About this series

History has shown that large-scale crises accelerate pre-existing trends and permanently change societies and civic life. While most of the nation's attention is currently focused on the response to Covid-19, we must ensure that recovery efforts in the months and years ahead lead to a more just and equitable society. *Pandemic to Prosperity* offers a comprehensive overview of the Covid-related impacts on our lives and livelihoods, governments, civic institutions, and overall well being.

Pandemic to Prosperity is a trusted, relevant, and highly-vetted source of information crucial for steering society toward a fair and complete recovery and yielding a better union than before the pandemic. This report – the third in a monthly series – analyzes disparate data, adding top-level insights about the implications of each indicator, what each indicator reveals, and how the indicators are interrelated. Such an objective, unbiased resource is essential in a world where there is almost too much data to process and verified facts are often overcome by disinformation.

Recovery from the pandemic will vary across communities, and different populations will face various barriers to achieving shared prosperity. *Pandemic to Prosperity's* thoughtfully-curated data will illuminate the challenges facing the nation'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 National Conference on Citizenship (NCoC) developed the *Pandemic to Prosperity* series. It builds on NCoC's data infrastructure and advocacy network developed for its national *Civic Health Index*, and leveraging the authors' success with *The New Orleans Index*, which informed many public and private decisions and actions post-Katrina. This series is designed to enable a solid understanding of the damage to lives and livelihoods as the pandemic continues to unfold; it will also examine aspirational goals around strong and accountable government, functioning institutions from child care to internet access to local news availability, and outcomes for people by race regarding employment, health, housing, etc. Until the recovery starts to stabilize, NCoC will publish Pandemic to Prosperity monthly, with indicators changing as the recovery transitions. This report highlights mostly state-level metrics with breakdowns by race, gender, and age where available, relying on both public and private data sources.

Sept 21, 2020

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Eight months since the first announcement of Covid-19 on U.S. soil, crises have begun to compound one another. Fires on the West Coast have damaged thousands of homes and brought air quality across most of Washington, Oregon, and California to unhealthy levels.[1,2] Hurricanes continue to ravage the South, and those forced to evacuate are straining available lodging in the cities that receive them.[3,4]

Meanwhile, the nation still has 11.5 million fewer jobs than at the start of 2020, and the share of adults with employment is lower than at the depths of the Great Recession, with youth and black adults experiencing the weakest employment prospects. Unemployment claims remain double their peak during the Great Recession. Freelancers, gig workers, contractors, and others ineligible for standard unemployment benefits may apply for specialized Pandemic Unemployment Assistance (PUA). Combined PUA claims and standard state unemployment claims indicate an astronomical 30 million workers, contractors, and sole proprietors are without earnings.

In 8 out of 10 counties nationwide, basic costs of housing, food, and transportation are unaffordable for those relying solely on current unemployment benefits. Not surprisingly, in half of all states, at least 1 in 3 adults anticipate they will be evicted or foreclosed upon in the next two months. And nationwide, more than 1 in 10 adults report their households have gone hungry during the pandemic.

New Census Bureau data on 2019 internet access reveals little improvement from the previous year. Even in states with the highest prevalence, 1 in 5 households lack internet access. This impacts children and young adults more than in the past, due to increased dependency on the internet for education. In particular, Black children are shown to be suffering from the lack of internet access, as they face learning loss and are more likely to be penalized for truancy when they cannot access online school. Equitable internet access will be crucial for a comprehensive path forward for schools during the pandemic.

Without clear guidance from the federal government, individuals, parents, businesses, schools, and institutions are all struggling to make good choices about how to manage risk of exposure to the virus while still earning a living, generating revenue, and/or keeping students' learning and development on track. All of this plus social isolation have caused 62% of adults to report feeling anxiety, with those earning below $25k feeling anxiety at a rate 15 percentage points higher than those earning $200k or more. Not surprisingly, households with children report anxiety at a rate 6 percentage points higher than those without.

With only days remaining before the Administration's deadline for counting everyone in the U.S., 5 states still have fewer than 90% of households enumerated in the 2020 Census. These include southern states where, in addition to Covid-related challenges, hurricanes have caused evacuations and near impossible conditions for completing the count.[5] Because census numbers are used to divide up congressional seats and federal funding by state, every state needs a complete count in order for those divisions to be fair.

Moreover, weeks before the national election on November 3rd, many states remain unprepared to hold safe elections in pandemic conditions.

Additional indicators include:

- States in the South and Midwest have the highest Covid case rates, while cases are stabilized in the Northeast. Hotspots continue to emerge across the rest of the nation.
- Native American, African American, and Hispanic/Latinx individuals are 4.5 times more likely to have severe Covid impacts than white individuals.
- Only 3 states—all in the Northeast—are currently making progress towards the *White House Opening Up America Guidelines*, with the majority of states trending poorly.
- At least 8 states are projecting fiscal year 2020 tax revenue reductions of 10% or more. In FY 2021, at least 32 states expect additional tax revenue reductions of 10% or more.
- More than half of counties currently experiencing high rates of new cases of Covid are in news deserts, meaning a critical vehicle for trusted information during the pandemic is unavailable.

As the data continues to reflect, states vary greatly in their ability to protect lives and livelihoods, support their most vulnerable, and prepare for safe and fair upcoming elections.

Pandemic to Prosperity continues to track changes to these and a number of other indicators each month as a means for measuring progress as the nation endeavors to simultaneously manage Covid and build a more equitable future.

Pandemic
Lives and Livelihoods

To begin 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 until an effective vaccine is developed and universally distributed. As such, tracking Covid-related damage will require monitoring more than one metric over multiple months.

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

Much of the current discussion about the pandemic is limited to these types of indicators 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 our nation's civic health.

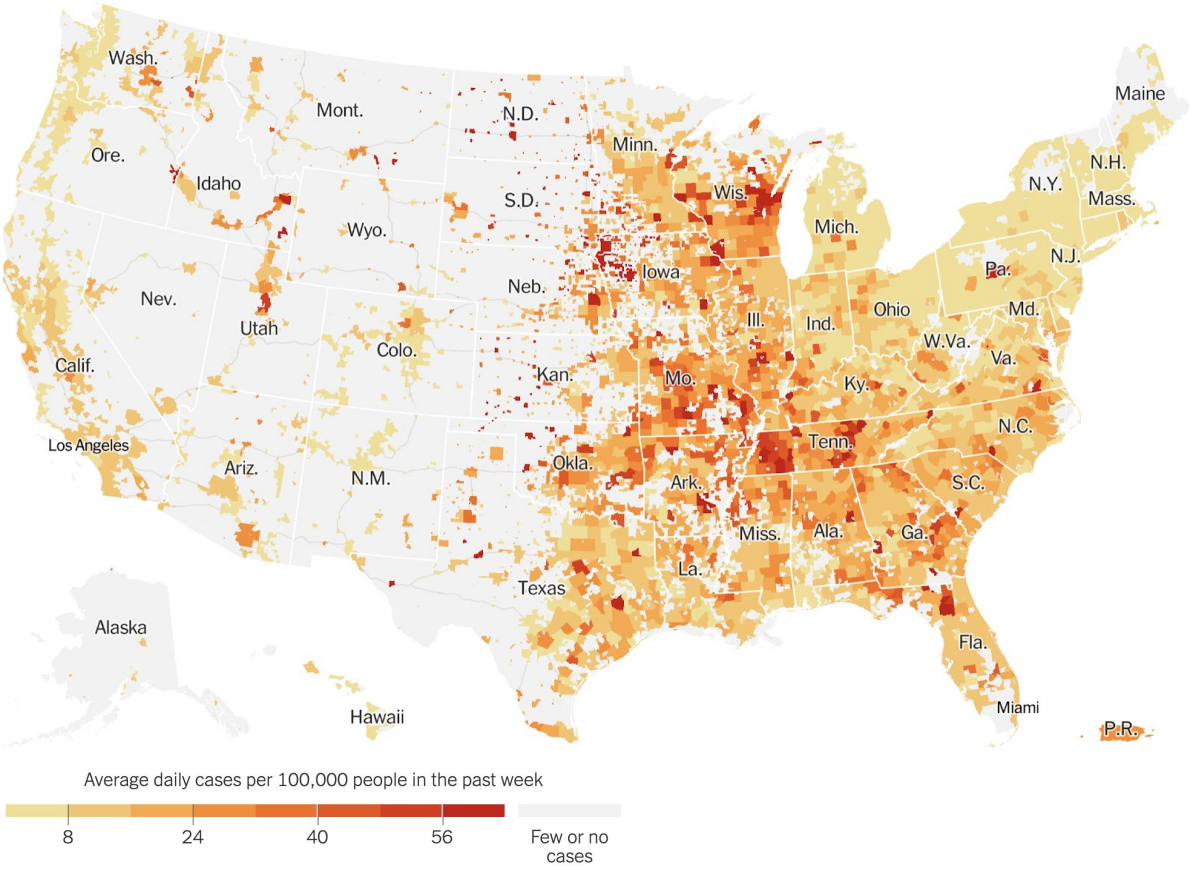
As more data becomes available, additional metrics will be added to this section to assess better how states are protecting lives and livelihoods.

Indicators in this section

- New Covid cases in past week
- Age-adjusted Covid-19-associated hospitalization rates by race/ethnicity
- Total jobs lost
- Unemployment claims

The South and Midwest have the highest Covid case rates, with hotspots continuing to erupt across rural America.

