



## Jan 28, 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 as we chart the path forward. 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 (NCoC) to examine data documenting the state of the South during the pandemic. The resulting report, which follows, highlights stark realities:

**Health Insurance.** As this report notes, before the pandemic struck, roughly 18% of working-age adults in seven Southern states lacked health insurance because those states had failed to adopt Medicaid Expansion. The Southern states that have not expanded Medicaid have the most failing rural hospitals.<sup>1</sup> Study after study shows that expanding Medicaid works for bringing down costs, expanding mental health access, and saving mothers.<sup>2,3,4,5</sup> It's not too late for these seven states to join the majority of US states that have expanded Medicaid and draw down billions of federal dollars into healthcare systems.

**Vaccines.** At least five Southern states are lagging the nation in vaccine distribution, and data gaps may be partly to blame. Reports out of Virginia and Alabama explain that data collection problems are actually hampering the states' ability to receive more vaccinations from the CDC.<sup>6,7</sup> To ensure equitable vaccine distribution, data is needed to inform prioritization of vulnerable communities for services such as Covid testing, vaccination sites and community health navigators such as those deployed in North Carolina to help people figure out the system.<sup>8,9</sup>

**Economic relief.** Since the pandemic struck, the South has lost 1.3 million jobs. In December, nearly 15% of Southern adults reported their household had gone hungry. Southerners need sustained direct relief until this pandemic is

over. With new leadership in Washington, substantial federal dollars may soon flow into states and communities. But if our state and local systems aren't up to the task of distributing benefits on a larger scale, those supports will not reach the people they are intended to help.

**Revenue shortfalls.** Every Southern state that has completed projections is anticipating tax revenue shortfalls, with 4 states projecting a 10% reduction for this year. Some Southern states are considering dramatic tax changes, such as eliminating income tax, which could further weaken their revenue systems. Resulting cuts in state budgets will threaten investments in education, public health, broadband, and labor departments. We must figure out ways to preserve—and even strengthen, rebuild, and modernize—our public systems if we are going to meet this moment and the next moment, whether it's another recession, another tornado or hurricane, or another pandemic.

**Spending accountability.** Given revenue shortfalls, federal fiscal relief will likely be needed to support state and local government budgets. When this arrives, we also need to hold state and local governments accountable for how the funding is spent. One important question to ask at this moment is: How did your community spend the CARES Act funds they received last year? That's a good indication of what might happen in the next round of stimulus. One city in Georgia funded rental assistance, hazard pay, child care, and internet access.<sup>10</sup> Another city in Georgia spent all of its proceeds on its police department.<sup>11</sup> Both had about 1 in 3 residents living in poverty before the pandemic. Civic engagement will be more important than ever in ensuring federal dollars are used to the greatest impact.

**2020 Census.** As the South struggles to recover from the Covid crises, accurate census data will be essential to securing our fair share of federal resources. But as this report reveals, self-response rates in Southern states lagged many Northern and Mountain states and the lasting impact from the pandemic, politicization, and natural disasters on the ultimate quality of the census is still unknown. It will be up to civic organizations and community partners across the South to double-down on efforts to ensure that the distribution of political power and resources based on the 2020 Census takes into account any inequities in the data.

**Information access.** Across the South, over 1 in 10 people lack internet access, and 2% of all counties are news deserts. To increase connectivity, Fair Count installed 160 internet hubs across Georgia, allowing people to complete their census, attend job fairs, register to vote, and apply for ballots.<sup>12</sup> These hubs contributed to the many efforts that increased ballots cast by over 800,000, and they will be critical for ongoing recovery efforts. Where local newspapers exist, we will partner with them to ensure citizens get the information they need to recover and thrive.


**Political representation.** During the upcoming redistricting process, Covid recovery can serve as a launching point to discuss representation and why historically the same populations—namely those of color—have had representation ripped from them. Moreover, we can drive conversations about how the power of communities choosing their elected officials, rather than politicians choosing their constituents, will be critical in bringing real recovery policy, resources, and efforts to the areas most in need.

**Policy infrastructure.** Finally, we are lifting up the Southeast Crescent Regional Commission (SCRC) as a priority that can help one of the most impoverished regions in the country—the Black Belt. We believe that the SCRC is an infrastructure that can mirror the Appalachian Regional Commission, and use this state-federal partnership to tackle additional challenges such as climate, rural broadband, rural health care, and rural child care.

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.



Dr. Jeanine Abrams McLean  
Vice President, Fair Count

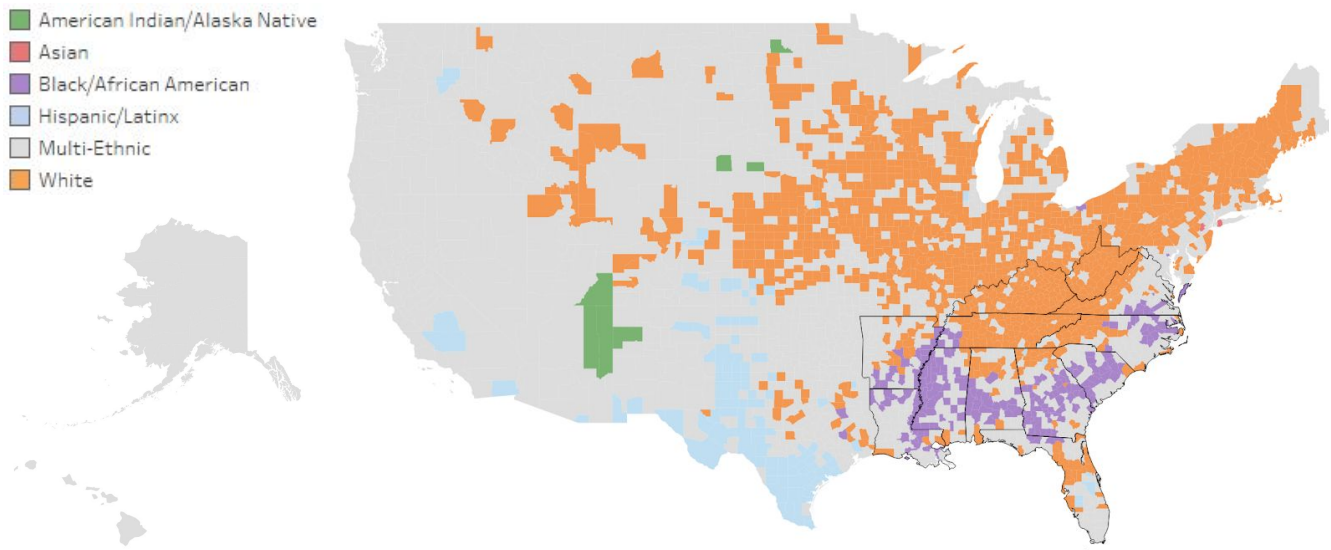


Dr. Sarah Beth Gehl  
Research Director, The Southern Economic Advancement Project

## 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 estimate 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 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 effective vaccines are 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 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.

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

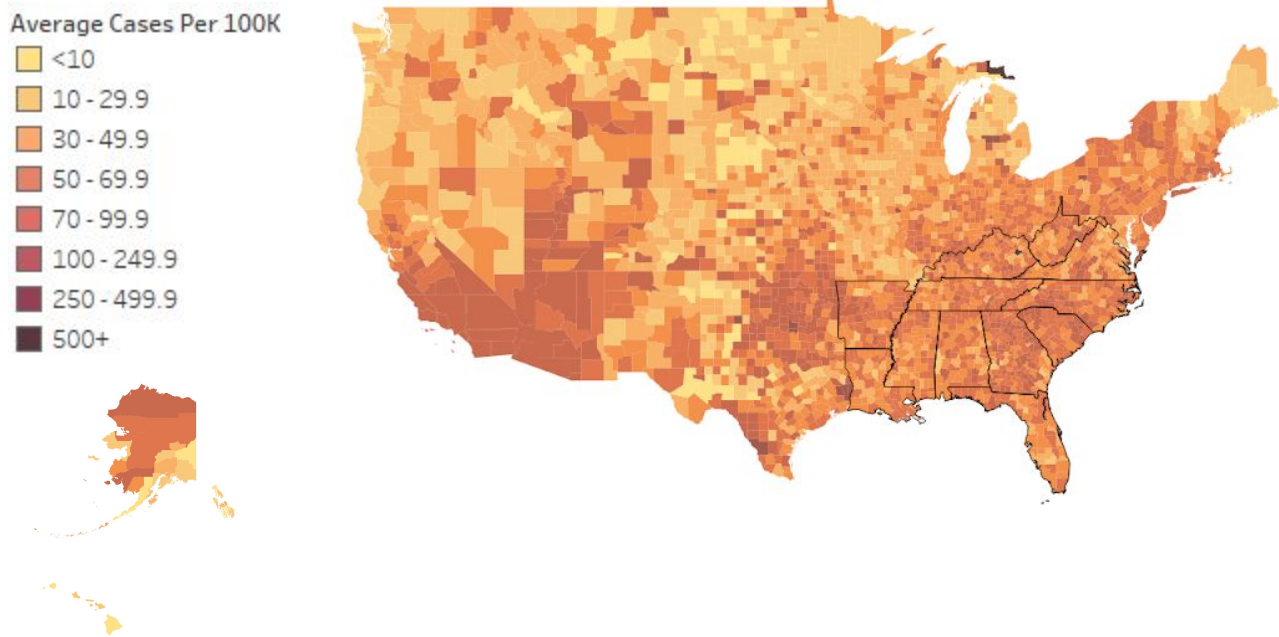
### Indicators in this section

- New daily Covid cases in the past week
- Covid-associated hospitalization rates by race/ethnicity, U.S.
- Excess deaths during the pandemic, U.S.
- Total jobs lost
- Small business closures
- Damages from weather and climate events

## The South is experiencing very high levels of Covid risk in this third wave of the pandemic.

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

Analysis of state and local health agencies and hospitals data as of January 15, 2021



Source: [The New York Times](#)

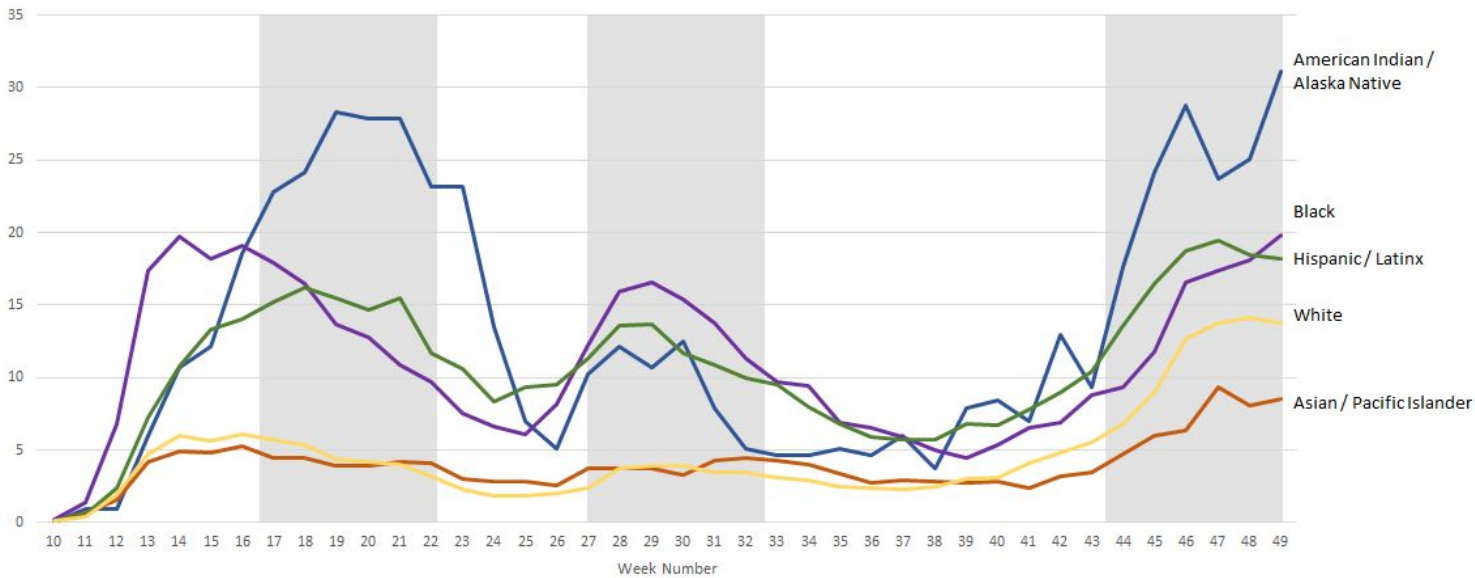
The nation is now deep into the third wave of infection. Even as vaccines roll out to frontline workers, residents in nursing homes, and people above certain age thresholds, the situation remains dire in most communities in the South. Morgan County, KY has one of the highest rates of new infections, where more than half of the 1,500 inmates at the Eastern Kentucky Correctional Complex have been diagnosed with the virus.<sup>1</sup> Local news reports in the summer and fall often included officials attributing spikes in new cases to flare ups in nursing homes or correctional facilities, or superspreader events such as weddings or socializing at bars.<sup>2,3,4</sup> Now, the spread is so uncontrolled that leaders generally can't point to any single source, and attribute cases to activities like people interacting more indoors due to winter weather, holiday travel and gatherings, as well as pandemic fatigue.<sup>5</sup>

Many areas of extraordinarily high rates of infection indicate imminent threats to health system capacity, given anticipated hospitalizations. A more transmissible genetic variant of the virus has been detected in an increasing number of Southern states, and CDC experts expect it will become the most dominant variant in the U.S. by March, meaning that public health measures that barely kept the virus at bay may no longer be sufficient.<sup>6,7</sup> For example, some scientists are now recommending that people use hospital-grade masks, rather than cloth, when indoors and to limit time indoors doing activities such as grocery shopping that were previously considered relatively safe when wearing a mask.<sup>8,9</sup>



## As of the first week of December, American Indian/Alaska Native, Black, and Hispanic individuals are 1.5 to 2 times more likely to have severe Covid impacts than white people across the U.S.

