April 13, 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.

Evidence shows that communities need a surge of support in order to beat the Covid-19 pandemic and create the foundation for equitable recovery. In the 1st edition of *Pandemic to Prosperity: South*, released in January 2021, we saw stark realities of where the South lagged the nation in health insurance, food security, Census response rates, information access, and more. This 2nd edition of *Pandemic to Prosperity: South* shows continued stress among many of those indicators, as well as new data on school attendance, vaccine uptake, internet access by income, personal income per capita, and PPP loans.

Vaccines. The South lags the nation in the share of people who are vaccinated or plan to be by 4 percentage points. Stakeholders from every sector should coordinate on targeted, evidence-based campaigns to increase vaccine uptake. Fair Count and SEAP launched the Road to Recovery: Count Me In campaign in Southwest Georgia to pilot a strategy that uses Get Out the Vote (GOTV) tactics and the community organizing infrastructure built during the 2020 Census to engage hard-to-reach communities. The strategies include local and regional tele-townhalls, text and phone banking campaigns, digital surveys, and coordination with faith leaders, local elected officials, and medical professionals to increase access to both vaccines and information.

Employment and training. The South now has 1.8 million fewer jobs than a year ago, and many of those that come back are going to be radically changed. Now is the time to reimagine job training for the many industries where digital transformation has accelerated during the pandemic. Nationwide, women lost 23% more jobs than men, and mothers of young children were more likely than women without children to leave their jobs when the pandemic hit. We must ensure schools and caregiving organizations provide the support needed to enable women to return to the workforce and narrow the gender employment gap.

Education. As school systems across the South prepare to end the year and plan for the Fall semester, the impacts of the pandemic on students must be at the forefront. For Southern 8th graders enrolled in remote public schooling, early indicators reveal concerning disparities in attendance for students who are economically disadvantaged, English learners, and those living with disabilities. This points to an immediate need to surge staffing and intensive tutoring programs to re-engage students over the summer.

Digital divide and small businesses. More than 1 in 10 people lack a computer or internet access in each Southern state. Counties in the Mississippi River basin have among the lowest rates of broadband subscriptions. Moreover, Southern small businesses may be missing out on forgivable loans as evidenced by the lower than average receipt of forgivable PPP loans per capita in 2021 in every Southern state, with the exception of Louisiana. Federal funds are available, and Southern businesses and communities must receive the support they need. It is vital that federal funds are tracked to ensure broadband programs, small business credits, support for impacted industries, and infrastructure improvements go to the most vulnerable communities.

Data infrastructure. It is well known that what you measure influences what you do. Therefore, Southern states must bolster systems tracking Covid-19 tests, monitoring for variants, and recording vaccine uptake, so that demographic data on small areas can be used to improve test/vaccine deployment and outreach campaigns. Further, Southern states need to double down on standards and mandatory reporting of educational metrics, so children do not fall through the cracks.

Civic engagement and spending accountability. Approximately $350 billion in new federal relief will soon flow to state and local governments. 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. One city in Georgia funded rental assistance, hazard pay, childcare, and internet access.[1] Another city in Georgia spent all of its proceeds on its police department.[2] Both had about 1 in 3 residents living in poverty. Civic engagement will be more important than ever to ensure federal dollars are used to the greatest impact.

The South is a vital region, and this pandemic is worsening our existing challenges and deepening our inequities. Now, it is our time to stand together and move from pandemic to prosperity.

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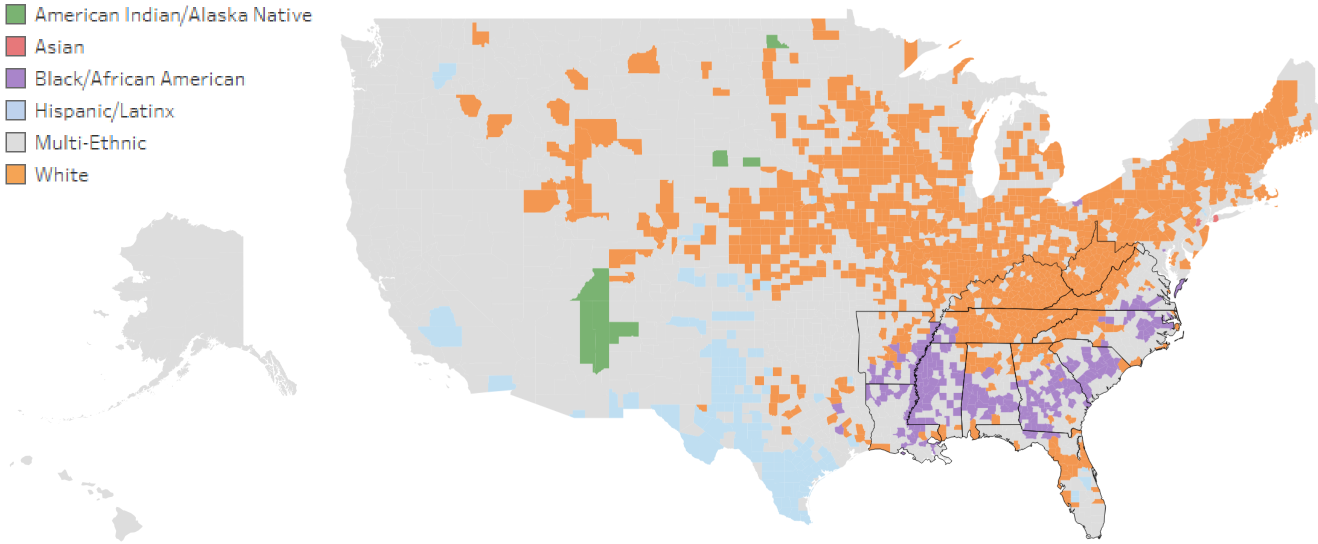
Southern states include 225 of the 229 U.S. counties where the Black population is uniquely greater than the national average.

Disproportionate representation of racial/ethnic group by county

Population by race/ethnicity, 2019



Source: Census Bureau Note: Color indicates the race/ethnicity that is higher than the national average in each county. Multi-Ethnic indicates the county has more than one race/ethnicity greater than the national average.

The Black Belt stretches from Virginia to Louisiana and has a unique demographic make-up—vestiges of a history of cotton and tobacco plantations and the millions enslaved there. The Appalachian region from northern Alabama to West Virginia has been long dominated by extractive industries such as coal mining. As a whole, these 12 states have struggled from a history of underinvestment in transportation, infrastructure, education, and job training, and still have among the highest poverty rates in the United States today.

In this report, the South is defined as the 12 states of Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, Virginia, and West Virginia.

Pandemic
Lives and Livelihoods

To 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 sufficiently 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.

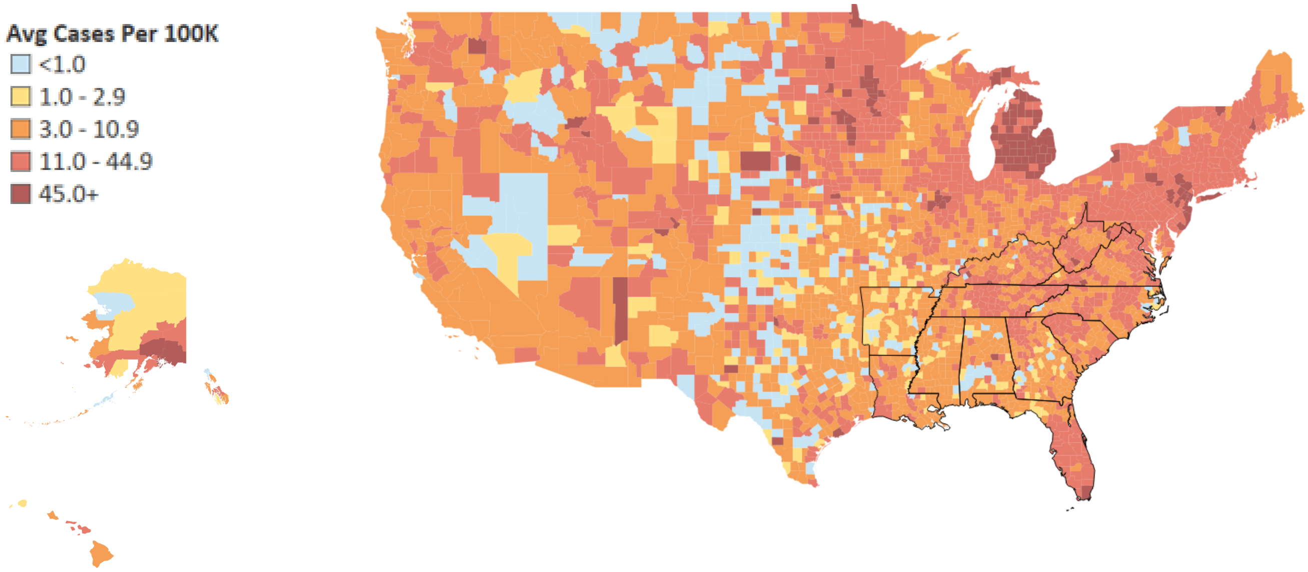
As more data becomes available, additional metrics will be added to this section to better assess how states and the federal government are protecting lives and livelihoods.

Indicators in this section

- New daily Covid cases in the past week by county
- Covid hospitalization rates by race/ethnicity, U.S.
- Excess deaths during the pandemic, U.S.
- Change in total jobs, by state and U.S
- Small business closures, by state and U.S.
- Damages from weather and climate events, 2020
- Personal income per capita, by state and U.S.

With conditions rapidly changing due to more contagious variants and loosening public health restrictions, most of the South remains at high risk of exposure to Covid despite increasing numbers of vaccinated residents.

Average daily new Covid cases per 100,000 population in past week, by county
Analysis of state and local health agencies and hospitals data as of April 7, 2021



Source: [The New York Times]

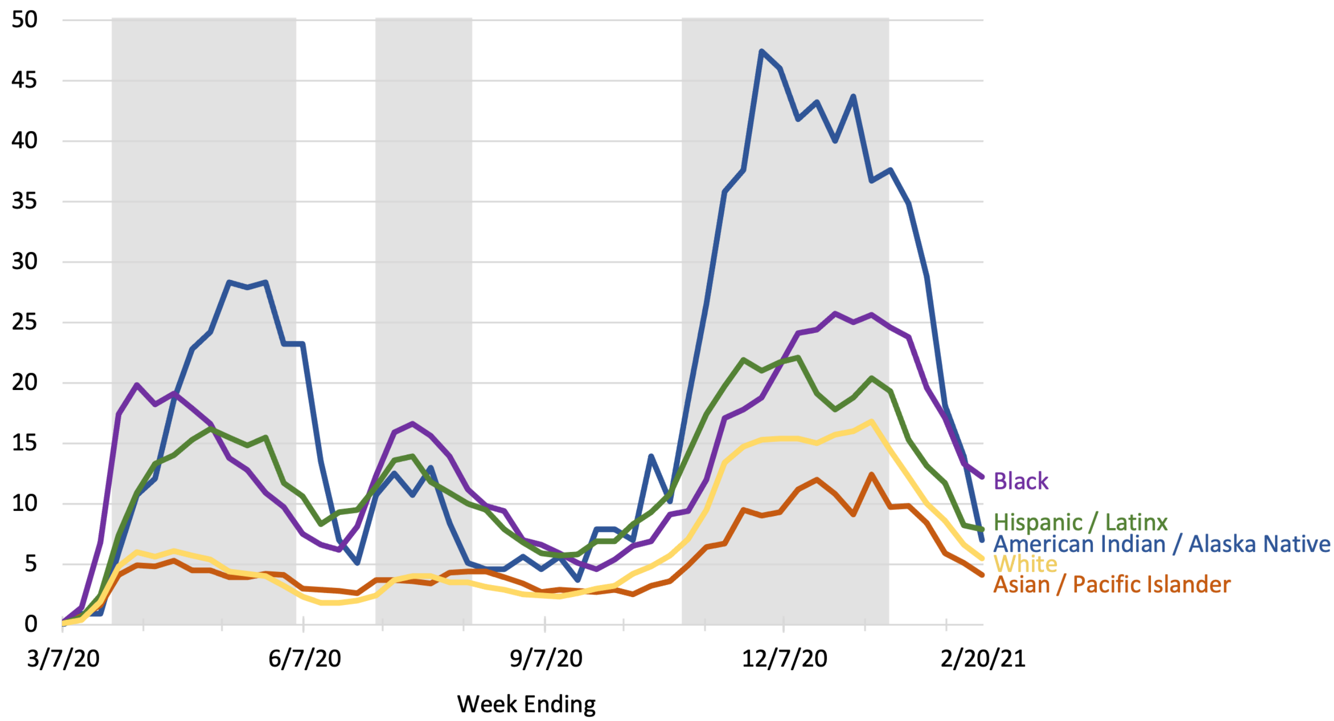
Though much of the country's attention is on the Covid surge in Michigan, most of the South is also at high risk of exposure to Covid (orange and red on this map). Specifically, 8 of 12 Southern states (Alabama, Mississippi, Tennessee, Virginia, Georgia, the Carolinas, and Kentucky) have higher than recommended rates of positive tests, meaning they are not testing enough to know the true scale of the Covid rates depicted on this map.[1] Despite pockets of low case rates, the South continues to be host to virus hotspots, such as Chattahoochee County, GA and Caldwell County, KY, which are currently in the top-ten counties for active case rates in the nation.