Average daily cases per 100,000 people in past week, by county
Analysis of state and local health agencies and hospitals data as of Sep 20, 2020



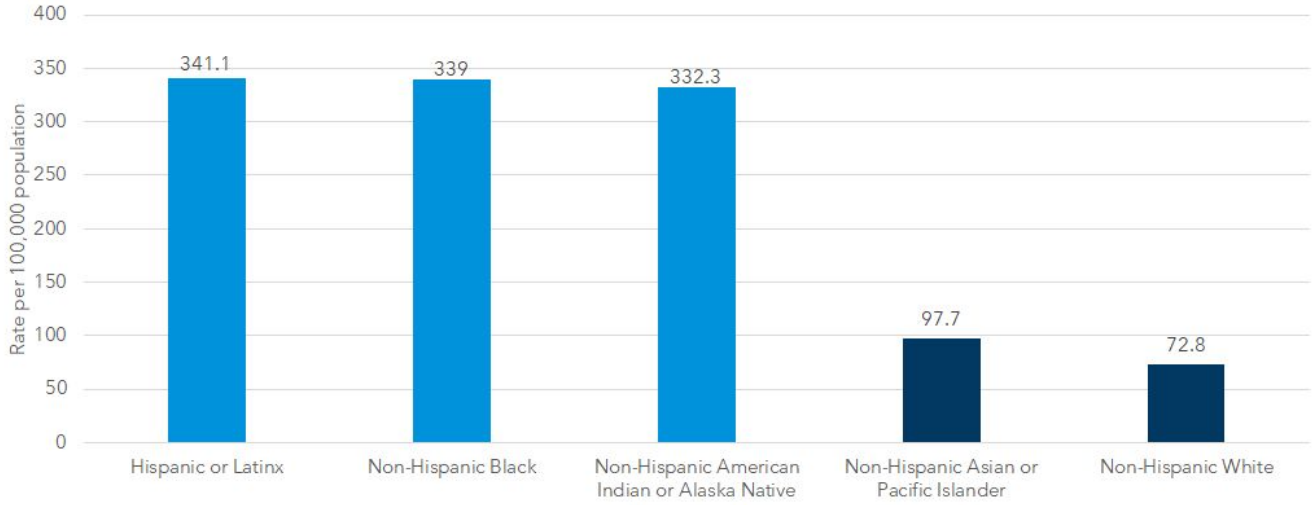
Source: From The New York Times. © 2020 The New York Times Company. All rights reserved. Used under license.

Despite concerns about testing backlogs this month, the rate of new cases still represents the most valid and immediate indicator of Covid's spread.[1,2] Both hospitalization and death rates – while important measures of impact – lag weeks or months after initial diagnosis and fail to capture the full magnitude of the pandemic.[3] However, epidemiologists warn that in the absence of widespread random sampling of the population, we will not know the pandemic's true scale and will continue to struggle in managing the crisis. The hotspots of new cases in the last week are troubling, and only represent perhaps as little as 1 in 5 of the actual infection rate.[4,5]

The Northeast, which experienced the worst of the virus early, continues to hold levels down. The West and Gulf Coasts have reduced covid rates over the last month. However, medical professionals are concerned that wildfire smoke in the West may worsen Covid outcomes for those residents, and gulf coast states are wrestling with high case rates as they reel from Hurricane Sally and prepare for Tropical Storm Beta. The Dakotas, Wisconsin, Montana, Oklahoma, Iowa, Arkansas, Utah, and Tennessee are experiencing extraordinarily high rates of infection (above 150 new cases in the last week per 100k population). Local leaders attribute these flare-ups to the return of in-person classes at schools and universities, transmission in group quarters such as correctional facilities and Immigration Customs and Enforcement (ICE) facilities, and failure to wear masks in public.[6,7,8,9]

American Indian/Alaskan Native, African American, and Hispanic/Latinx individuals are ~4.5 times more likely to have severe Covid impacts than white individuals.

Age-adjusted Covid-19-associated hospitalization rates, March 1-September 5, 2020
By race and ethnicity



Source: CDC

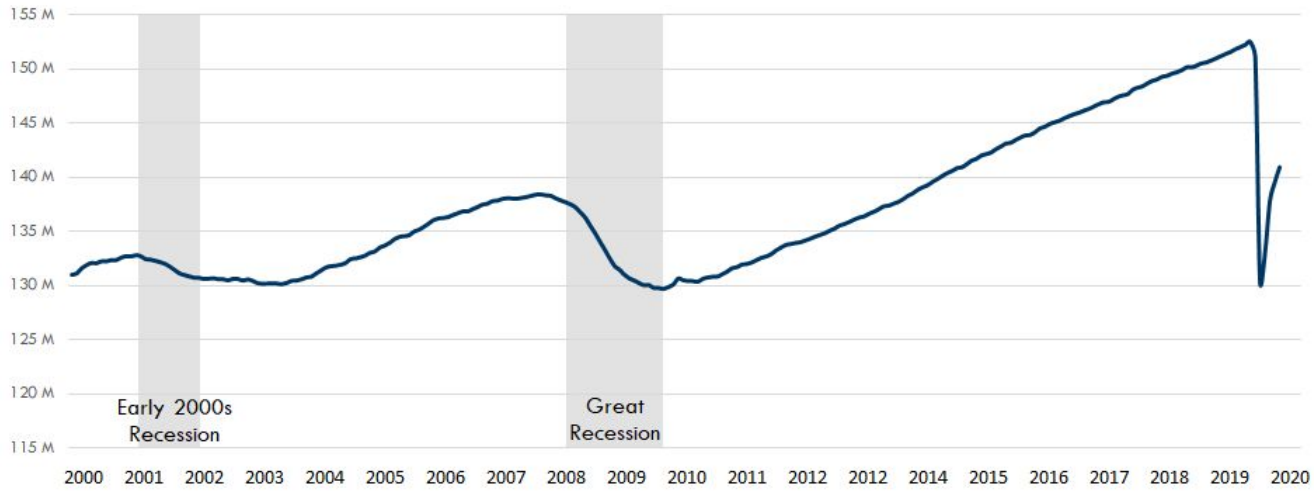
Despite ongoing debates about the quality and completeness of data on Covid cases reported by hospitals,[1] available data on hospitalizations nonetheless illuminates stark disparities between racial groups. Hispanic/Latinx, Black, and Indigenous individuals are around 4.5 times more likely to be hospitalized or die due to Covid than white people.

Recent CDC analyses of hospitalization data reveal that the disparity applies to children as well, with cumulative hospitalization rates 8 and 5 times higher, respectively, for Hispanic and Black children than for white children.[2]

Racial disparities in health outcomes have existed long before Covid, but only partially explain the divide in this pandemic. Emerging research points to occupational exposure as a key driver of higher infection rates.[3] Populations of color most impacted by Covid are over-represented in front-line work such as agriculture, food processing, transportation, janitorial work, and caregiving, and thus are not granted the privilege of working from home.[4,5,6] Plus the cumulative health impacts of living in unsafe neighborhoods, breathing polluted air, having less access to healthy foods or quality medical care, and a lifetime of experiencing racial discrimination mean that these populations have higher rates of comorbidities such as diabetes, heart disease, and obesity that are associated with greater morbidity and mortality in Covid cases.[7,8,9,10] For example, baseline rates of diabetes are nearly 15% among Native Americans, 13% for Hispanics, and 12% for Black Americans, compared to 8% for white Americans according to the CDC's 2020 National Diabetes Statistics Report.[11]

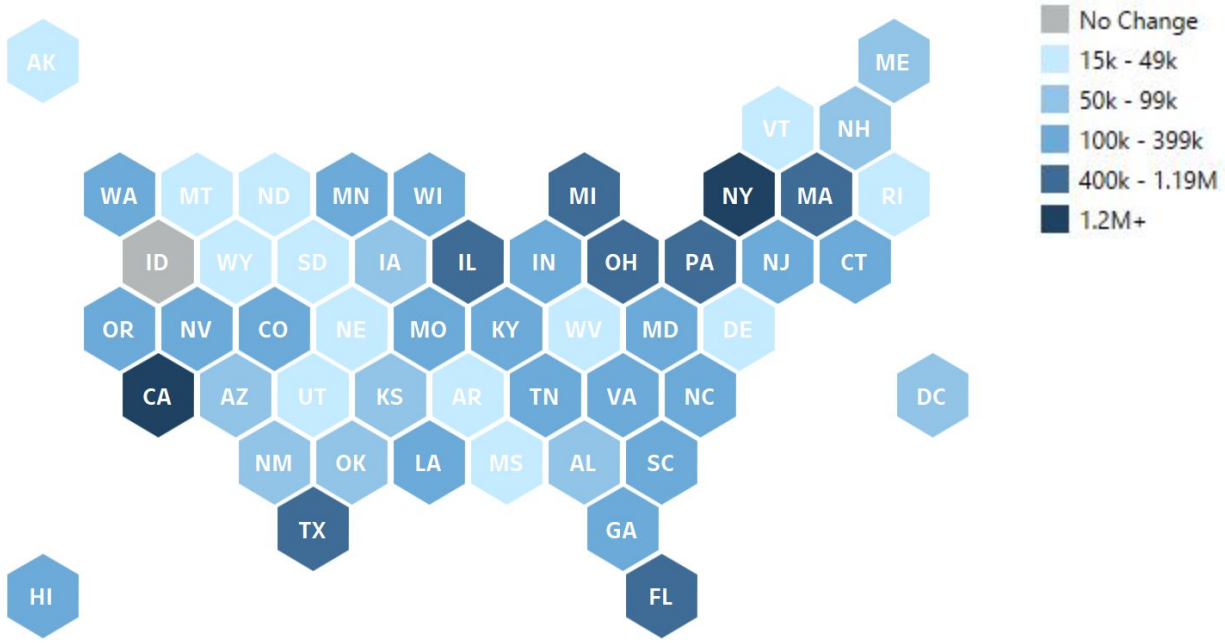
The U.S. has 10 million fewer jobs than one year earlier. 2 states have lost more than 1 million jobs and 7 additional states have lost 400k+ jobs.

Total jobs by month, U.S.



