



July 20, 2021 FOREWORD

A civic ecosystem has been burgeoning for decades in the South, and it now offers an opportunity to turn the tragedy of this pandemic into an opportunity to build prosperity and progress for all. Data and civic engagement will be critical. In 2019, Stacey Abrams founded the Southern Economic Advancement Project (SEAP) to lift up policies that address particular vulnerabilities in the South such as underfunded public health infrastructure, thin protections for workers, and weak supports for the unemployed, families, and children. That same year, Abrams founded Fair Count to achieve a fair and accurate count in the 2020 Census while strengthening pathways to continued civic participation. Together, SEAP and Fair Count commissioned the National Conference on Citizenship to document the state of the South during the pandemic.

Healthcare. A record number of people are enrolling in ACA health insurance plans, which offer deeper subsidies and an expanded window for enrollment. However, even more Southerners could be insured if the remaining 7 Southern states adopted Medicaid expansion. Without Medicaid expansion, rural communities are disproportionately impacted. Rural hospitals are left to treat too many uninsured patients, receive insufficient reimbursement for the care they provide, and face closure, contributing to a downward spiral for rural communities during the greatest public health crisis of our times.

Employment. The South continues to have 1.4 million fewer jobs than in February 2020, prior to the start of pandemic closures. Louisiana has roughly half the number of small businesses it had before the pandemic, and the South as a whole has about $\frac{1}{3}$ its previous number of small businesses. Shortages in childcare and elder care are hindering the ability of women to return to work. Without wages that sufficiently cover childcare and afterschool care expenses, many parents cannot afford to return to work, and employers will be hard-pressed to attract workers.

Internet Access. The Covid pandemic has shown that lack of access to computers and internet significantly hinder educational support, job seeking, skill building, and small business development and success. As children return to school, workplaces become more digitized, and communities continue to deal with pandemic-related challenges, investments in broadband access at state and local levels will be essential.

Housing, food, and other basic needs. Though jobs are growing, unemployment remains high at 5.9%, and state unemployment benefits do not cover basic expenses in 11 Southern states. Nonetheless, 7 of these states voted to prematurely cut expanded federal benefits while unemployed and low-income families struggle to pay for housing, food, and healthcare. The Child Tax Credit is expected to reduce child hardships by providing monthly payments to the vast majority of American families July–December 2021. Advocates can help by getting the word out about this important benefit and making the case for public investments in housing, mental health, and education.

Pandemic and crisis readiness. Despite having some of the lowest vaccination rates, combined with rising Covid infections and the presence of the more contagious Delta variant, several Southern states are slowing the frequency of Covid reporting. Without consistent and accurate data on cases, hospitalizations, deaths, and vaccinations, states will be ill-prepared in the event of future shocks and stressors. To mitigate impending challenges, every Southern state should make a long-term investment in a Chief Data Officer and a team dedicated to keeping critical data flowing.

ARP implementation. State and local governments are receiving unprecedented federal funding through the American Recovery Plan that can help address many of these economic, health, and social challenges. The ability of these funds to make a real impact will depend on effective and equitable community engagement. To encourage a values-driven framework, SEAP’s SouthStrong initiative developed an [ARP Toolkit](#) for local governments to develop strategic and sustainable recovery initiatives that benefit all community members.

Redistricting. Every legislative seat in the U.S. must be drawn using 2020 Census data, which was delayed by Covid and is now due by August 16. State deadlines vary in the amount of time they have to redraw maps before their own deadlines, with Southern states ranging from 4–11 months to redraw Congressional maps. With compressed (but sufficient) timelines, lawmakers may be tempted to skip transparency and public input. Communities should be ready for robust engagement both prior to the delivery of redistricting data and as soon as the data are made available. Fair Count is a member of the [CHARGE redistricting hub](#), which provides resources and trainings to help bolster community engagement during the redistricting process.

Voting restrictions. Voters turned out in record numbers for the 2020 election, which experts described as “the most secure in American history.”¹ However, several Southern states (AL, GA, FL, KY, and AR) have responded to this election with the passage of new restrictive voting laws. In fact, all 12 Southern states have passed or introduced legislation to raise barriers to voting in 2021. Between April and June of this year, Southerners participated in dozens of demonstrations against these new restrictive laws and advocated for reduced barriers to voting.

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.



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Table of Contents

[Population by race/ethnicity](#)

PANDEMIC

[New daily Covid cases in the past week](#)

[Covid-associated hospitalization rates by race/ethnicity](#)

[Total jobs by month, U.S.](#)

[Change in jobs by state](#)

[Quits rate by industry](#)

[Small business closures](#)

[Damages in property loss due to weather and climate disasters](#)

PROSPERITY: GOVERNMENT

[Frequency of reporting new Covid cases by vaccination rates](#)

[Paycheck Protection Program approved loans](#)

[Time for redistricting](#)

[Voter turnout](#)

[Civil unrest](#)

PROSPERITY: INSTITUTIONS

[News deserts](#)

[Internet access by county](#)

[Drop in school attendance](#)

[Child care disruptions](#)

[Health insurance coverage by county](#)

[Health insurance coverage by race/ethnicity](#)

[Affordable Care Act enrollments, 2021](#)

PROSPERITY: PEOPLE

[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](#)

[Delayed health care](#)

[Personal income per capita](#)

[Monthly poverty rate by age group](#)

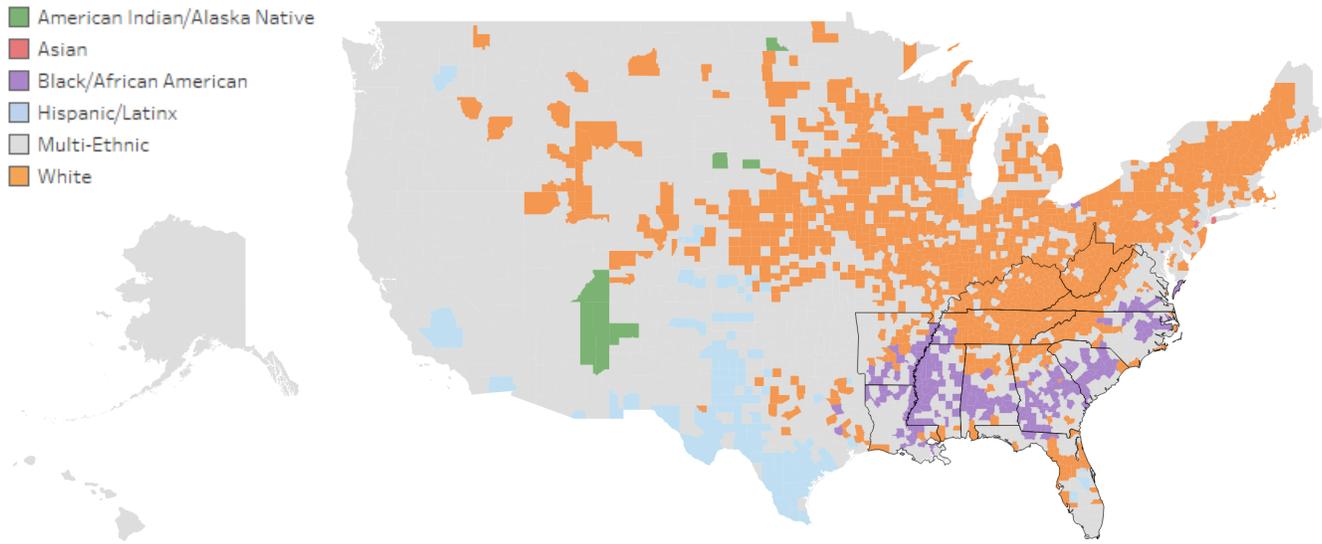
REFERENCES

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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 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.

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.

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 more transmissible variants are on the rise. 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 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.

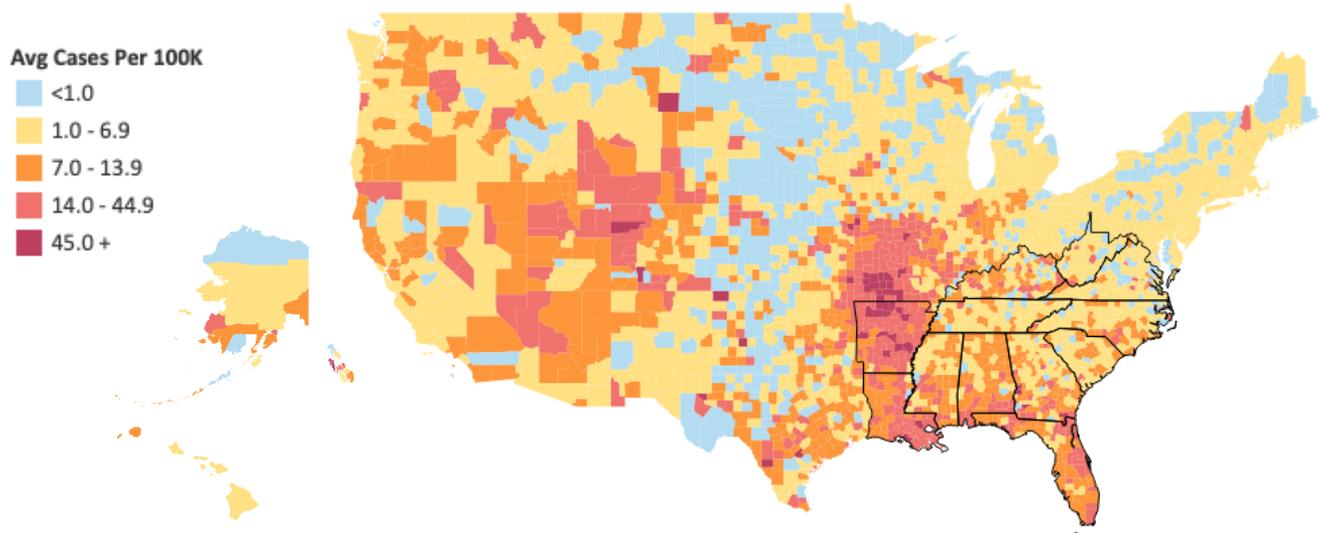
Indicators in this section

- New daily Covid cases in the past week by county
- Covid hospitalization rates by race/ethnicity, U.S.
- Change in jobs, by state and U.S., and monthly
- Quits rate by industry, U.S.
- Small business closures, by state and U.S.
- Damages in property loss from weather and climate events, by state and over time

With low vaccination rates across the South, some communities, especially in Arkansas, Florida, Louisiana, and Mississippi, are experiencing another peak in the pandemic.

Average daily new Covid cases per 100,000 population in past week, by county

Analysis of state and local health agencies and hospitals data as of July 14, 2021



Source: [The New York Times](#) and [Census Bureau PEP](#)

The national Covid case rate is now about one-tenth that of the high-point in early 2021. While early hotspots in the Northeast are now low, pockets of high rates pepper the South, which has some of the nation's lowest rates of vaccination. Half of the 10 states with the highest case rates are currently in the South (AR, FL, LA, AL, and MS).

Baxter County, Arkansas (population 42,000) borders the current Covid epicenter in the state of Missouri and has the third highest rates of daily average Covid cases in the nation. Baxter is typical of current counties with high rates. The more transmissible Delta variant has been identified in Baxter, but the extent to which it is contributing to the surge is unknown because the local health department is not testing for variants at scale. The percent of Covid tests that come back positive is 15%—3 times the level recommended by the World Health Organization and an indicator that not enough tests are being performed. Local health officials attribute high case rates to the new Delta variant and low vaccination rates, coupled with a return to normal with social events, workplaces, and summer camps.¹

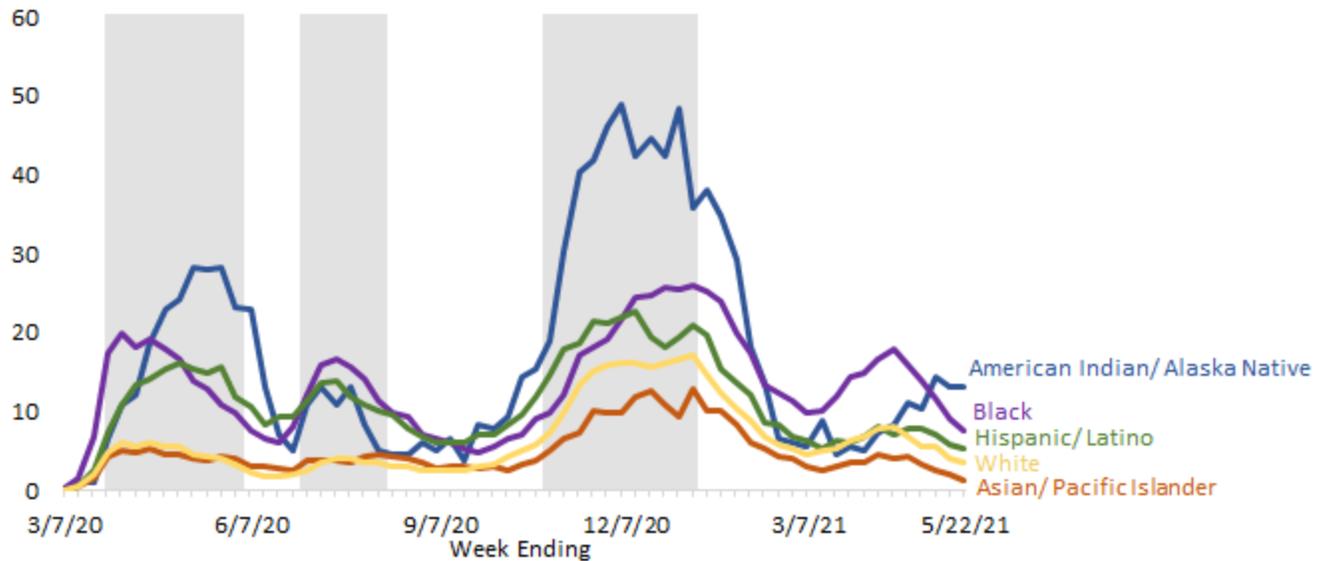
Those areas with a weekly average of greater than 7 new cases per day per 100,000 population are at a level at which health systems can soon be overcome, and also where more immunized individuals will now experience “breakthrough” Covid infection.²

Complicating the public health response to Covid is what the U.S. Surgeon General describes as the “urgent threat” posed by health misinformation. In May, a Kaiser Family Foundation survey found that $\frac{2}{3}$ of unvaccinated adults believed in Covid myths such as the vaccination causing infertility or changing one's DNA.³ Civic infrastructure such as healthcare clinics, local news, schools, and community groups have an essential role in sharing accurate information on Covid and building resilience to misinformation.⁴

As of May 2021, American Indian/Alaska Native, Black, and Hispanic individuals are 1.5 to 3.7 times 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 - May 22, 2021



Source: [CDC](#)

As shocking as nationwide case rates have been—nearly 34 million people have tested positive for Covid and more than 600,000 have died—hospitalizations reveal concerning disparities between racial groups.¹ Case rates nationwide have been declining since the winter peaks, and available data on hospitalizations shows that American Indian, Black, and Hispanic/Latino individuals are now around 1.5 to 3.7 times more likely to have severe Covid impacts than white people. This is down from the disparity during the first wave of the pandemic when American Indian patients were being hospitalized at 6 to 10 times the rate of white patients.