With Southern governors removing business restrictions (all) and mask requirements (some: Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Mississippi, Missouri, Tennessee, and South Carolina), public health officials warn that measures that barely kept the virus at bay may no longer be sufficient against new variants.[2,3]

Meanwhile, vaccinating Southern populations has taken on an greater urgency as more contagious variants of the virus are confirmed in most Southern states (particularly Florida and Georgia).[2]

As of February 2021, American Indian/Alaska Native, Black, and Hispanic individuals are 1.3 to 2.2 times more likely to have severe Covid impacts than white people across the U.S.

Covid-associated hospitalization rates per 100,000 population, U.S.
By race and ethnicity, Mar 7, 2020 - Feb 20, 2021



Source: CDC

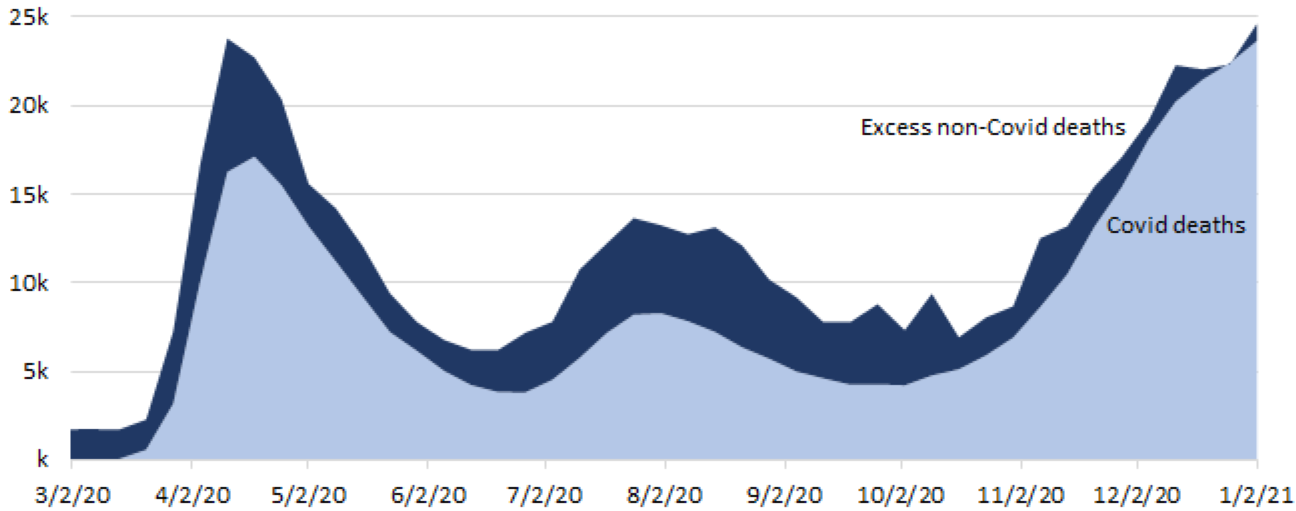
As shocking as nationwide case rates are, hospitalizations have been even more alarming—revealing large disparities between racial groups. As case rates nationwide have been declining since the winter peaks, available data on hospitalizations reveals that American Indian, Black, and Hispanic/Latinx individuals are now around 1.3 to 2.2 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. This graph reflects the truism that crises exacerbate disparities—the gap between racial outcomes increases during the peak pandemic waves, and then the lines coalesce when overall rates are lower, such as we are currently experiencing.

Emerging research points to occupational exposure as a key driver of higher infection rates.[1] Populations of color most impacted by Covid have been over-represented in front-line work such as agriculture, food processing, transportation, janitorial work, and caregiving, and thus not granted the privilege of working from home.[2,3] Racial disparities are not new to Covid, and contribute to higher rates of comorbidities such as diabetes, heart disease, and obesity that are associated with worse Covid outcomes.[4,5,6,7,8,9] Last week, the Centers for Disease Control joined nearly 200 state and local governments in declaring that racism itself is a public health threat, noting that the Covid crisis "is another stark example of these enduring health disparities."[10]

Nationwide, for every 5 known Covid deaths, 2 additional people have died above the level of expected deaths, compared to the previous 3-year average.

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

Above expected levels from national average through Jan 2, 2021



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.[1,2,3] Nearly 1 in 3 families have missed a well-child visit since the pandemic began.[4] At the same time, many patients seeking care have found their doctors' offices shuttered or shifting to telehealth.[5,6]

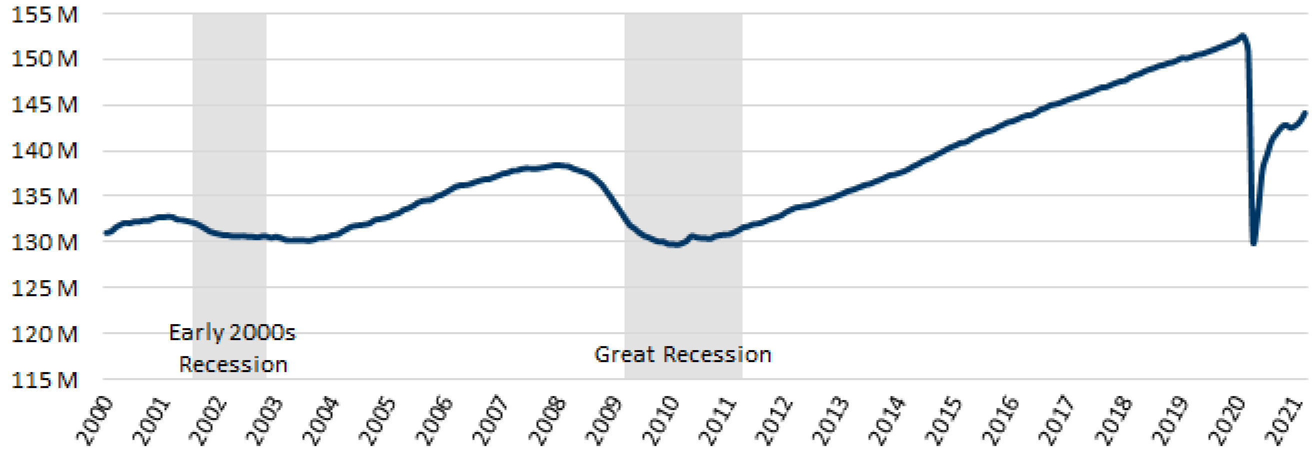
It is not surprising in this context that for every 5 known Covid deaths, 2 additional persons have died beyond the number expected nationwide since the pandemic began. Such "excess deaths" reflect a variety of challenges. Some of these excess non-Covid deaths could have been misclassified and were actually Covid cases, some may have been patients reluctant to seek care in a pandemic, others may have fallen victim to cracks in the healthcare system, and many could not afford to seek care without health insurance. A research letter last fall to the Journal of the American Medical Association noted that the U.S. ranks among the nations experiencing the highest rates of excess deaths, and attributes this in part to "weak public health infrastructure and a decentralized, inconsistent U.S. response to the pandemic."[8]

The weak public health infrastructure also applies to data reporting. This chart only goes through January 2 because the backlog in states reporting deaths makes more recent data potentially misleading.[9]

As the nation begins to re-open, the deferral of preventative care is likely to result in more severe health problems in the coming months and years. Outcomes may be particularly devastating for women in fair or poor health, almost half of whom have skipped recommended tests or treatments during the last year.[10] For low-income mothers with children under 18, taking care of their own health issues has been especially difficult, given that nearly 40% have taken time off—often unpaid—to care for children during school and childcare center closures.[11]

The U.S. gained 916,000 jobs in March—but remained 8.4 million jobs down from Feb 2020. Southern states lost 1.8 million jobs over the last year.

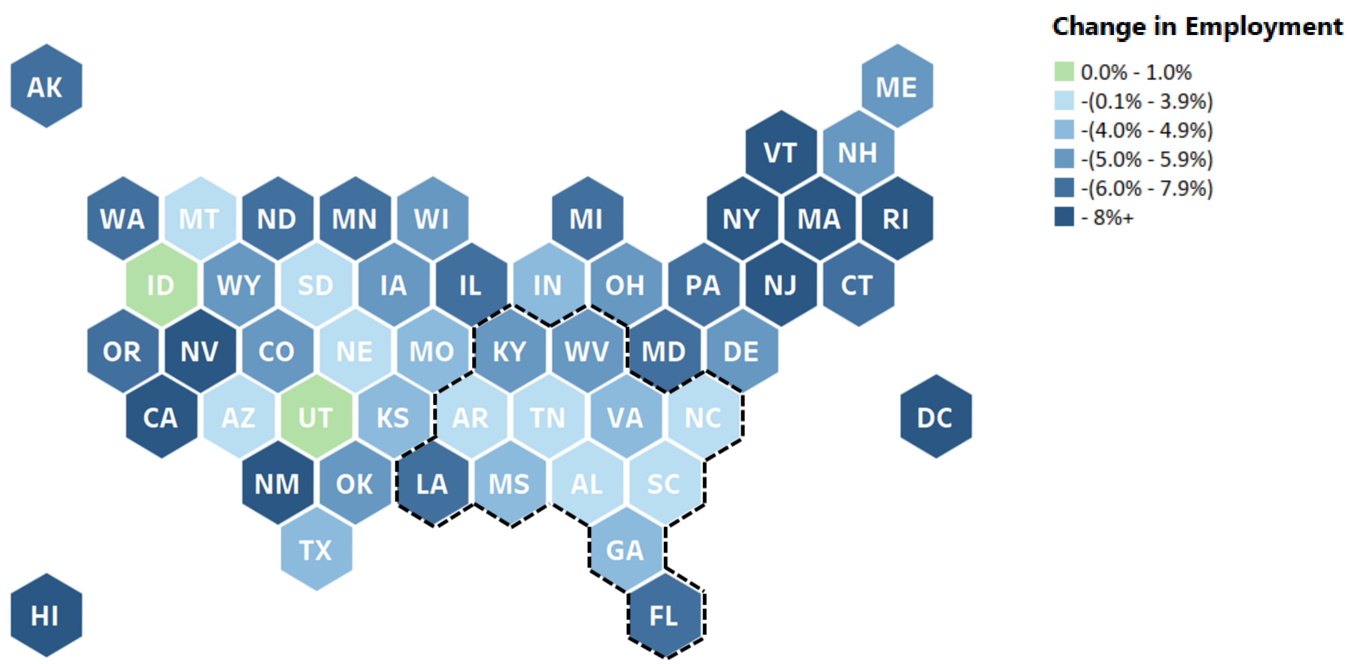
Total jobs by month, U.S.