Source: Bureau of Labor Statistics

Loss of jobs by state, August 2019 to August 2020
Employment by state, seasonally adjusted

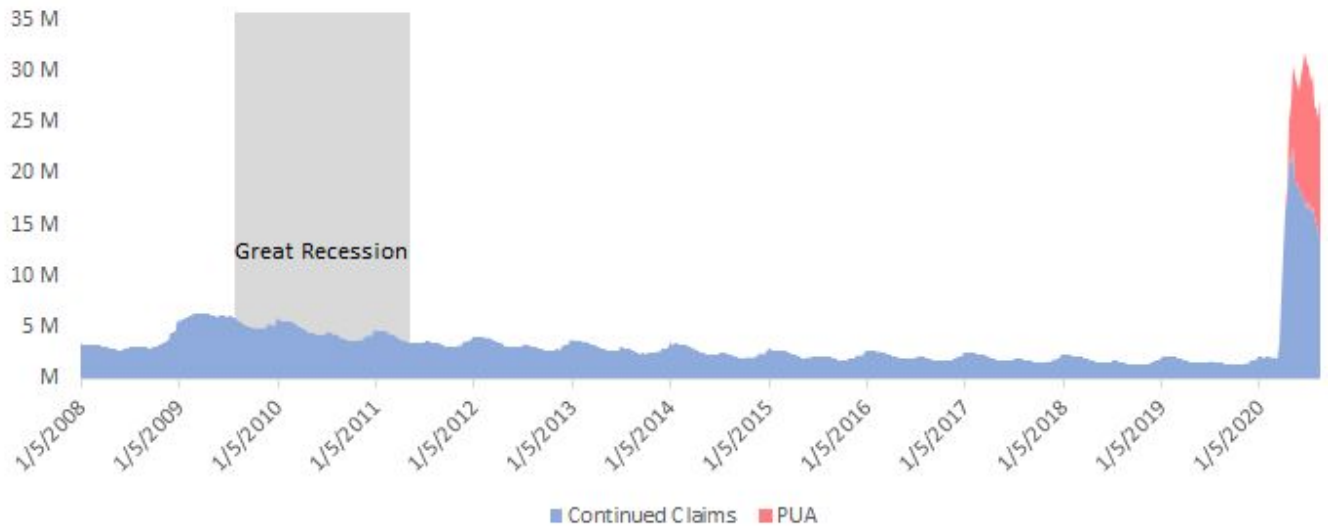


Source: Bureau of Labor Statistics Note: Data for July 2020 and August 2020 are preliminary

The total number of U.S. jobs fell from a high of 152 million in February 2020 to a low of 130 million by April 2020. Despite recent rebounds, the total number of jobs in September at 140 million is still 11.5 million fewer than its February peak. The U.S. hasn't experienced such a low jobs number since March 2014. Both California and New York have at least 1.2 million fewer jobs compared to last summer. Texas, Pennsylvania, Florida, Ohio, Michigan, Illinois, and Massachusetts each lost more than 400,000 jobs in August compared to a year ago.

As of August 15, the number of continuing unemployment claims, not including special pandemic unemployment assistance claims, is more than double the peak claims from the Great Recession.

Continuing unemployment claims, regular state and Pandemic Unemployment Assistance
Through August 15, 2020



Source: Department of Labor, Economic Policy Institute Note: Non-seasonally adjusted numbers, due to change in counting methods. PUA and Continued Claims should be non-overlapping, but in some instances may be due to counting errors.

There were 3.5 times more continued unemployment claims during the height of the Covid-19 pandemic (thus far) compared to the height of the Great Recession. As of August 15, there are more than double the claims than at the Great Recession's peak. Pandemic Unemployment Assistance has also been made available to some of those not eligible for the regular assistance. This expanded support helps those in certain work situations or those who have exhausted normal assistance avenues.

Due to the enormous job loss, Congress approved an additional $600 in weekly unemployment benefits in March. But this support ended in late July, and unemployed workers are now receiving only about 40% of their pre-pandemic wages per week.[2] This will likely contribute to significant hardships for millions of American households including food and housing insecurity. In addition, recent research from Opportunity Insights suggests that the effects of stimulus payments and the PPP program on consumer spending has been minimal. In contrast, social safety net programs like unemployment benefits have the potential to spur demand and support jobs.[3] In fact, one economic analysis estimated that the loss of the additional $600/month would reduce consumer spending and lead to the loss of roughly 2 million jobs over the next year.[4]

Prosperity

The previous section examined how the pandemic has affected the lives and livelihoods of people across the country. The next section moves on from the "damage assessment" to track measures that will be important for 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.

Government

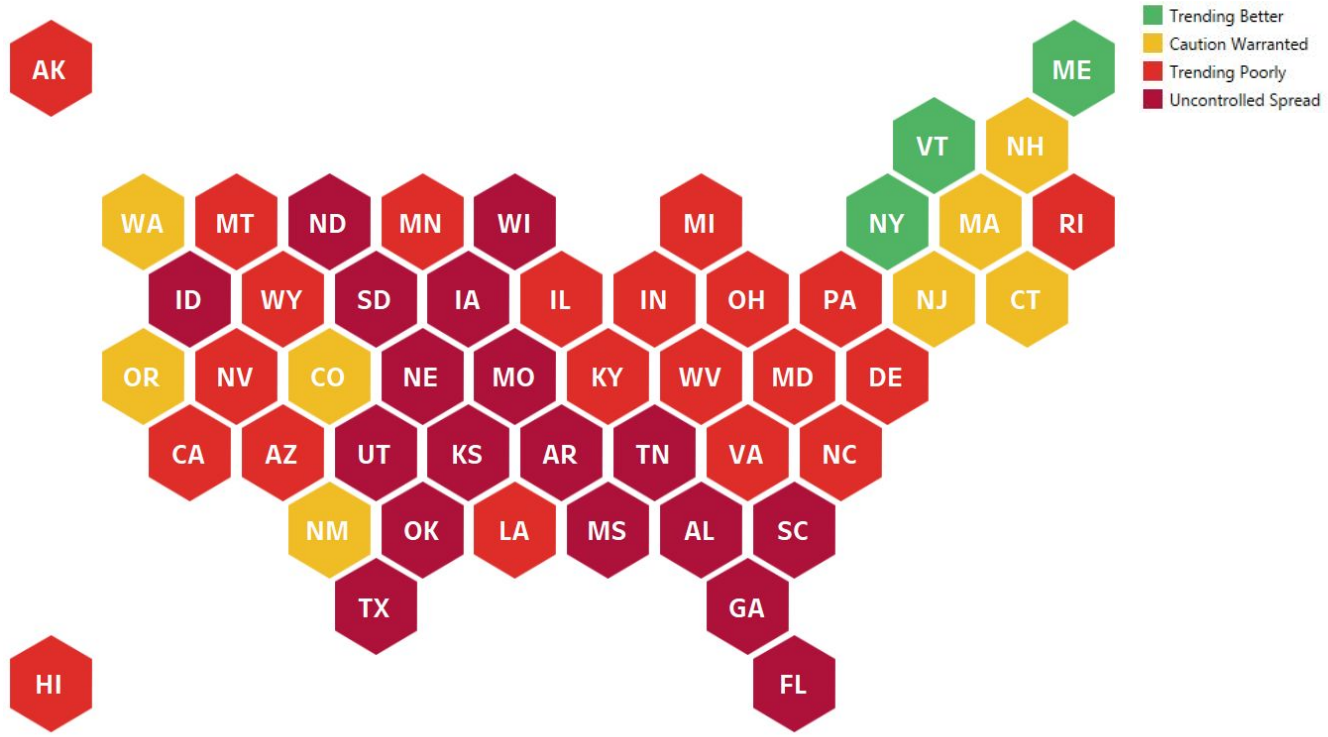
Governments–local, state, and federal–are being asked to do a lot during the Covid crisis. We start with metrics that assess how states are performing relative to White House reopening guidelines, available data on Covid-related funding to states, the projected tax revenues states will need for their myriad public functions, challenges the pandemic presents for counting all residents for the 2020 Census, and preparedness for the upcoming presidential election. 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

- Progress toward White House *Opening Up America Again* Guidelines
- Paycheck Protection Program loans as share of small businesses
- FY 2020 and 2021 preliminary estimates of decline in tax revenues
- 2020 Census enumeration progress by state
- Non-voters who cited structural reasons for not voting in the 2016 election
- Readiness to vote by mail in a pandemic

Only 3 states are making progress toward White House *Opening Up America Again* guidelines, with former Northeast hotspots faring best.

Progress toward White House *Opening Up America Again* Guidelines
As of September 16, 2020



Source: Covidexitstrategy.org

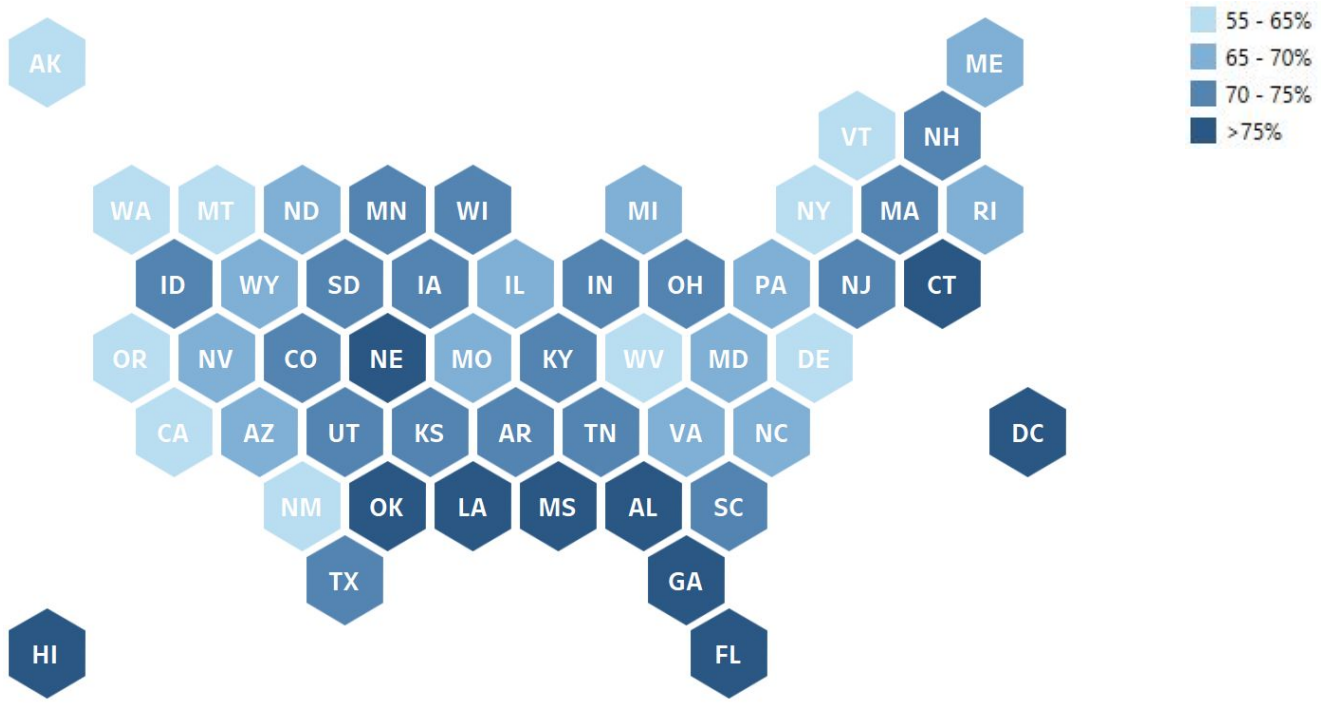
The White House *Opening Up America Guidelines* set criteria for reopening based on trajectory of new cases, hospital capacity, and degree of testing.[1] Challenges with quality and availability of data on deaths, number of people in ICUs, tests conducted, contact tracers hired, and more continue to be a theme in the pandemic.[2] Public trust in data is low as well, with roughly 1 in 3 of Americans believing the death numbers are inflated, and 1 in 3 that they are under-reported.[3] Regardless, as of September 16, 3 states (all in the Northeast) are meeting the minimal White House criteria. Meanwhile 18 are categorized as having "uncontrolled spread" – down 2 from last month.