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.

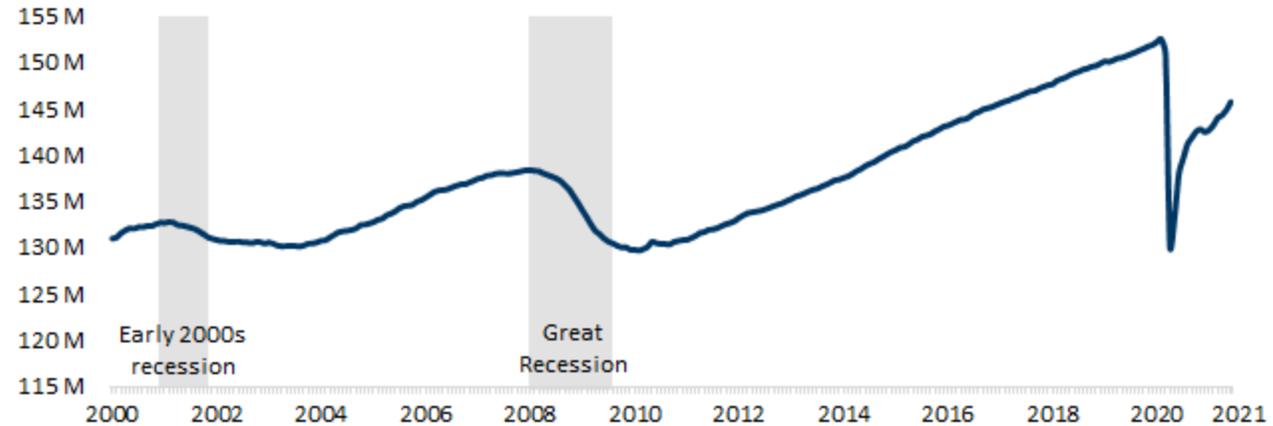
State and local governments prioritizing projects for the American Rescue Plan can use these funds to begin to eliminate structural disparities that ultimately determine health outcomes—such as access to good jobs, quality education, safe/walkable neighborhoods, healthy foods, and quality medical care. Researchers recently analyzed outcomes for patients hospitalized with Covid and found that Black patients had an 11% higher mortality rate than white patients. The researchers concluded that these outcomes are “associated with the hospitals at which Black patients disproportionately received care.”²

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.

While the U.S. gained 850,000 jobs in June, nationwide there are 6.8 million fewer jobs than in Feb 2020. The South lost 1,381,300 jobs since Feb 2020.

Total jobs by month, U.S.

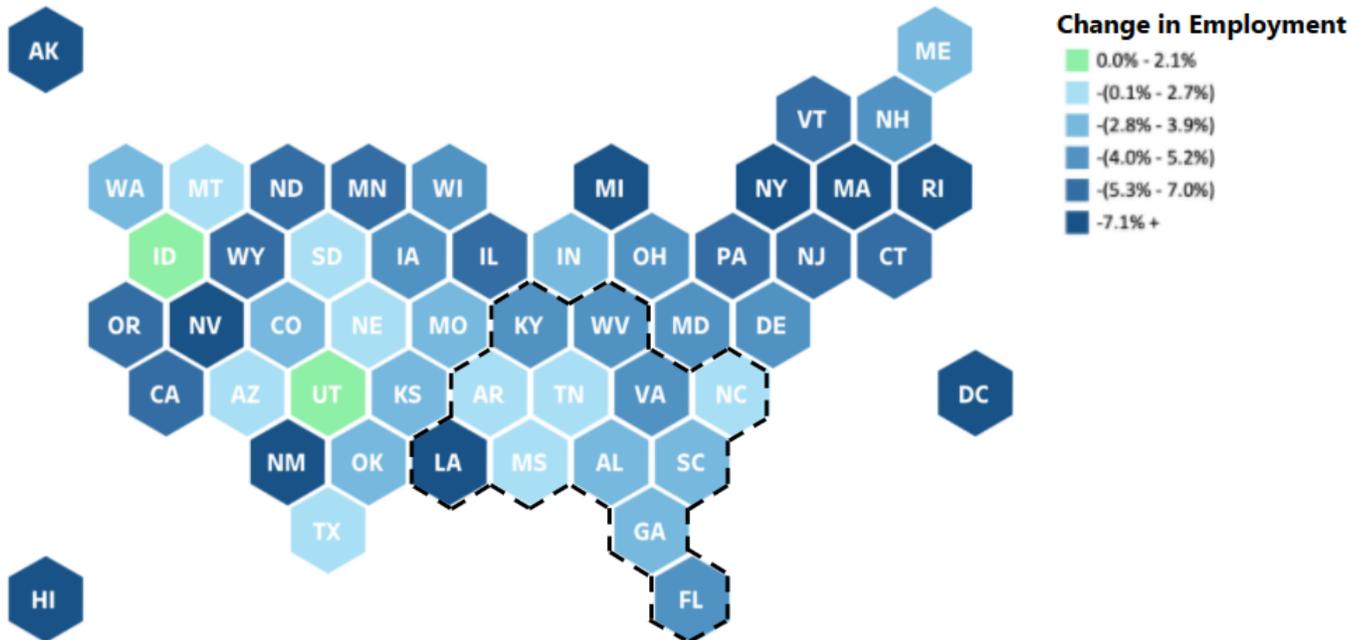
Jan 2000-June 2021



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

Change in jobs by state

June 2021 compared to February 2020

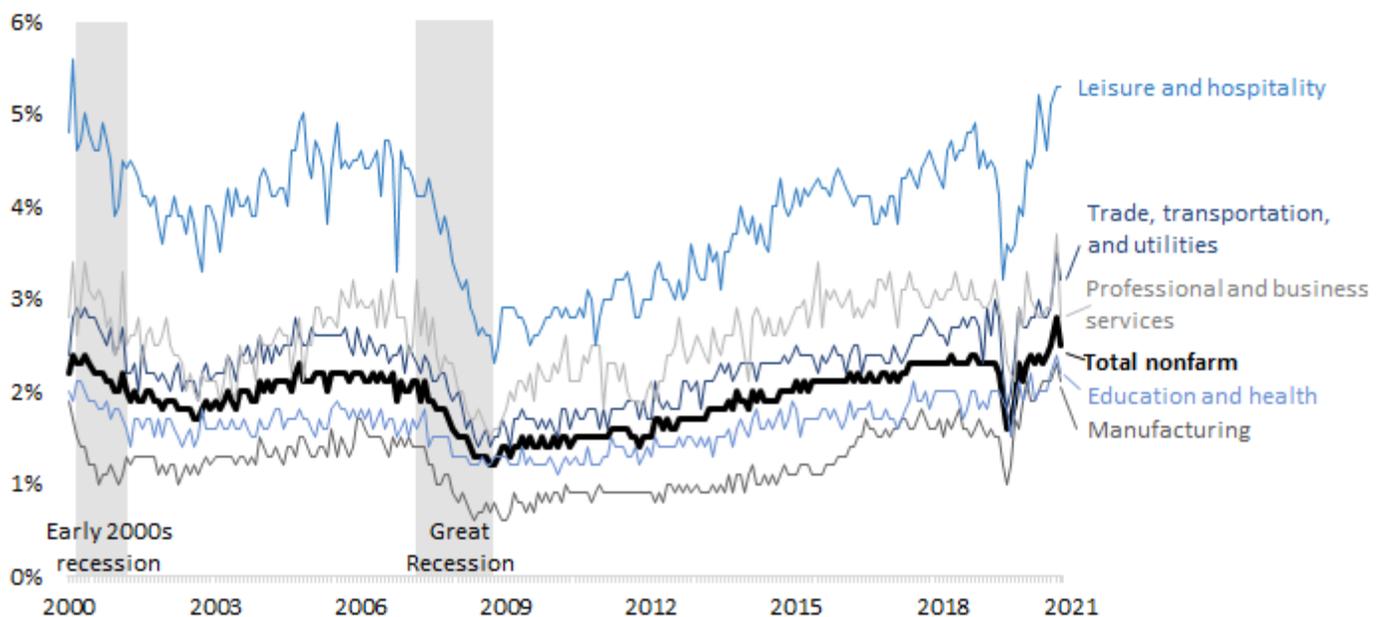


Source: [Bureau of Labor Statistics](#) Note: Seasonally adjusted. Data for June 2021 are preliminary.

The nation as a whole gained 850,000 jobs in June—but still has 6.8 million fewer jobs than in February 2020. Women have lost 27% more jobs than men since the pandemic began. Across the South, 1.4 million jobs have disappeared since February 2020. Florida, the largest state in the South, lost the most jobs at 374,000. Five Southern states (Florida, West Virginia, Kentucky, Virginia, and Louisiana) have lost 4% or more of jobs, with Louisiana down 7.8% compared to its February 2020 jobs level. In June the national unemployment rate remained high at 5.9%, despite the fact that jobs have grown month-by-month since January as more Americans get vaccinated.

Workers quit their jobs at record levels in April, and high turnover continued in May. Since January 2021, nearly 18 million workers have quit their jobs.

Quits rate by industry Dec 2000 - May 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. May 2021 data is preliminary.

This year, over 3 million employees quit their jobs each month January through May—and nearly 4 million quit in April. The rate at which workers quit their jobs in April (2.8%) was the highest level on record since measurements began in 2000. The quits rate has been highest in the leisure and hospitality industry, where wages are low and churn has historically been high. But high levels of quits in every sector, combined with layoffs and delayed rehiring in 2020, have also stymied service delivery in airports, healthcare, and childcare centers.^{1,2,3}

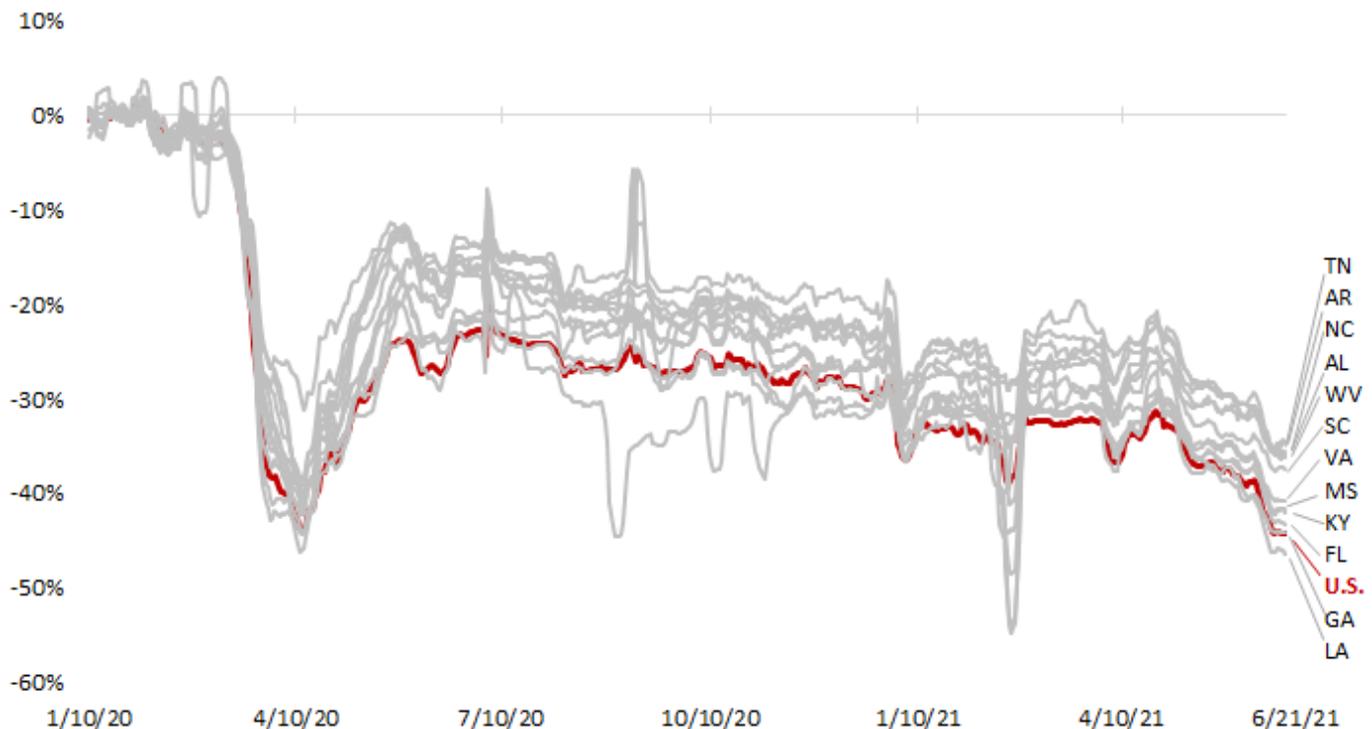
At the beginning of the pandemic, many companies laid off workers, while some companies with greater cash reserves and greater investments in their workers held onto them.⁴ At the same time, the changing working conditions during the pandemic caused workers to rethink their options, with some upskilling to transition to higher paying occupations. Across industries, 1 in 4 full-time workers indicated in early March that they plan to look for a new job as the pandemic eases.⁵ Moreover, workers are retiring early in larger numbers.^{6,7} As a result, many employers have had to exert substantial effort to find new workers as demand for goods and services begins to rebound. Generally speaking, workers are demanding higher wages and better working conditions including flexibility and remote work.^{8,9,10} Shortages in childcare are creating a domino effect, hindering parents' ability to return to work.¹¹

Worker shortages are particularly severe in some industries where substantial training is required including healthcare, finance, and professional business services.¹² As workplaces become more and more digitized, demand will increasingly shift from high-contact, low-wage service jobs, to jobs requiring more specialized training. Investment in training and education will be needed for occupations requiring skills for the new economy.