Source: Bureau of Labor Statistics Note: Seasonally adjusted. Data for Feb 2021 and Mar 2021 are preliminary

Change in jobs by state

February 2021 compared to February 2020



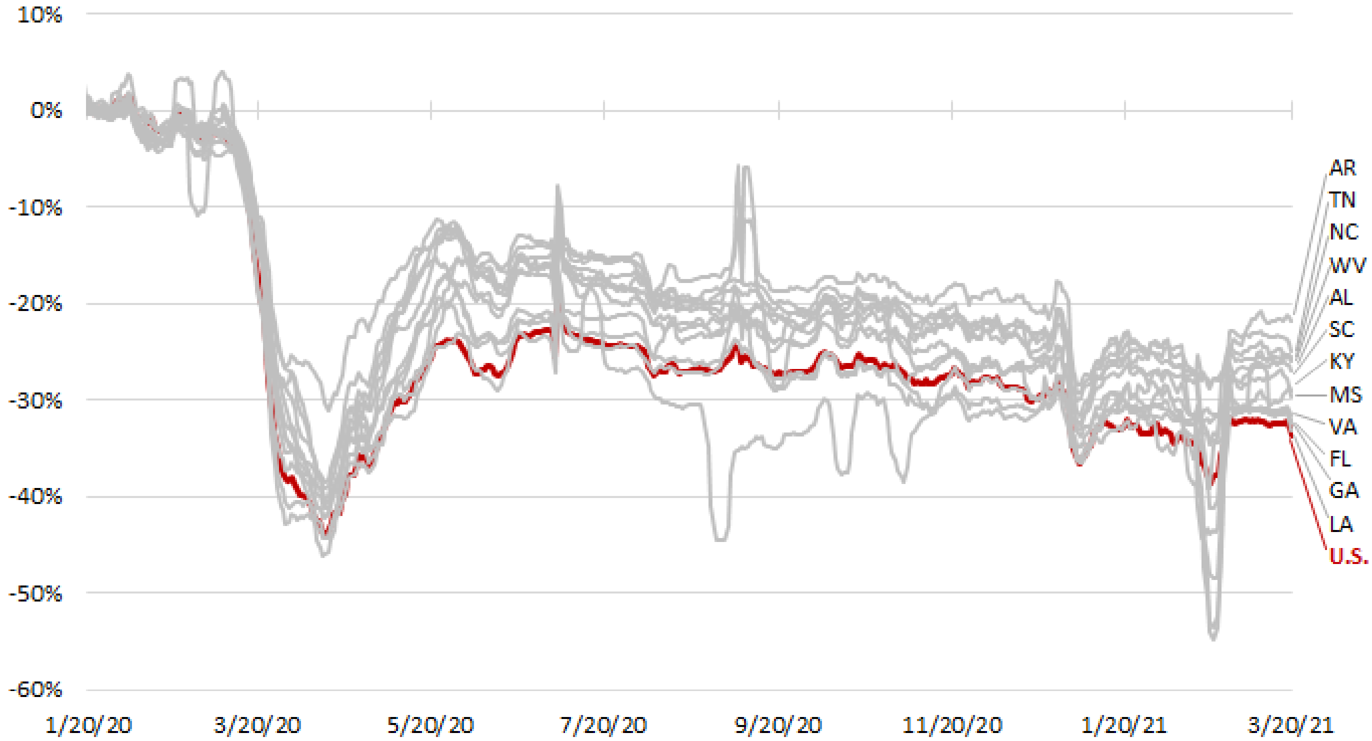
Source: Bureau of Labor Statistics Note: Seasonally adjusted. Data for Feb 2021 are preliminary.

Across the South, 1.8 million jobs disappeared in the past year. The largest states in the South lost the most jobs: Florida reported 560,000 fewer jobs than a year earlier and Georgia had 213,600 fewer. But Louisiana's economy was hit the hardest, with jobs down 7.8 percent compared to a year earlier. The nation as a whole gained 916,000 jobs in March—but was still down 8.4 million jobs compared to the February 2020 jobs peak. Women lost 23% more jobs than men. The upheaval of the past year has catalyzed 1 in 4 full-time workers to plan to look for a new job once the pandemic is over, suggesting that employers may struggle to retain talent in coming months.[1]

In Louisiana, 1 in 3 small businesses are closed. In other Southern states, at least 1 in 4 small businesses are closed.

Percent change in number of small businesses open, as of Mar 20, 2021

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



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

States have differed in their “shut-down” policies to stop the virus’ spread, but dramatic changes in consumer buying behaviors since the onset of the pandemic have also taken a tremendous toll on small businesses. Small businesses in leisure and hospitality have been particularly hard hit, with the majority of these businesses nationwide closed as of March 20, 2021. In Louisiana, fully one in three small businesses were closed. Georgia, Florida, and Virginia were close behind with 32 percent of small businesses closed.

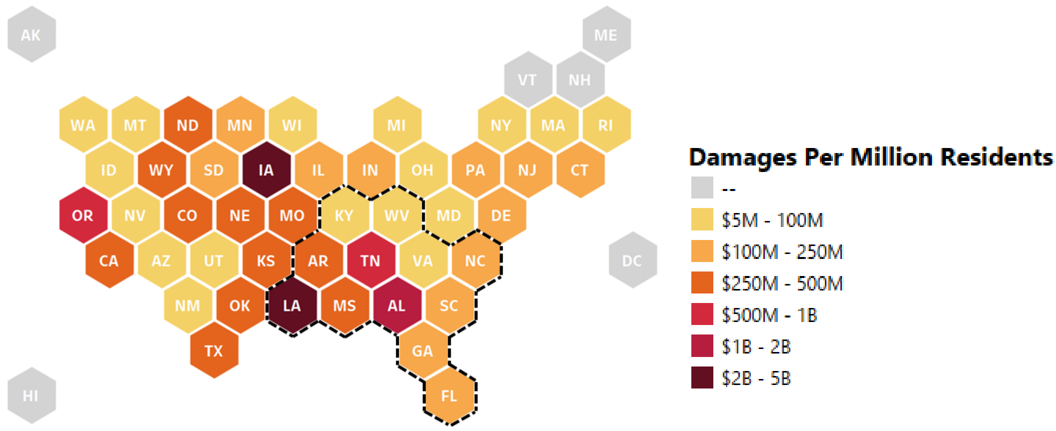
Among small businesses that have closed are childcare centers that operate on very thin margins and were particularly vulnerable. Even where states did not mandate closure, many childcare centers closed likely because their revenue dropped suddenly. For example, in Georgia 55% of licensed childcare providers closed within two months of when Covid struck.[1] The shuttering of childcare and other caregiving businesses had an impact on parents’ ability to fully participate in the workforce. Mothers of young children were more likely than women without children to leave their jobs when the pandemic hit. And fathers of young children were more likely to reduce their work hours.[2]

The deep freeze that affected Texas in February 2021 also severely impacted several Southern states (albeit with less media attention). Between 40% and 55% of small businesses in Arkansas, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, and Tennessee were closed on Feb 19, 2021—highlighting the disruptive potential of climate change on current and future economic activity.

In 2020, the South experienced some of the highest levels of damage from weather events relative to its population size.

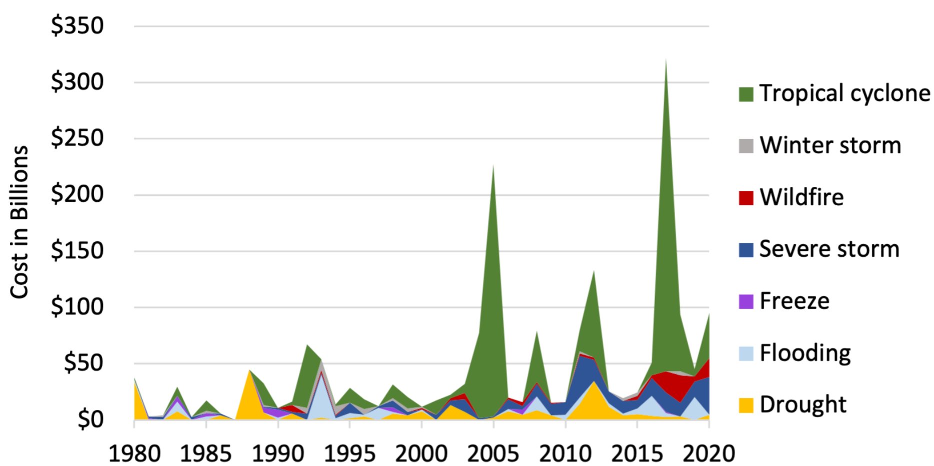
U.S. billion-dollar weather and climate disasters, 2020

Cost per million residents by state



U.S. billion-dollar weather and climate disasters

Cost by disaster-type, nationwide



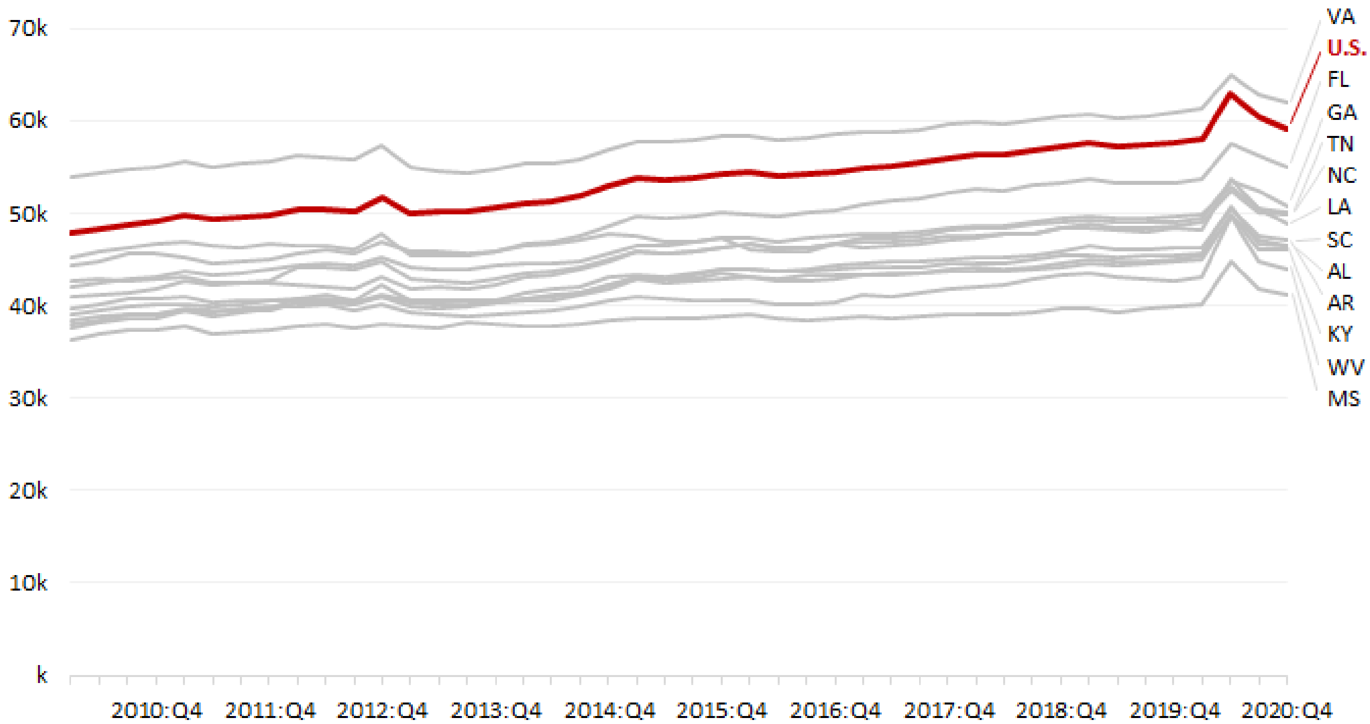
Source: NOAA National Centers for Environmental Information (NCEI) U.S. Billion-Dollar Weather and Climate Disasters (2021).
Note: These billion-dollar events account for >80% of the damage from all recorded U.S. weather and climate events.

Climate disasters have compounded the nation's misery during the pandemic. While data on 2021 disasters is not yet available, data on 2020 disasters highlight the incredible challenges presented by climate change. Last year, six hurricanes causing at least a billion dollars in damage hit the South. Importantly, disasters do more than damage property. They often take lives, and hurricanes typically cause the greatest number of deaths of all disaster types.[1] The scale of disasters starting with Hurricane Katrina is much larger than in the past, and local governments are rarely well-equipped to respond to human needs for housing, transportation, and mental health services that last for months as communities struggle to rebuild.[2] Disasters have been shown to increase inequity in part because of difficult application processes overly-focused on preventing fraud. The result is often that only those families and governments with greater capacity can successfully navigate the red tape for recovery assistance.[3] At the same time, federal disaster bail-outs disincentivize financial markets from investing in resilient infrastructure and housing.[4] Strategic investments in climate resilience and revisions to federal disaster policies will be needed to keep state economies moving forward.

Personal income saw a bump up in the second quarter of 2020 when $1200+ stimulus payments reached many American households. Unemployment insurance compensation remained high through the end of 2020.

Real personal income per capita, 2010:Q1- 2020:Q4

Southern states and U.S



Source: Bureau of Economic Analysis. CPI-U-RS for inflation adjustment.