Covid-associated hospitalization rates, U.S., March 2 - December 6, 2020  
By race and ethnicity



Source: [CDC](#)

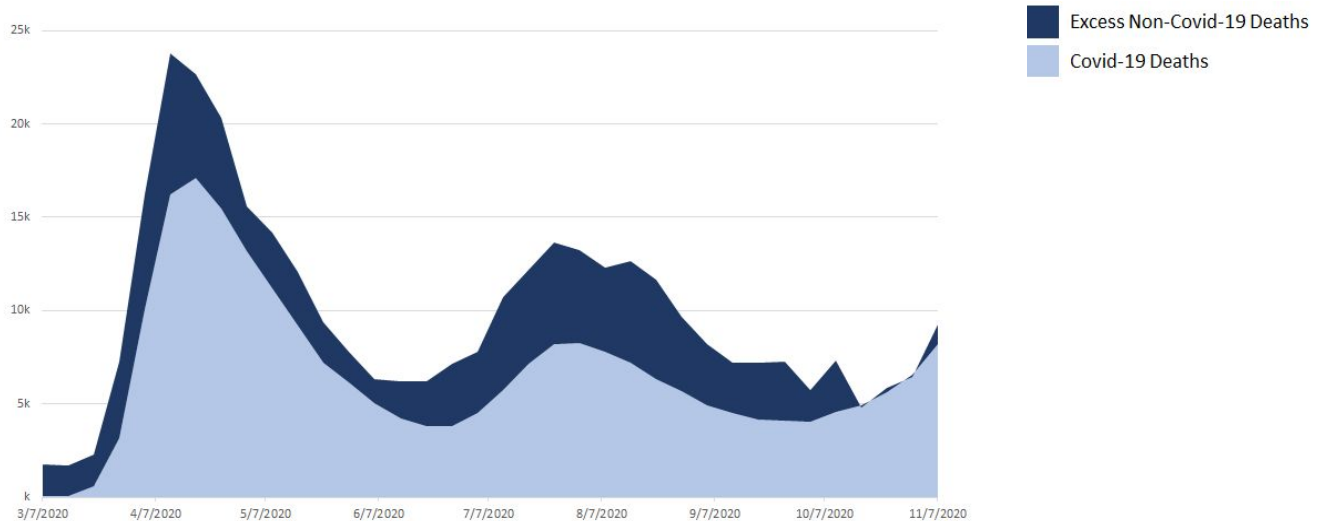
As shocking as nationwide case rates are, hospitalizations are even more alarming—revealing large disparities between racial groups. Available data on hospitalizations, as of December 6, 2020, reveals that American Indian, Black, and Hispanic/Latinx individuals are around 1.5 to 2 times more likely to have severe Covid impacts than white people. This is down from the disparity during the first wave of the pandemic when American Indians were being hospitalized at 6 to 10 times the rate of whites. However, it's not because outcomes for people of color are getting better, it's because more white people are now requiring hospitalization. This graph also elucidates the truism that crises exacerbate disparities—the gap between racial outcomes increases during the peak pandemic waves, and then the lines coalesce during breaks.

Racial disparities in health outcomes have existed long before Covid, and only partially explain the divide in this pandemic. Emerging research points to occupational exposure as a key driver of higher infection rates.<sup>1</sup> 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.<sup>2,3</sup> 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 contribute to higher rates of comorbidities such as diabetes, heart disease, and obesity that are associated with greater morbidity and mortality in Covid cases.<sup>4,5,6,7,8,9</sup>

# Nationwide, for every 2 known Covid deaths, 1 additional person has died above the level of expected deaths, compared to previous 3-year average.

## Excess deaths, Covid and non-Covid, U.S.

Above expected levels from national average through November 7, 2020



Source: [CDC](#)

Soon after the pandemic began, emergency room staff across America noticed that their normal flow of patients with chest pain, appendicitis, bowel obstruction, and strokes had slowed to a trickle. Other healthcare providers noticed patients canceling care for cancer treatment, orthopedic issues, and chronic disease.<sup>1,2,3</sup> Nearly 1 in 3 families have missed a well-child visit since the pandemic began.<sup>4</sup> At the same time, many patients seeking care have found their doctors' offices shuttered or shifting to telehealth.<sup>5,6</sup>

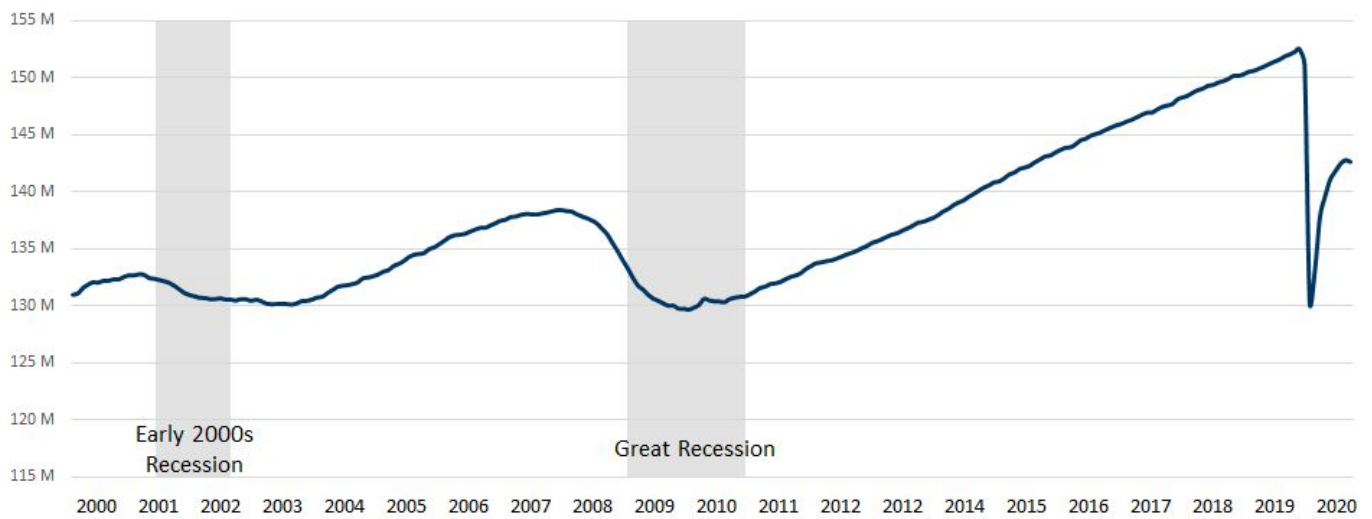
It is not surprising in this context that for every 2 known Covid deaths, 1 additional person has died beyond the number expected nationwide.<sup>7</sup> Such "excess deaths" reflect a variety of challenges. Some of these excess non-Covid deaths could have been misclassified and were actually Covid cases, 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 this fall to the Journal of the American Medical Association noted that the U.S. ranks among the highest nations experiencing excess deaths, and attributes this in part to "weak public health infrastructure and a decentralized, inconsistent U.S. response to the pandemic."<sup>8</sup>

The weak public health infrastructure also applies to data reporting. This chart only goes through November 7 because the lag in states reporting deaths makes any more recent data potentially misleading.<sup>9</sup> As a result, this analysis does not include the third Covid wave happening this winter. However, one can surmise that with the sharp increases in case rates and ICU utilization since this date, the strain on community healthcare infrastructure has only grown worse.

The impact of Covid on mortality has especially hit Black and Hispanic/Latinx populations. A recent study published by the National Academy of Sciences projects that for 2020, Covid will reduce average life expectancy in the United States by 1.13 years, with Black and Latinx populations estimated to lose 3 to 4 times the life expectancy as the white population. The authors warn that this troubling trend may continue due to the virus itself, and "long-term health, social, and economic impacts of the pandemic."<sup>10</sup>

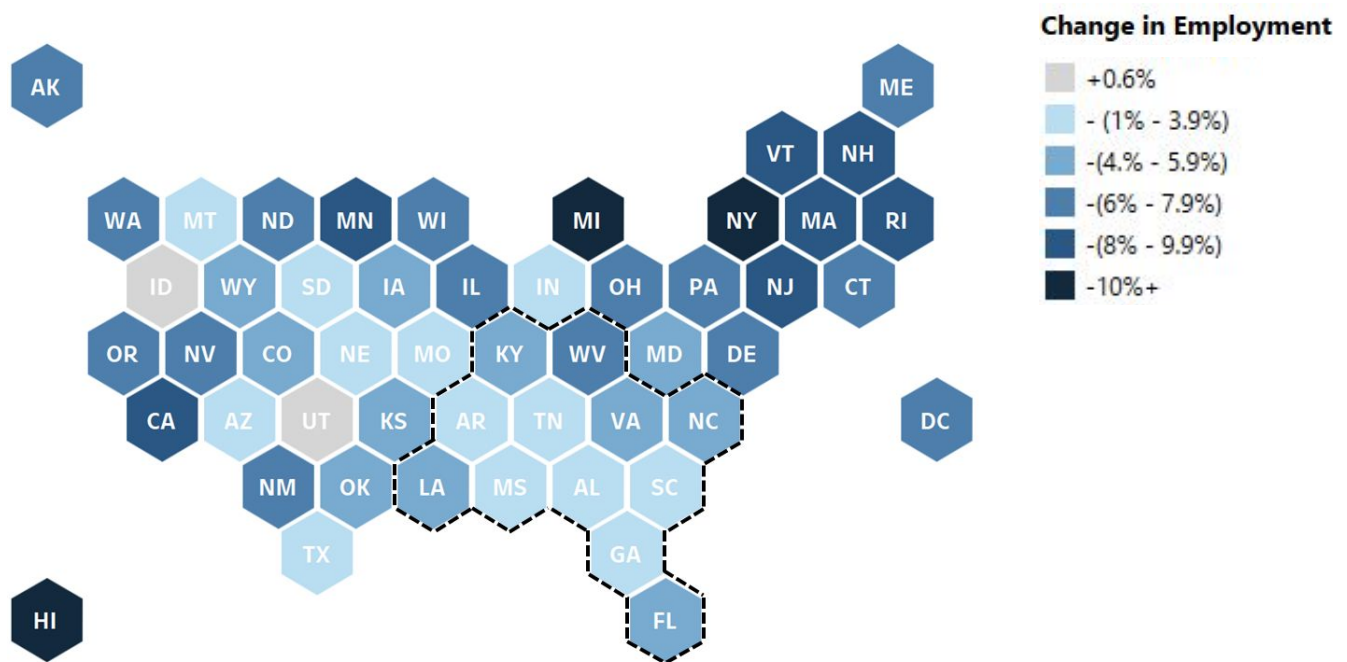
## The U.S. lost 140,000 jobs in December—the first decline since April. Southern states have lost 1.3 million jobs over the last year.

Total jobs by month, U.S. Seasonally adjusted



Source: [Bureau of Labor Statistics](#) Note: Data for Nov 2020 and Dec 2020 are preliminary

Change in jobs by state, December 2020 compared to December 2019 Seasonally adjusted



Source: [Bureau of Labor Statistics](#) Note: Data for Dec 2020 are preliminary.

