONCLUSION: TWO YEARS INTO THE PANDEMIC, SOUTHERN FAMILIES STILL STRUGGLING WITH HOUSING, INTERNET ACCESS, AND DEBT AS LAWMAKERS BEGIN ARP SPENDING PLANS



SUMMARY

For each of these respondents across Alabama, Georgia, Mississippi, and the city of New Orleans, Louisiana, the findings in this report show the disproportionate negative impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic are ongoing two years later. Affordable housing and utilities, broadband access, and job opportunities are amongst the top challenges residents would like to see tackled through incoming ARP funds.

As local leaders begin blueprinting their spending plans for incoming ARP funds, these findings tell us a stronger push toward community engagement is needed.

SURVEY NOTES

SEAP's ARP Community Needs Survey is live and continues to collect responses. Launched in November 2021, SEAP requested participation from SNAP beneficiaries in Alabama, Georgia, Mississippi, and New Orleans, LA, through the Providers app. All survey responses to date have been collected digitally.



Some responses will total more than 100%. This is due to rounding.



Some quote responses were edited for typos.

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