In 2020, earnings increased only 0.3%—the lowest growth in earnings since 2009. Earnings decreased most in accommodation, food service, arts, and entertainment industries.[1]

Personal income increased substantially in the 2nd quarter of 2020 when many American families received $1200+ in direct stimulus payments. Analyses of actual consumer spending data following these stimulus payments found that low-income households increased their spending, but high-income households did not.[2] Moreover, the personal savings rate increased by ⅓ from the 1st quarter to the 4th quarter of 2020. Lifting pandemic restrictions on businesses did little to increase consumer spending, particularly in high-income neighborhoods, and businesses serving high-income neighborhoods have shed low-wage jobs at the highest rates since the onset of the pandemic.[3] Unemployment benefits have been a lifeline in the absence of earnings, and yet, as recently as February 2021, 1 in 3 households that were receiving unemployment benefits have had continued difficulty paying for basic households expenses including rent and food.[4]

Based on analysis of consumer spending patterns, experts have concluded that the key to driving economic recovery is restoring consumer confidence and spending particularly among higher-income households by investing in public health efforts that resolve the pandemic. Moreover, they anticipate the recovery of low-wage jobs in leisure and hospitality will be very slow, and unemployment benefits will continue to be critical for reducing hardship for low-wage workers who have lost jobs.[3]

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

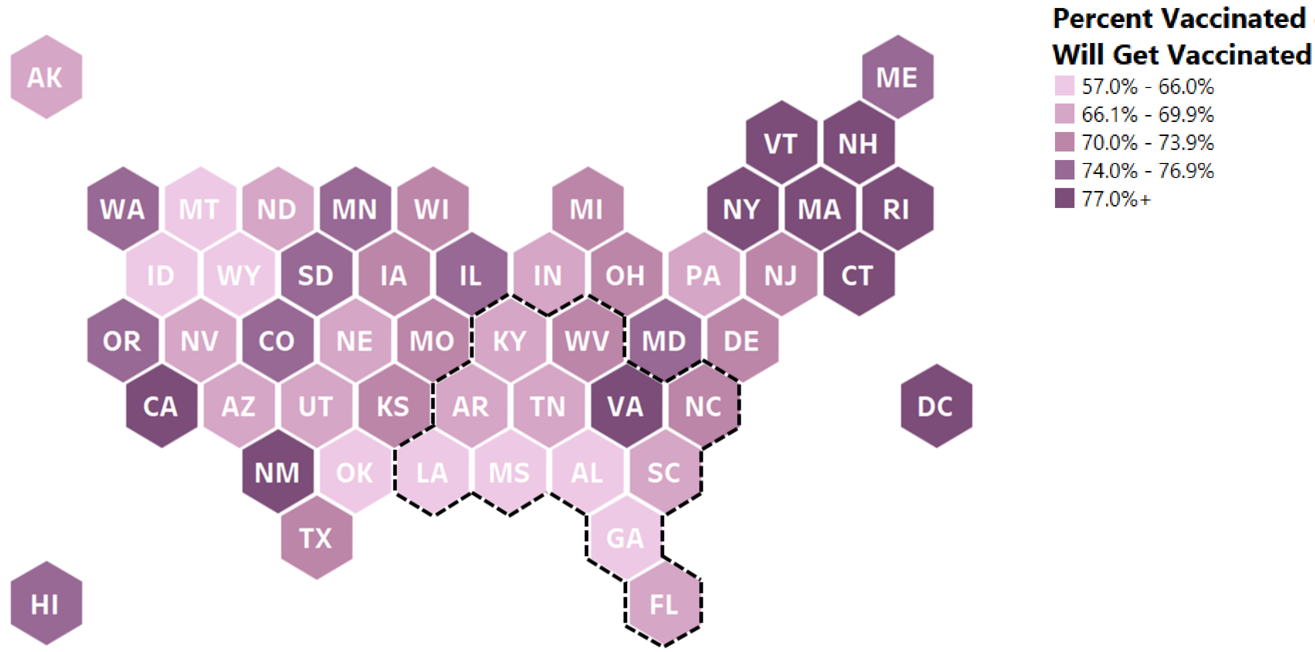
Governments—local, state, and federal—are being asked to do a lot during the Covid crisis. We start with metrics that assess vaccine uptake, Covid-related funding to small businesses, the tax revenues states need for their myriad public functions, barriers that voters face and their possible implications for upcoming elections, 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

- Vaccinated or definitely will get vaccinated, by state
- Paycheck Protection Program approved lending, 2021
- Percent change in state tax revenues, 2020
- Barriers to registered voters by state
- Civil unrest per 1,000 residents

Virginia, West Virginia, and North Carolina lead the South in percentage of the population who have received the vaccine or definitely plan to.

Vaccinated or definitely will get vaccinated when available, by state
Percentage of adults, Mar 17 - Mar 29, 2021



Source: Census Bureau's Household Pulse Survey

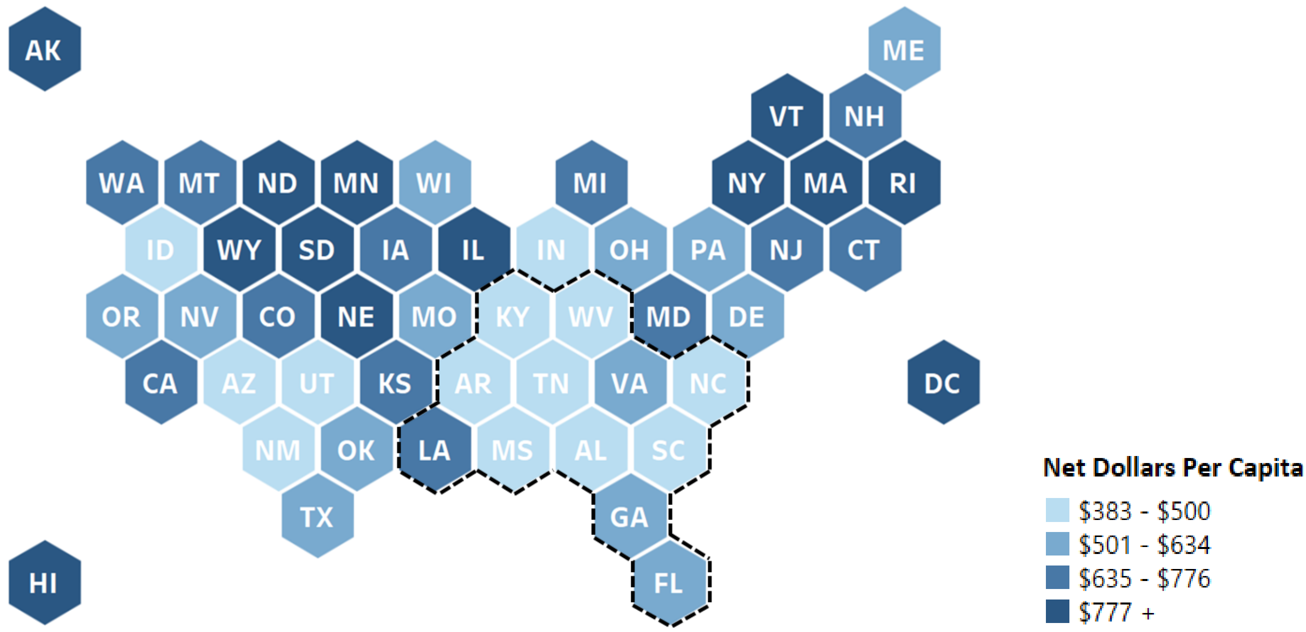
Nationwide, 1 in 5 Americans are now fully vaccinated.[1] At the beginning of the vaccine rollout, demand overwhelmed supply. But, as of the writing of this report, supply is no longer the limiting factor to reaching herd immunity, and public health efforts turn to increasing demand.[2]

Virginia (77%), West Virginia (73%), and North Carolina (71%) lead Southern states in their population shares of who already are or definitely plan to get vaccinated. For the remaining states, especially Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama, and Georgia, the challenge will be to increase local access to vaccinations, decrease access barriers with approaches like walk-in options and extended hours, and address mis- and dis-information about vaccines circulating in different communities. A recent Kaiser Family Foundation survey notes increasing enthusiasm among Black adults for receiving the vaccine (up 14 percentage points from Feb to Mar to 55%), and 3 in 10 who identified as Republicans or white evangelicals are still squarely in the "definitely not" camp.[3]

With federal, state, local, and philanthropic efforts to increase vaccination rates ramping up, it will be crucial to design campaigns using evidence of what works; research shows that some approaches that seem like good ideas (such as celebrity or political endorsements) can actually backfire, but messages from trusted healthcare professionals are more effective.[4] The CountMeInGA.org campaign in Georgia takes such an evidence-based approach, featuring current details on vaccine eligibility and locations, and video conversations with Black healthcare workers address common questions and concerns.[5,6] With a deadly race between viral variants and vaccinations, timely data-tracking and transparency by local governments will be crucial to support mid-course corrections in vaccine campaign tactics as conditions rapidly change.

Every Southern state except Louisiana has received lower than average forgivable PPP loans per capita so far in 2021.

Paycheck Protection Program (PPP) approved lending
Net dollars per capita January 1, 2021 thru March 28, 2021



Source: Small Business Administration

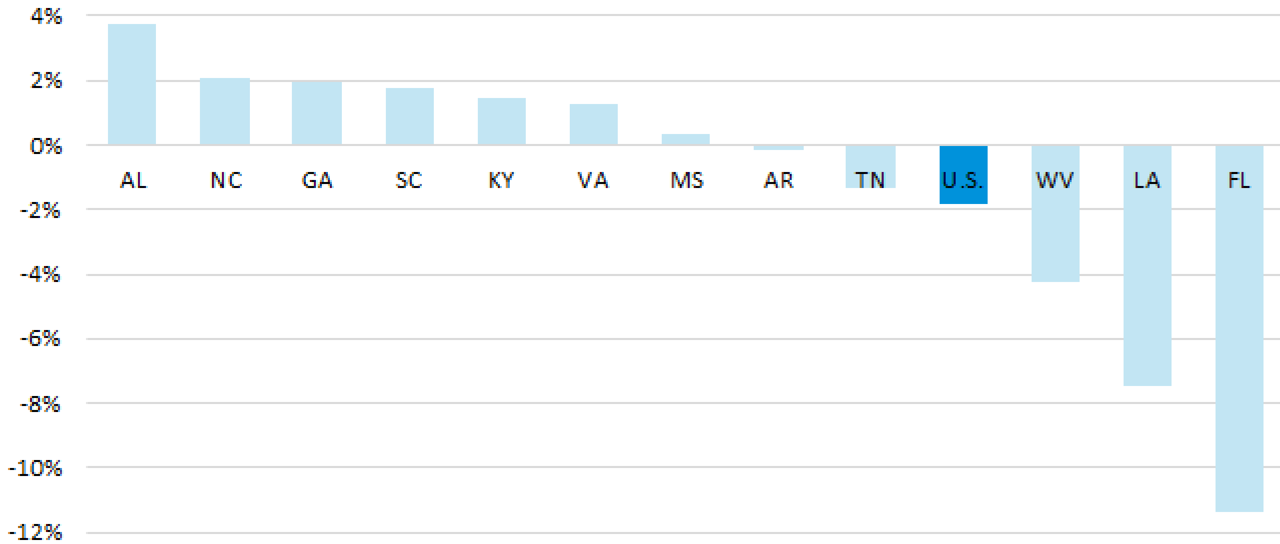
The December stimulus bill included $285 billion in new forgivable Payroll Protection Program funding. Second time loans were made available only to businesses with fewer than 300 employees, and maximum loan amounts are limited to $2 million.[1] In late February, for two weeks, the SBA offered PPP loans only to businesses and nonprofits with fewer than 20 employees. These businesses and larger eligible businesses have until May 31, 2021 to apply. Other rule changes were made to increase equitable distribution of the funds. For example, student loan debt delinquency was eliminated as a disqualifier for receiving PPP funding.[2,3] As of March 28th, Southern states have received lower than average amounts of PPP funding per capita. Local lenders will be critical in providing the information and technical assistance needed to ensure qualified micro-businesses and sole proprietors access this important lifeline. Regional leaders can form networks among chambers of commerce, entrepreneurship support organizations, and community-based nonprofits to support distribution of this funding as well as the $29 billion Restaurant Revitalization Fund and $1.25 billion in Shuttered Venue Operators grants that are coming available.[4]

After disasters, there is often a difficult balance between distributing relief quickly and preventing fraud. The first rounds of PPP funding in 2020 were distributed extremely quickly in an effort to provide timely relief to small businesses. The U.S. Department of Justice is playing an important role pursuing a large number of possibly fraudulent claimants from the first two rounds of PPP loans.[5]

5 Southern states reported state tax revenue declines in 2020. West Virginia, Louisiana and Florida reported declines of 4, 7 and 11 percent, respectively.

Percent change in state tax revenues

Apr-Dec 2020 compared to Apr-Dec 2019



Source: Urban Institute, compiled from individual state fiscal agencies

Even with the pandemic's severe toll on the economy, total state tax revenues were down less than 2% in 2020 from the previous year, according to the State and Local Financial Initiative at the Urban Institute.

The largest reduction in the South came from Florida, with an 11.3% loss. This loss was attributed to depressed tourism. [1,2] Louisiana saw a reduction of 7.5% compared to last year due in large part to unemployment, disasters, and loss of revenue in the oil and gas industries.[3] West Virginia was down 4.3% compared to 2019, with declines also attributed to unemployment and decreased demand for natural gas and coal. [1,4,5,6] States like Alabama and North Carolina saw increases in 2020, 3.7% and 2.1% respectively. [1,7] Both states relied heavily on property taxes which have been resilient during the pandemic.