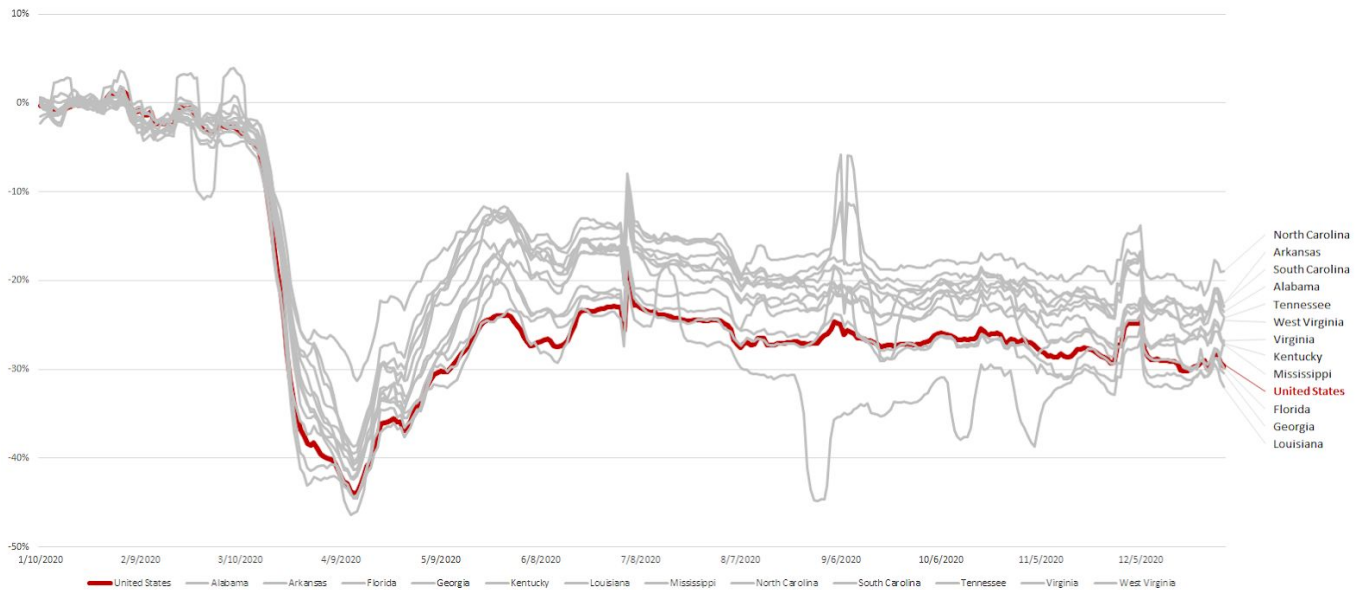
Across the South, 1.3 million jobs have disappeared in the past year. The largest state lost the most jobs. Florida has 419,000 fewer jobs than a year earlier. But the smallest state, West Virginia, lost nearly 44,000 jobs—a disproportionately large share of the jobs in that state. The nation as a whole lost 140,000 jobs in December—a month when jobs usually increase due to holiday spending. The Covid economic crisis has been particularly hard on women who have disproportionately lost jobs.



**In each Southern state, at least 1 in 5 small businesses are now closed. Disproportionately, hard-hit states include FL, GA, and LA where between 31% and 33% of small businesses have closed.**

**Percent change in number of small businesses open, December 30, 2020**

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

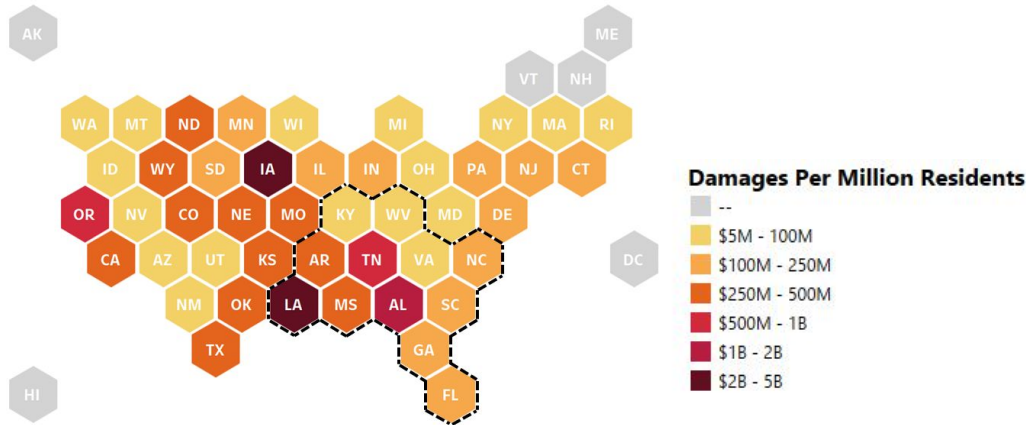


Source: [Opportunity Insights](#) Note: “Open” is defined as having financial transaction activity. Small businesses are defined by SBA thresholds for annual revenues, which vary by 6-digit NAICS codes.

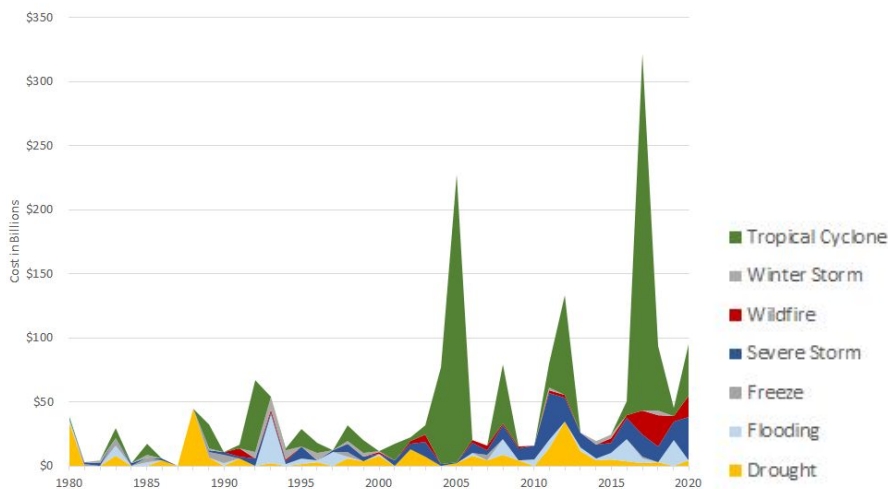
Although states have differed in their policies to stop the virus’ spread, consumer buying behaviors have changed dramatically since the onset of the pandemic, and this has taken a tremendous toll on small businesses. Small businesses in leisure and hospitality have been particularly hard hit, with 48% of these businesses closed nationwide as of December. Tourism-heavy states like Louisiana and Florida have been disproportionately impacted. Latinx-owned businesses were roughly twice as likely as white-owned businesses to have closed and Black-owned businesses were about 2.5 times as likely to have closed by April.<sup>1</sup> Among small businesses that have closed are child care centers that operate on very thin margins and are particularly vulnerable. Even where states did not mandate closure, many child care centers closed likely because their revenue dropped suddenly. For example, in Georgia 55% of licensed child care providers closed.<sup>2</sup>

**In 2020, 6 hurricanes hit the South causing at least a billion dollars in damage each. Overall, the South experienced some of the highest levels of damage from weather events relative to population size.**

**U.S. billion-dollar weather and climate disasters, 2020**  
Cost per million residents by state



**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.

Compounding the injuries of this incredible year, 2020 was also a record breaker for weather and climate disasters. Six hurricanes causing at least a billion dollars in damage hit the South. Hurricanes typically cause the greatest number of deaths of all disaster types.<sup>1</sup> Also, the scale of disasters starting with Katrina are much larger than in past, and local governments are rarely well equipped to respond to human needs for housing, transportation, and mental health services that last for months afterward as communities struggle to rebuild.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, disasters have been shown to increase inequity largely because of arduous application processes overly focused on rooting out fraud, such that only those families and governments with greater capacity successfully secure recovery resources.<sup>3</sup>

# 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 how Southern states are performing relative to common metrics for Covid risk levels, the projected tax revenues states will need for their myriad public functions, challenges the pandemic presents for generating fair and accurate 2020 Census data, and the number of ballots cast 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.

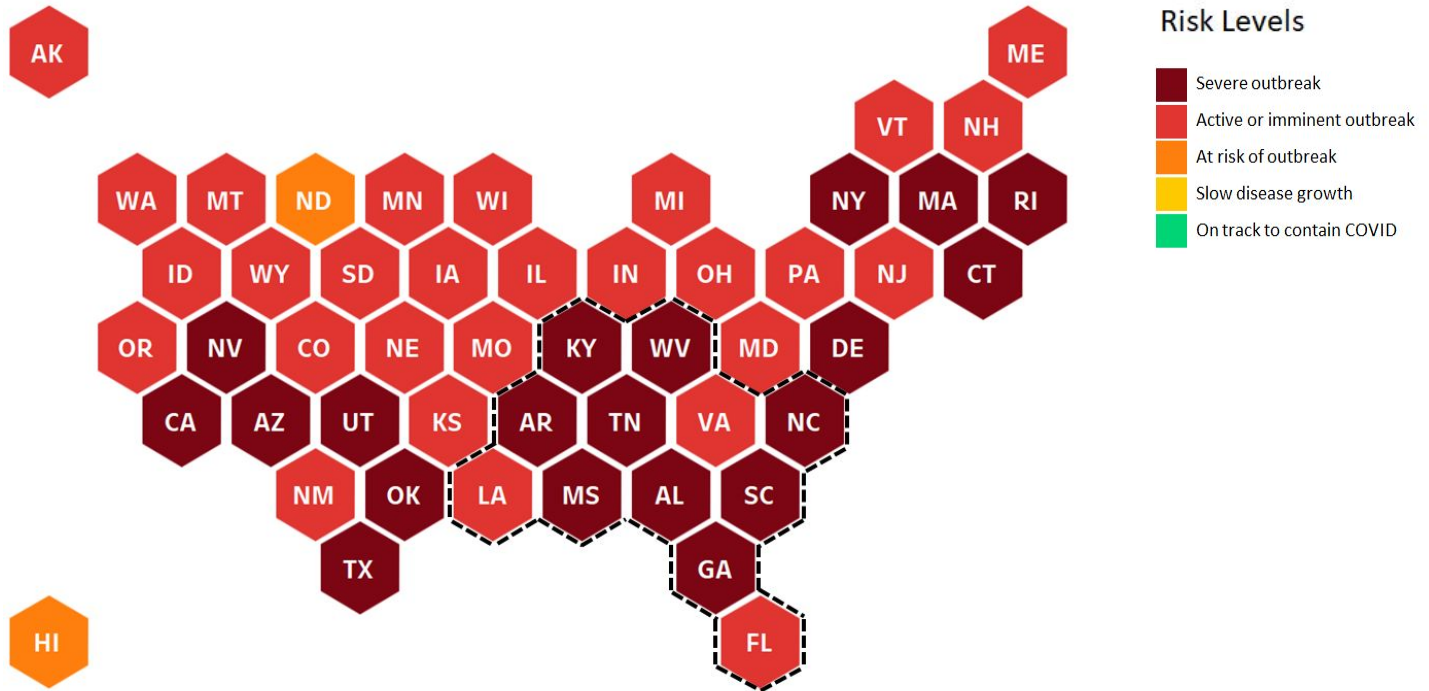
## Indicators in this section

- Covid risk levels
- Vaccine distribution
- FY 2020, 2021, 2022 preliminary estimates of decline in tax revenues
- 2020 Census self-response rates
- Total ballots counted in presidential elections (2004-2020)
- Civil unrest per capita

# All Southern states are facing severe or imminent risk of Covid outbreaks. No states are currently at low risk.

## Covid risk levels as of January 15, 2021

Based on daily new cases, infection growth  $R(t)$ , and positive test rate



Source: [Covid Act Now](#)

Public policy and community behaviors should be informed by community risk levels, which are more than just case rates. Covid Act Now uses three metrics in their risk score—in addition to daily new cases adjusted for population, they include a metric of how many people one infected person passes the virus on to.<sup>1</sup> More transmissible variants of the virus would, for example, increase this number and thus increase the overall risk.

Lastly, this risk score includes a positivity rate, which is what percentage of tests for the virus come back positive. If more than 10% of the tests are positive, that means a community is not testing enough, and for every positive test, there are many others who go undetected. This indicator is widely used in gating criteria that set thresholds for phased re-opening of schools and businesses, but one should be cautious about reading too much into these numbers because the U.S. does not have systemic Covid surveillance and testing varies across different settings. For example, many universities have regular or random Covid testing requirements for students, staff, and faculty. Presumably, their positivity rate would be lower than communities where people only get tested when they have symptoms or may have been exposed.<sup>2,3</sup>

For leaders setting state or local policies, or engaging communities around safe reopening plans, composite metrics on outbreak risk levels can be useful, if rough, measures. The bottom line is that the entire South, indeed the entire nation, is currently in the red zone. Of course, local conditions can vary within a state, but the virus does not respect municipal or institutional boundaries.