Though the guidelines are federal, the responsibility for public health programs and policies to support safe reopening falls to state and local governments. Policy tracking initiatives from the National Governors Association and National League of Cities reveal a wide range of policies on masks, gatherings, business reopenings, and reopenings of public services such as libraries, schools, and childcare centers.[4,5] Ultimately, though, much of the power to contain the spread lies with individual choices. In the absence of a vaccine or effective treatment, public health measures such as social distancing, wearing masks, and widespread testing are essential for managing the pandemic.

As of mid-September, nearly a quarter of Americans now know somebody who has died of the disease – driving home how high the stakes are for reopening policies.[6]

In many states across the South, as well as HI, CT, and D.C., more than 75% of businesses received CARES Act (PPP) forgivable small business loans.

Paycheck Protection Program (PPP) loans as a share of total small businesses
CARES Act small business loan approvals through July 6, small businesses have < 500 employees



Source: Brookings Institution
Note: Brookings' Small business data comes from the 2018 Annual Business Survey -- firms with fewer than 500 employees, excluding independent contractors, self-employed individuals, and sole-proprietors.

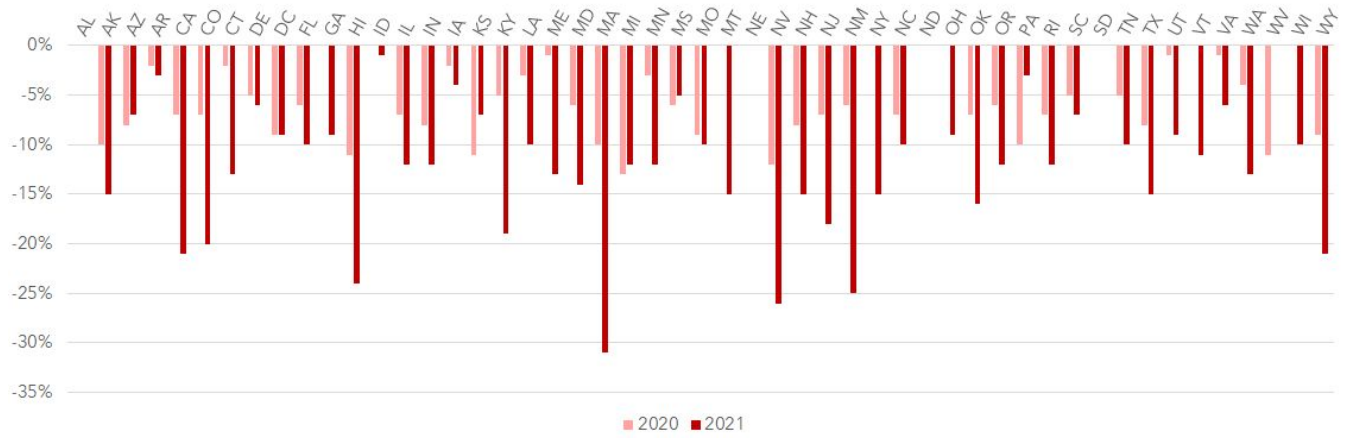
Nearly $350 billion in PPP forgivable loans were approved before April 19th. An additional $173 billion in loans were approved between late April and August. When the program deadline was reached on August 8th, $134 billion remained unclaimed.[1]

In early July, the SBA released detailed data about the companies that had received PPP loans. A Brookings analysis of this data found that 70% of all small businesses in the U.S. received PPP funding. However, in several states less than 65% of small businesses received the loans including Alaska, California, Delaware, Montana, New Mexico, New York, Oregon, Vermont, Washington, and West Virginia. In contrast, in most southern states more than 75% of small businesses received this federal support.[2] More than one study found that minority-owned businesses and very small businesses, with fewer than 10 employees, were less likely to receive PPP funding.[2,3,4] Moreover, the PPP funding was meant to support payroll costs for roughly 2.5 months. With the pandemic continuing to depress demand among high-interaction industries such as brick and mortar retail, small businesses will need additional financial support to stave off a wave of closures. An analysis by Opportunity Insights found that demand has decreased most dramatically in higher-income neighborhoods, and small businesses in these communities may be particularly at risk.[5]

Eight states are projecting tax revenue reductions of 10% or greater for the fiscal year 2020, increasing to at least 32 states for FY 2021.

FY 2020 and 2021 preliminary estimates of decline in tax revenues by state, as of September 11

Percent decline in tax revenues



Note: Some states do not have published projections for both or either years

Source: Center on Budget and Policy Priorities

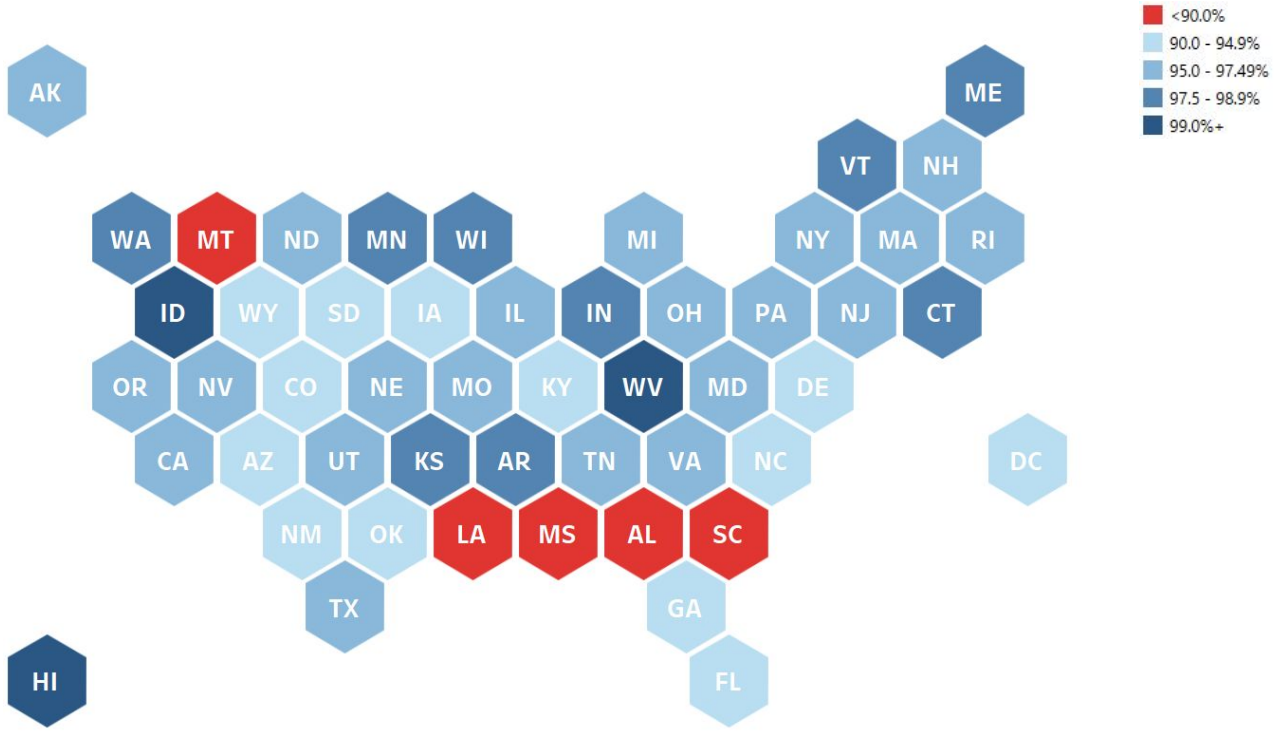
The economic crisis spurred by Covid hits states directly, especially in terms of reduced income and sales tax revenues. State tax collections have declined by 5.5% in fiscal year 2020 according to new Census data.[1] The disparate impacts of the pandemic on demand for tourism and oil & gas hit states' finances as well. Hardest hit in fiscal year 2020 were Michigan and Nevada, with an 13% and 12% reduction respectively, due in large part to unemployment, reduced production, and tourism.[2,3]

For fiscal year 2021, 32 states are projecting a tax revenue reduction of 10% or greater. Loss of jobs in service industries and travel specifically will have a major impact on the tax revenues of states such as Massachusetts and Nevada, projecting losses of 31% and 26% respectively.[4,3] Hawaii will also be affected by the loss of tourism, projecting a 24% loss in tax revenues.[5] Energy-producing states such as Wyoming and New Mexico are projecting declines of 21-25% driven by losses in oil & gas.[6,7]

This revenue loss will have an impact on funding essential services states provide such as education, disaster preparedness and response, public spaces, and transportation.[8] More troubling is the impact these reductions could have on the state's ability to mount a robust public health response to Covid.[9] For example, recent NPR survey of states found that only 3 states plus D.C. are appropriately staffed for contact tracing.[10]

Five states have 2020 Census enumeration rates below 90%, making a fair count across all states less likely by the Administration's deadline of September 30.