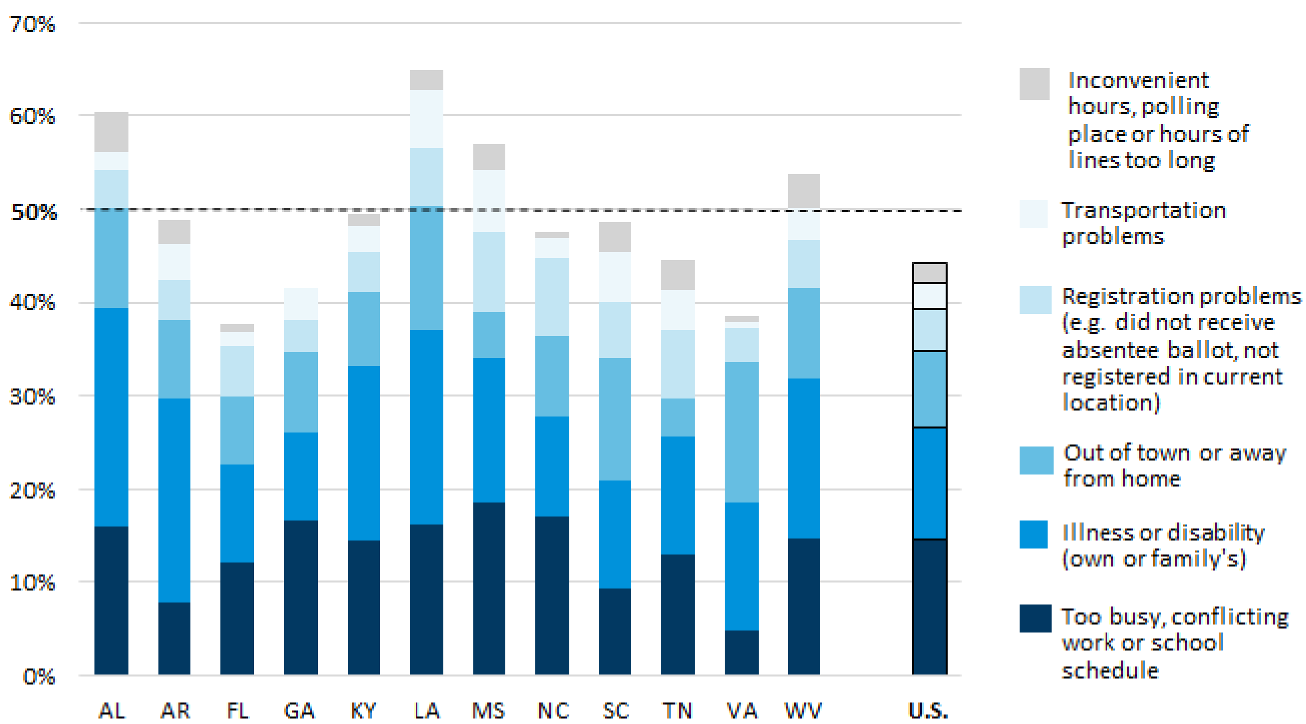
While the loss of state revenues could impact the ability of states and cities to meet the needs of residents, the American Rescue Plan provides $350 billion in support to states and many cities and counties. Localities will have big decisions to make about whether to use these funds to plug budget shortfalls, or to invest in supports such as workforce development initiatives that will prepare workers for an exponentially more digital economy, and in resilient childcare businesses and schools that can continue to function in the face of shocks.[8,9]

Localities will also have to build the data systems and infrastructure needed to track the delivery of public assistance benefits to a historic number of claimants, and to measure the effectiveness of modernized education and skill building programs for both youth and adults. Most immediately, states and localities will need robust data infrastructure to track vaccine dissemination, including the collection of reliable statistics by race to ensure equitable distribution of the life-saving Covid vaccines.

Structural barriers have hampered voter turnout in past elections. Currently 7 Southern states have either passed or are moving forward with bills that will increase barriers to voting.

Structural barriers to not voting in the 2016 presidential election

Main reason given for not voting by registered voters



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

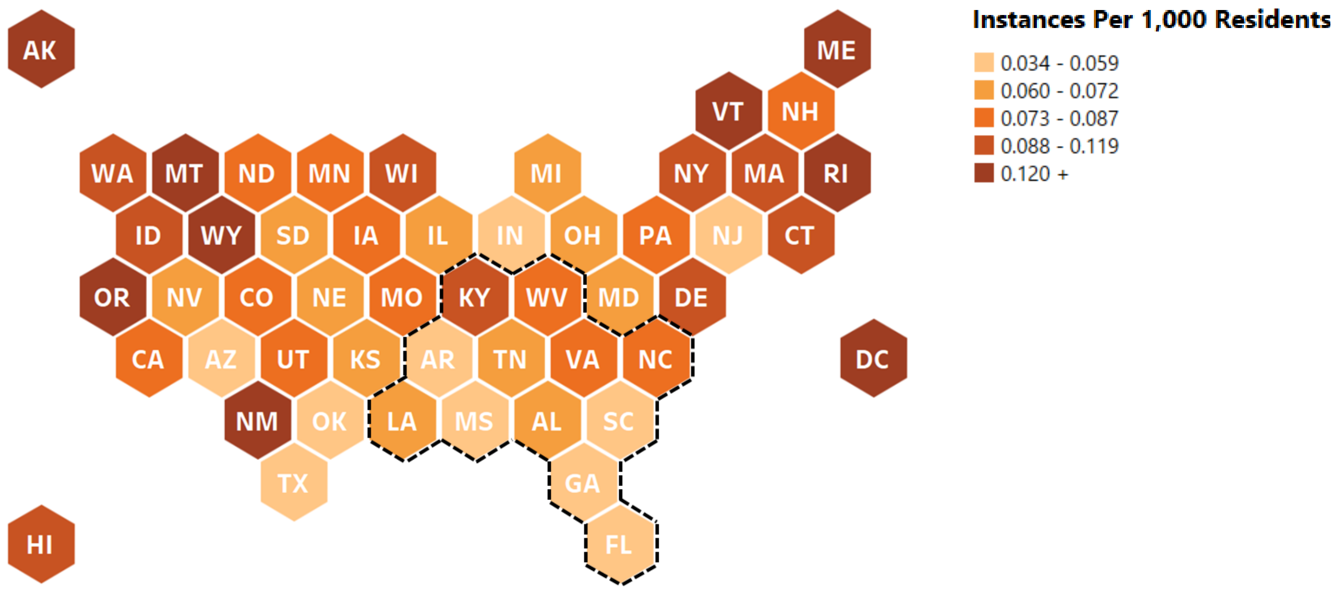
With states passing bills restricting access to the polls, it is instructive to consider the most recent data available on structural barriers for not voting and how those might be exacerbated by new restrictions. Presidential elections typically garner the greatest voter participation. The 2016 presidential election had a turnout rate of 60% for eligible voters.[1] Among the 40% of voters who did not participate in that election, the Current Population Survey found that a large portion did not vote because of structural barriers such as polling place hours, accessibility challenges, registration problems, or not being near polls on voting day.

In anticipation of the 2020 election, many states increased the availability of mail-in voting, but GA, FL, LA, MS, and TN made no such changes.[2] Regardless, voter turnout increased in every state in the nation, and national voter participation jumped to about 67%.[3,4] Still U.S. voter turnout lags behind other developed-nation peers, ranking 24th out of 35 such countries.[5,2]

Recently seven Southern states have passed or introduced legislation to raise barriers to voting in the future. At the same time, several Southern states are moving forward with legislation meant to expand voter's access to the polls. Most notably VA has passed several bills that expand voting supports for those with disabilities, expand the locations and days for early voting, and permit pre-registration for 16- and 17-year olds.[6] All of these efforts could have significant impact on voter engagement in future elections.

The number of demonstrations across the South have ranged from 146 in West Virginia to 1,222 in Florida—97% of them peaceful.

Civil unrest instances per 1,000 residents
April 1, 2020 - March 26, 2021



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

Over 5,000 protests have taken place across the South since April 1, 2020—occurring across every state. While violent protests commanded the most media attention, 97% of all protests across the South since April 1, 2020 were peaceful.

Demonstrations against the results of the 2020 presidential election declined significantly after the attempted insurrection on January 6th. Nationwide, only two demonstrations against the election took place in the last week of January.[1] In the South, by March just a smattering of demonstrations were in support of traditionally conservative causes such as ending abortions, anti-gay/trans rights, and the reduction of Covid restrictions. The vast majority of Southern protests were for social justice including over 50 protests advocating for criminal justice reforms and in support of Black Lives Matter, over 30 vigils were against Asian hate, nearly 30 demonstrations were in support of workers rights (including Amazon unionization, more PPE and better working conditions among healthcare workers, and increasing the minimum wage), and nearly 20 protests were against voting restrictions. On a smaller scale, protests both for and against the reopening of schools have taken place—suggesting challenges ahead in providing safe, high quality K-12 public school education across all populations.

Prosperity

Institutions

Beyond governments, American society has always depended on a wide array of civic institutions to provide critical information to constituents, hold governments accountable, and offer support to families and workers to be healthy, educated, and productive. This section examines civic institutions—and whether they are fair, effective, and healthy.

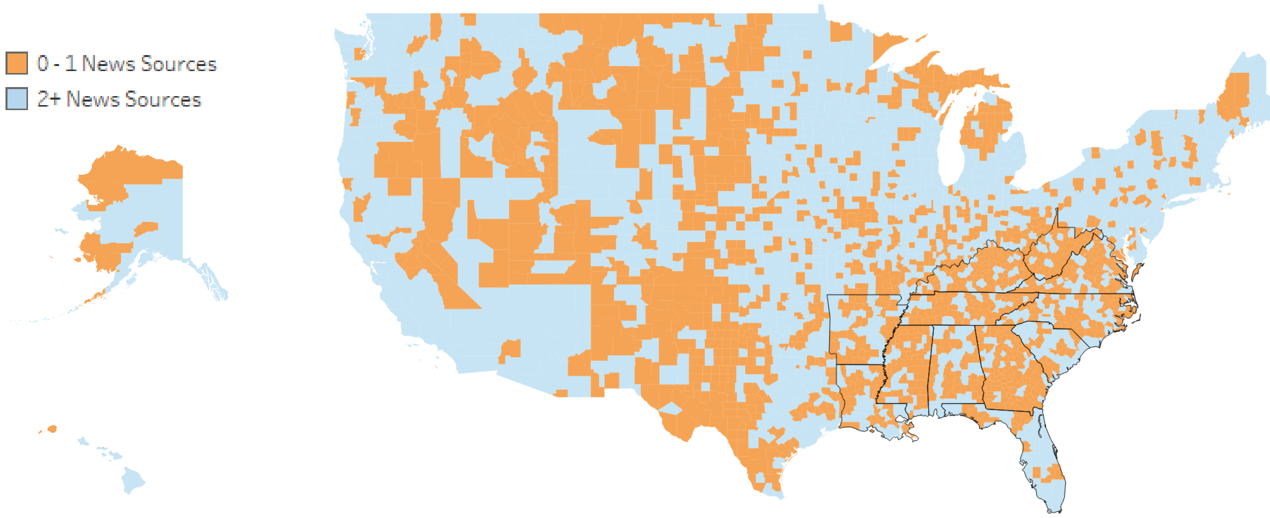
This issue of *Pandemic to Prosperity: South* examines the ability of Southerners to access information they need to make informed decisions during a pandemic. We examine local news and internet access to assess communities' ability to receive critical information and remain connected in a world that is dramatically more digital than just a few months ago. We also examine K-12 attendance, and health insurance availability by income, and the recent jump in Affordable Care Act enrollments.

Indicators in this section

- News deserts
- Lack of internet access by state and by income
- Drop in school attendance
- Lack of health insurance coverage by state and by income
- Affordable Care Act enrollments, 2021

Southern counties are more likely to be news deserts than the national average. Fully 2/3 of Southern counties are news deserts, meaning a critical vehicle for delivering trusted information 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]()

As communities ramp up vaccination efforts, trusted local news sources are key for getting the word out when new groups become eligible for the shot, reinforcing public health messaging as pandemic fatigue sets in, countering mis- and disinformation, and holding local governments accountable.