## Data reporting problems compound an already troubled rollout of the vaccine. West Virginia has one of the highest rates in the nation of people who have received at least one shot.

### Overall Covid vaccine distribution and administration

Through January 24, 2020, for Southern states and the nation

	Percent of people given		Doses distributed	Shots given	Doses used
	at least one shot	two shots			
Alabama	4.5%	0.6%	521,225	250,612	48%
Virginia	4.9%	0.7%	1,069,725	482,973	45%
South Carolina	5.0%	0.9%	453,250	307,348	68%
Georgia	5.0%	0.6%	1,235,775	604,067	49%
Tennessee	5.3%	1.5%	838,825	462,646	55%
<b>United States</b>	<b>5.5%</b>	<b>1.0%</b>	<b>38,710,725</b>	<b>21,285,145</b>	<b>55%</b>
Mississippi	5.5%	0.5%	358,100	180,960	51%
North Carolina	5.6%	0.8%	1,246,600	676,037	54%
Arkansas	6.1%	1.1%	368,650	221,095	60%
Kentucky	6.2%	0.7%	471,000	307,462	65%
Louisiana	6.4%	0.9%	543,700	341,447	63%
Florida	6.4%	0.7%	2,908,275	1,544,794	53%
West Virginia	9.2%	2.2%	243,100	203,992	84%

Source: [CDC](#), [U.S. Census Bureau](#), inspired by analysis at the [NYTimes](#)

Because states each receive a delivery of vaccines proportional to their population, the percent of people given at least one shot is a good metric for how well the local rollout is going in a state. Stories from vaccine distribution in the South hold useful lessons for the nation. West Virginia bypassed the federal program that worked through national pharmacy chains, and instead delivered the vaccine directly to local, mostly independent pharmacies. These pharmacies already had relationships with the nursing home patients that were going to be the first priority, so by the time the vaccine was ready, local pharmacists had already scheduled many appointments.<sup>1,2</sup> As a result, West Virginia is second in the nation behind Alaska for percent of population who have received at least one shot.

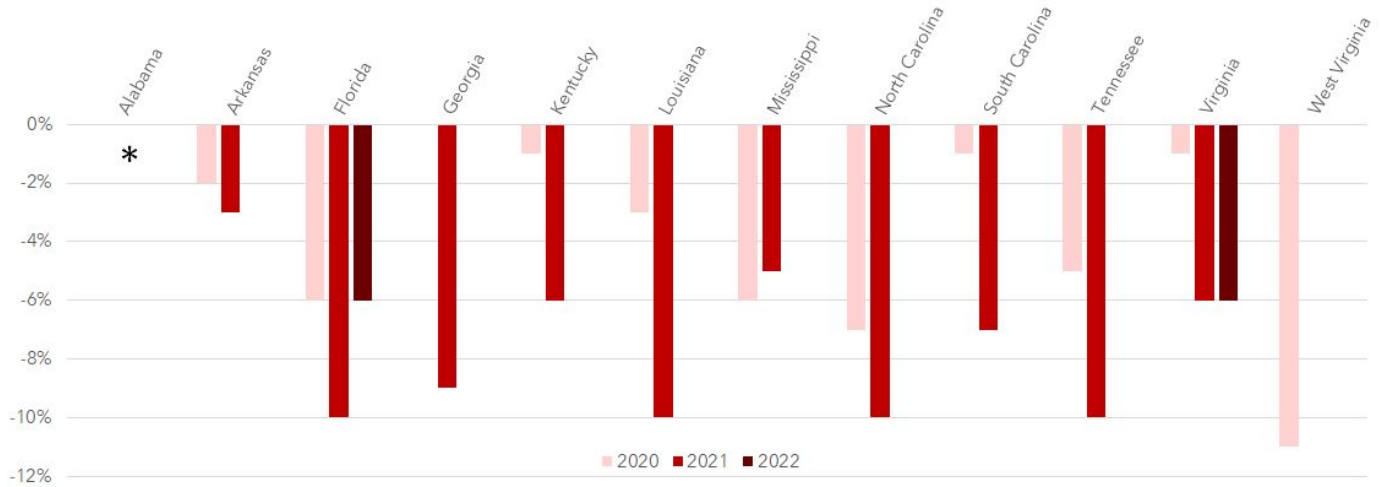
CDC numbers for Alabama and Virginia, which show those states as using less than half of the delivered doses so far, reflect problems with data reporting and not necessarily just in delivery.<sup>3</sup> Providers are not reporting shots administered to the state in a timely manner. The Virginia state vaccine distribution coordinator notes that in rural areas, lack of internet access is often to blame for the lag.<sup>4</sup> When data on shots administered fails to make it to the CDC, the CDC will not authorize more vaccine shipments because their data shows that the freezers are still full of unused vaccines.

The bottom line is that insufficient data reporting infrastructure is not only making it hard to understand how the rollout is going across and within states, but data reporting problems also actually slow down the delivery of needed vaccines.



**Every Southern state that has reported revenue projections is anticipating revenue losses in fiscal year 2021. 4 Southern states are projecting tax revenue declines of 10%.**

**FY 2020, 2021, and 2022 preliminary estimates of decline in tax revenues by state, as of January 8**  
Percent decline in tax revenues



Source: [Center on Budget and Policy Priorities](#)

Note: Some states do not have published projections for one or more years

\*Alabama does not have published tax revenue projections.

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 4.4% across the nation in fiscal year 2020 according to new Census data.<sup>1</sup> In the Southern states, West Virginia was hit the hardest in fiscal year 2020 with an 11% reduction, around \$500 million.<sup>2</sup> These losses were due in large part to unemployment, pushing down personal income tax and consumer sales tax collections.

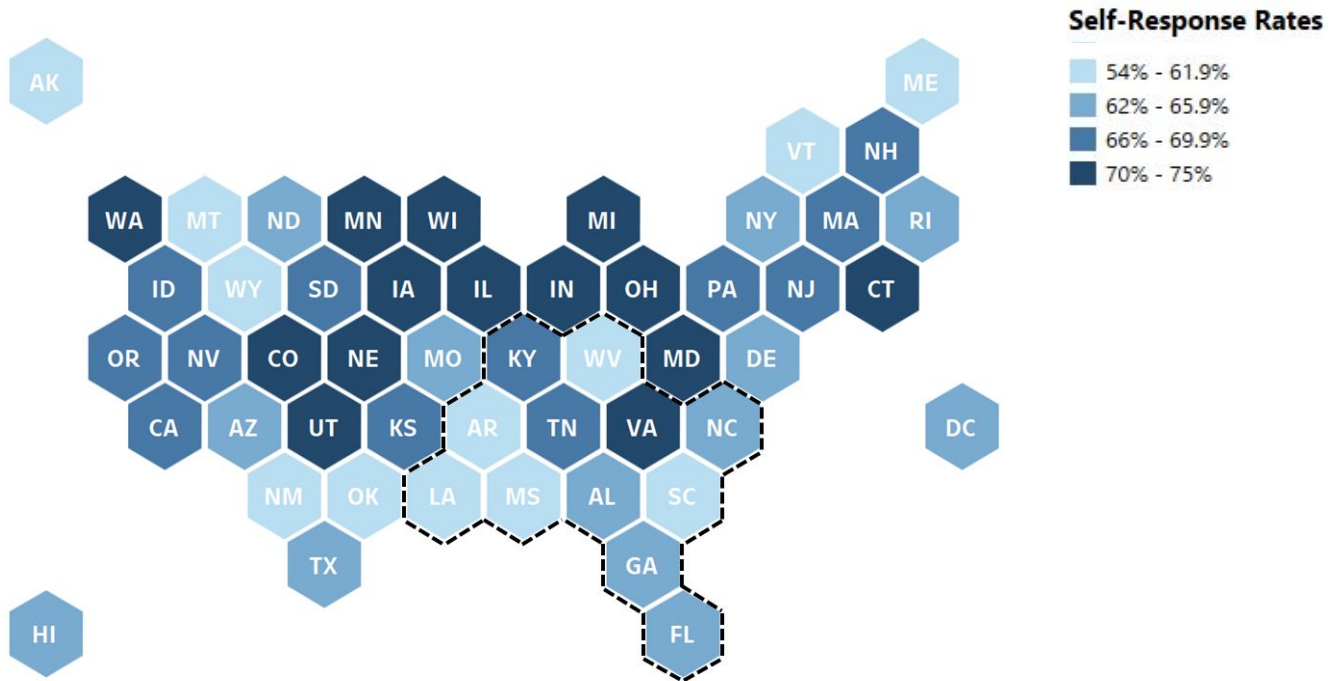
For fiscal year 2021, 4 states in the South are projecting a tax revenue reduction of 10%. Tennessee relies heavily on sales tax and due to COVID, consumer spending has dropped significantly causing a loss of revenue for the state.<sup>3</sup> Florida’s reduction is due in part to tourism and unemployment, a similar story can be seen in North Carolina.<sup>4,5</sup> Louisiana has been impacted not only by unemployment and disasters but loss of revenue in the mineral and oil industries.<sup>6</sup>

As mentioned in SEAP’s “Southern State Economic Responses to Pandemic” report, the loss of state revenue will impact their ability to have an effective public assistance program during the pandemic. These programs do not have the capacity to address the potential \$577 billion decline in wages and salaries earned in seven industries in the South.<sup>7</sup> Also troubling is the impact these reductions could have on a state’s ability to mount a robust public health response to Covid. For example, a recent NPR survey found that despite adding 20,000 new tracers since October, only 2 states—Hawaii and Montana—are appropriately staffed for contact tracing.<sup>8</sup>

## Southern and more rural states had lower self-response rates for the 2020 Census, and therefore may be more vulnerable to data quality issues.

### 2020 Census self-response rates

By state



Source: [Census Bureau](#)

The timing of this pandemic was unfortunate for the constitutionally-mandated census of all persons every 10 years. The census asks about every person living in each household in the U.S. on April 1, 2020—a date that fell just as Covid consumed the nation’s attention. This map shows what percentage of households responded on their own to the census—by phone, internet or paper. Research shows that groups less likely to self-respond are more likely to be undercounted.<sup>1</sup>

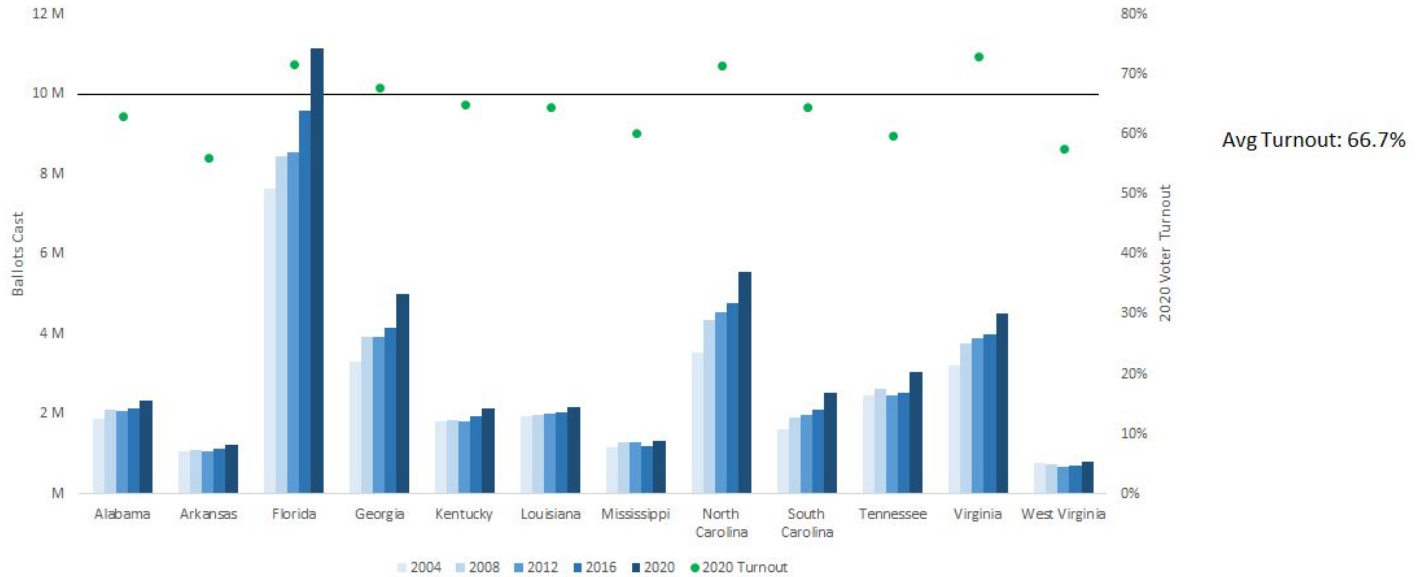
Compounding this challenge, after the self-response phase, the census experienced extreme headwinds due to the pandemic, wildfires, hurricanes, and intense politicization of what should be a non-political process. As a result, the normal processes of knocking on doors and spending time to carefully process and quality check the data were less than ideal. For example, most of the state of Louisiana was in a National Hurricane Center forecast cone for 20 days during the census, and coastal Georgia, the Carolinas, and most of Mississippi lost about a week of door-knocking to hurricane preparation.<sup>2</sup>

Because census numbers are used to divide up congressional seats and state legislatures, electoral college votes, and federal funding by state, every state needs a complete and accurate count in order for those divisions to be fair. But, there is a 15% percentage point gap between the self-response rates for Louisiana and Mississippi and that of Minnesota. The gap between West Virginia and Minnesota was 19%. Lower self-response rates, coupled with the subsequent barriers to a complete count, may impact the fair apportionment of political power and money among states to a degree yet to be measured. States and jurisdictions can support granting the Census Bureau more time to complete its work, and to advocate for a more robust process for including additional local data—for example, records from group quarters.