Despite the lifting of government restrictions, more small businesses closed than reopened from May to late June, and fewer small businesses were open in late June than at the depth of the spring shutdown in April 2020.

Percent change in number of small businesses open, as of June 21, 2021

7-day moving average, indexed to Jan 4-31, 2020, for Southern states and nation



Source: [Opportunity Insights](#). Note: Seasonally adjusted. "Open" is defined as having financial transaction activity. Small businesses are defined by SBA thresholds for annual revenues, which vary by 6-digit NAICS codes.

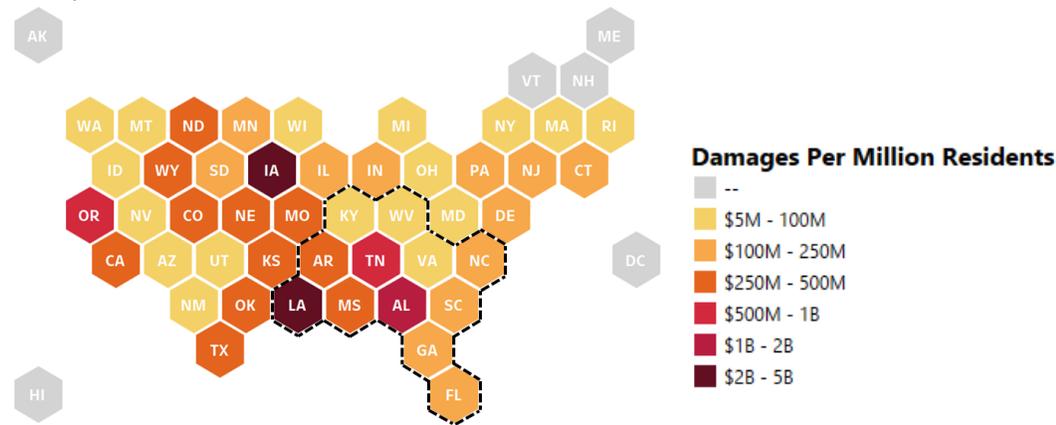
From early April through June, states began lifting business restrictions such that by July 1st all states except Hawaii were fully reopened.¹ But changes in consumers' buying behaviors have had a dramatic impact on small businesses, regardless of government restrictions being lifted. And many of these behaviors are not anticipated to return to pre-pandemic levels. Increases in remote work have reduced demand at downtown restaurants. Demand for business travel has fallen and will likely not fully rebound.² Small businesses in leisure and hospitality have been particularly hard hit, with 59% fewer of these businesses nationwide open as of June 21, 2021. Louisiana has roughly half the number of small businesses it had before the pandemic, and the South as a whole had about $\frac{1}{3}$ its previous number of small businesses.

Among small businesses that have closed are childcare centers that operate on very thin margins. For example, in Georgia, 55% of licensed childcare providers closed within two months of when Covid struck.³ In June, 1 in 10 adults couldn't find childcare, preventing more than 1 million adults from looking for a job.⁴

Disasters, that are growing in size and impact, are accelerating inequity—with recovery aid going disproportionately to applicants with greater capacity.

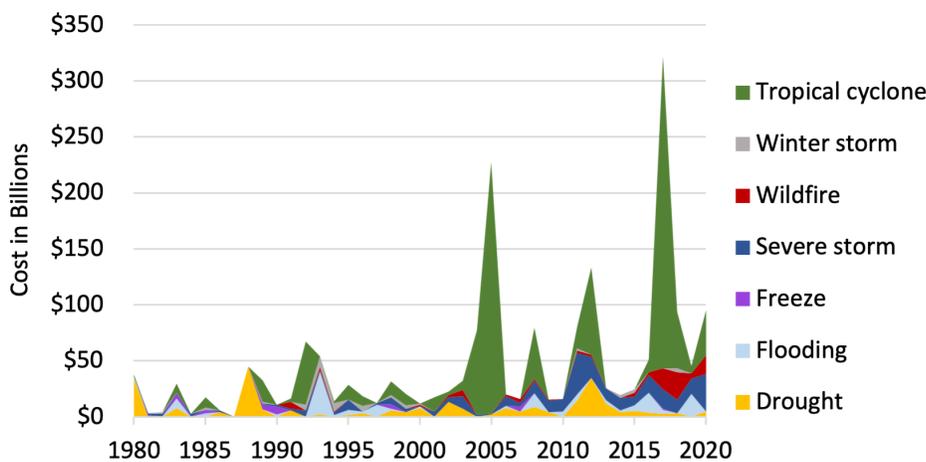
U.S. billion-dollar weather and climate disasters, 2020

Cost per million residents



U.S. billion-dollar weather and climate disasters

Cost by disaster-type, nationwide



Source: NOAA National Centers for Environmental Information (NCEI) [U.S. Billion-Dollar Weather and Climate Disasters](#) (2021).
 Note: These billion-dollar events account for >80% of the damage from all recorded U.S. weather and climate events.

Climate disasters have compounded the nation’s misery since the pandemic struck. In 2020, six hurricanes causing at least a billion dollars in damage hit the South. Importantly, disasters do more than damage property. They often take lives, and hurricanes typically cause the greatest number of deaths of all disaster types.¹ In February of this year, a historic cold wave impacted many Southern states. Although media attention focused on burst water pipes and power outages in Texas, many Southern cities were affected. Residents of Jackson, MS suffered through several weeks without water.² The scale of disasters have been increasing exponentially, and local governments are rarely well-equipped to respond to human needs for housing, transportation, and mental health services that last for months as communities struggle to rebuild.³ Disasters have been shown to increase inequity in part because low-income jobs and housing are more affected, and government assistance is distributed to those with the greatest capacity to apply.⁴ At the same time, federal disaster bail-outs disincentivize financial markets from investing in resilient infrastructure and housing.⁵ 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 to small businesses, voter representation, 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.

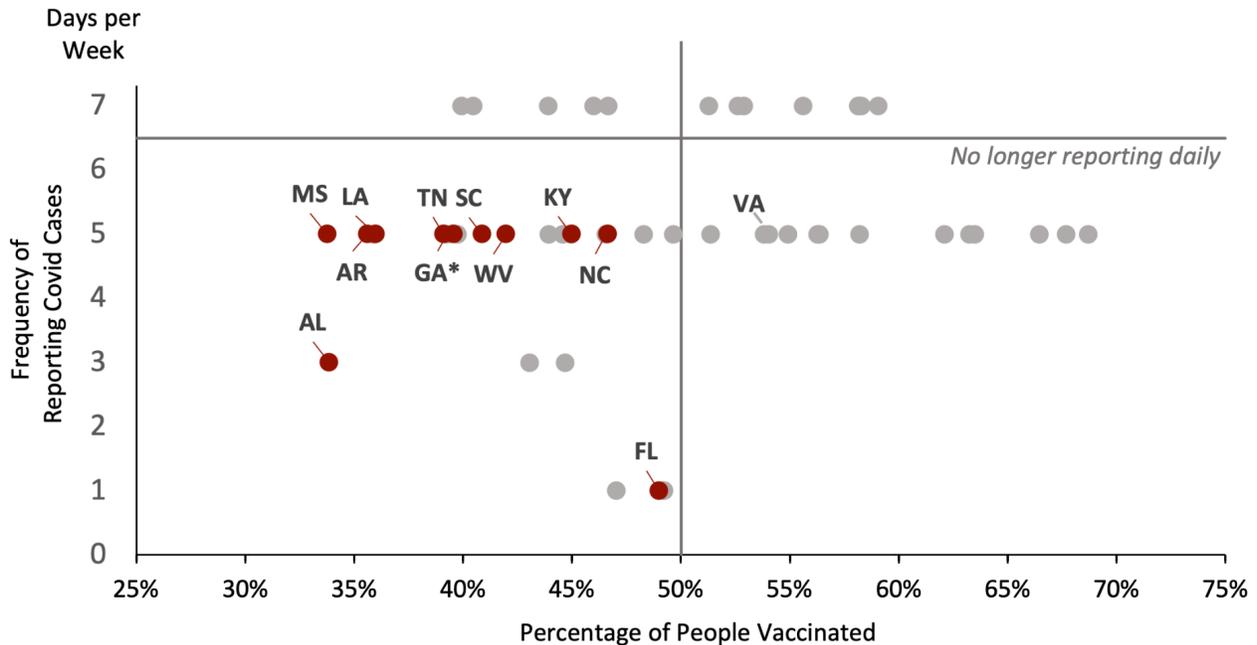
Indicators in this section

- Frequency of reporting new Covid cases by vaccination rates
- Paycheck Protection Program approved lending, 2021
- Time for redistricting by state
- Voter turnout, 1976-2020
- Civil unrest instances per 1,000 residents

Southern states except VA have less than half of their population vaccinated *and* all Southern states have decreased the frequency at which they alert the public of new cases.

State frequency of reporting new Covid cases by vaccination rates

As of July 19, 2021



Sources: [John Hopkins Coronavirus Resource Center: Vaccines](#) and [John Hopkins Center for Systems Science and Engineering \(CSSE\) GitHub](#) *GA is also no longer reporting on official holidays.

21 states including DC have more than 50% of their populations fully vaccinated.¹ However, in the South, all but Virginia fall below 50% vaccinated, with Alabama, Mississippi, Arkansas, and Louisiana setting the national floor at just over 33%. Not surprisingly, this is translating into new Covid cases, with AR, FL, LA, and AL ranking among the 10 states with highest case rates as of July 15, 2021.²

Meanwhile, news reports increasingly talk about the toll the pandemic is taking on unvaccinated young people, and the rapid spread of the Delta variant in communities with low vaccination rates.³

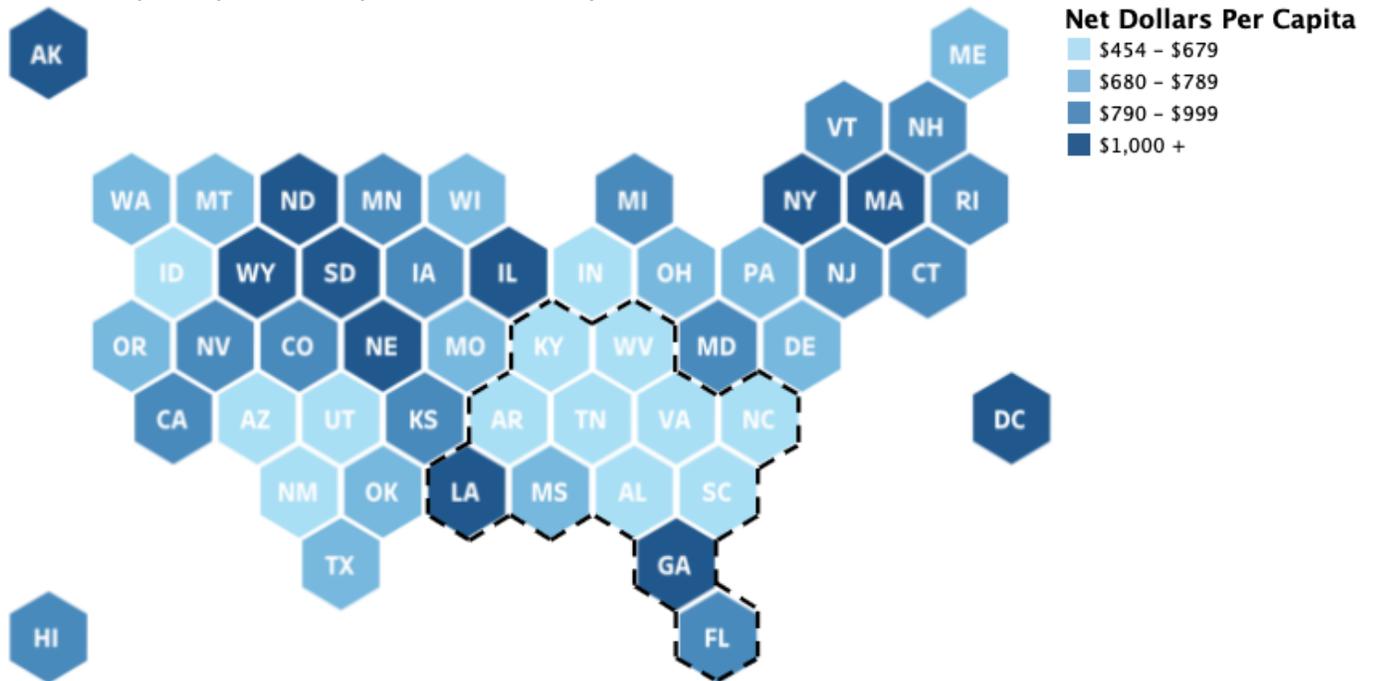
With this backdrop, it is concerning that some states are slowing the frequency at which they report data on Covid cases, hospitalizations, deaths, and vaccinations. 10 Southern states are now reporting Covid data only 5 days a week, with 9 of them having vaccination rates well below 50%, in addition to Georgia not reporting on holidays. As of July 15, Alabama is now reporting only 3 days a week and Florida just once a week. States in the lower left quadrant of the graph above have less frequent data with less vaccinated populations. As these states move toward less frequent reporting, they increase the risk of not detecting surges and hospital systems being caught unprepared. States in the upper right quadrant are at lowest risk.

Beth Blauer of the Johns Hopkins Coronavirus Center, notes that “the rollback of reporting frequency indicates that many states do not see this past year of investment in data infrastructure and public data reporting as a permanent fixture.”⁴ With a deadly race between viral variants and vaccinations, 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.

Louisiana, Georgia, and Florida all received greater than average forgivable PPP loans per capita compared to the U.S. as a whole during 2021.

Paycheck Protection Program (PPP) approved lending

Net dollars per capita January 1, 2021 thru May 31, 2021



Source: [Small Business Administration](#)

The December stimulus bill included \$285 billion in new forgivable Payroll Protection Program funding. Second time loans were made available only to businesses with fewer than 300 employees, and maximum loan amounts were limited to \$2 million.¹ In late February, for two weeks, the SBA offered PPP loans only to businesses and nonprofits with fewer than 20 employees. Other rule changes were made to increase equitable distribution of the funds. For example, student loan debt delinquency was eliminated as a disqualifier for receiving PPP funding.^{2,3} When the program ended on May 31st, Southern states as a whole had received lower than average amounts of PPP funding per capita (\$755 compared to \$839 across the U.S.). However, Louisiana, Georgia, and Florida all received greater than average PPP loans at \$1066, \$1032, and \$876 respectively.