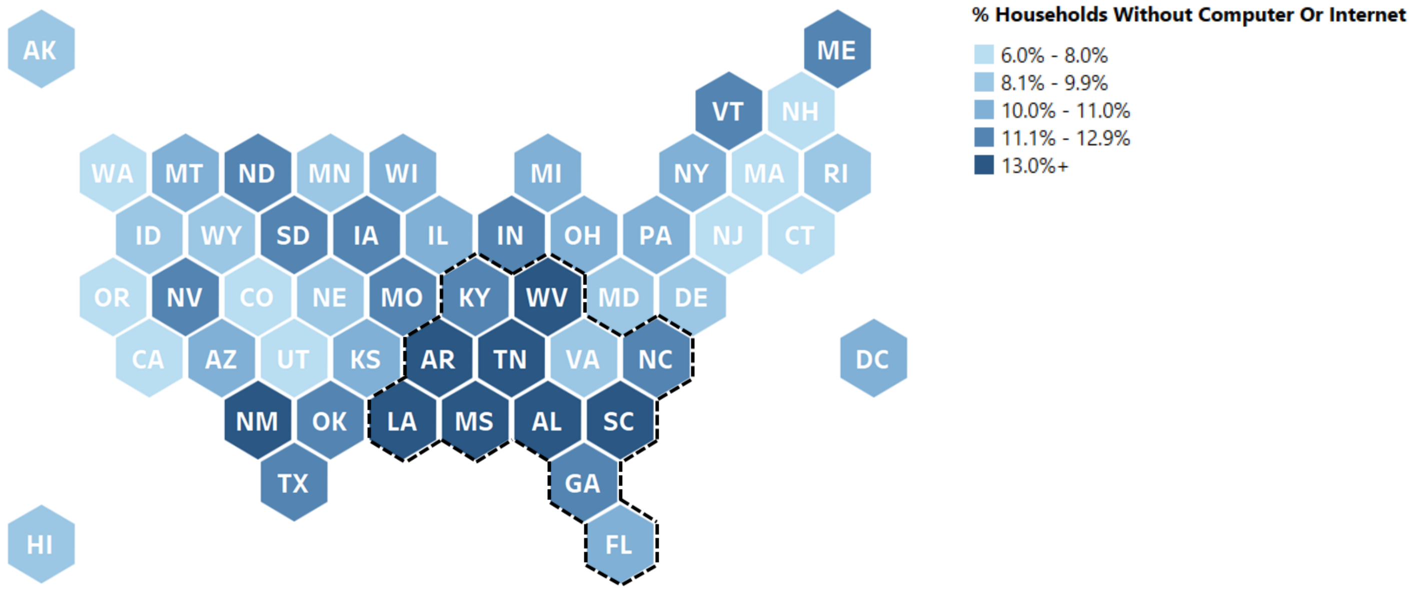
However, more than half of counties nationwide are what experts describe as "local news deserts" that have either no newspaper or only one (often a weekly or a thinly staffed daily).[1] And 2 out of every 3 Southern counties are news deserts, meaning a critical vehicle for trusted information during the pandemic is absent. With more than 550,000 people dead—nearly 150,000 from southern states—obituary writers with local newspapers also have the role of turning those grim statistics into stories about lives lost. The *Arkansas Democrat Gazette* randomly pulls people's names from the coroner's data and writes features about them, in an effort to make explicit the human toll of the virus. "A virus," journalist Jeannie Roberts notes, "that a lot of people say isn't real, and… But, hey, here's a lady that served in the school lunchroom for 30 years and was famous for her cinnamon rolls. Here's the face of this virus."[2] The *Gazette* has published around 50 of these feature obituaries for ordinary residents—column inches normally reserved for community leaders or celebrities—as part of their Covid reporting.

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.[3] The news desert situation is getting worse with the pandemic, with Poynter research identifying more than 70 closures of local newsrooms due to the Covid crisis.[4, 5]

7 of the 8 states with the lowest internet access in the U.S. are in the South.

Lack of internet access by state, 2019

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



Source: Census Bureau's American Community Survey

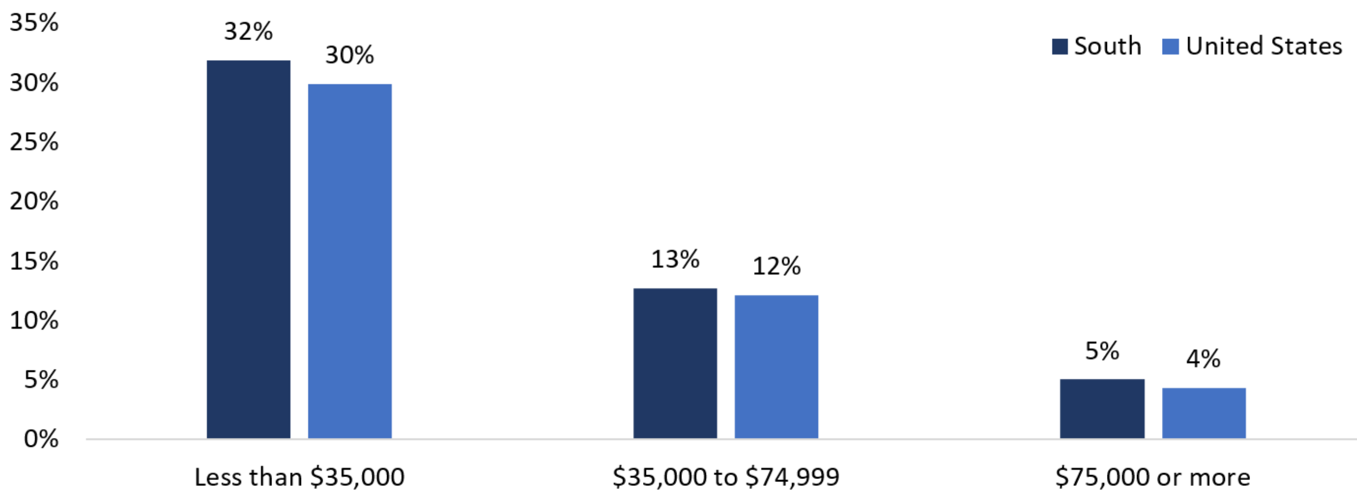
Southern states have less internet access as a whole than the nation. More than 1 in 10 people lack a computer or internet access in each Southern state. And nearly 1 in 5 people lack a computer or internet in Mississippi, Louisiana, and Arkansas. In rural areas of America, there are fewer broadband providers and slower internet speeds. The Census Bureau found that counties in the Mississippi River basin had among the lowest rates of broadband subscriptions. Among counties with 10,000 people or more, Telfair County, GA, Holmes County, MS, Kemper County, MS, Leflore County, MS, and Monroe County, AL all had among the lowest subscription rates.[1] 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.[2]

The Covid pandemic made clear that the internet has become an essential utility for every American. Having access to a computer and broadband is essential to support education and homework, job seeking and skill building, as well as small business development and success. Families that lacked internet access found their children struggling to keep up with school, and working adults weren't able to complete new online responsibilities without internet access. Internet access is even essential in the farming industry and will be key to community and families' resilience in the face of future shocks.[3,4,5,6,7] As investments in the U.S. Interstate Highway System laid the foundation for the American economy from 1960 onward, additional investments in broadband could lay the foundation for America's economy for the 21st century.

Nearly 1/3 of Southern households earning less than $35,000 lack internet—a rate 6 times greater than higher-earning Southern families.

Lack of internet access by income, 2019

Percent of households without an internet subscription



Source: Census Bureau's American Community Survey

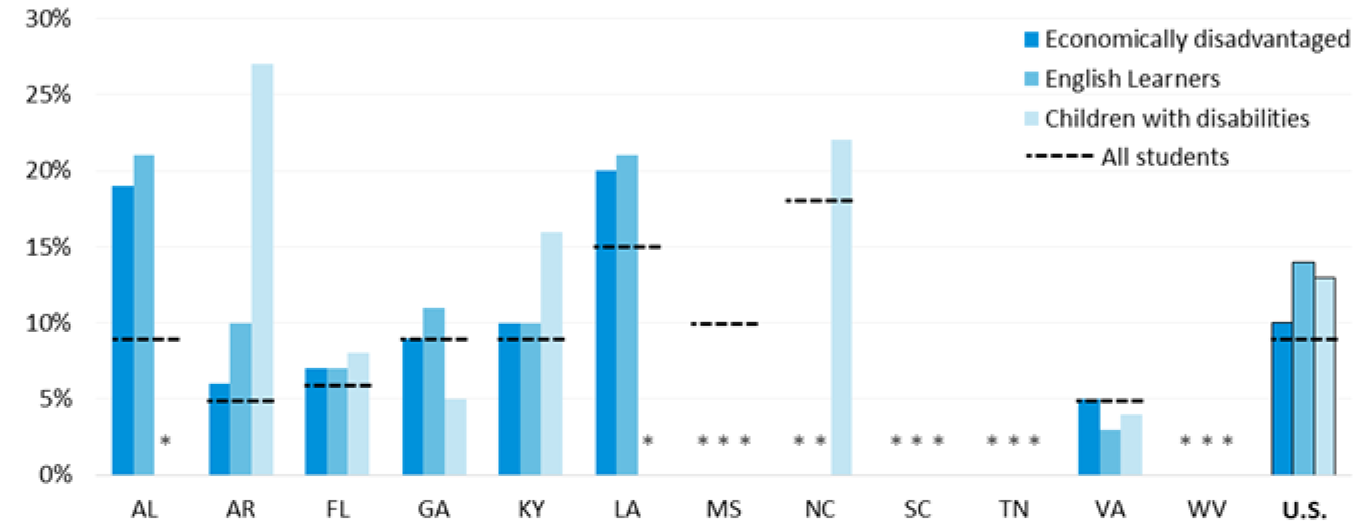
Lack of access to the internet has had harmful consequences, particularly during the Covid pandemic. Without internet access, Americans have limited access to telehealth, news, worship, and communication with the outside world. Even access to Covid vaccines is limited when Americans don't have the ability to make appointments online.[1]

Recent estimates indicate Americans pay between $60 and $70 per month for internet access.[2,3] It is no surprise then that roughly 1 in 3 low-income households lack an internet subscription. But among the lowest-income households and highest income households, Southerners are less likely to have internet access than their national peers.

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

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

Southern states and U.S., public schools only



Source: Dept of Education Institute of Education Sciences * Missing data: WV declined to participate in this federal survey. SC, TN, and MS submitted insufficient data. AL and LA did not meet data standards for "children with disabilities." NC did not meet data standards for "economically disadvantaged" nor for "English learners."

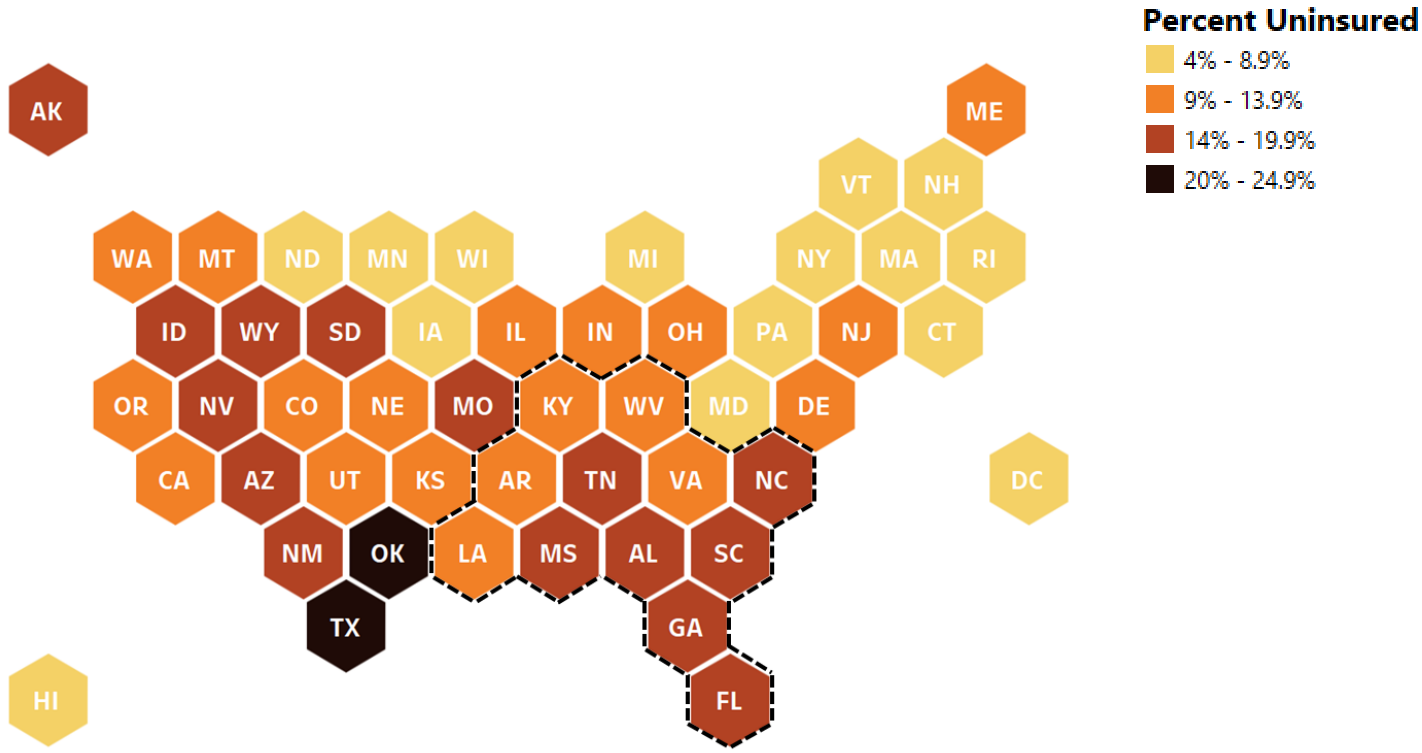
Lack of access to the internet and computers, students caring for siblings or taking jobs, and decreased support services have all contributed to a drop in school attendance among K-12 students during the pandemic. For 8th graders enrolled in remote public schooling, early indicators from the federal Institute of Education Sciences' new Monthly School Survey Dashboard reveal concerning disparities in attendance for students who are economically disadvantaged, English learners, or living with disabilities. Students in these groups in Alabama, Arkansas, Kentucky, and Louisiana all have non-attendance rates at least 5 percentage points higher than the total population of 8th graders in their states. Some disparities are far greater, such as Alabama's economically disadvantaged and English learner populations (with absence rates more than double those of their total 8th grade population). Disparities in attendance in Virginia and Florida appear to be low, but likely for different reasons. Virginia has standardized, mandatory attendance reporting and has prioritized 60% of English learners and 79% of students with disabilities for in-person learning (the highest prioritization rates in the nation). Florida is the only state in the South with no statewide attendance policies or data reporting standards, and it prioritized only 1/3 of English learners and students with disabilities for in-person learning.[1]