**Many Southern states saw significant increases in total ballots cast in the 2020 election—most notably FL, GA, NC, and VA. Still, a large number of eligible voters from each Southern state did not participate.**

**Total ballots counted by state**  
Presidential elections 2004-2020

**Voter Turnout by state**  
2020 presidential election



Source: [United States Election Project, Statista](#)

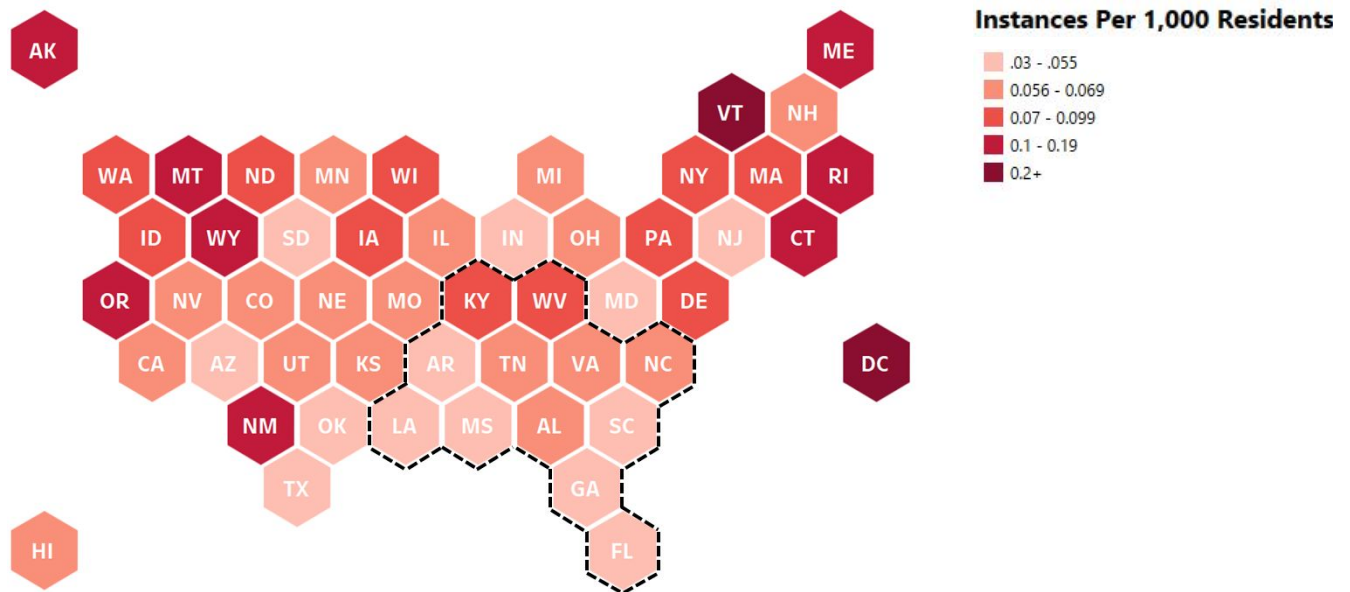
In the most populous Southern states, the raw number of ballots cast in the 2020 presidential election jumped substantially compared to 2016.<sup>1</sup> Voters in Florida increased by 1.5 million, in Georgia by over 800,000, in North Carolina by nearly 800,000, and in Virginia by more than 500,000.

While Florida had one of the largest increases in ballots cast nationwide, voter turnout there is estimated at only 72%. Estimated turnout of all eligible voters across the South ranged from a low of 56% in Arkansas to a high of 72% in Florida. Yet, average voter turnout nationwide is estimated at 66.7%. Some Northern states achieved higher voter turnout—for example, Minnesota at 80%. Georgia, which received substantial media attention for its unexpected surge in Democratic voters, had only average voter turnout at 67.7%.<sup>2</sup> Substantial continued efforts to engage voters and combat voter suppression could yield even more ballots cast in future elections. Challenges remain because of the gutting of Section 5 of the Voting Rights Act, current voting restrictions codified in law, and expected legislative efforts to make it harder to vote, rather than easier, in the South.

## The number of demonstrations across the South have ranged from 129 in West Virginia to 1,030 in Florida, 97% of them peaceful.

Civil unrest instances per 1,000 residents

April 1, 2020 - January 8, 2021



Source: [Armed Conflict Location & Event Data \(ACLED\) Project and Bridging Divides Initiative](#)

Nearly 5,000 protests have taken place across the South since April 1—occurring across every state. Although the raw number of protests in West Virginia have been low, demonstrations per capita in this sparsely populated state have been relatively high for the South. From April 2020 to January 2021, protests nationwide shifted significantly from demonstrations against racial injustices, as highlighted by the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement, to Covid-related concerns of labor leaders, health workers, teachers, and students, and most recently to the protests attempting to overturn the 2020 election results.<sup>1</sup> BLM-linked protests were more than twice as likely to be broken up by law enforcement than right-wing protests. And more often than not (51% of the time), authorities used force such as tear gas or rubber bullets at BLM-linked demonstrations. When law enforcement intervened to break up right-wing demonstrations, force was used only 1/3 of the time. Armed individuals were more likely to have been present at right-wing demonstrations.<sup>2</sup> While violent protests commanded the most media attention, 97% of all protests across the South since April 1 were peaceful.

The United States has a long history of protests as an important and effective form of civic activism.<sup>3</sup> Research on Civil Rights era *peaceful* protests revealed that those demonstrations were effective in swaying public sympathy toward the protestors and yielded substantive policy reforms.<sup>4,5</sup> In 2009, Tea Party demonstrations generated additional support for Republican candidates and yielded more conservative policy making.<sup>6</sup> Studies on the effects of *violent* protests have generated mixed conclusions with 1960s violent protests yielding greater support for “social control”<sup>4</sup> while the 1992 Los Angeles riots yielded a liberal shift in voting patterns.<sup>7</sup>

# 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 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, and health insurance availability by race and ethnicity.

## Indicators in this section

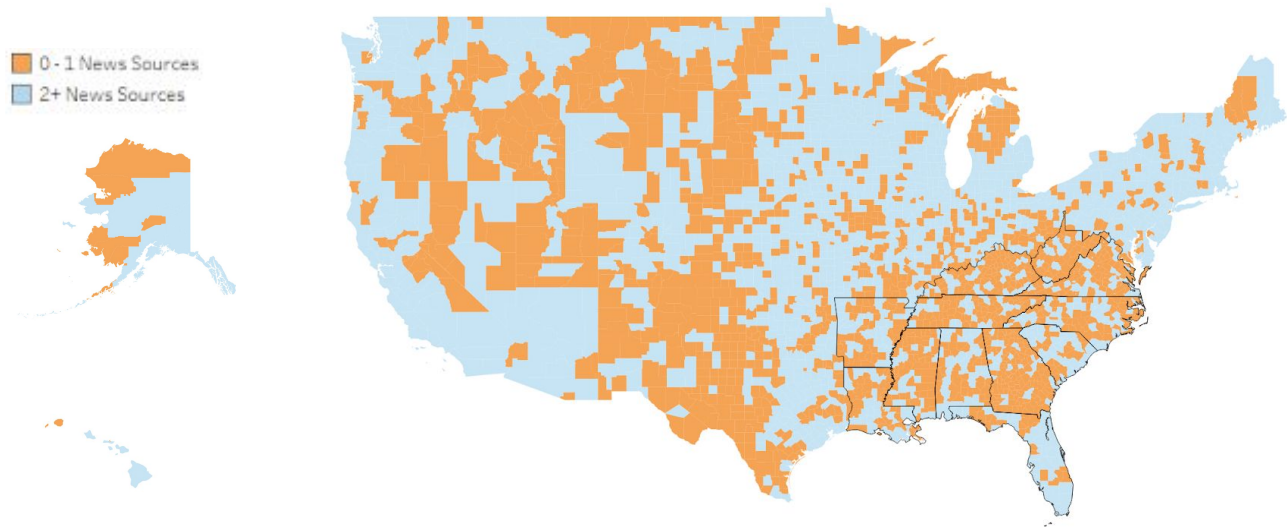
- News deserts
- Internet access by state and by race/ethnicity
- Estimates of missing K-12 students
- Health insurance coverage by state and by race/ethnicity



**Southern counties are more likely to be news deserts than the national average. Fully ⅔ of Southern counties are news deserts, meaning a critical vehicle for delivering trusted information during the pandemic 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](#)

Trusted local news sources are key to the success of public health campaigns, countering mis- and disinformation, holding local governments accountable, and getting the word out about testing and vaccinations.<sup>1</sup>

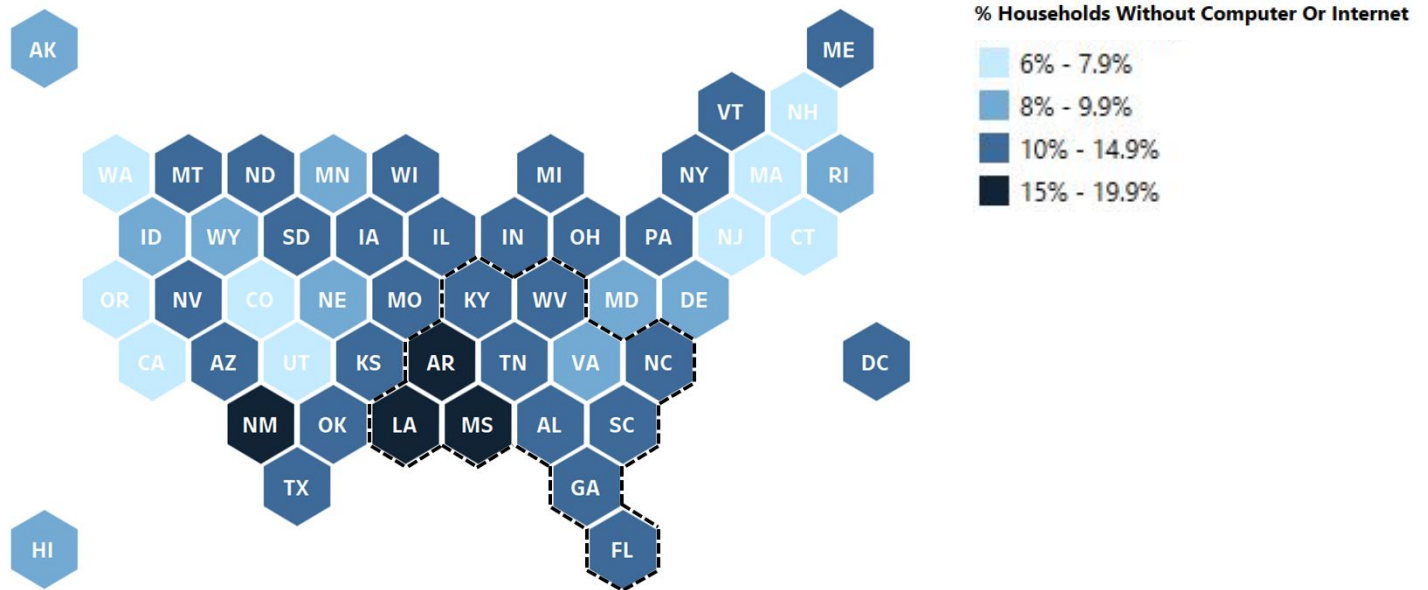
However, more than half of counties nationwide are what experts describe as “local news deserts” that have either no newspaper or only one (often a weekly or a thinly staffed daily).<sup>2</sup> And fully ⅔ of Southern counties are news deserts, meaning a critical vehicle for trusted information during the pandemic is absent. Local newspapers are especially critical as we enter the vaccination phase of the pandemic. For example, when vaccines opened up for residents ages 65 and older, the South Central Health District in middle Georgia was concerned about how they would get consent forms to eligible residents, as there was no budget for printing. Many health districts post their forms online so residents can print them at home or submit electronically. However, the owner of the local paper notes that, “Most of those in our area do not have access to the internet, much less a printer.”<sup>3</sup> The Tri-County Connector published the consent form for the vaccine on the front page of their newspaper so residents could simply cut the form out of the paper, fill it out, and bring it to the vaccine site.