2020 Census Housing Unit Enumeration Progress by State
As of September 19, 2020



Source: U.S. Census Bureau Total Response Rates by State

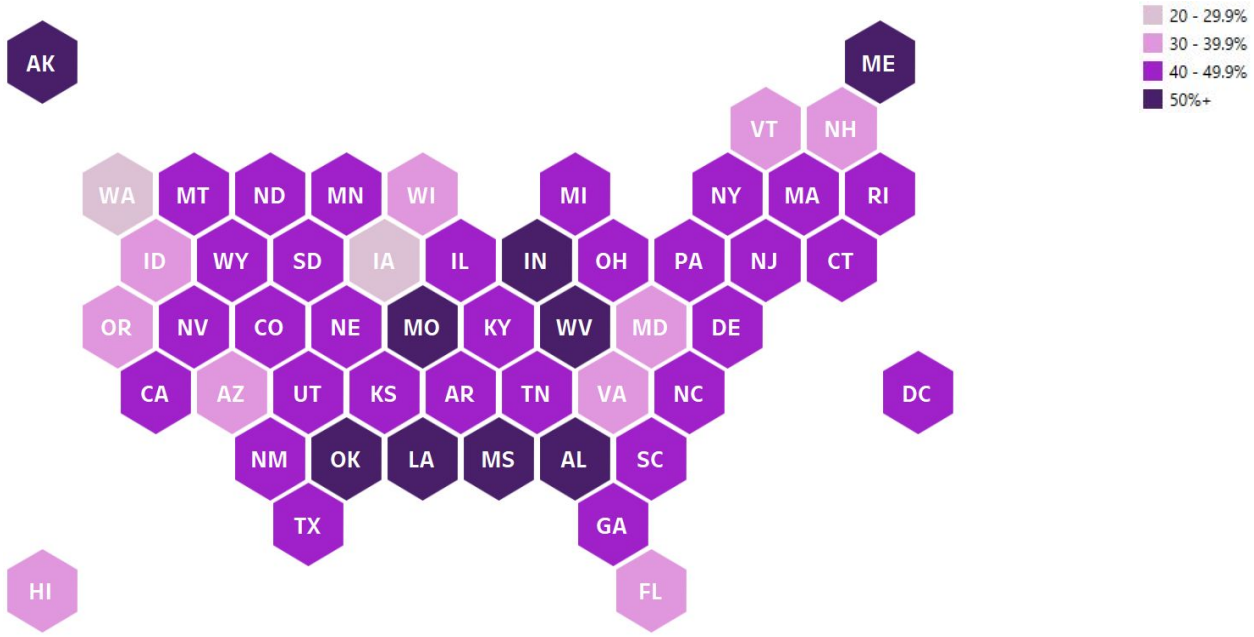
The timing of this pandemic was unfortunate for the constitutionally-mandated census of all persons every ten years. The census asks about all persons living in each household in the U.S. on April 1, 2020–a date that fell just as Covid consumed the nation's news cycles. This census was already expected to be a difficult one, with record-high levels of distrust in government, digital divide issues, and concerns that misinformation might depress response rates.[1] But, between the pandemic, fires, and hurricanes, a Census Bureau staffer recently noted "I can't really project whether Mother Nature is going to let us finish.[2]

With counting currently slated to end on September 30 (a month earlier than Bureau staff originally said they needed given the pandemic), 5 states are still below a 90% total response rate. Of those, Alabama, Mississippi, and South Carolina have been impacted both by recent hurricanes *and* are current Covid hotspots, with rates exceeding 100 new weekly cases per 100k people. Given these conditions, the Census Scientific Advisory Committee unanimously recommended last week that the timeline be extended, noting that a rushed process unacceptably compromises quality.[3]

Because census numbers are used to divide up congressional seats and federal funding by state, every state needs a complete and accurate count in order for those divisions to be fair.

In 9 states, more than 50% of registered voters who didn't vote in 2016 cited structural reasons for not voting. The pandemic, fires, and hurricanes are likely to amplify these barriers in 2020.

Non-voters who cited structural reasons for not voting in the 2016 election
Percent of registered voters who did not vote



Source: [Current Population Survey (Voting and Registration Supplement 2016)]

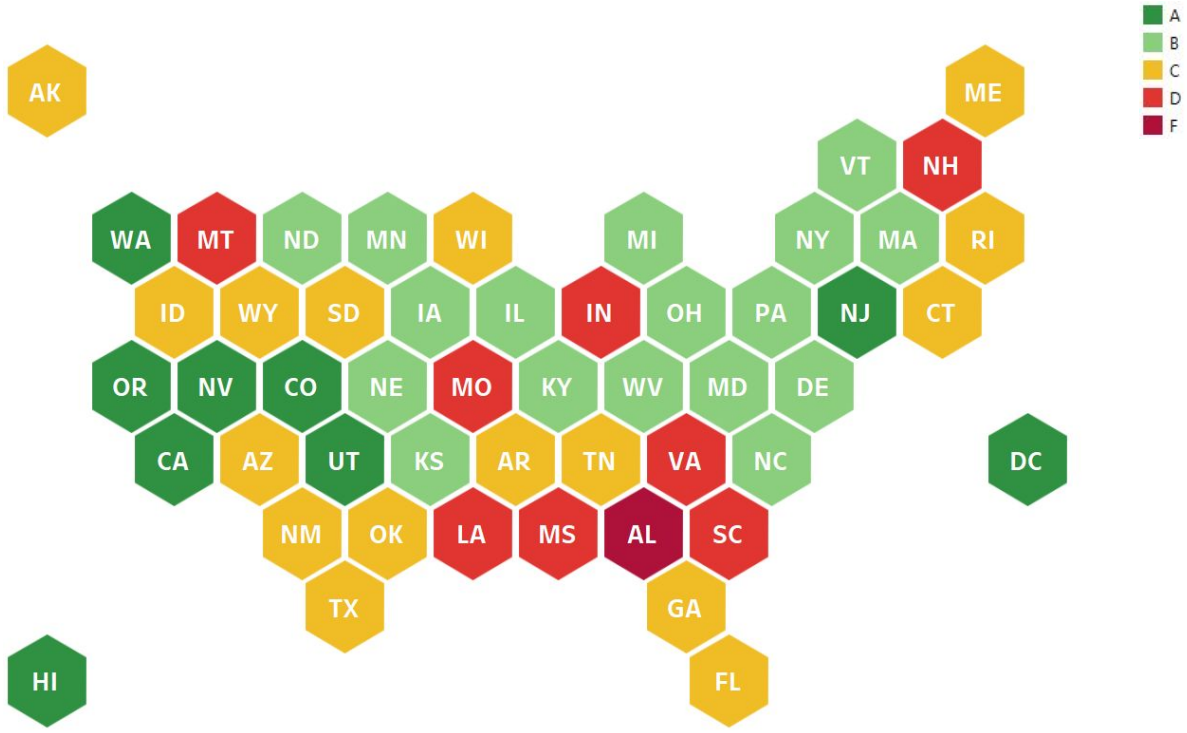
The 2016 presidential election had a turnout rate of 60% for eligible voters.[1] More than 50% of registered voters in 9 states who didn't vote in 2016 cited structural reasons such as polling place hours, accessibility challenges, registration problems, or not being near polls on voting day. With the 2020 presidential election likely to be taking place under pandemic and disaster-recovery conditions, it is instructive to consider recent structural barriers for not voting and how they might be exacerbated.

The Current Population Survey asked registered voters why they did not vote. Their answers included a range of barriers that could dramatically reduce voter turnout during the pandemic, especially for states that have an extraordinarily high rate of infection (above 100 new cases in the last week per 100k population). For example, North and South Dakota, Missouri, and Oklahoma are current hotspots for Covid-19 and have historically high structural barriers to voting. In 9 states, more than 50% of registered voters who didn't vote in 2016 cited structural reasons.

For example, in 19 states, 10%+ of would-be voters indicated they did not go to the polls because they were 'out of town or away from home,' a reason likely to be exacerbated by disaster- and Covid-related displacement. As of the middle of September, there were 71 large fires across the country and 7 significant hurricane landfalls.[2,3] In 24 states, 15% or more of eligible voters did not go to polls because they were 'too busy" and had "conflicting work or school schedules." This November, with many families juggling work and children being at home due to school and childcare closures, finding time to leave the house to vote may be even more difficult. Concerns about using public transportation, long lines, and safety of polling places could depress turnout. Already, nearly half of registered voters believe it will be difficult to vote in November's election (compared to only 15% in 2018).[4]

25 states and the District of Columbia are mostly ready for voting by mail in a pandemic, with only Kentucky making forward progress in the last month.

Readiness to vote by mail in a pandemic
As of September 18, 2020



Source: [Voting by mail in a pandemic: A state-by-state scorecard](), Brookings Institution

Primary and other elections this spring were marred by pandemic-related complications such as poll workers pulling out due to health concerns.[1,2,3] In addition to safe and adequately staffed in-person voting, the CDC recommends that election officials "consider offering alternatives to in-person voting if allowed in the jurisdiction."[4] A recent Fox News survey found 2 out of 3 registered voters favor voting by mail as an option in this election.[5] Some jurisdictions had robust options for voting by mail in place before the pandemic, and some are making special accommodations.[6]

Brookings researchers designed a rubric for grading a state's readiness for voting by mail in the pandemic.[7] The rubric spans 14 criteria on requesting, completing, and submitting a mail-in ballot, with the focus on preparedness for the November election rather than permanent policies.[8] Voting by mail reduces barriers to voting exacerbated by the pandemic such as transportation challenges, not being at usual place of residence, caregiving responsibilities, and difficulty getting to the polls during open hours. In the indicator on the previous page, Alabama, Louisiana, and Mississippi have among the largest shares of registered voters who cited structural barriers such as these for not voting in 2016. These states are also insufficiently prepared for voting from home, and are experiencing high Covid rates, and face potential for further disruption due to tropical storms. Kentucky was the only state to improve citizens' ease of voting by mail this month by offering mail-in absentee ballots for any voter concerned about Covid.[9]

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 support families and workers to be healthy, educated, and productive. This section examines civic institutions–and whether they are fair, effective, and healthy.