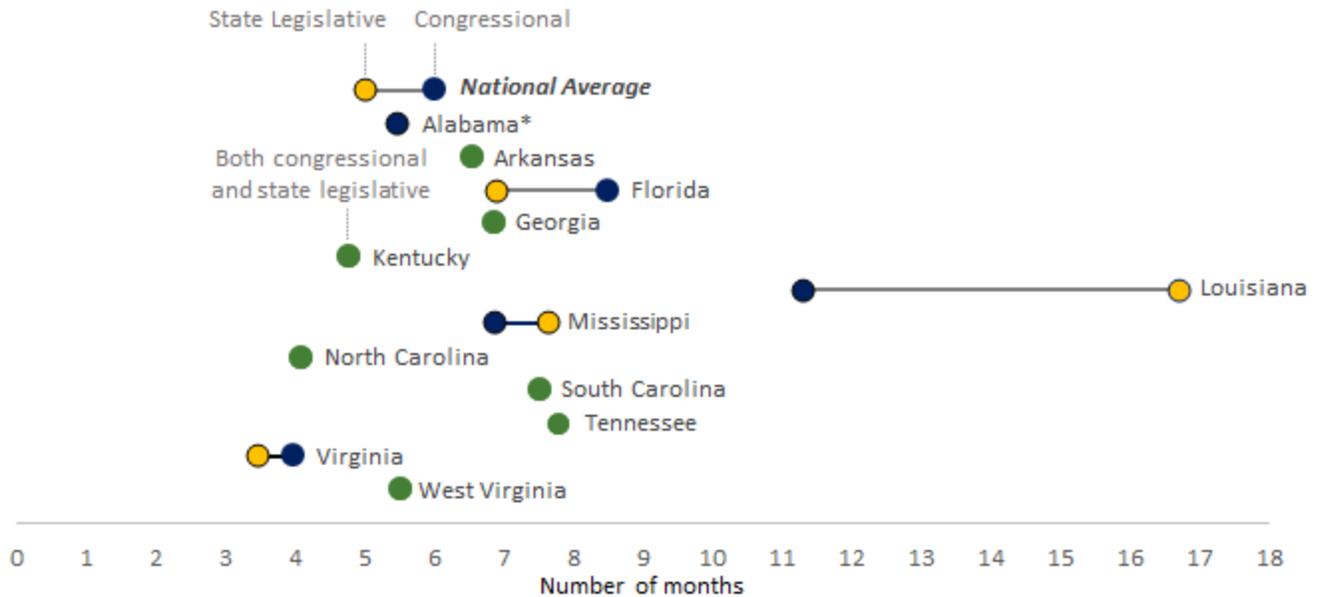
The \$29 billion Restaurant Revitalization Fund deadline was May 24, 2021 but the \$16.25 billion Shuttered Venue Operators grant programs had a bumpy start and only began distributing funds in June.^{4,5} At least \$2 billion is reserved for venues with fewer than 50 employees.⁴ Local lenders will be critical in providing the information and technical assistance needed to ensure qualified micro-businesses access this important lifeline.

After disasters, there is often a difficult balance between distributing relief quickly and preventing fraud. The first rounds of PPP funding in 2020 were distributed extremely quickly in an effort to provide timely relief to small businesses. The U.S. Department of Justice is playing an important role pursuing a large number of possibly fraudulent claimants from the first two rounds of PPP loans.⁶

Despite delays in delivery of census data, Southern states have sufficient time to engage the public in fair and transparent redrawing of voting districts.

Months between first release of redistricting data and state deadlines

For state legislative and congressional districts in 12 Southern states



Source: [Brennan Center](#) and Common Cause, compiled from individual state law and electoral calendars.

* Alabama is one of 8 states nationwide with statutory or state constitutional deadlines for redistricting before the Aug. 16 delivery date for redistricting data, which will be impossible to meet.

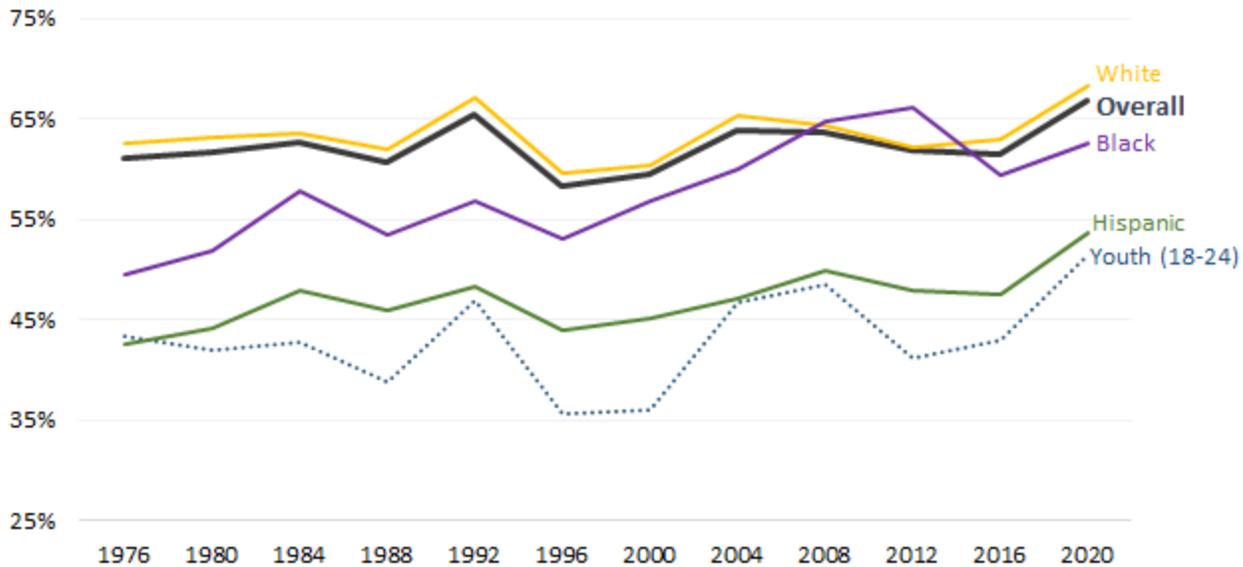
Maps delineating every legislative and congressional district in the U.S. are redrawn once a decade using decennial census data. The pandemic and politicization delayed the release of this decade’s redistricting data, which will now be delivered to states by August 16. While necessary to ensure adequate time for processing the data, the delay creates challenges for many states, who must meet their own internal deadlines. States have turned to a number of remedies such as court extensions and calling for special legislative sessions. States vary in the amount of time they have to redraw maps, with Southern states ranging from 4-11 months to redraw congressional maps. Under normal circumstances, states would have almost 4 more months for the process, though few used all that time in the past redistricting cycle.¹

As states seek to work within these compressed timelines, it’s important that lawmakers aren’t tempted to skip transparency and public input. To do so would be particularly troublesome given that about half of Americans believe that congressional districts are not fairly drawn.² Though public input is largely not required by law in the Southern states, 11 of 12 Southern states solicited public input in the last redistricting cycle through public hearings, accepting citizen-drawn maps, or allowing public comment.^{3,4}

The districts drawn this year will shape lives and communities for the next decade. Communities should be ready for robust engagement both prior to the delivery of redistricting data—through activities such as learning and educating others about the redistricting process in their state, organizing, and testifying at public hearings—and as soon as redistricting data are made available, through activities such as community mapping. Timing adjustments should not be a reason to dispense with public participation; Southern states have sufficient time to engage the public for fair and transparent redrawing of voting districts.

Despite the pandemic, voters turned out in record numbers for the 2020 election. Progress on expanding voting access should be continued.

Voter turnout in presidential elections, U.S.
1976-2020



Source: [Current Population Survey \(Voting and Registration Tables 1976-2020\)](#)

Despite concerns that the pandemic might depress voting rates, voter turnout was at a record high in the 2020 presidential election. Among youth voters (aged 18-24) turnout was the highest it has been since the 26th Amendment lowered the age to vote to 18 in 1971, with more than half of youth voters casting their ballot in 2020.

In anticipation of the 2020 election, many states temporarily increased the availability of mail-in voting because of the pandemic, but in the South, GA, FL, LA, MS, and TN made no such changes.¹ Even where there were no improved accommodations, voter turnout increased in every state in the nation. National voter participation jumped to about 67% while cases of fraudulent voting were virtually nonexistent.² Voter participation in the South neared 65%.³

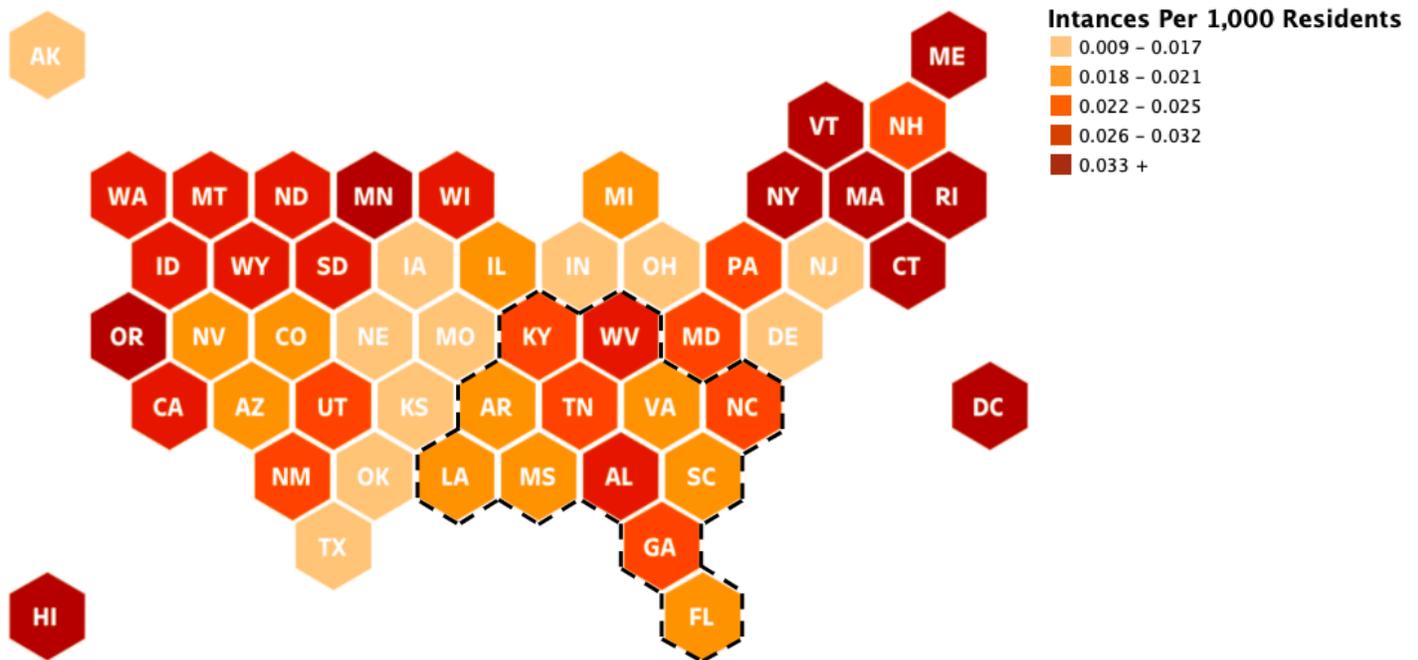
However, since the 2020 election there has been a series of restrictive voting laws introduced across the country. In the first 6 months of 2021, 17 states enacted 28 new laws that restrict access to the vote.⁴ All 12 Southern states have passed or introduced legislation to raise barriers to voting.⁵

Among the one-third 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.⁶ Rather than building on the progress made in 2020 by focusing on ways to reduce barriers to voting, state efforts aimed at further restricting voting access could have a significant impact on voter engagement in future elections.

The number of demonstrations across the South have ranged from 53 in West Virginia to 443 in Florida—99% of them peaceful.

Civil unrest instances per 1,000 residents

January 1, 2021 - June 25, 2021



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

Over 1,700 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.

From April through June, nearly 300 demonstrations advocated for criminal justice reforms and in support of Black Lives Matter, and nearly 100 protests were in support of worker rights—most for miners, janitors, fast food workers, increasing the minimum wage and better working conditions as a whole. Southerners are increasingly concerned about gun violence and participated in nearly 100 demonstrations against gun violence. Southerners also participated in 53 protests against new restrictive election laws and anti-rioting laws, as well as 52 protests in support of LGBTQ rights, and 39 demonstrations for environmental justice. About 40 demonstrations took place demanding greater investments in community needs such as affordable housing and mental health services, and against evictions and cuts to higher education.

Roughly equal numbers of protests (14 each) took place in support of and against the teaching of what has been called *Critical Race Theory* (but more accurately is the history and current impact of white supremacy in America).¹ As the Israeli-Palestinian conflict erupted in May, 55 demonstrations in support of Palestinians and 13 demonstrations in support of Israel took place. Notably, about 35 protests took place against mask-mandates—many of them against mask mandates in schools—suggesting challenges ahead in providing safe, in-person K-12 public school education. At the same time, 14 recruitment and training events took place among militia organizations such as the American Contingency Group. Only 1 protest against perceived election fraud took place in the South after January.

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 K-12 attendance, child care disruptions, health insurance availability, and the recent jump in Affordable Care Act enrollments.