Even before the pandemic, local newspapers were being squeezed out by competition for advertising dollars from tech giants such as Google and Facebook, and being hollowed out following buyouts by private equity funds.<sup>4</sup> The news desert situation is getting worse with the pandemic, with Poynter research identifying 60 closures of local newsrooms due to the Covid crisis.<sup>5</sup>

# Across Southern states, more than 1 in 10 people lack a computer and internet. In Mississippi, Louisiana, and Arkansas the situation is more acute with nearly 1 in 5 people lacking computer/internet access.

## Internet access by state, 2019

Percent of individuals in households without a computer, or without broadband or dial-up internet access



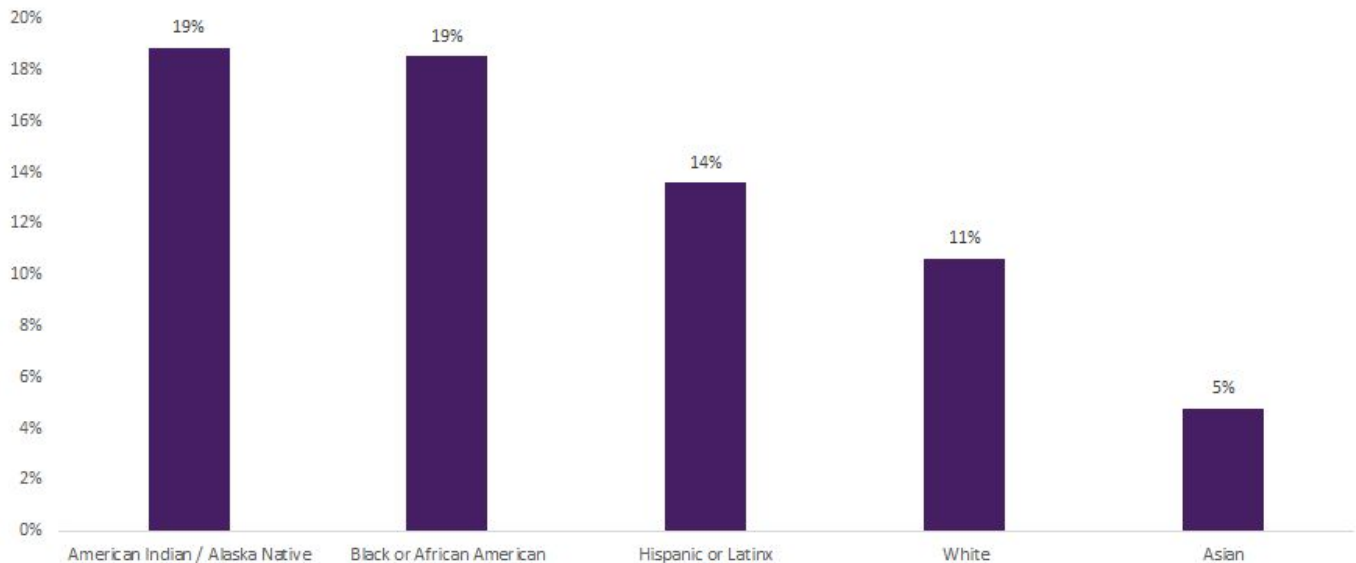
Source: [Census Bureau](#)

Southern states have less internet access as a whole than the nation. More than 1 in 10 people lack a computer and internet access in each Southern state. And nearly 1 in 5 people lack a computer and internet in Mississippi, Louisiana, and Arkansas. In rural areas of America, there are fewer broadband providers and slower internet speeds. One study from 2018 found that the majority of rural residents in the U.S. felt access to high speed internet was a significant problem.<sup>1</sup>

**Across the South, American Indian and Black individuals are nearly twice as likely to lack a computer and internet than white individuals, and nearly 4 times more likely than Asian individuals.**

**Internet access in the South, by race/ethnicity, 2019**

Percent of individuals in households without a computer, or without broadband or dial-up internet access



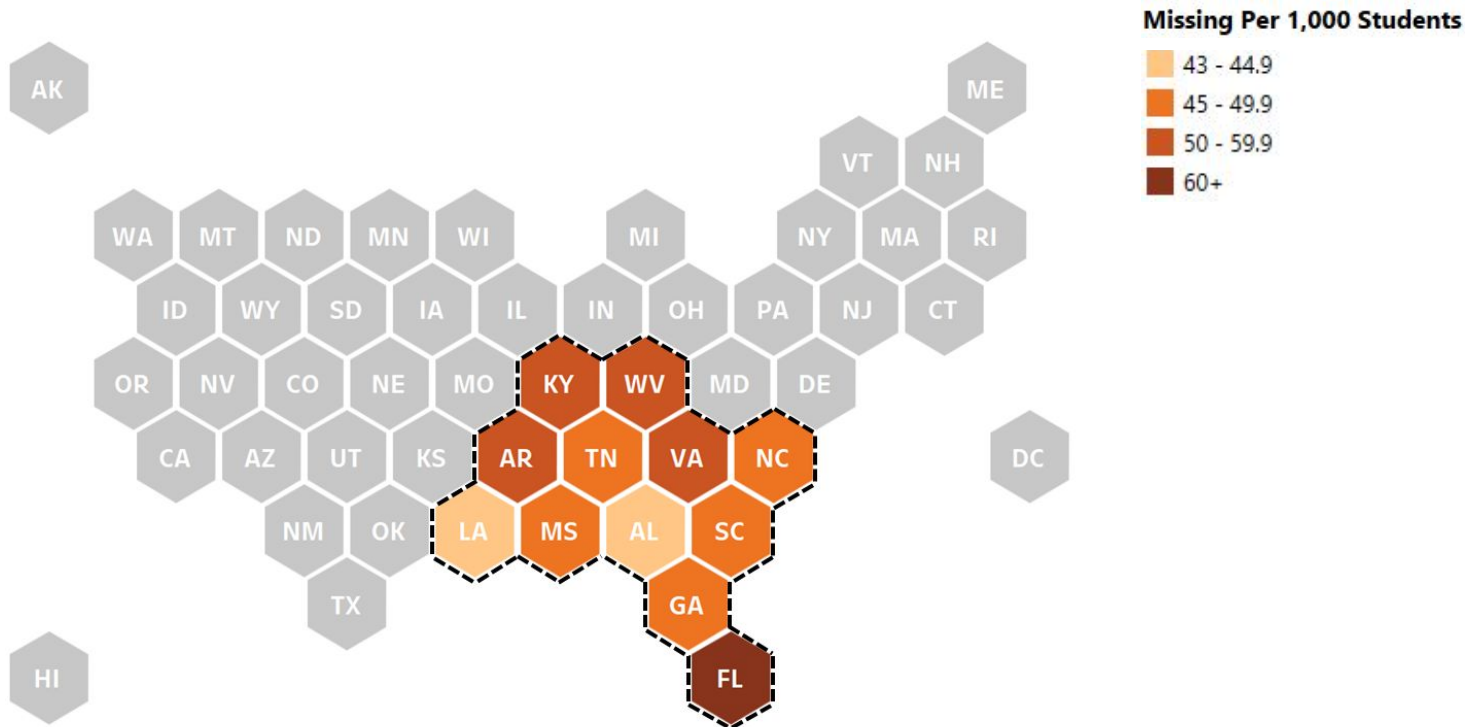
Source: [Census Bureau](#)

Internet access is a strong indicator of racial inequity in the United States. According to the most recent data about the South, roughly 1 in 5 American Indian and Black people live in homes without computers and internet access, compared to only 11% of white people and 5% of Asian people. School-age Black and Indigenous children are particularly at risk of learning loss where instruction has moved to all-virtual during the pandemic—especially if state governments and school districts fail to ensure all children have access to needed equipment and internet connectivity.<sup>1</sup>

Lack of access to the internet has additional harmful consequences during the pandemic, as it limits safe access to telehealth, news, worship, and communication with the outside world. Troubling anecdotes are emerging of instances of internet-savvy individuals snatching up limited vaccine appointments, leaving none for those who need to schedule by phone.<sup>2</sup>

# Up to 670,000 K-12 students may be missing from Southern schools since the start of the pandemic, a number which likely under estimates the total missing student population.

Projected estimate of children in marginalized communities absent from school, since start of pandemic  
Per 1,000 students, Southern states



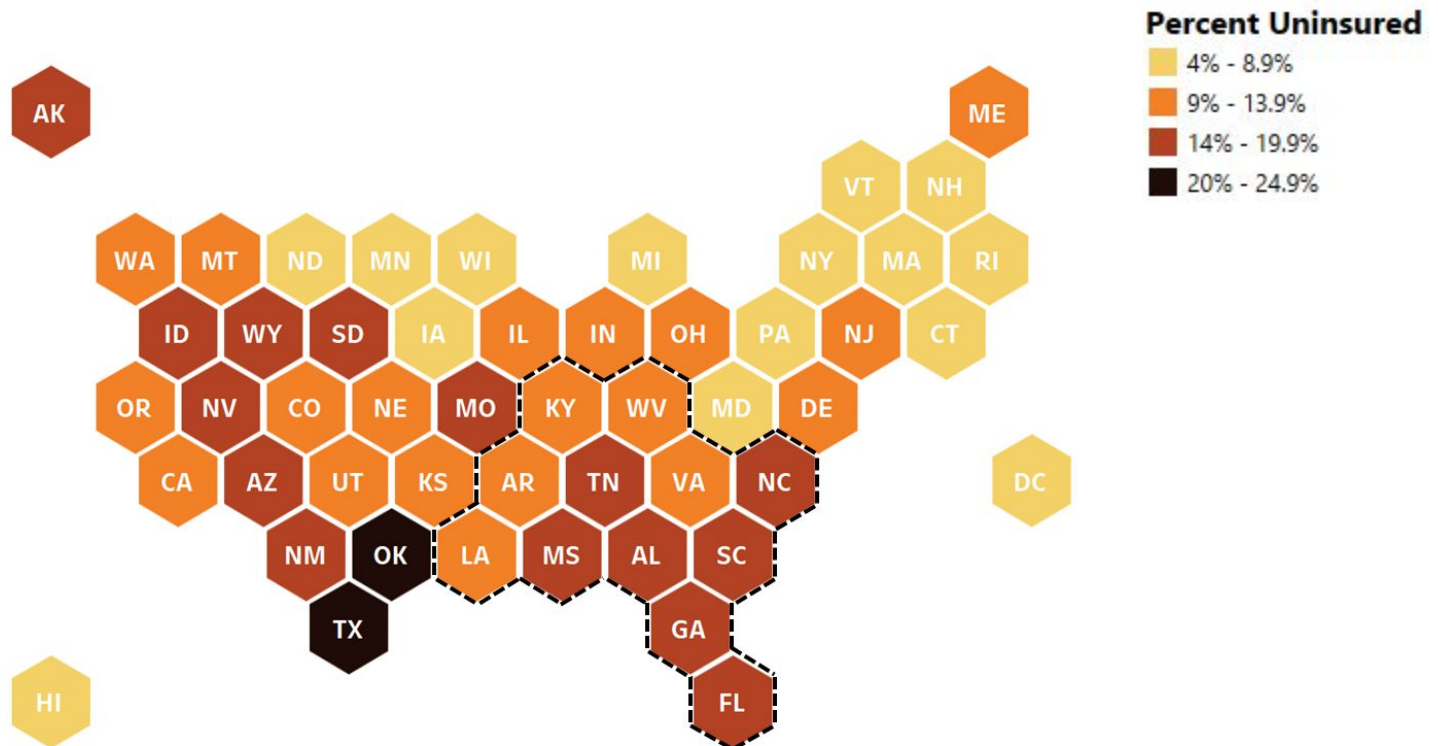
Source: [Bellwether Education Partners](#), [National Center for Education Statistics](#)

Lack of access to the internet and computers, students acting as caretakers or taking jobs, and decreased services for students with disabilities all contributed to an observable (but challenging to precisely quantify) drop in school attendance among K-12 students during the pandemic. Education think tank Bellwether Education Partners looked at available data on English learners, students in foster care, and other vulnerable groups to estimate that 260,000 to 670,000 students could be missing from K-12 schools based on vulnerable populations in each Southern state.