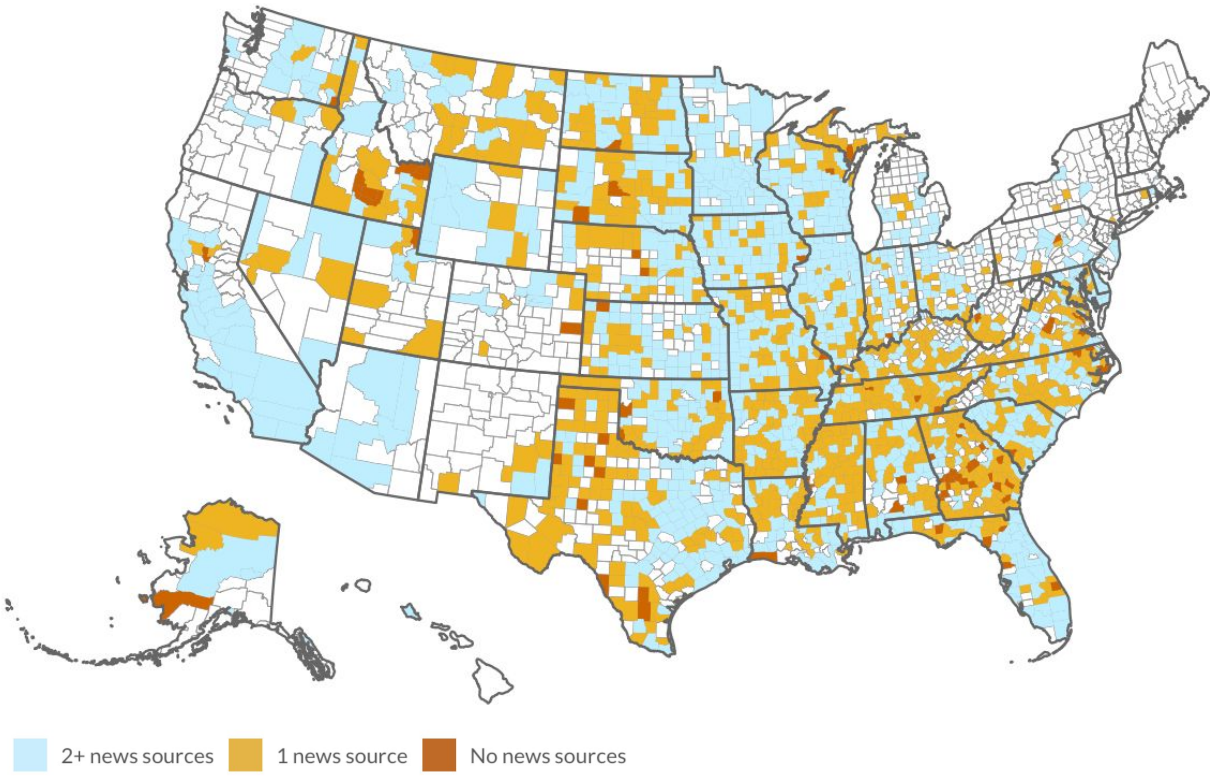
This third issue of *Pandemic to Prosperity* focuses on the ability of people to access information they need to make informed decisions during a pandemic. We examine local news and internet access to assess the ability of communities to receive critical information and remain connected in a world that is dramatically more digital than just a few months ago.

Indicators in this section

- Counties with no or only one newspaper in Covid hotspots
- Internet access by state

More than half of counties experiencing high rates of new cases of Covid are in news deserts, meaning a critical vehicle for trusted information during the pandemic is absent.

Counties with no or only one newspaper (often only a weekly) that also have high Covid rates
News deserts as of 2020, Covid cases as of Sep 17, 2020



Source: UNC Hussman School of Journalism and Media; New York Times Covid-19 data; inspired by Brookings research
Note: Counties with ≥50 cases/100k people in the past week are classified as "high rate" of new cases for this analysis. Blank counties on the map have Covid rates below threshold.

Trusted local news sources are key to the success of public health campaigns, holding local governments accountable, and for getting word out about Covid outbreaks attributed to contact at local bars, workplaces, group quarters, and weddings. Local newspapers are also bastions of normalcy for communities missing the social connections they hold dear. In September, for example, the Minneapolis Star Tribune endeavored to "offer a small break and bring a little joy" by creating a 10-day virtual state fair, complete with a talent contest, concerts including Lyle Lovett and Lucinda Williams, and a virtual beer garden. They even continued the paper's long tradition of selling fair-themed lip balm (flavored as pickles, ketchup, and bacon in past years). This time they sold lip balm via drive-thru and a flavor tuned to local palettes: cheese curds.[2]

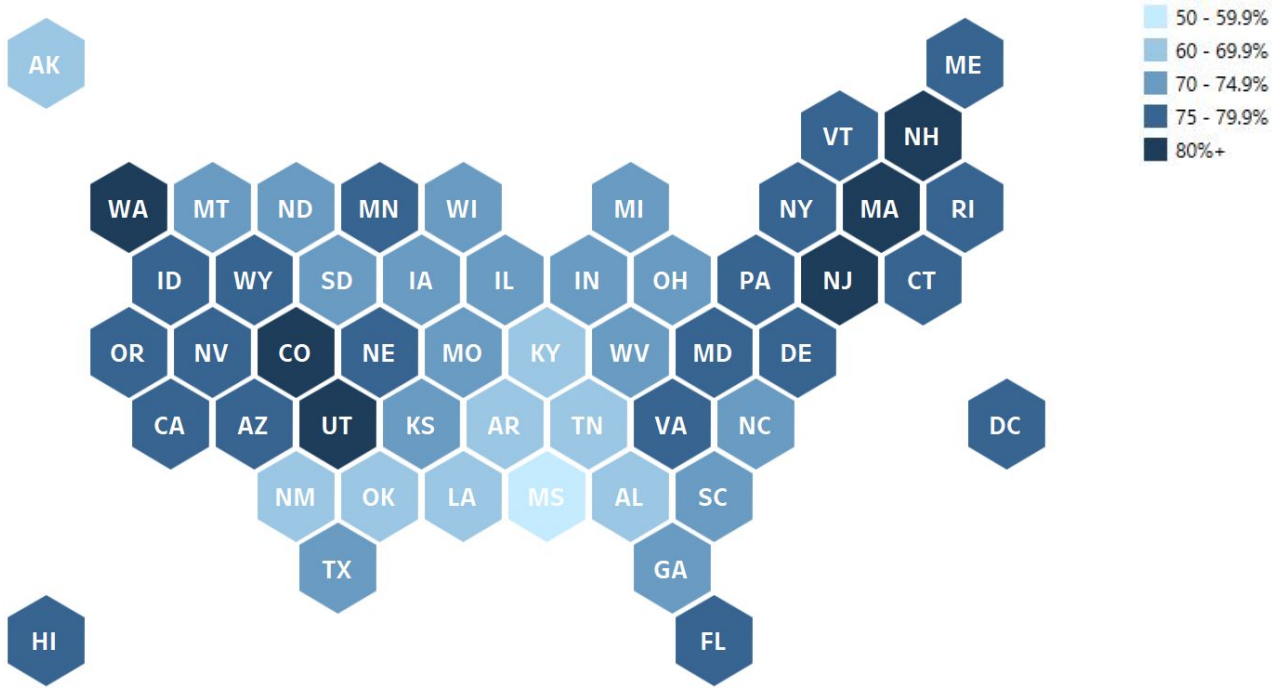
When the Covid rate passes 50 new cases per 100k a week, communities are considered to be on the brink of runaway infection rates, if public health measures are not rapidly implemented and followed.[3] More than half of counties that are above that pandemic threshold are also in what experts describe as "local news deserts" that have either no newspaper or only one (often a weekly or a thinly staffed daily).[4]

The news desert situation is getting worse with the pandemic, with Poynter research identifying 50 closures of local newsrooms due to the Covid crisis.[5]

Levels of internet access remained unchanged from 2018 to 2019, with Southern states suffering the most from lack of access.

Internet access by state, 2019

Percent of households with broadband, dial-up, or other internet access, excluding cellular-only



Source: United States Census Bureau

Even as the importance of the internet has grown, new data indicates that very little progress has been made on the expansion of internet access throughout states. Just released Census data on 2019 internet access shows that 11 states are without internet in more than 30% of households, a statistic that has not changed from 2018. Similarly, states with the highest prevalence of internet are still without internet in 1 in 5 households.

As the school year starts and many maintain virtual learning, households without internet access are at a significant disadvantage. Lack of internet access disproportionately impacts Black children's ability to receive the same level of education: Brookings reports that "the educational achievement gap has widened for Black students by 15 to 20 percent since the onset of school closures. Black K-12 students who remain disconnected from learning will experience 10.3 months of cognitive losses and for low-income students that number will be more than one year. Students of color who are less likely to have broadband will also be disproportionately targeted for 'virtual truancy,' and have an increased likelihood to drop out as school systems are pressed to adapt old learning paradigms for the digital age."[1] Equitable internet access for all students has become a crucial aspect in the path forward from this pandemic.

Additionally, pre-existing conditions may worsen without access to medical care through telehealth.[2,3] Internet access also enables residents to be informed about Covid updates and be civically engaged. But many rural areas – and tribal communities in particular – are less prepared for this rapid transition.[4]

Prosperity

People

At the end of the day, governments and institutions are intended to ensure the well being of the communities they represent. This section examines outcomes for people since the onset of the Covid crisis.

While much of the most meaningful data on how people are faring will not be available until months after the date it reflects, 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, and an analysis of unemployment benefits relative to basic costs in each county. For each indicator, we provide a brief explanation of findings and implications to weave together an overview of how Americans are faring during the pandemic.