Anecdotally, more granular data from school districts suggest that the problem is likely bigger than the state-level pilot survey data shown here.[2] Even more troubling are the data that are unreported. No states in the U.S. reported sufficient attendance data on students experiencing homelessness, and 7 southern states are missing data for one or more vulnerable student populations. Additionally, attendance data misses all of the students who are not enrolled in school at all during the pandemic.

With $122 billion to support schools and students in the American Rescue Plan, it may seem prudent to only fund building improvements and other one-time expenses.[3] However, the massive scale of students who will need re-engagement calls out the need to prioritize funds for intensive tutoring, summer programs, finding and supporting missing students, and increasing mental health services.[4]

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, 2019
Population age 19-64

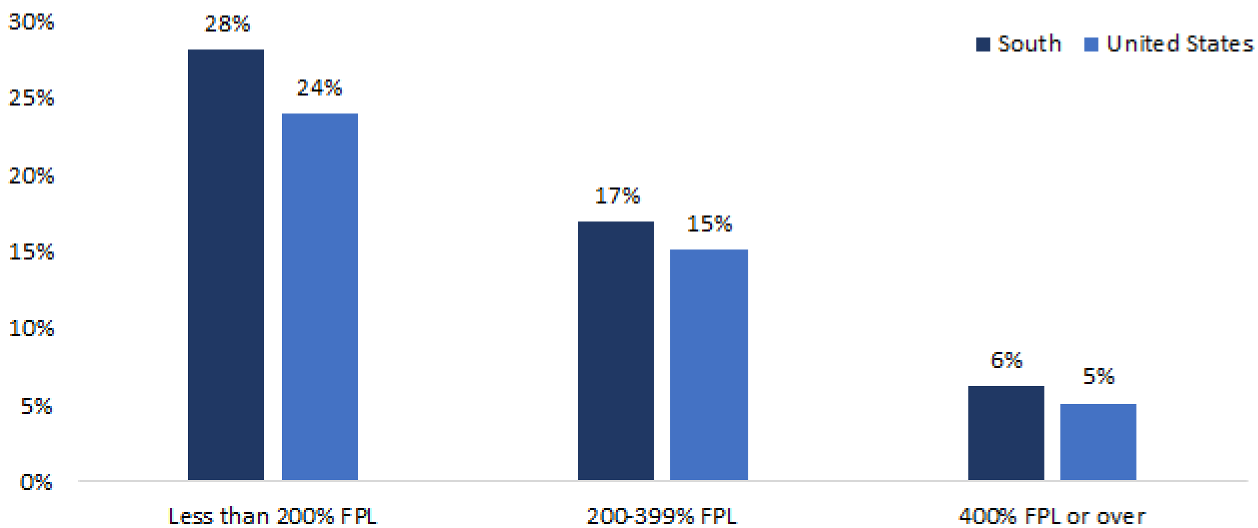


Source: [Census Bureau's American Community Survey]

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.[1] Health insurance increases access to necessary health care for individuals, both during times of illness, and in the form of preventative care.[2,3] A lack of health insurance coverage can lead to untreated illness or injury, and is likely contributing to the increase in non-Covid deaths above previous years.[4] When many people lack health insurance, societal costs increase through greater use of expensive emergency room visits and lost worker productivity.[5] 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.[6] With scientists predicting more frequent pandemics in the future, access to health insurance will be critical to ensure adults can withstand health crises and continue to provide for their families.[7]

In the South, more than 1 in 4 working-age adults below 200% of poverty level lacked health insurance before the pandemic, a rate higher than the U.S.

Lack of health insurance coverage by ratio of income to federal poverty level (FPL), 2019
Population age 19-64



Source: Census Bureau’s American Community Survey

Note: 200% of FPL = $52,344 for a family of four; 400% of FPL = $104,688 for a family of four

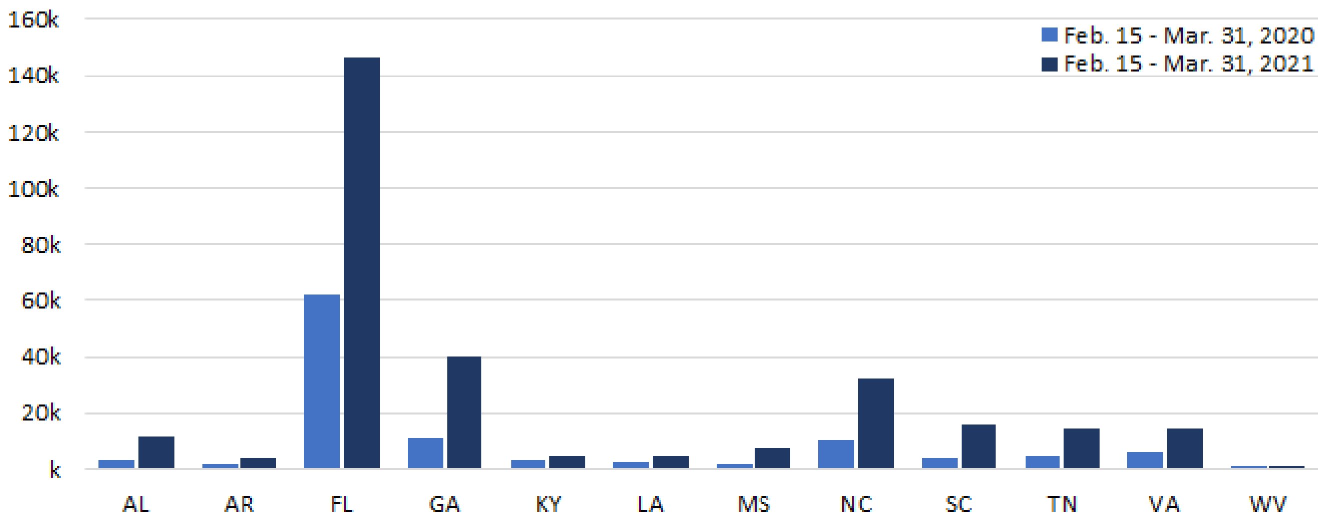
Health insurance can be expensive, and many employers do not offer health insurance, much less fully cover health care premiums. Not surprisingly, low-income adults were the least likely to have health insurance coverage even before the pandemic. This was even more true in the South where 28% of adults earning less than 200% of the federal poverty level and 17% of those earning between 200% and 399% of the federal poverty level lacked health insurance.

According to the Census Bureau’s Pulse survey in late March 2021, nearly half of all Americans report having lost some employment income for their household or self in the last year. The Urban Institute estimated that 3.5 million people nationwide may be uninsured due to the pandemic.[1]

Health insurance available through both Medicaid and Affordable Care Act (ACA) Marketplaces has served an important role in providing coverage to families during the pandemic—particularly lower-income families.[2]

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

New Affordable Care Act health plan selections (net of cancellations or terminations)
Feb 15 - Mar 31, 2021 compared to same period in 2020



Source: [The Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services]
Note: All 12 Southern states currently rely on the federal HealthCare.gov. KY and VA are developing their own Marketplaces.

Currently all 12 Southern states rely on the federal ACA Marketplace rather than managing their own Marketplaces. Each year, enrollment in Affordable Care Act (ACA) health insurance plans is restricted to certain windows of time. In 2020, in the face of the pandemic, states that had their own Marketplaces created additional open enrollment opportunities, but the federal government did not.[1]

In previous years, outside the open enrollment period, only individuals experiencing qualifying life events (such as losing health coverage, having a baby, etc.) could enroll in an ACA health plan. But the Biden Administration reopened the ACA Marketplaces from February 15, 2021 to August 15, 2021 (6 months) to all Americans regardless of life circumstance.[2] Across the South, the number of enrollments in ACA health plans since February 15, 2021 has greatly surpassed enrollments during the same time period in 2020. In the first two weeks, states with high uninsured rates that have not expanded Medicaid including FL, GA, and NC, saw the highest increases.[3] Of course, widening eligibility criteria contributes to increased enrollments. But widening the enrollment window also makes accessing health insurance more feasible for time-burdened families many of whom have additional child supervision and family care responsibilities during the pandemic.[4]

The March American Rescue Plan provides increased subsidies for ACA insurance, which will make ACA health insurance more affordable for more Americans.[5] The American Rescue Plan also invests $50 million in marketing and community engagements (up from $10 million under the previous administration) to reach the uninsured with updated information about subsidies and options.[1,3] Investments will also be needed in robust data collection and accountability systems to ensure transparency as federal spending on health care substantially increases over the coming year.

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 to weave together an overview of how Americans appear to be faring during the pandemic.

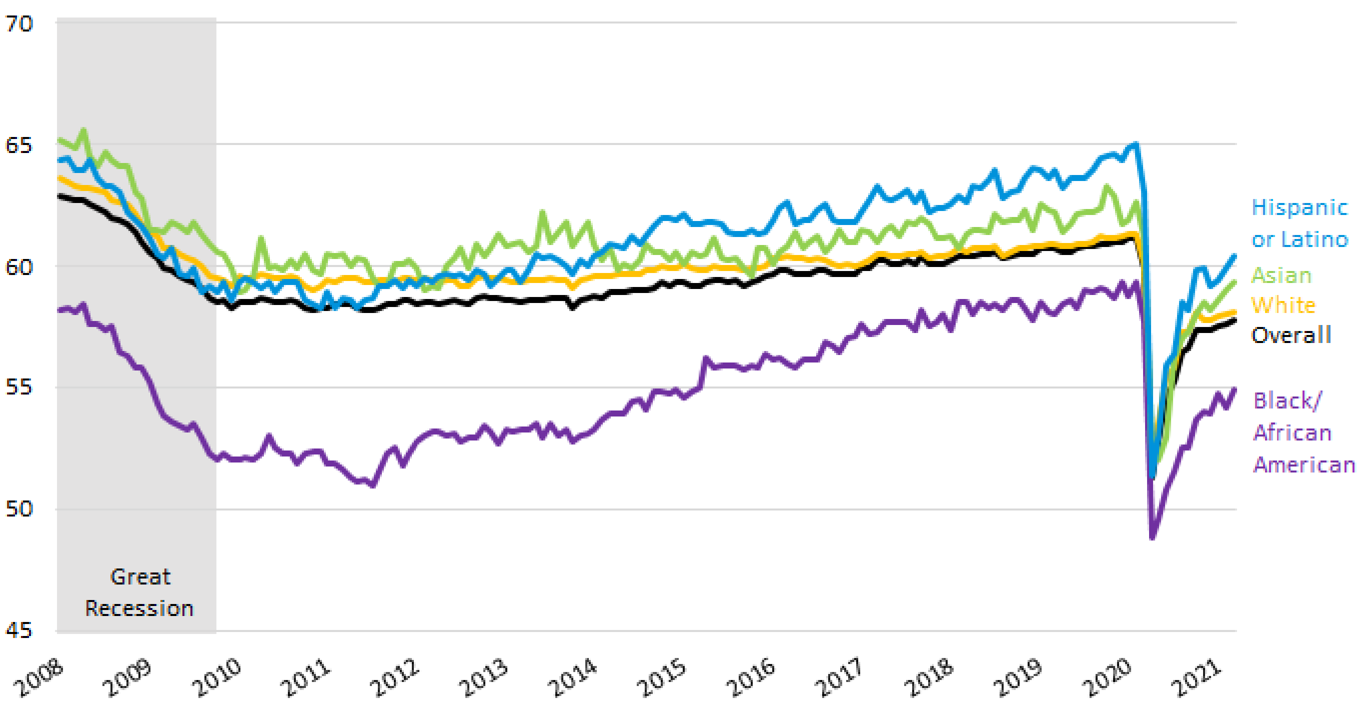
Indicators in this section

- Employment rate by race/ethnicity, U.S.
- Employment rate by gender, U.S.
- Counties where state unemployment insurance fails to cover basic costs
- Food insecurity by state
- Likelihood of eviction or foreclosure by state

The nationwide March employment rate of 57.8% was below the lowest point during the Great Recession. White, Black, Hispanic, and Asian employment rates were down 3 to 5 percentage points compared to February 2020.