Anecdotal evidence is available from some school districts, such as a survey done in South Carolina which reported that “only 17% [of teachers] had contacted all of their students...[and]about 21% of the teachers said they had been in contact with less than half of the students in their classes.”<sup>1</sup> Actual school attendance data is needed to determine the full scale of the issue.<sup>2</sup> In the meantime, it is clear that these initial estimates and anecdotes indicate a drastic problem for students this year.<sup>3</sup>

## The 7 Southern states that have not adopted Medicaid expansion had disproportionate shares of uninsured working-age adults prior to the onset of the pandemic.

Lack of health insurance coverage by state  
Population age 19-64



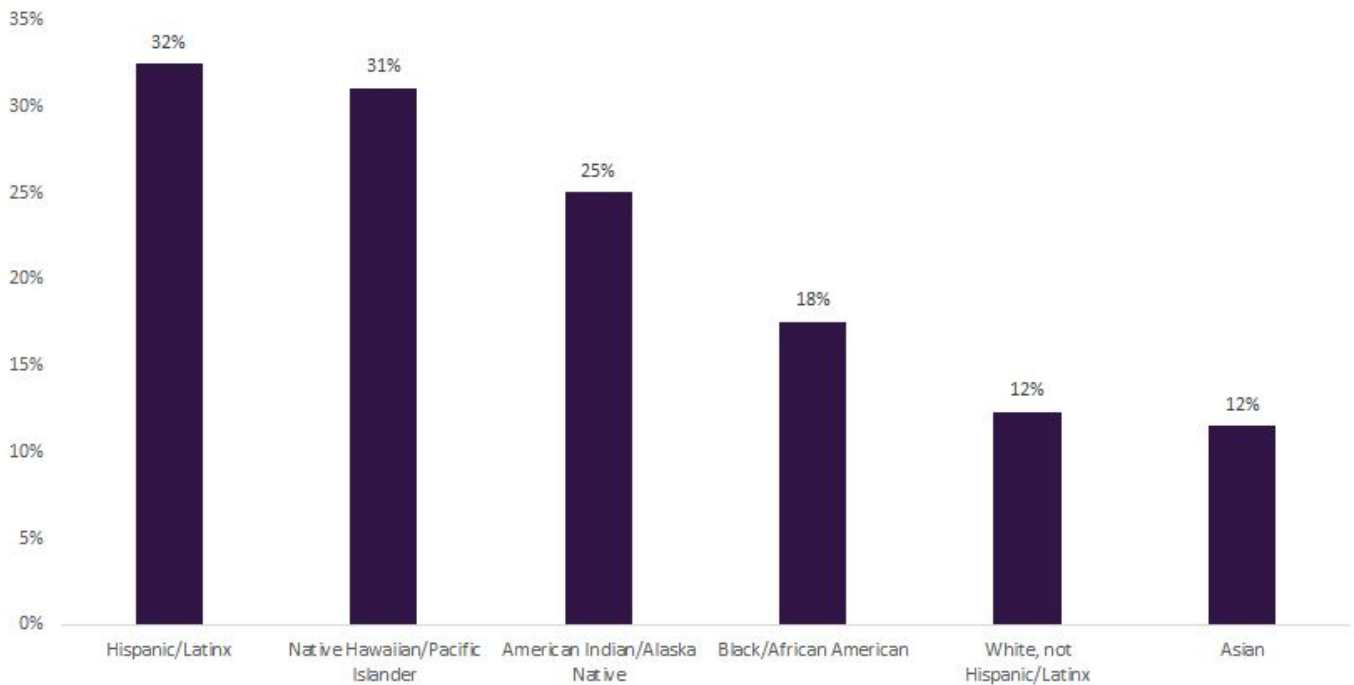
Source: [Census Bureau's American Community Survey](#)

Across the U.S., 13% of working-age adults lacked health insurance prior to the pandemic. In the 7 Southern states where Medicaid expansion has not been adopted (Mississippi, Alabama, Georgia, Florida, South Carolina, North Carolina, and Tennessee) a disproportionate share (18%) of working-age adults lacked health insurance in 2019.<sup>1</sup> Health insurance increases access to necessary health care for individuals, both during times of illness, and in the form of preventative care.<sup>2,3</sup> A lack of health insurance coverage can lead to untreated illness or injury.<sup>4</sup> When many people lack health insurance, societal costs increase through greater use of expensive emergency room visits and lost worker productivity.<sup>5</sup> While children under 19 and adults over 64 are often eligible for public forms of health insurance (Medicaid, CHIP, Medicare) that lead to higher rates of coverage, adults age 19-64 may lack coverage if they cannot get it through an employer.<sup>6</sup>



## Roughly 1 in 3 Pacific Islander and Hispanic working-age adults, and 1 in 4 American Indian working-age adults across the South lacked health insurance before the pandemic.

Lack of health insurance coverage in the South, by race/ethnicity  
Population age 19-64



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

While over 1 in 10 white and Asian working-age adults lacked health insurance across the South in 2019, nearly three times as many Pacific Islander and Hispanic adults lacked health insurance. American Indian adults were twice as likely to lack health insurance. Black adults also lacked health insurance at rates 6 percentage points higher than white and Asian adults.

With the compounding impact of job loss, lack of access to healthy foods, and exposure to pollution, certain race groups that are extremely vulnerable to Covid are even more vulnerable because of their lack of health insurance. Access to telehealth services is also not equitable, with internet access not consistently available across racial groups.<sup>1</sup>

During the pandemic, affordable health insurance has been tenuous given the millions of people who have lost their jobs and access to their employer-sponsored health insurance.<sup>2,3</sup> The Urban Institute reports that an estimated 3.5 million people nationwide may be uninsured due to the pandemic.<sup>4</sup>

# Prosperity

## People

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

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.

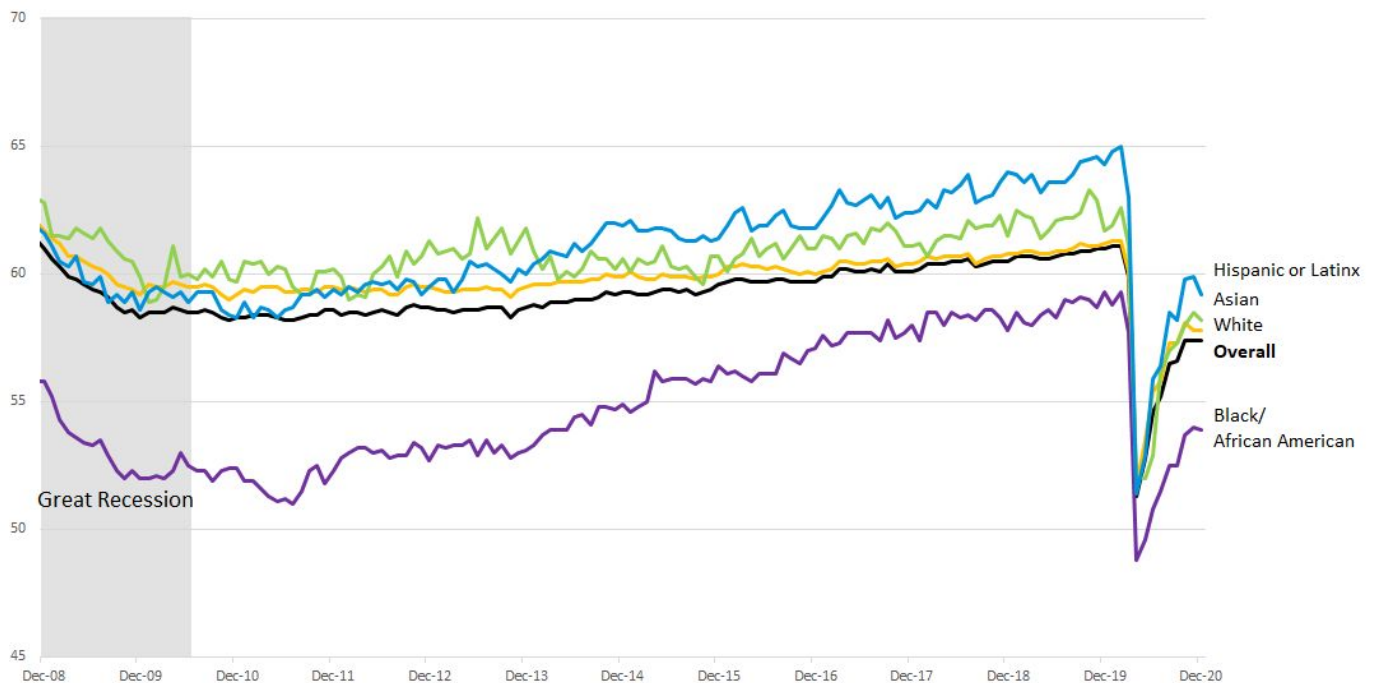
### Indicators in this section

- Employment rate by race/ethnicity, U.S.
- Employment rate by gender, U.S.
- Ability to cover basic needs through unemployment insurance by county
- Food insecurity
- Likelihood of eviction or foreclosure

**The nationwide December employment rate of 57% was below the lowest point during the Great Recession. While the white employment rate remained steady from November to December, all other groups experienced a decline.**

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

Employment-population ratio of civilian, non-institutionalized workforce age 20+, seasonally adjusted



Source: [Bureau of Labor Statistics](#)

In December 2020, the employment rate for adults nationwide was only 57%—below the lowest point during the Great Recession and well below February of this year when 61% of all adults had employment. In April, employment rates plunged to 51%. Since April, employment rates were increasing month by month but stalled at 57% in October.

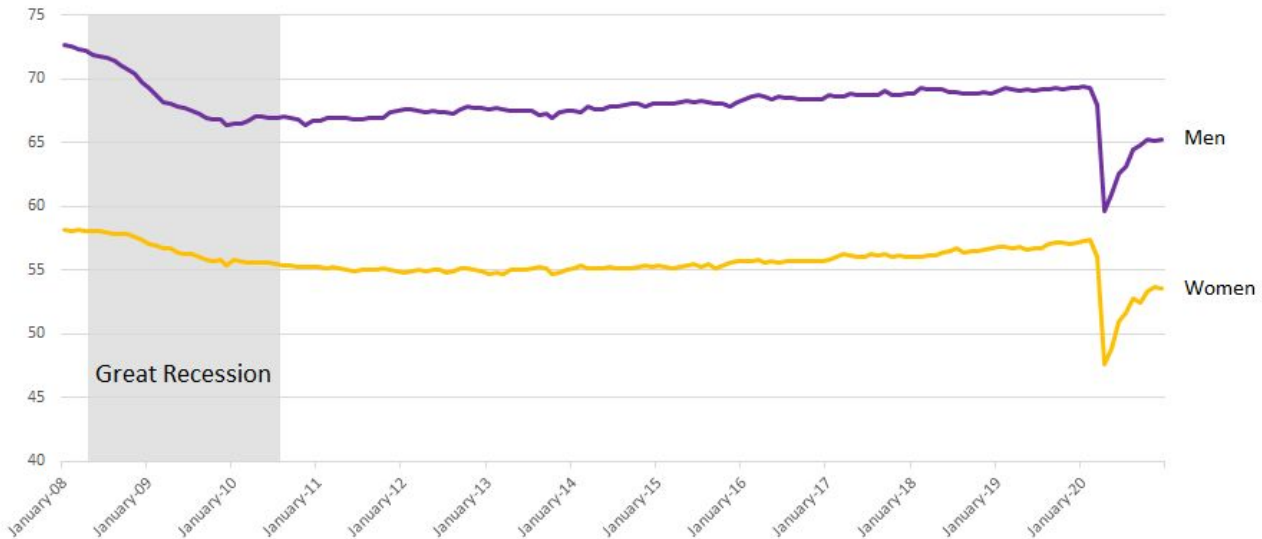
In December, only 54% of all Black adults nationwide had employment. White and Asian adults had employment of 58%. Hispanic or Latinx adults remained highest at 59% with many employed in essential positions in agriculture, food processing, and janitorial services.<sup>1,2,3</sup>

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 that many adults will become discouraged and stop looking for work all together due to the depth and length of the current recession.<sup>4</sup>

**While employment rates for both men and women remain well 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.**

Employment-population ratio of civilian, non-institutionalized workforce age 20+, seasonally adjusted



Source: [Bureau of Labor Statistics](#)

Nationally in December, the employment rate for women fell slightly, while men’s employment rate actually increased. Between November and December, the leisure and hospitality sector lost nearly half a million jobs as Covid’s long dark winter descended on the country, chilling leisure activities. Women as a whole lost 156,000 jobs, while men gained in employment such that the economy lost a net of 140,000 jobs in December.