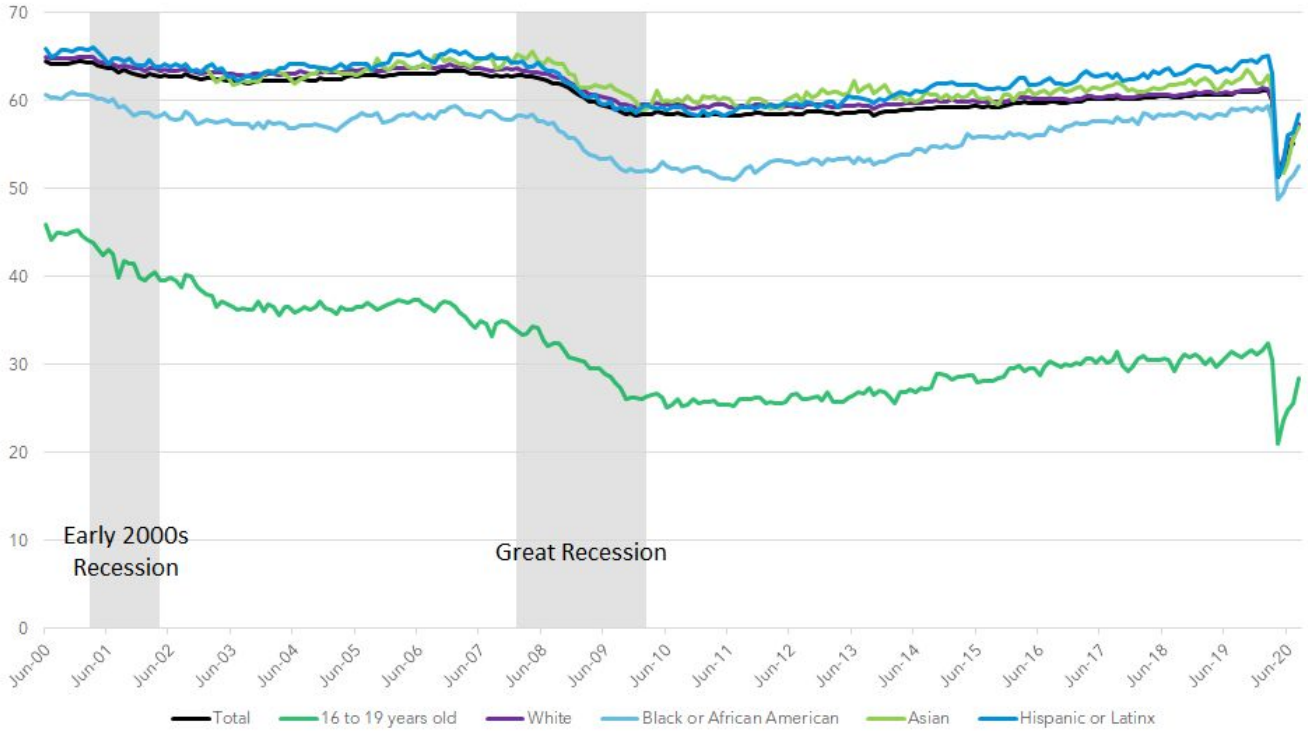
Indicators in this section

- Employment rate by race/ethnicity
- Mental health
- Food insecurity
- Likelihood of eviction or foreclosure
- Counties where UI benefits are insufficient for basic costs, by Covid hotspot

August employment rates of 57% remain lower than in the depths of the Great Recession when only 58% of adults had employment. Black adults are particularly hard hit with only 53% employed in August.

Employment rate, by race and age, Aug 2020

Employment-Population Ratio of civilian, non-institutionalized workforce age 16+, seasonally adjusted



Source: Bureau of Labor Statistics

In August 2020, the employment rate for adults was only 57%. Although employment rates have grown month by month since April, employment remains below the low point of the Great Recession and well below February of this year when 61% of all adults had employment.

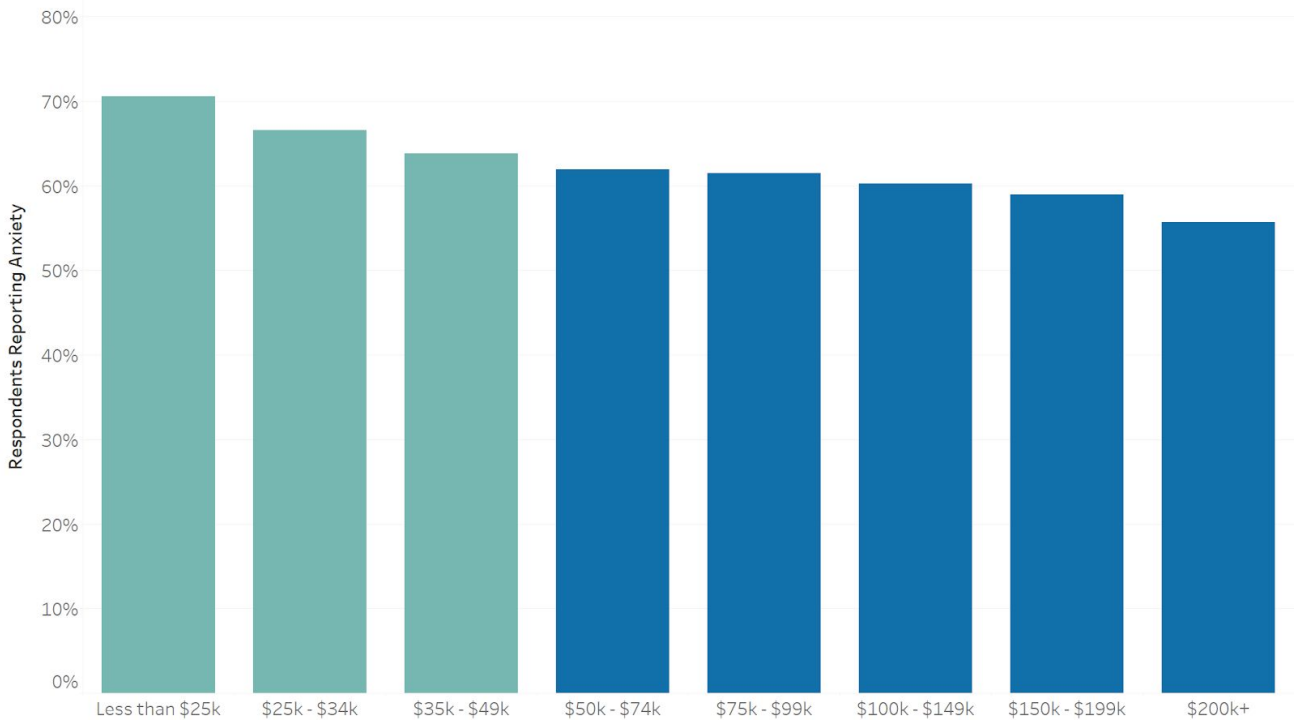
Just as the Great Recession had long lasting negative impacts on the share of adults with employment (as depicted in this graphic), some economists worry about structural changes to the economy due to the depth and length of the current recession.[1]

In August, employment rates for Hispanic or Latinx adults was highest at 58% with many employed in essential positions in agriculture, food processing, and janitorial services that simultaneously expose them to significant Covid risks.[2,3,4] White and Asian adults had the highest employment rates at 57% while only 53% of Black adults and 28% of youth had employment in August. For young people this is particularly problematic, because lack of early work experiences hampers future employment and earning potential.[5]

62% of adults reported anxiety over the last week. Those making below $50k per year report feeling anxious at rates 7 percentage points higher than those making $50k and above.

Instances of anxiety, Aug 19-31, 2020

Percentage of respondents who suffered from anxiety in the last 7 days



Source: U.S. Census Bureau Household Pulse Survey

Mental health has undoubtedly been affected by the Covid-19 pandemic. As many find themselves in more isolated situations, coupled with the stress of the pandemic and the economic downturn, cases of anxiety and depression have increased.

According to the Census Pulse Survey, 62% of adults reported feeling anxiety over the last 7 days. This number increases as household income decreases. Among those earning less than $25K, 71% report feeling anxiety. Children yield additional sources of stress, with 66% of households with children reporting anxiety compared to 60% in households without. Uncertainties catalyzed by the pandemic, such as job insecurity and schools reopening, more heavily impact low income adults and parents with children.

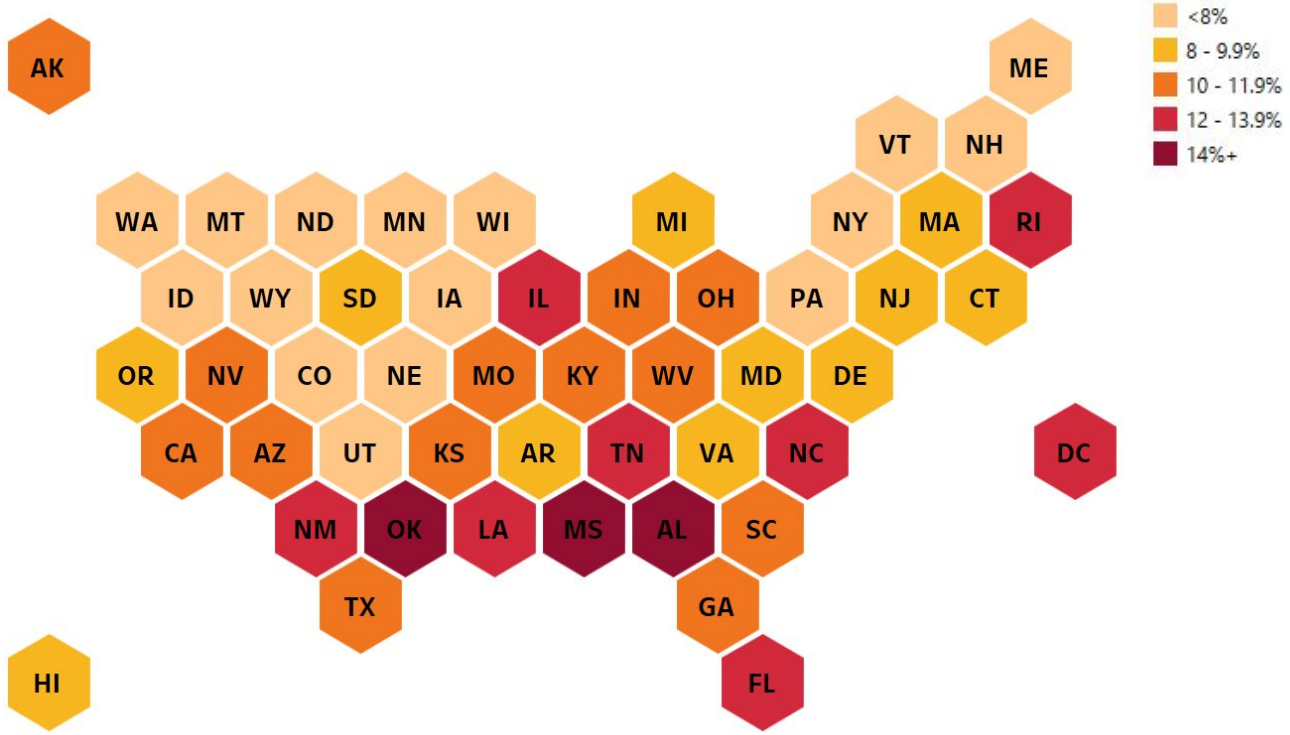
The Kaiser Family Foundation found in July that the mental health of 53% of adults in the United States had worsened due to concerns over the pandemic, up from 32% in March.[1] They point to a link between social isolation and poor mental health, adding that job loss can exacerbate these outcomes.

Psychiatrists writing in The New England Journal of Medicine recently noted that Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) resulting from pandemic anxiety has the potential for long-lasting consequences.[2]

More than 1 in 10 adults report their households have gone hungry during the pandemic. Mississippi ranks highest with 15%. Alabama and Oklahoma are next at 14% and Vermont and New Hampshire are lowest at 5%.