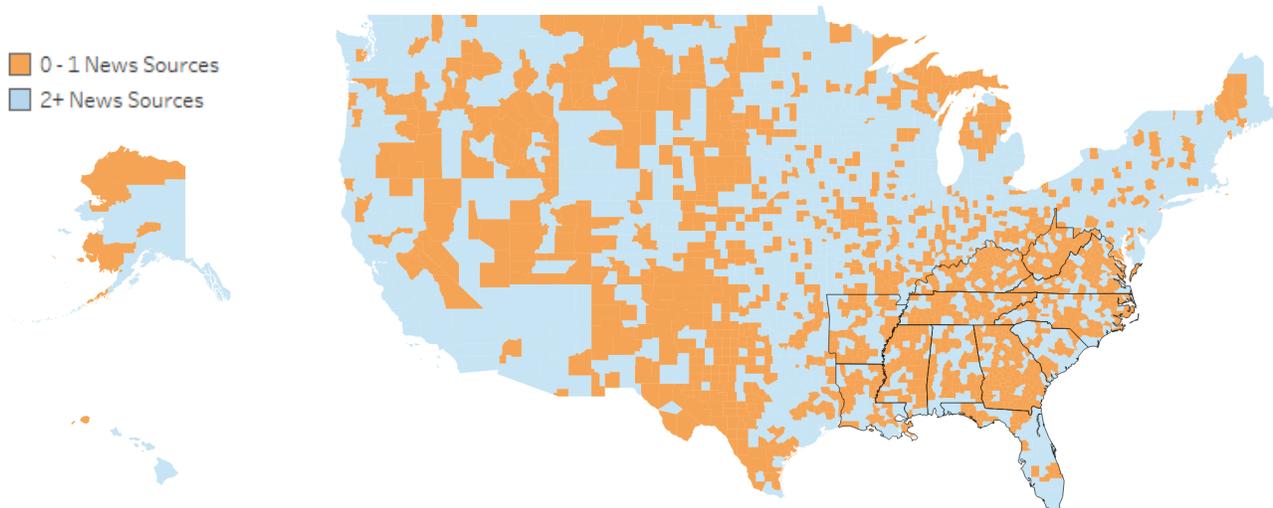
Indicators in this section

- News deserts
- Lack of internet access by county
- Drop in school attendance
- Child care disruptions
- Lack of health insurance by county and by race/ethnicity
- Affordable Care Act enrollments, 2021

Southern counties are more likely to be news deserts than the national average. Fully 2/3 of Southern counties are news deserts, meaning a critical vehicle for delivering trusted information on the recovery 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 \$350 billion on its way to local governments through the American Rescue Plan (ARP), local newspapers are an important platform for both transparency on how governments plan to spend the funding, and also for sharing ideas on what spending priorities should be. 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).¹ And 2 out of every 3 Southern counties are news deserts, meaning a critical vehicle for trusted information during the recovery is absent.

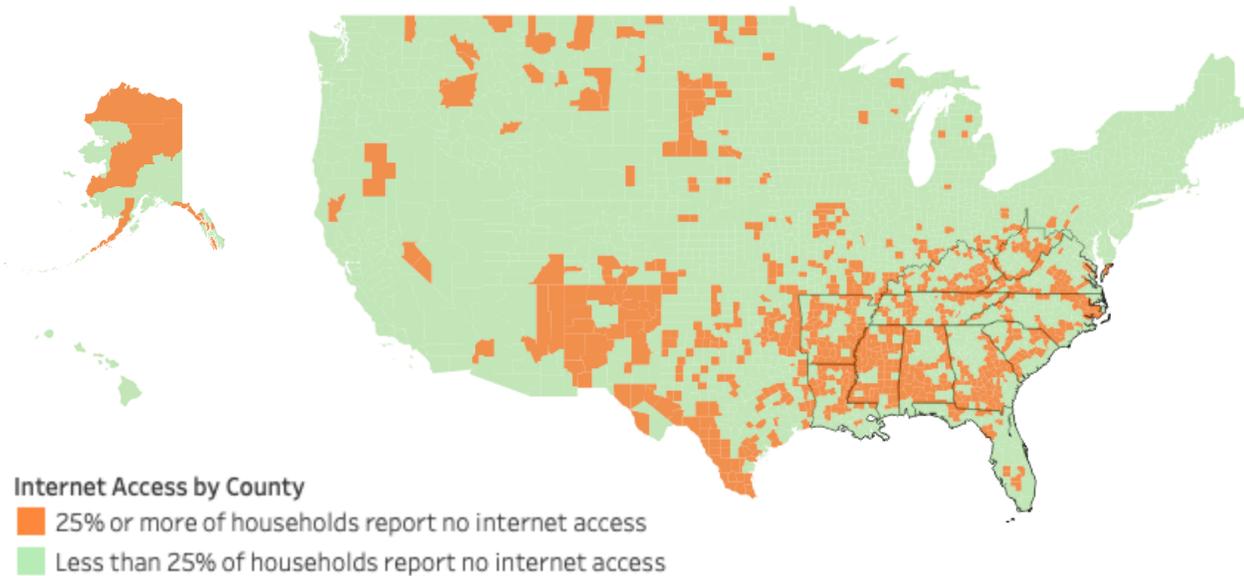
Across the South, remaining local news outlets are raising awareness about ARP spending and opportunities for public input.

- The *Wilmington Star News* reported on how Brunswick County, NC and cities/towns within are tentatively planning to spend their ARP funds on items ranging from replacing aging infrastructure to renourishing the sand on vanishing beaches vital for the tourism industry.²
- A roundtable of nonprofit, faith, and business leaders used the local news to share their recommendation for the City of Mobile, AL to delay the distribution of ARP funds by 4 weeks in order to “to work with the community to help address their priorities and ensure that monies are best distributed for the greatest impact.”³
- A Mississippi State Representative used an op-ed in the *Clarion Ledger* to make the case that cities should use ARP to “undo the systemic issues and racist policies that have stripped wealth and furthered disinvestment in majority Black—mostly rural—communities throughout the state.”⁴
- West Virginia Public Radio featured ideas on how lawmakers should “use this time to gather information from West Virginians about what they’ve experienced with food insecurity during the pandemic” to design policies that will result in tangible outcomes.⁵
- And, the *Herald Leader* covered the Lexington, KY Vice Mayor’s call for “projects that are transformative and sustainable,” plus a survey to rank spending priorities, as well as a round of neighborhood meetings and town halls throughout the summer.⁶

46% of Southern counties have poor internet access, whereas only 16% of counties outside the South have poor access.

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](#)

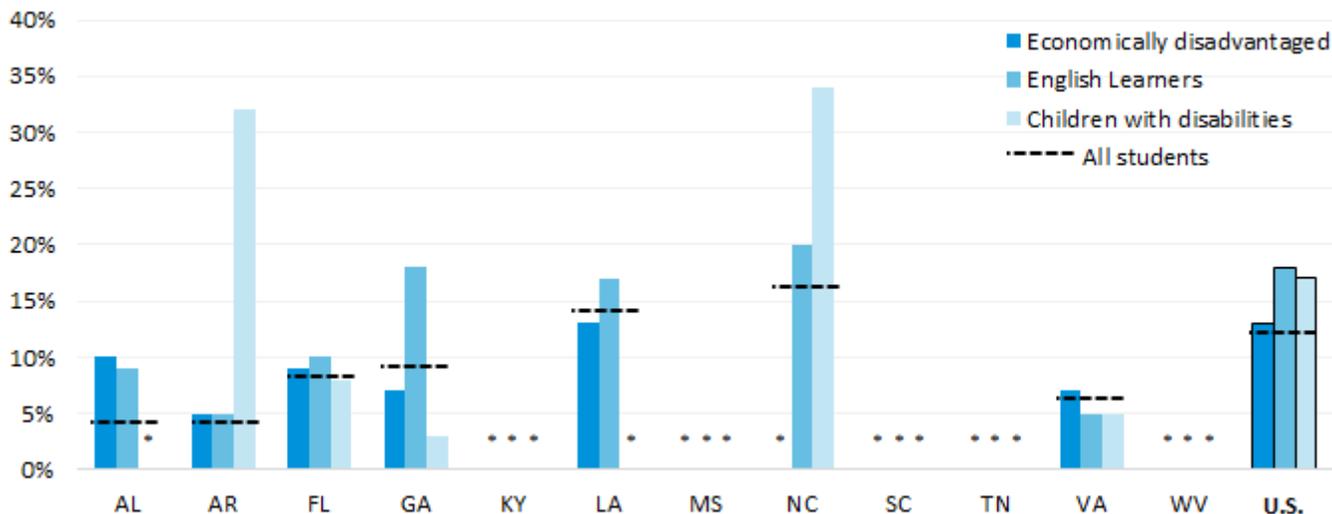
Though current data on internet access is lacking, prior to the pandemic, the majority of rural residents in the U.S. felt access to high speed internet was a significant problem.¹ According to a 2018 Census Bureau study, counties in the Mississippi River basin had among the lowest rates of broadband subscriptions. Among counties with 10,000 people or more, Telfair County, GA, Holmes County, MS, Kemper County, MS, Leflore County, MS, and Monroe County, AL all had among the lowest subscription rates.² 46% of Southern counties have poor internet access, whereas only 16% of counties outside the South have poor access. In 2019, 1 in 5 households lack a computer or internet in Mississippi, Louisiana, and Arkansas.³

The Covid pandemic made clear that the internet has become an essential utility for every American. Having access to a computer and broadband is essential to support education and homework, job seeking and skill building, as well as small business development and success. Families that lacked internet access found their children struggling to keep up with school, and working adults weren't able to complete new online responsibilities without internet access. Internet access is also essential in the farming industry and will be key to community and families' resilience in the face of future shocks.^{4,5,6,7,8} 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.

Attendance data for remote schooling raises the need to re-engage the most vulnerable students, but widespread missing/low quality data on vulnerable populations portend a much larger crisis ahead.

Non-attendance rate for 8th grade remote students by sub-population, May 2021

Southern states and U.S.



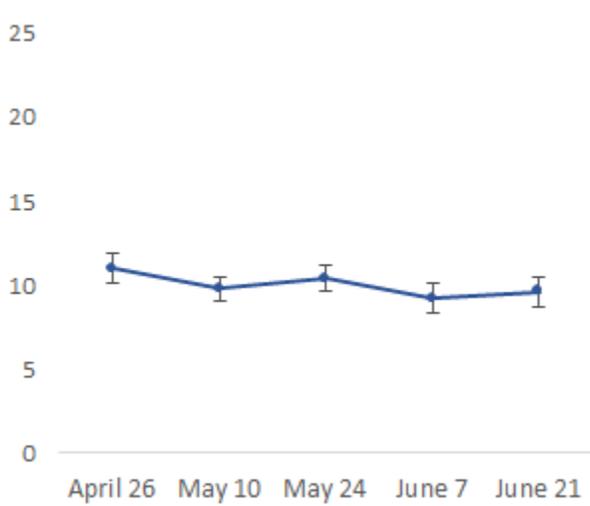
Source: [Dept of Education Institute of Education Sciences](#). *KY, MS, SC, and TN submitted insufficient data. WV declined to participate. AL, LA, and NC did not meet data standards for certain subgroups.

Lack of access to the internet and computers, students caring for siblings or taking jobs, and decreased support services all contributed to a drop in school attendance among K-12 students during the pandemic. For 8th graders enrolled in remote public schooling, May 2021 indicators from the federal Institute of Education Sciences’ new Monthly School Survey Dashboard reveal concerning disparities in attendance for students who are economically disadvantaged, English learners, or living with disabilities. Students in at least one of these groups in Alabama, Arkansas, Georgia, and North Carolina have non-attendance rates 5+ percentage points higher than the total population of 8th graders in their states. Some disparities are far greater, such as Arkansas’ and North Carolina’s children with disabilities (with absence rates more than double those of their total 8th grade population). Disparities in attendance in Virginia and Florida appear to be low, but likely for different reasons. Virginia has standardized, mandatory attendance reporting and has prioritized 62% of English learners and 71% of students with disabilities for in-person learning (the highest prioritization rates in the nation). Florida is the only state in the South with no statewide attendance policies or data reporting standards, and it prioritized only 24% of English learners and 30% of students with disabilities for in-person learning.¹

Anecdotally, more granular data from school districts suggest that the problem is likely bigger than the state-level pilot survey data shown here.² Even more troubling are the data that are unreported. No states in the U.S. reported sufficient attendance data on students experiencing homelessness, and 8 southern states are missing data for one or more vulnerable student populations. Additionally, attendance data misses all of the students who are not enrolled in school at all during the pandemic. With \$122 billion to support schools and students in the American Rescue Plan, it may seem prudent to only fund building improvements and other one-time expenses.³ However, the massive scale of students who will need re-engagement calls out the value of prioritizing funds for intensive tutoring, summer programs, finding and supporting missing students, and increasing mental health services.⁴

1 in 10 adults continue to experience childcare disruptions, forcing them to make difficult choices.

Percent of adults experiencing a childcare disruption in the last four weeks and how they responded
United States, June 21, 2021



How families responded to childcare disruption:	Number of families impacted:
Took unpaid leave to care for children	1,219,781
Used vacation or sick days, or other paid leave to care for children	1,250,549
Cut work hours to care for children	1,595,992
Left a job in order to care for children	914,428
Lost a job because of time away to care for children	434,975
Did not look for a job in order to care for children	1,011,263
Supervised one or more children while working	1,716,969

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

The nation began to re-open this spring, with many states removing mask mandates, occupancy limits, and restrictions on businesses. On May 13, the CDC officially declared that people who were fully vaccinated did not need to wear masks or social distance, even indoors. While many people are now going back to work in person, childcare disruptions have not improved—leaving families in a lurch. 1 in 10 adults still experienced a childcare disruption in the 4 weeks ending June 21, 2021.

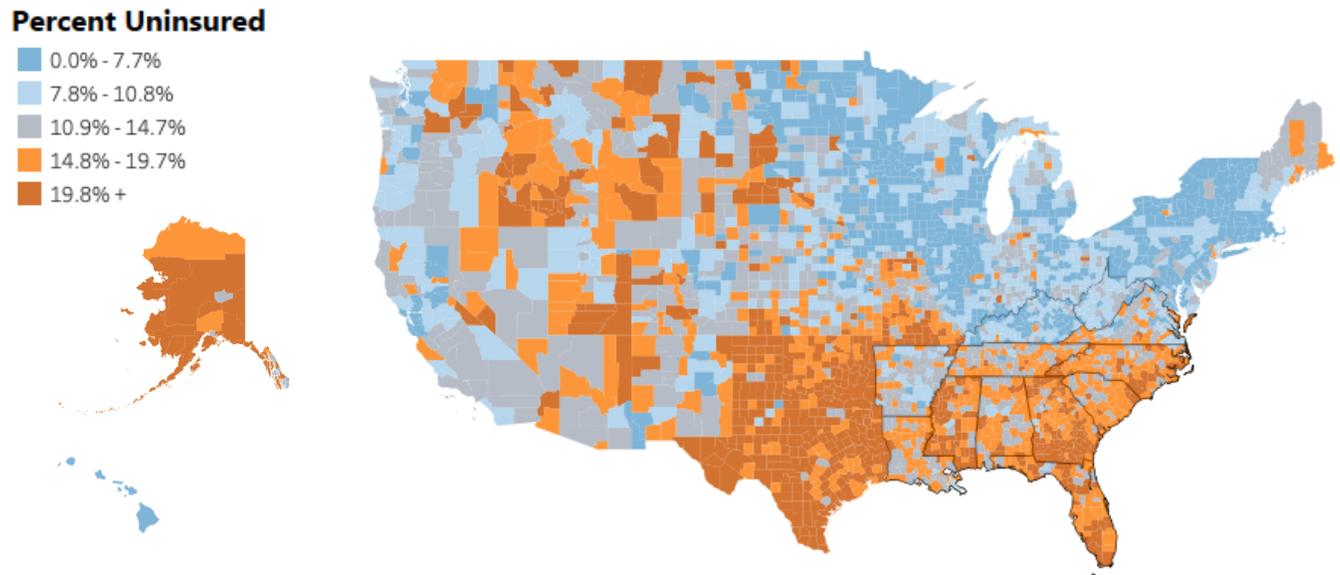
The impact on both careers and workplaces is not trivial. More than 1.5 million parents cut their work hours to care for children, and 1.2 million parents took unpaid leave to care for children. Nearly 1 million left a job, half a million lost a job, and 1 million didn’t look for a job because of childcare disruptions—all of which mean reduced income that can cause a family to skip a rent payment, delay seeking needed health care, and struggle to put food on the table.