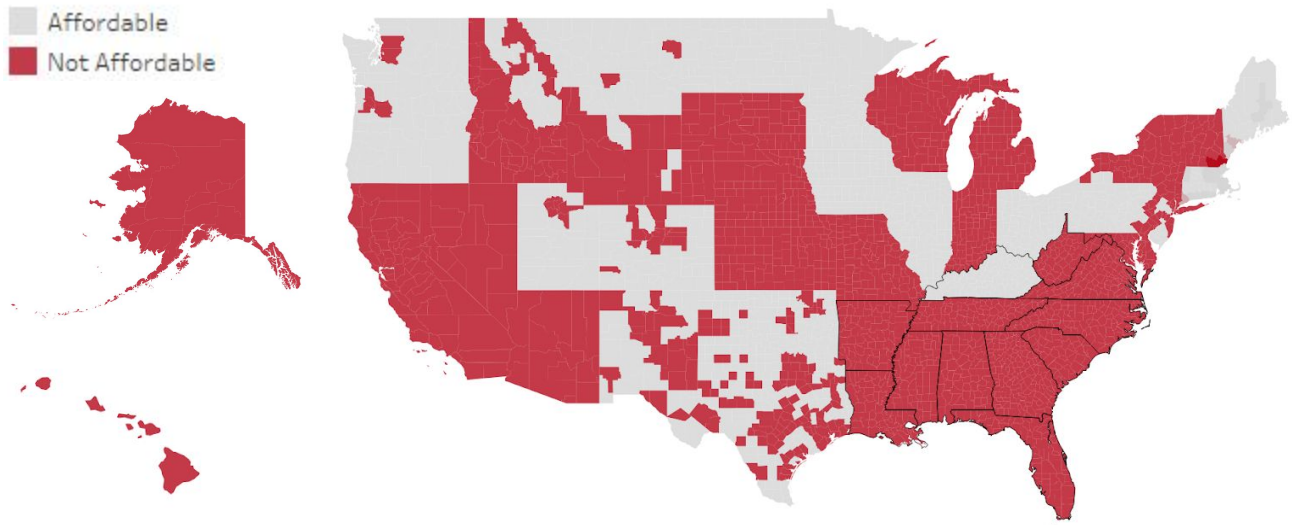
Since the beginning of the Covid recession, women have been more deeply impacted because they are more often employed in the low-wage service jobs in restaurants and retail that have evaporated. Moreover, 1 in 4 women in the U.S. have children under 14 at home and are disproportionately responsible for at-home childcare duties. This fall, many mothers found themselves unable to work or unable to advance meaningfully in their careers as childcare centers are unavailable or schools require remote learning.<sup>1,2</sup>

An estimated 1.3 million slots at licensed childcare providers is estimated to have been lost across the South during the pandemic.<sup>3</sup> Childcare centers’ thin margins mean they have little ability to survive increased costs for sanitizing and masks, and little capacity to even apply for government aid when it’s available.<sup>4</sup> The permanent closing of childcare centers will be a roadblock to many women’s ability to return to work and could dramatically impact the available workforce and dampen economic recovery even after the pandemic is no longer a threat.

## Cost of living is unaffordable across all counties in the South for those who must rely on only state unemployment insurance, except in Kentucky, where state unemployment insurance covers basic needs.

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

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



Source: [USA Facts](#), [HUD](#), [Department of Labor](#)

State unemployment insurance pays only 40% of a workers' previous wages on average.<sup>1</sup> In part to motivate workers to continue looking for employment, unemployment insurance benefits are generally lower than a workers' previous wages. However, the South has lost 1.3 million jobs compared with December 2019, and many workers are not able to find employment despite earnest efforts to do so.

Unemployment benefits, which are designed to be only temporary support for job seekers, have been inadequate to pay for cost of living expenses across every Southern state except Kentucky, where standard monthly unemployment assistance is \$400 higher than the next highest Southern state. In April, Congress approved an additional \$600 weekly benefits but this ended in July, and the outgoing president delayed approving additional support such that many workers may have experienced a gap in unemployment support in late December.<sup>2,3</sup> The nation is not likely to regain many of the jobs lost until the pandemic is under control, and unemployed workers will need additional support to make ends mean until the economy recovers.

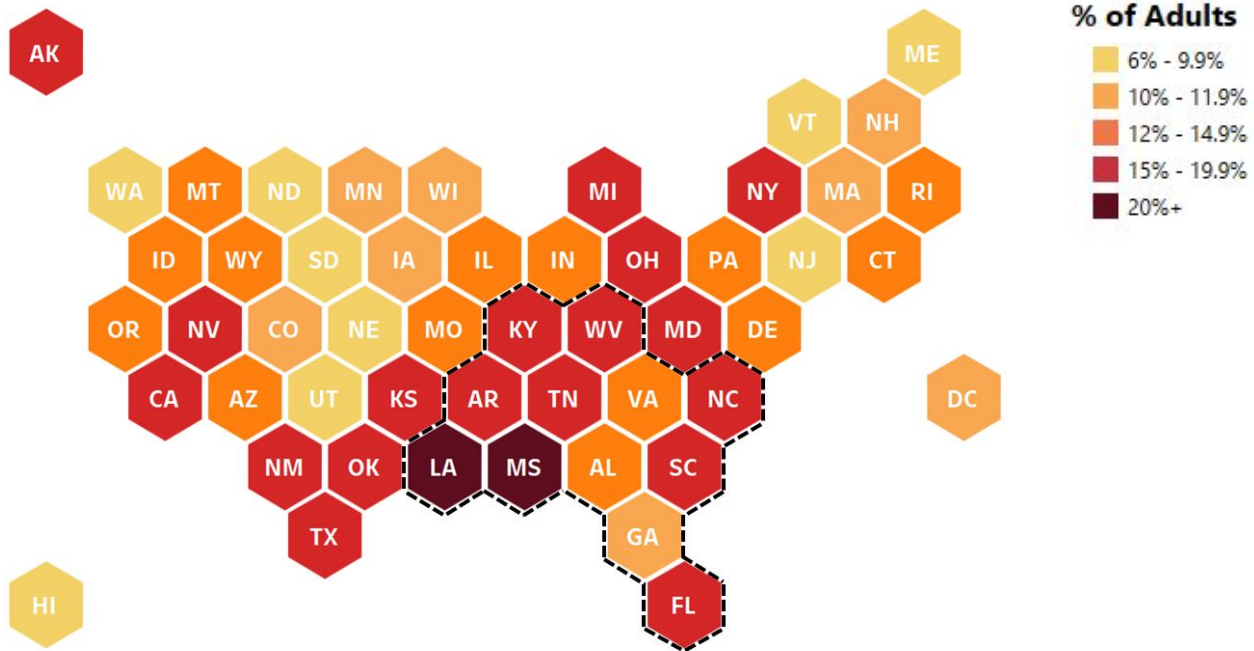
Many who have lost their jobs are also struggling to navigate unemployment systems, with some facing unanswered calls and long-pending claims. And with benefits lapsing for some, the bureaucracy means more time without receiving financial support or a full understanding of what benefits they are entitled to.<sup>4</sup> A Southern Economic Advancement Project survey of SNAP households found that in addition to difficulty navigating public benefits such as SNAP and stimulus checks, nearly 1 in 5 respondents had difficulty navigating through the unemployment insurance process.<sup>5</sup>



# More than 1 in 10 adults nationwide report their households have gone hungry during the pandemic. Among all states, Louisiana and Mississippi ranked highest at roughly 1 in 5.

## Food insecurity by state, December 9 - 21, 2020

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



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

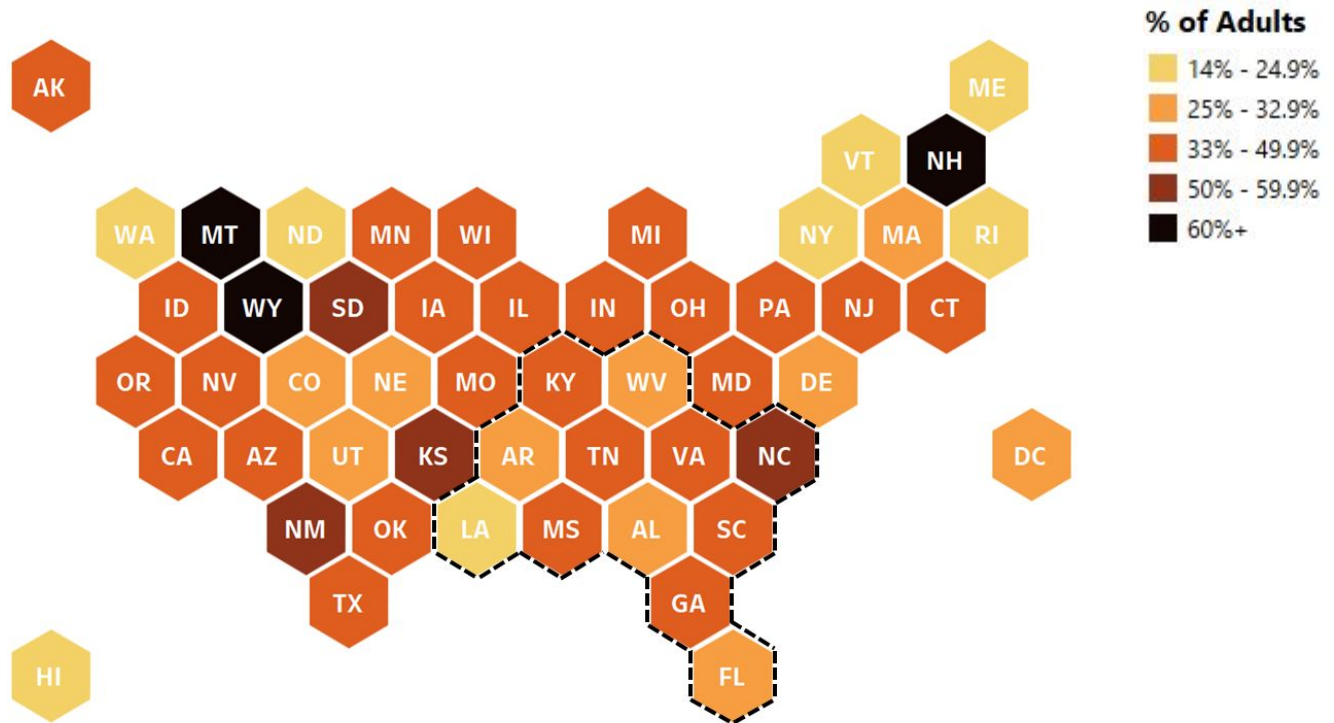
Covid job losses and higher food prices have exacerbated the challenges that families have putting food on the table.<sup>1</sup> While 14% of U.S. families have reported food insecurity during the past several weeks, Southern states have fared even worse. In Louisiana and Mississippi, at least 1 in 5 adults report going hungry during the pandemic. Louisiana has been hit especially hard this year, with both hurricanes and the pandemic leaving many in dire need. Demand at food banks, often an early indicator of community distress, has skyrocketed. As of the holidays, the state of Louisiana has distributed \$674 million for emergency food assistance.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, 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.

Not only are there differences in food security across states during the current crisis, but historical data shows a persistent racial disparity, with Black and Hispanic households going hungry at rates twice that of white households.<sup>3</sup> 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.<sup>4,5</sup>

**The majority of adults in North Carolina, and nearly half of adults in Virginia anticipate they will be evicted or foreclosed upon in the next two months. The same is true for roughly 1 in 3 adults in 8 additional Southern states.**

**Likelihood of eviction or foreclosure by state, December 9 - 21, 2020**

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



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

With 1.3 million fewer jobs across the South, many Southerners are uncertain they'll have housing beyond the next two months. Roughly 1 in 3 adults in 10 Southern states report they are likely to be evicted or foreclosed upon in the next two months. The current federal moratorium on all evictions for nonpayment of rent is effective until March 31st. The Biden administration has plans to extend the moratoria on eviction and foreclosures until September 30, 2021 and increase funding for rental assistance.<sup>1</sup> However, enforcement of eviction moratoria varies greatly across localities and landlords can find reasons to evict other than nonpayment of rent.<sup>2</sup> In addition, at the end of the moratoria, mortgages and rents due could be enormous.<sup>3</sup>

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# About this series

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

*Pandemic to Prosperity: South* offers a comprehensive overview of the Covid-related impacts on our lives and livelihoods, governments, civic institutions, and overall well being, with a focus on the states of Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, Virginia, and West Virginia. This report series analyzes disparate data, adding top-level insights about the implications of each indicator, what each indicator reveals, and how the indicators are interrelated. It highlights mostly state-level metrics with breakdowns by race, gender, and age 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 in 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 inaugural release of *Pandemic to Prosperity: South*. The *Pandemic to Prosperity* series (both the national one and this one focused on the South) are 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 vaccines and as the nation grapples with new shocks and stressors such as disasters and civil unrest; it will also examine 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 regarding employment, health, housing, and more. With each new report in the series, indicators will change as the recovery transitions.

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

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

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

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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.*