Food insecurity by state, Aug 19-31, 2020

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



Source: U.S. Census Bureau Household Pulse Survey

Early on in the pandemic, nutritional lifelines for communities already experiencing food insecurity unraveled. School closures made it more complicated to access food through school lunch programs, and shortages of staff and food at food pantries led to long lines and empty shelves.[1,2,3,4] Plus, new populations found themselves going hungry – including people who lost their jobs, or who were unable to leave the house because they were at high risk. This summer, disasters such as the midwest derecho, western wildfires, and Gulf Coast hurricanes have resulted in additional demand for food banks.[5]

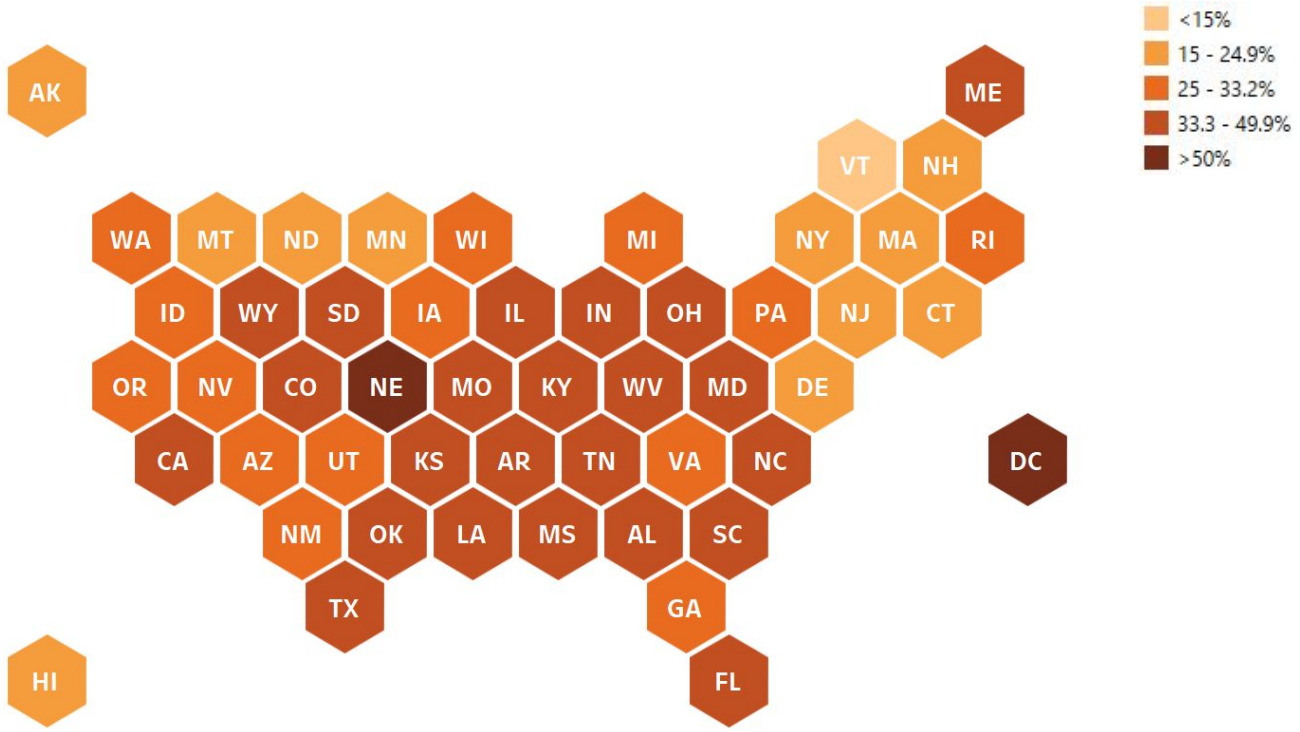
Though difficult to quantify, the role of food pantries, community volunteers, local emergency food programs, and increased flexibility for federal food programs are most certainly buffering the full impact of the pandemic on hunger.[6,7,8] Even so, an estimated 9-17 million children in the U.S. report are sometimes or often going hungry.[9] As they are now, during the first phase of the Census Bureau's Pulse surveys (April-July), southern states were consistently among the most food-insecure.

Not only are there differences in food security across states during the current crisis, but historical data shows a persistent disparity, with Black and Hispanic households going hungry at rates twice that of white households.[10] For those living in food deserts, a cruel twist of biology comes into play; food insecurity is linked to conditions such as diabetes and obesity, and those comorbidities are also among the most common risk factors for worse Covid outcomes.[11,12]

Half of adults in Nebraska and Washington D.C. report they are likely to be evicted or foreclosed upon in the next two months. In 23 additional states, at least 1/3 of all adults anticipate losing housing in that time frame.

Likelihood of eviction or foreclosure, Aug 19-31, 2020

Percentage of adults living in households where eviction or foreclosure in the next two months is either very likely or somewhat likely.



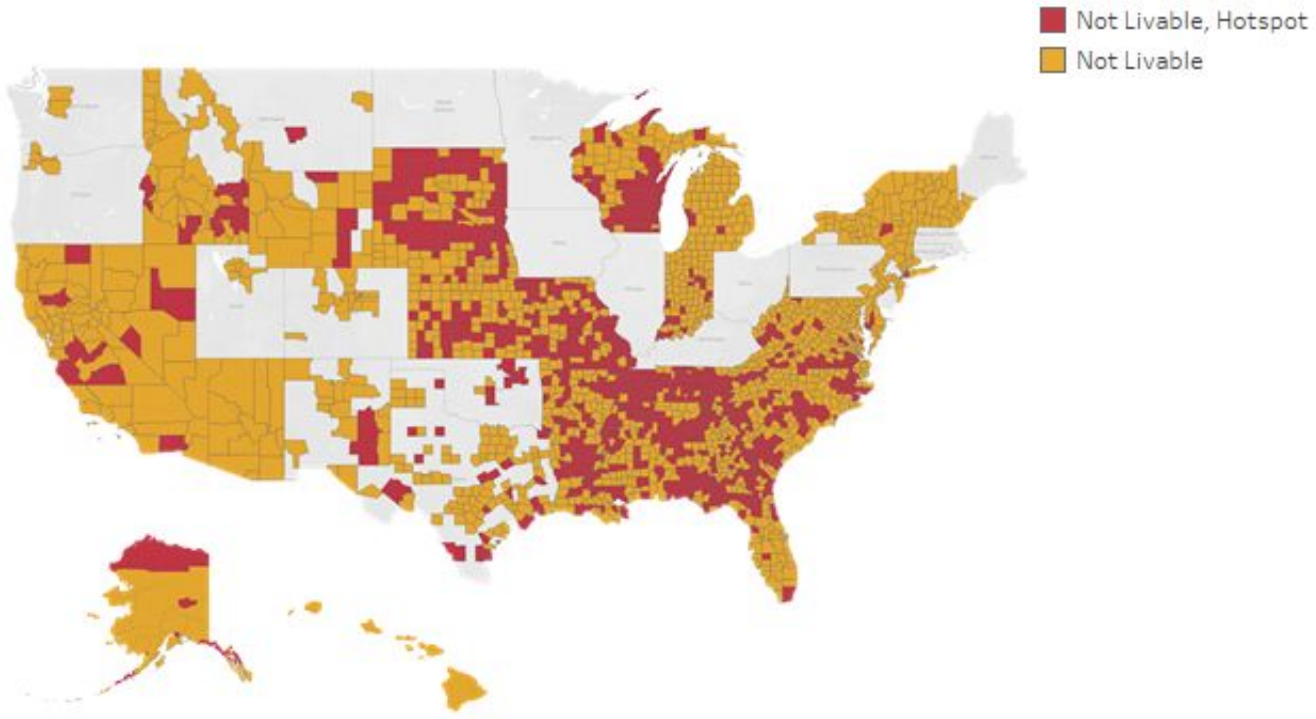
Source: U.S. Census Bureau Household Pulse Survey

With 11.5 million fewer jobs across the U.S., Americans are feeling very uncertain about their future. More than 1 in 3 adults in half of all states report they are likely to be evicted or foreclosed upon in the next two months. This is true across a wide swath of southern and midwestern states. The effects of housing insecurity on children are dramatic. Eviction or foreclosure may force families to suddenly move, begin couch surfing, or even become homeless.[1] Not surprisingly this can lead to frequent school moves, absenteeism, and lower test scores for children.[2] Children without stable housing are also susceptible to mental health issues, developmental delays, and trauma that can affect children's future health, education, and employment outcomes.[3]

On September 4th, the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) issued a moratorium on all evictions for nonpayment of rent effective September 4 through December 31, 2020.[4] However, tenants will still be obligated to pay back rent on January 1, 2021.[5] Also troubling is the effect on landlords of nonpayment of rent, and the ultimate effect on banks as mortgages go unpaid.[6] The Mortgage Bankers Association reported that since the pandemic began, mortgage delinquency rates have hit their highest point in 9 years.[7]

Nearly 1/3 of the nation's 2,600 counties that are unaffordable for those relying on state unemployment insurance are also active Covid hotspots.

Counties where state unemployment insurance fails to cover basic costs, by Covid hotspot status
Includes costs for a two-bedroom home, food, and transportation



Source: USAFacts, New York Times Covid-19 data
Note: Counties with ≥100 Covid cases/100k people in the past week are classified as "hotspots" for this analysis. Blank counties on map are not "unaffordable" for those on state unemployment insurance.

State unemployment insurance pays only 40% of a workers' previous wages on average.[1] In part to motivate workers to continue looking for employment, unemployment insurance benefits are generally lower than a workers' previous wages. However, the nation has lost 11.5 million jobs since February, and many workers are not able to find employment despite earnest efforts to do so. Congress approved an additional $600 in weekly unemployment benefits, but this support ended in late July. USAFacts analyzed people's ability to live off of state unemployment insurance by comparing fair market rents plus the average costs of food and transportation to the maximum available financial support in each county.[2] Their data show that in 8 out of 10 counties, the state unemployment insurance is not sufficient to cover these costs.

In those counties where unemployment benefits are insufficient to meet basic needs, housing and food insecurity is likely to be high. The Midwest and deep South are particularly hard hit by these compounding factors and the challenge of living in a Covid hotspot (100+ new weekly cases per 100k people). The crisis is particularly extreme in southern counties also recently hit by hurricanes.

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