Comprehensive data on childcare closures or reduced capacity due to staffing shortages is hard to come by because the sector is so much more decentralized than K-12 education. What data do exist are concerning.

In North Carolina, for example, 1 in 4 centers are closed, with unquantified others operating at reduced capacity. The State Attorney General recently wrote that “If providers don’t get the funding they need to stay open, we’ll lose critical small businesses and place even more financial burdens on families already struggling during the pandemic.”¹ In mid-state Tennessee, childcare center directors are organizing to figure out how to hire qualified staff when the average wages are \$12 an hour.² In Louisiana, where the pandemic caused an estimated \$245 million in losses for the childcare sector, policymakers and childcare leaders are actively discussing how to best use incoming American Rescue Plan dollars to shore up a fundamentally unstable sector, where parents can’t afford tuition, educators can’t afford to live on the low salaries, and centers can’t break even.³ Fundamentally, the challenge is how to leverage these one-time investments into long-term investment in early childhood education.⁴

Prior to the pandemic, 16% of working-age Southerners lacked health insurance compared to 11% in the rest of the U.S.

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



Source: [Census Bureau's American Community Survey](#)

Across the South, 16% of working-age adults lacked health insurance in 2015-19 compared to only 11% of working-age adults in the rest of the United States. Seven Southern states have not adopted Medicaid expansion (Mississippi, Alabama, Georgia, Florida, South Carolina, North Carolina, and Tennessee), contributing to this South/non-South disparity.¹

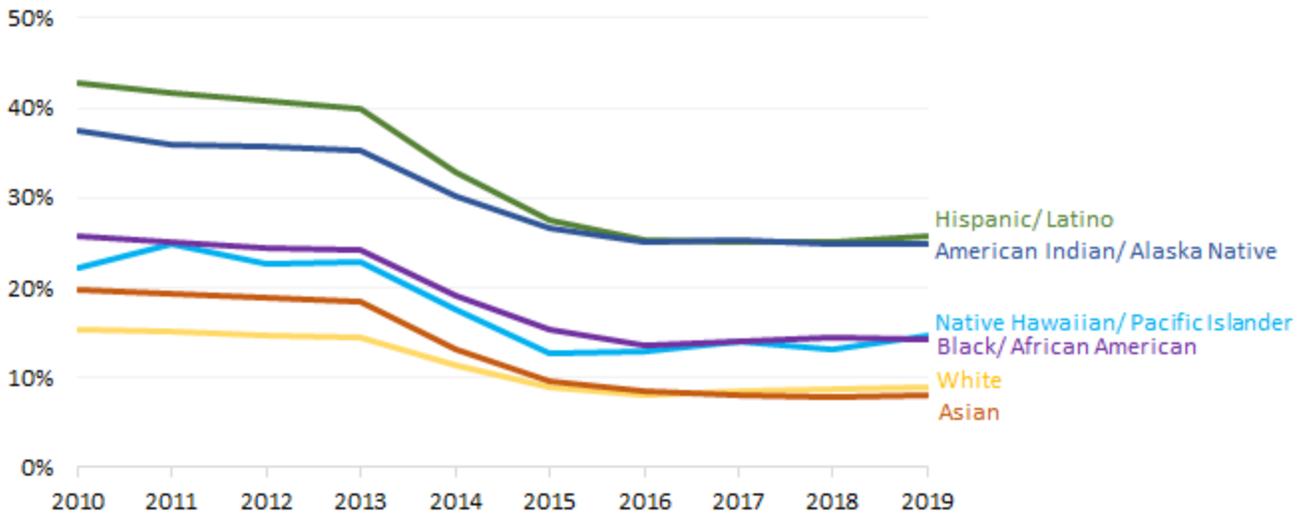
The implications of not expanding Medicaid are particularly hard on rural communities. Without Medicaid expansion, hospitals end up treating too many uninsured patients, don't receive sufficient reimbursement for the care they provide, and as a result, oftentimes must close for financial reasons. Data from 2011 to 2017 reveals that the rural hospitals most likely to close down were in the South.² Looking at Southern counties with particularly high rates of uninsurance (15% of all working-age adults lacking health insurance), 69% of these counties were completely or mostly rural. Only 31% of these counties were mostly or completely urban.

An assessment of hospitals in Tennessee found that more than 1 in 4 rural counties had no hospital and 1 in 5 had no emergency room, forcing residents to rely on "ambulances as emergency rooms."³ 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.⁴ Moreover, when rural hospitals close, a key job center is lost, making it hard to attract new residents, which makes it hard to attract businesses—contributing to a downward spiral for rural communities.⁴

Disparities in health insurance coverage across racial and ethnic groups before the pandemic contributed to disparities in Covid outcomes by race/ethnicity.

Lack of health insurance coverage by race/ethnicity

Population age 18-64



Source: [Census Bureau's American Community Survey](#). Note: Data for 2017-2019 is 19-64 year olds.

Health insurance can be expensive, and many employers do not offer health insurance, much less fully cover the cost of health care premiums. Not surprisingly, low-income adults were the least likely to have health insurance coverage in 2019. This was even more true in the South where 28% of working age adults earning less than 200% of the federal poverty level lacked health insurance in 2019.¹

Since 2010, rates of the uninsured have dramatically dropped with the implementation of the Affordable Care Act (ACA). Nonetheless, before the pandemic, white and Asian populations had the lowest rates of uninsured adults, while Hispanic/Latino and American Indian/Alaska Native populations had the highest rates of uninsured adults.

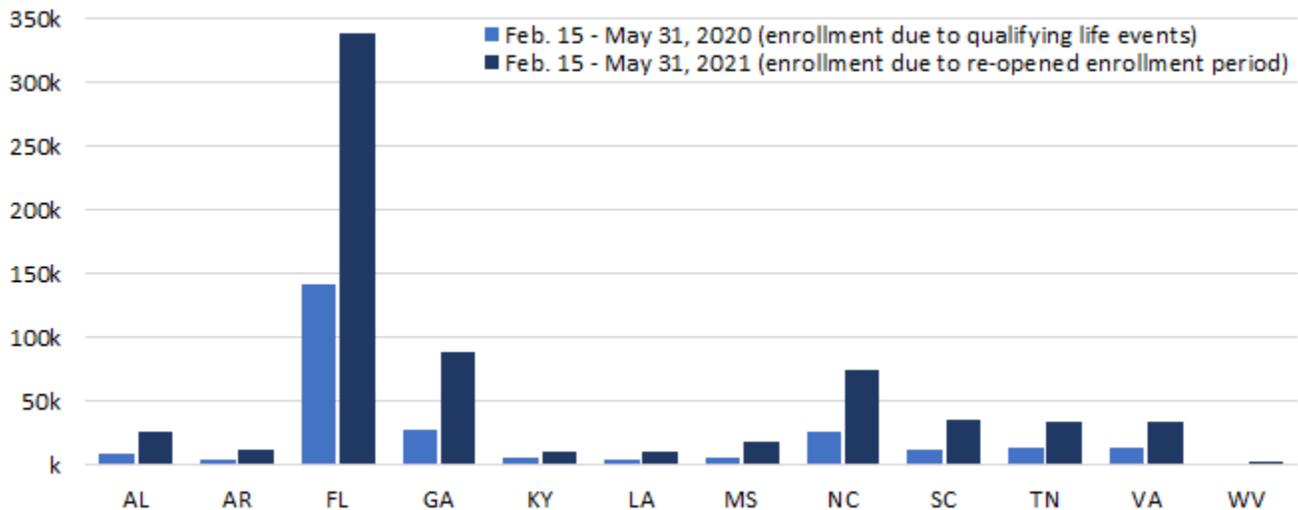
Just before the onset of the pandemic, 1 in 4 Hispanic/Latino and American Indian/Alaska Native adults were without health insurance. With the compounding impact of job loss, lack of access to healthy foods, and exposure to pollution, the racial and ethnic groups with the highest exposure to Covid were even more vulnerable because of lack of health insurance.²

While children under 19 and adults over 64 are often eligible for public forms of health insurance (CHIP, Medicare) that lead to higher rates of coverage, adults age 19-64 may lack coverage if they cannot get it through an employer.³ 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.⁴

Enrollment in Affordable Care Act health insurance plans spiked in 2021.

New Affordable Care Act health plan selections (net of cancellations or terminations)

Feb 15 - May 31, 2021 compared to same period in 2020



Source: [The Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services](#)

Note: All 12 Southern states currently rely on the federal HealthCare.gov. KY and VA are developing their own Marketplaces.

In 2021, the Biden Administration re-opened the Affordable Care Act (ACA) Marketplace for 6 months (from February 15, 2021 to August 15, 2021) to all Americans regardless of life circumstance.¹

Typically, enrollment in ACA health insurance plans is restricted to about 6 weeks. In 2020 many states created additional open enrollment opportunities in response to the pandemic. The federal government, however, did not—and all 12 Southern states rely on the federal ACA Marketplace rather than managing their own.³ Thus, access to ACA health insurance was greatly constrained in Southern states in 2020. Re-opening enrollment helped to address pent up demand among Southerners, with enrollment numbers for this time period ranging from 2,509 (WV) to 339,396 (FL) to date. Nationwide, total enrollments are on track to reach a record high.²

In previous years, only individuals experiencing qualifying life events (such as losing health coverage, having a baby, etc.) could enroll in an ACA health plan outside of the open enrollment period. Thus, widening eligibility criteria in 2021 contributed to increased enrollments. But increasing the length of the enrollment window also made accessing health insurance more feasible for time-burdened families many of whom have additional child supervision and family care responsibilities during the pandemic.⁴

With the reopening of the Federal Marketplace, the number of enrollments in ACA health plans in 2021 has greatly surpassed enrollments during the same time period in 2020. The American Rescue Plan also provides increased subsidies for ACA insurance, which will make ACA health insurance more affordable for more Americans.⁵ Lastly, the American Rescue Plan invests \$50 million in marketing and community engagement (up from \$10 million under the previous administration) to reach the uninsured with updated information about subsidies and options.^{3,6}

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.

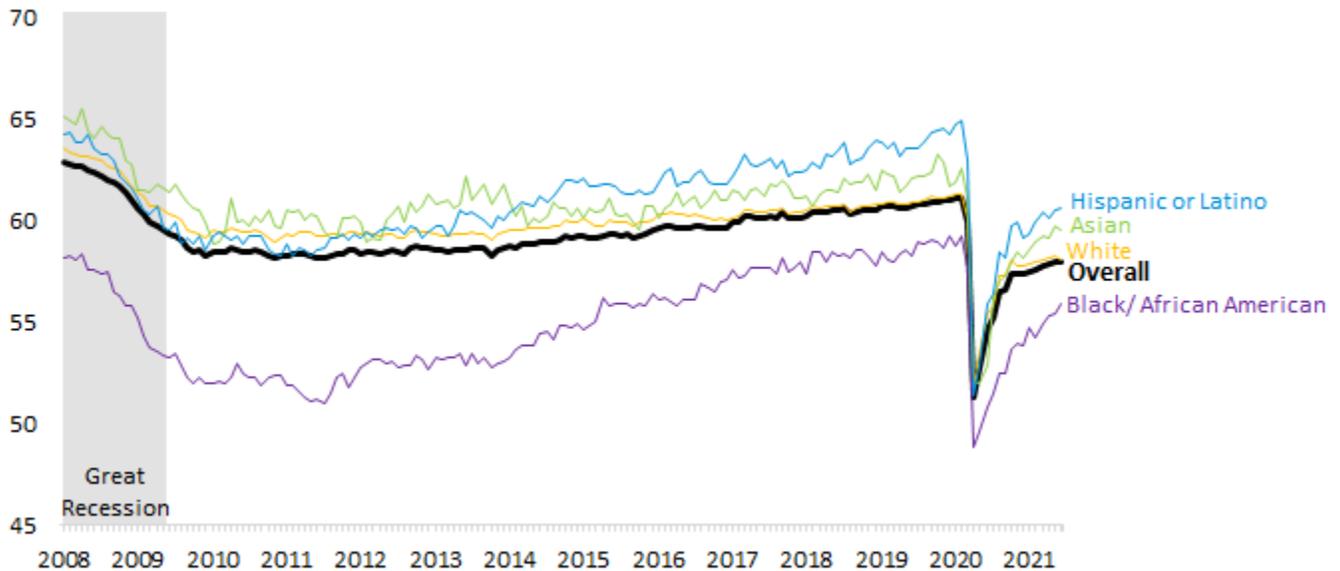
Indicators in this section

- Employment rate by race/ethnicity, U.S.
- Employment rate by gender, U.S.
- Counties where state unemployment insurance fails to cover basic costs
- Food insecurity by state
- Likelihood of eviction or foreclosure by state
- Delayed health care
- Personal income per capita
- Estimated monthly poverty rate by age

The nationwide June employment rate of 58% was below the lowest point during the Great Recession. White, Black, Hispanic, and Asian employment rates were down 3 to 4 percentage points compared to February 2020.

Employment rate by race/ethnicity, U.S.

Jan 2008-June 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.

Although the nation gained 850,000 jobs in June 2021, the employment rate nationwide remained at only 58.0%—below the lowest point during the Great Recession and well below February 2020 when 61.1% of all people ages 16+ had employment. In June 2021, only 56% of Black people 16+ nationwide were employed. White and Asian people 16+ had employment rates of 58% and 60%, respectively. Hispanic employment rates remained highest at 61% with many occupying essential positions in agriculture, food processing, and janitorial services.^{1,2,3}

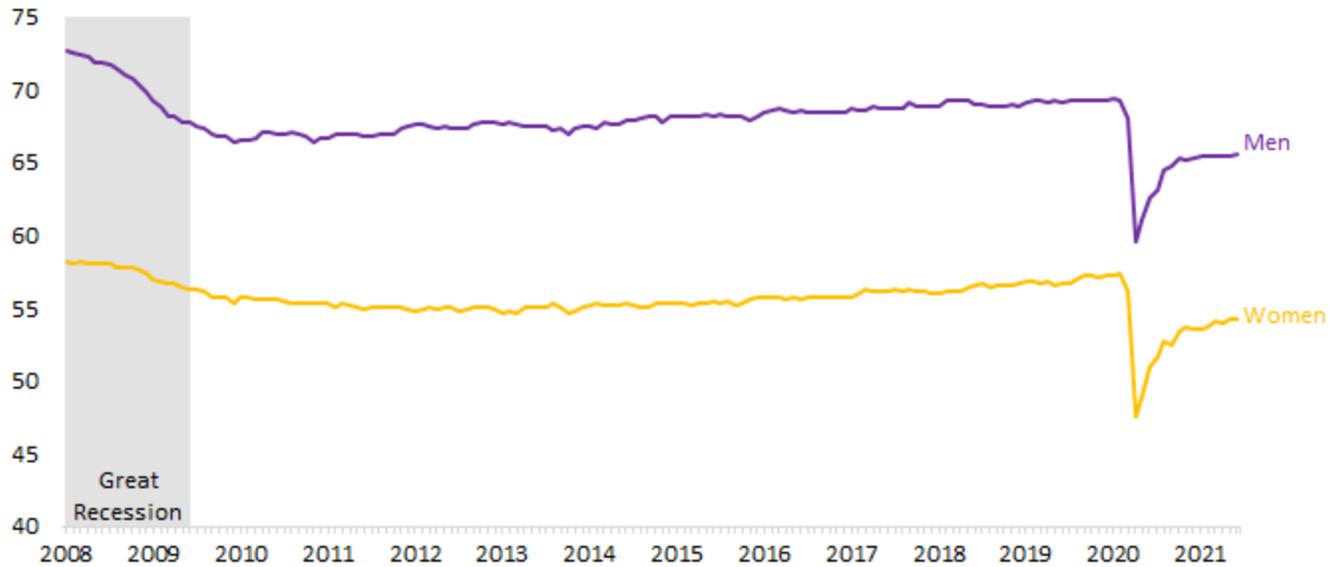
While many employers report difficulty finding workers, jobs have still not rebounded to pre-pandemic levels. Instead workers are quitting at record levels, to some extent driven by the desire to keep working remotely.⁴ Overall, potential hirees are demanding higher wages and better working conditions—including livable wages and work schedules, flexibility and remote work.^{5,6,7} 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 free-lance and gig work that offer 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 Americans without stable employment—particularly African Americans.⁸

While employment rates for both men and women remain below the lowest point during the Great Recession, women’s employment has been particularly hard hit during the Covid recession.

Employment rate by gender, U.S.

Jan 2008-June 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 June 2021, the employment rate for men inched up to 65.6%, while the employment rate for women stayed put at 54.3%. Childcare and elder care remain significant impediments to women’s ability to return to work.

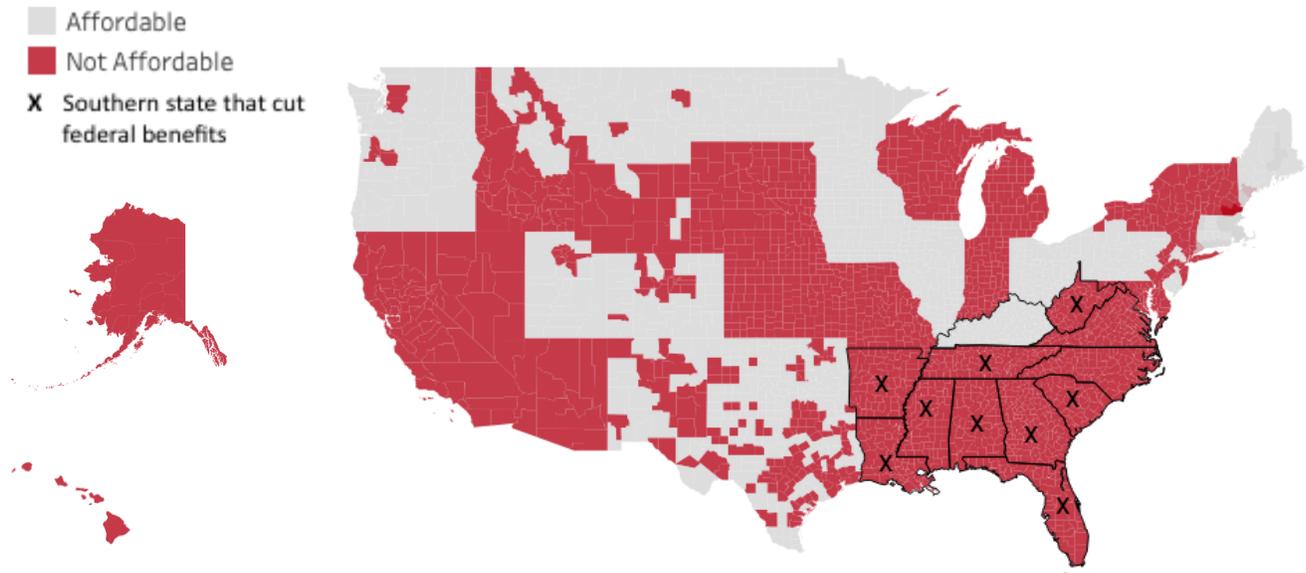
Across the South, roughly 1.3 million slots at licensed childcare providers were estimated to have been lost during the pandemic.¹ In June, nearly 1 million parents reported leaving a job due to lack of childcare, and over 1 million reported being unable to look for a job due to disruption in childcare.

Moreover, 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.² But many women had to provide elder care themselves, making a return to work more difficult. Lack of childcare 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 finding workers. The demand for home health care is projected to continue to grow by 34% by 2029 as the Baby Boom generation ages.³

For Southern workers who receive only state unemployment benefits, cost of living is unaffordable across all counties except in Kentucky. But by early July, 8 Southern states had cut supplemental federal unemployment benefits.

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](#)

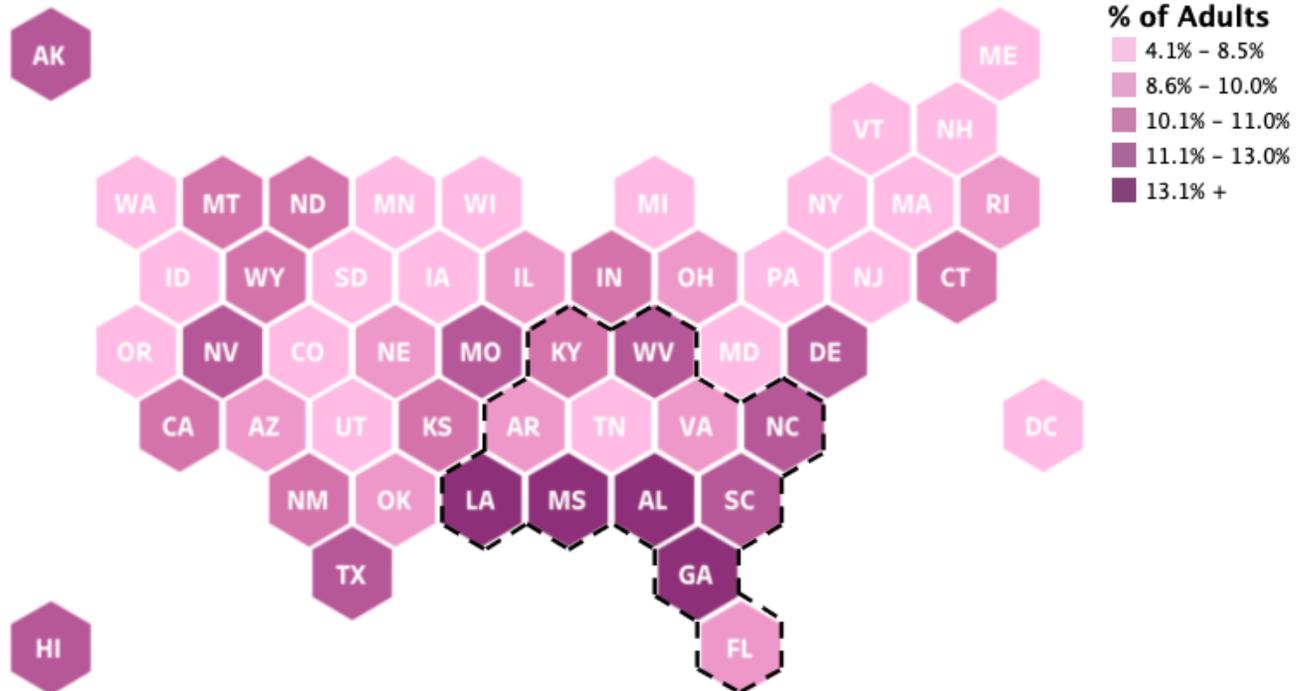
In every Southern state except Kentucky, state unemployment benefits are insufficient to cover basic household expenses. In June, the national unemployment rate remained high at 5.9% (despite the fact that jobs have grown since January). An additional \$300/week in federal unemployment benefits, available since December 2020, has undoubtedly been a lifeline for those who can't find a job. But even these additional federal benefits have not been enough. In March, 1 in 3 households that received unemployment benefits, including the additional federal benefits, continued to have difficulty paying for basic expenses including rent and food.¹ 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.^{2,3}

Even with the additional \$300 federal benefit, weekly unemployment benefits are low. In Louisiana, for example, the maximum unemployment benefit is \$247/wk.⁴ Including the federal supplement, unemployed workers in Louisiana received a max of \$547/wk (equivalent to \$28,444/year or \$13.68/hour). Employers who do not provide wages above \$13.68/hour will be hard pressed to attract workers who must pay their babysitters \$16.75/hour.⁵ In other words, without affordable childcare and afterschool care, many parents can't afford to return to work. Yet by July 3rd, 8 Southern states (AL, AR, FL, GA, MS, SC, TN, WV) had eliminated the \$300 federal benefit, Louisiana is slated to end the \$300 benefit by August 3rd—well before the official end date of these benefits on September 6, and before many schools reopen.⁶

Across the South more than 1 in 10 adults reported their households going hungry in June. AL, GA, LA, and MS have the highest rates of food insecurity in the nation.

Food insecurity, June 9 - 21, 2021

Percentage of adults who report their household sometimes or often went hungry in the last 7 days



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

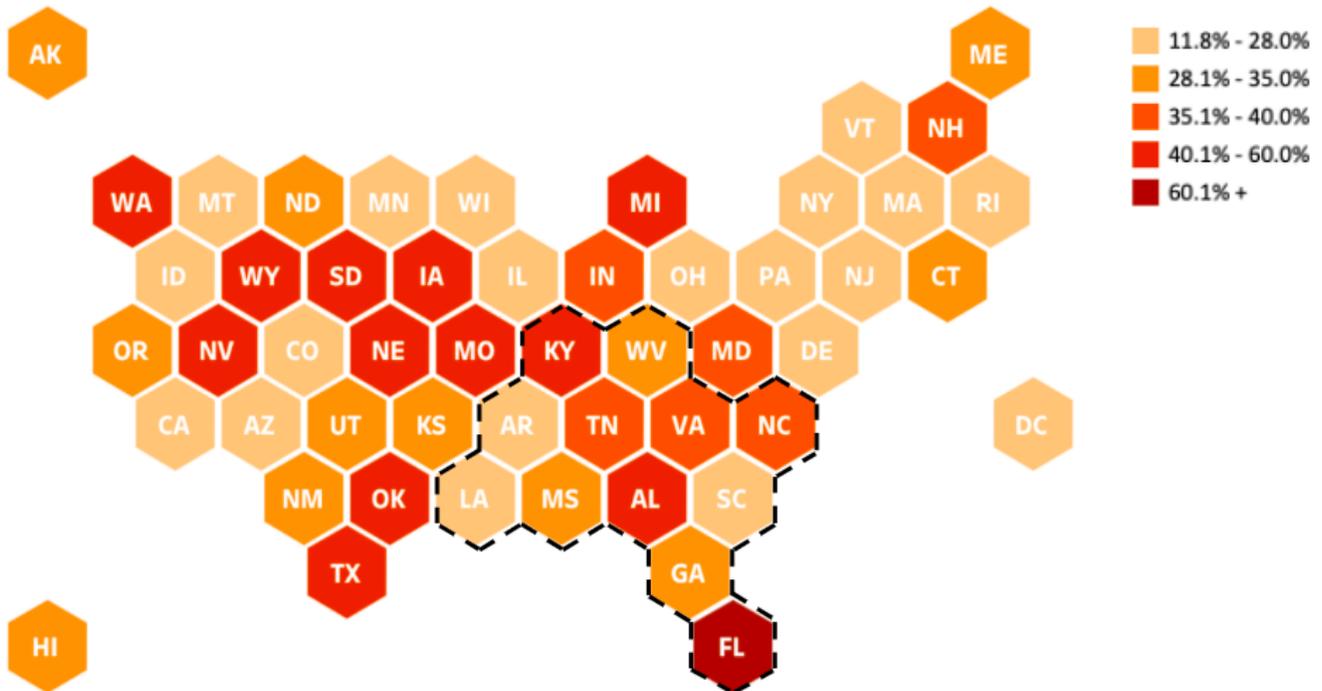
Loss of jobs and fewer working hours have made it difficult for families to keep food on the table. Compounding the problem are food prices which rose early in the pandemic and are expected to rise again due to supply chain issues and labor shortages.^{1,2} More than 1 in 10 Southern adults reported their families didn't have enough to eat in June. In Alabama, nearly 1 in 5 adults reported going hungry. A SEAP survey of SNAP recipients across the South found that half of respondents had trouble accessing public assistance such as SNAP, unemployment benefits, or stimulus payments. Challenges included difficult websites, busy phone lines, and long wait times. Respondents in Mississippi reported the greatest difficulty accessing public food assistance benefits such as SNAP and P-EBT.³

Nationwide, adults with children were particularly likely to report food insecurity. In total, 13% of families with children did not have enough to eat in early March 2021, compared to 8% of households without children.⁴ Moreover, historical data shows a persistent racial disparity, with Black and Hispanic households going hungry at rates twice that of white households.⁵

More than 40% of Southern adults who are late on rent/mortgage expect to be evicted or foreclosed upon in the next two months. In Florida a crisis may be brewing.

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”

June 9 - 21, 2021



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

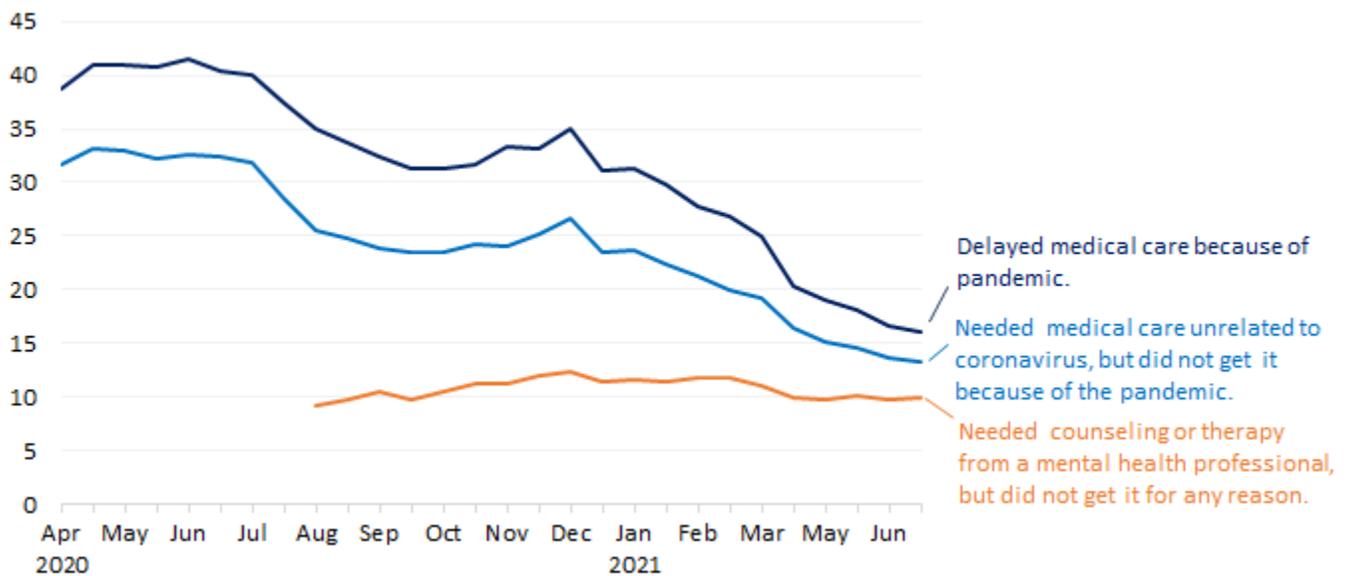
In Florida, more than 60% of adults who are late on their rent or mortgage fear they are likely to be evicted or foreclosed upon in the next two months. Florida may have some of the harshest eviction laws in the country and many evictions there have been filed despite the CDC moratorium.¹ The current CDC moratorium on evictions is effective only until July 31st.² Regardless, the accumulated rents due on July 31st could be enormous.³

More than 40% of Southern adults who are late on housing payments are afraid they will be evicted or foreclosed upon in the next 2 months—with eviction being the more imminent threat. The December Stimulus bill and the March American Rescue Plan 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. This large number and variety of programs has made disbursing the funds slow with only 13% estimated having been spent.⁴

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).⁵ Moreover, open data will be needed to transparently track successes and challenges of rental assistance programs.

The share of adults delaying health care has declined by half since the beginning of the pandemic, but >15% of adults report continued delays.

Percent of adults who delayed or did not receive needed health care in the past four weeks, U.S.
Apr 23, 2020- Jun 21, 2021



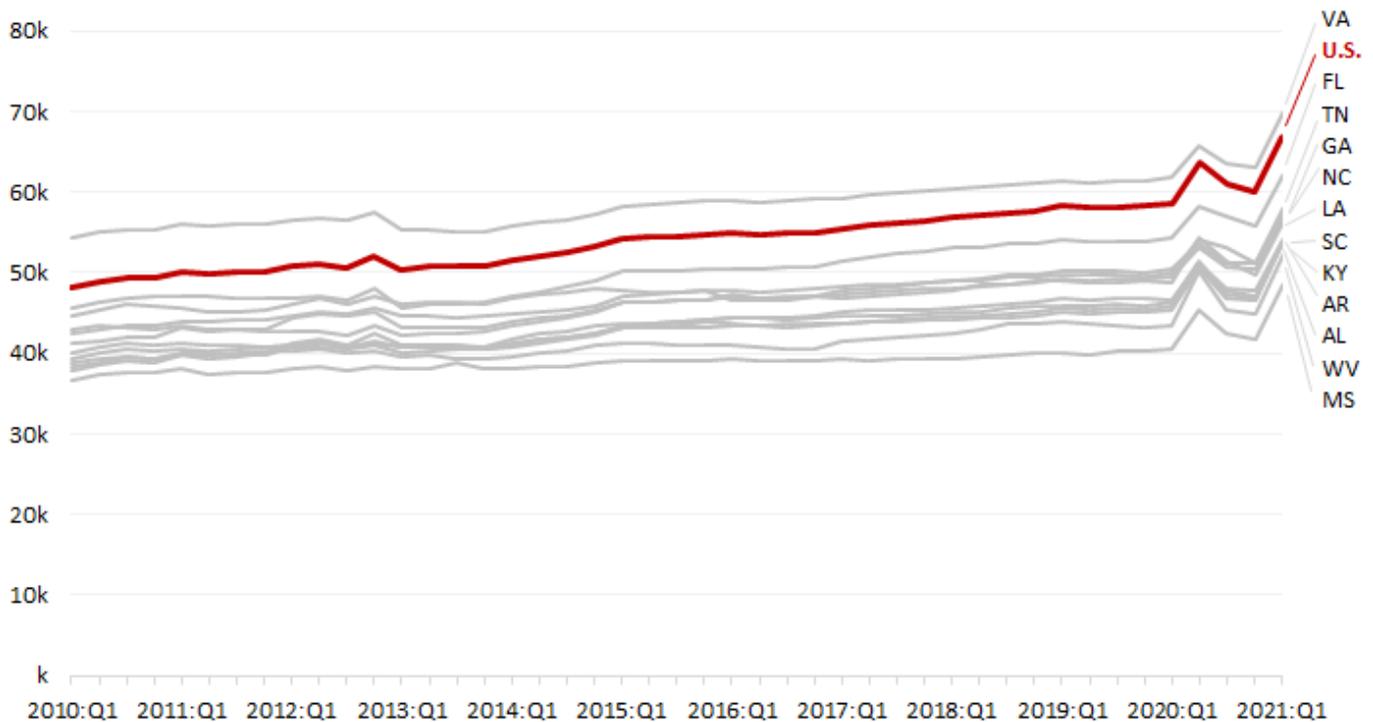
Source: [Census Bureau's Household Pulse Survey](#). Notes: The mental health question was added to the survey in Aug 2020.

Last month, more than 15% of Americans reported delays in medical care due to the pandemic, and 1 in 10 Americans who needed mental health care were not able to get it. As the nation lurches back to normal, the deferral of preventative care is likely to result in more severe health problems in the coming months and years. Outcomes may be particularly devastating for women in fair or poor health, almost half of whom have skipped recommended tests or treatments during the last year.¹ Children are also particularly at risk, with a recent CDC report noting the need to catch up on missed routine vaccinations.² Difficulty accessing mental health care is also taking a toll, with drug overdose deaths up by nearly 30% in 2020 from the year prior.³

Delayed healthcare has already made its mark on the U.S. population. 18 months since the first announcement of Covid on U.S. soil, more than 600,000 people have died from the virus, and an additional 64,000-162,000 people died from other causes beyond the number expected for that time period.⁴ Such “excess deaths” reflect a variety of challenges. Some of these excess non-Covid deaths could have been misclassified and were actually Covid cases, some may have been patients reluctant to seek care in a pandemic, others may have fallen victim to cracks in the healthcare system, and many could not afford to seek care without health insurance. A research letter last fall to the Journal of the American Medical Association noted that the U.S. ranked among the nations experiencing the highest rates of excess deaths, and attributes this in part to “weak public health infrastructure and a decentralized, inconsistent U.S. response to the pandemic.”⁵

Personal income spiked in the first quarter of 2021 largely due to \$2,000+ stimulus payments, which contributed primarily to personal savings.

Real personal income per capita, 2010:Q1 to 2021:Q1
Southern states and U.S.



Source: [Bureau of Economic Analysis](#). CPI-U for inflation adjustment.

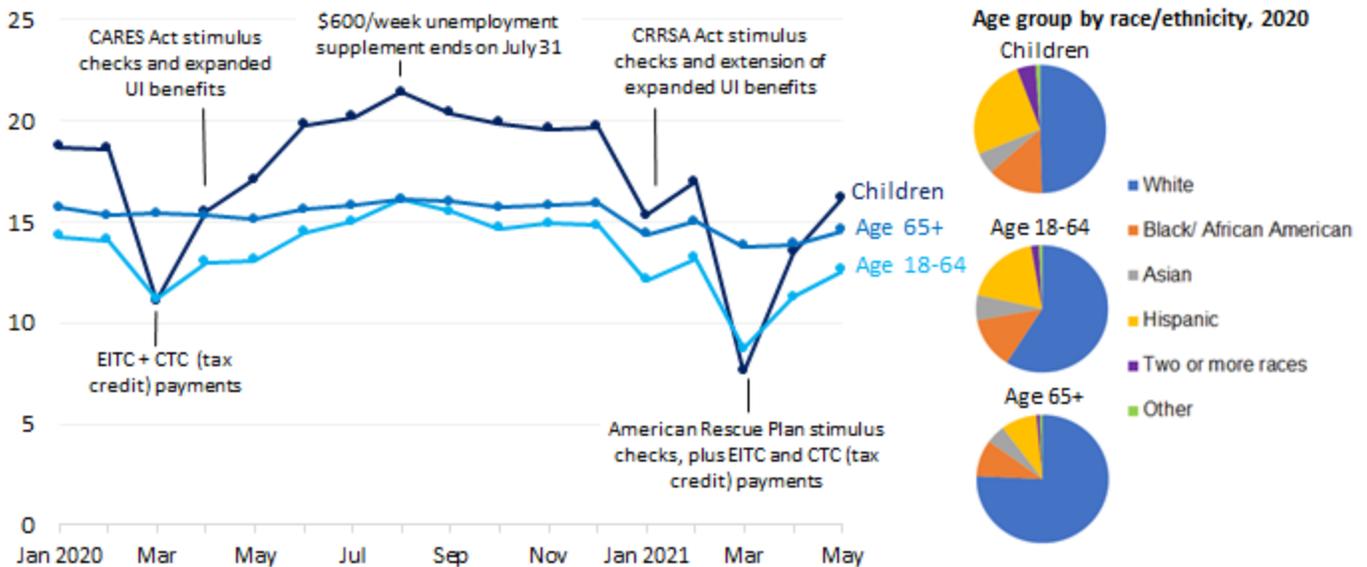
Direct stimulus payments to households (employed and unemployed alike)—including \$600+ in early January and \$1400+ in late March/early April—were the largest contributors to the jump in personal income in the first quarter (Q1) of 2021. Specifically, “other transfer payments” jumped by nearly \$2 trillion largely due to direct stimulus dollars. In contrast, higher unemployment benefits increased aggregate personal income by only \$250 billion. During the same time, personal income due to wages increased by about \$200 billion—continuing a consistent recovery in wage income since Q2 2020.¹

From December 2020 to April 2021, as stimulus payments were rolling out, food insecurity in American households decreased by over 40%, financial instability fell by 45%, and anxiety also fell by 20%. These reductions in “hardship” were most pronounced among families with children.² Analyses of actual consumer spending data following these stimulus payments in the 2nd quarter of 2020 found that low-income households increased their spending, but high-income households did not.³ Instead, the personal savings rate more than doubled from the 1st quarter 2020 to the 1st quarter of 2021. Thus, the very large federal expenditure on direct stimulus payments contributed more to savings of well-off families than to reducing hardships among low-income families. Harvard researchers estimated that each \$200 billion of direct stimulus dollars yielded only \$15 billion in additional spending, and recommended that federal spending directed specifically to lower-income households would provide more economic benefit per dollar spent.⁴

Stimulus checks and expanded unemployment benefits kept millions out of poverty during the pandemic, but did not entirely blunt a rise in poverty.

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.

After the Great Depression, Social Security was enacted to reduce poverty and stabilize the financial well-being of the elderly. But the program originally excluded domestic and agricultural workers—a large percentage of whom were African American.¹ Unemployment insurance (UI) and Aid to Families with Dependent Children (commonly called “welfare”) were also enacted in 1935. Programs designed to provide assistance to non-elderly low-income Americans including Head Start, food assistance programs, and the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC) were instituted in the 1960s and 70s.² Welfare was reformed in 1996 to include work requirements, but the Child Tax Credit (CTC) provided some support to families with children starting in 1998.³ For 20 years, the CTC received strong bi-partisan support and was increased several times, most recently in 2018.⁴ Studies of the effect of the Child Tax Credit reveal that this additional financial support for children helped increase student test scores, reduce teen birth rates, and yield higher earnings in adulthood.⁵

By far the largest safety net in the U.S. benefits the elderly. In 2019, \$1 trillion was spent on Social Security. In contrast, \$360 billion was spent on safety net programs such as the EITC, Child Tax Credit, unemployment insurance, food assistance and childcare.⁶ 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).⁷

Estimates of monthly poverty rates during the pandemic highlight the benefit of annual EITC and CTC payments for working-age adults and children. They also illustrate how stimulus and expanded unemployment reduced financial hardships, particularly for children. Still the monthly child poverty rate fluctuated between 8% and 21% from January 2020 to May 2021. The 2021 American Rescue Plan includes new expanded CTC payments which the vast majority of American families will begin receiving monthly in July through December of 2021. Experts estimate these CTC payments will greatly reduce child poverty and also increase demand for school supplies, clothes, and food.⁸

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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 second 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) 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) 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) 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

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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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