Employment rate by race/ethnicity, U.S.

Employment-population ratio of civilian, non-institutionalized workforce age 16+, seasonally adjusted



Source: Bureau of Labor Statistics

Although the nation gained nearly a million jobs in March 2021, the employment rate nationwide remained at only 57.8%—below the lowest point during the Great Recession and well below February 2020 when 61.1% of all persons 16+ had employment. Last April, employment rates plunged to 51% and then began increasing month by month until the Fall. The overall employment rate has hovered at 57%-58% since October 2020.

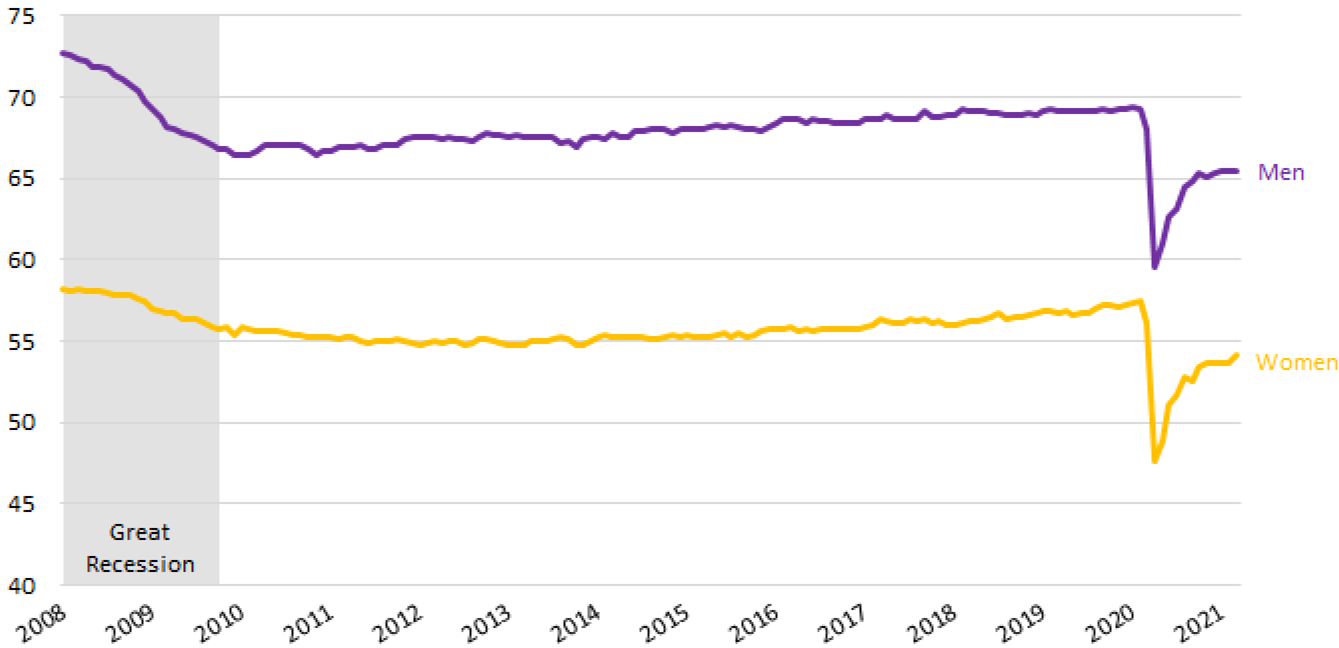
In March 2021, only 55% of Black persons 16+ nationwide had employment. White and Asian persons 16+ had employment of 58% and 59%, respectively. Hispanic employment rates remained highest at 60% with many employed in essential positions in agriculture, food processing, and janitorial services.[1,2,3]

Just as the Great Recession had long-lasting negative impacts on employment rates (as depicted in this graphic), some economists worry that many persons will become discouraged and stop looking for work altogether due to the depth and length of the current recession.[4]

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

Employment rate by gender, U.S.

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



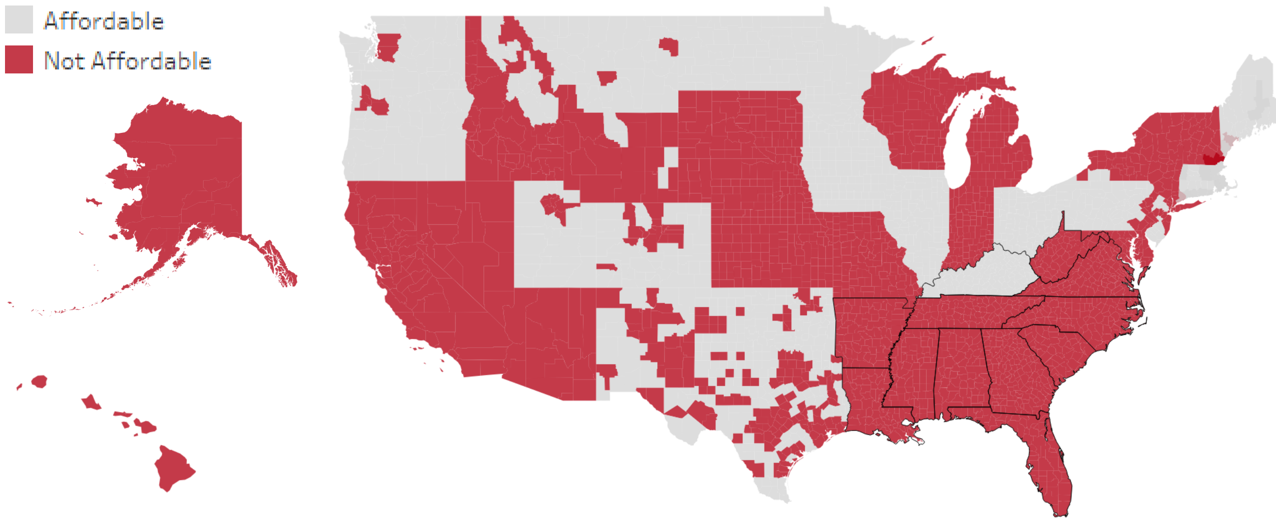
Source: Bureau of Labor Statistics

Nationally in March 2021, the employment rate for men dropped very slightly to 65.4%, while the employment rate for women slightly increased to 54.1%. But since the beginning of the Covid recession, women have lost 4.6 million jobs while men have lost 3.8 million jobs. Of these, roughly 1.4 million are mothers with school-age children at home. Mothers often must take leave in summer months when children are out of school, but the pandemic may have forced many to take additional leave or drop out of the workforce entirely.[1] Many mothers who did work found themselves unable to advance meaningfully in their careers, and for women in professional jobs, leaving the workforce, even temporarily, contributed to losses in lifetime earnings.[2,3]

Roughly 1.3 million slots at licensed childcare providers are estimated to have been lost across the South during the pandemic (though actual numbers on childcare capacity have been elusive).[4] 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.[5] 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 rely on state unemployment benefits as their only source of income, 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: [USAFacts](), [HUD](), [Department of Labor]()

State unemployment benefits, which are designed to be only temporary support for job seekers, are insufficient to cover basic cost of living expenses across every Southern state except Kentucky. Supplemental unemployment benefits from the federal government have undoubtedly been a lifeline, but these expanded benefits have come in fits and starts since the start of the pandemic. Most recently, the American Rescue Plan provides $300 per week in additional benefits through September 6, 2021.[1]

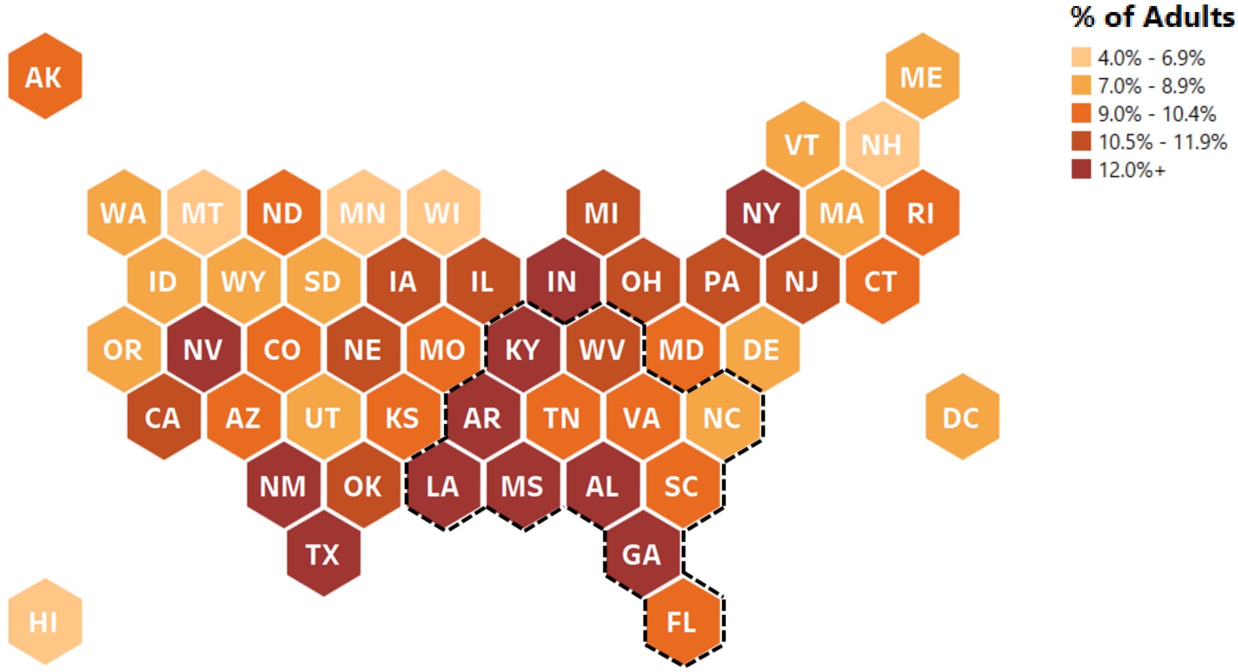
With 1.8 million fewer jobs across the South, and many self-employed and gig workers losing customers, state labor departments have faced a historic deluge of unemployment applications. Many applicants have struggled to navigate unemployment systems, with some facing unanswered calls and long-pending claims.[2] A Southern Economic Advancement Project survey of SNAP households found that nearly 1 in 5 respondents had difficulty navigating through the unemployment insurance process.[3] In addition, some states have struggled to verify applicants' identity due to antiquated identity verification systems, contributing to a substantial number of fraudulent applications.[4]

States have slashed labor departments' budgets in recent years, leaving them with insufficient staff and out-dated technology, unable to handle the Covid surge in unemployment claims.[5] States will need to make substantial investments in administrative capacity and technology to ensure that eligible applicants receive the benefits to which they are entitled in a timely manner.[6] These investments will also be needed to verify personal identities and prior earnings levels so as to reduce fraudulent claims.

More than 1 in 10 adults nationwide —and nearly 1 in 5 in LA—report their households have gone hungry during the pandemic.

Food insecurity by state, March 3 - March 15, 2021

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



Source: Census Bureau's Household Pulse Survey

Covid job losses and higher food prices have exacerbated the challenges that families have had putting food on the table.[1] While 11% of U.S. families have reported food insecurity during the past several weeks, Southern states have fared even worse. Six southern states—Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama, Kentucky, Arkansas, and Georgia—rank among the 11 states with the highest food insecurity. In these 6 states, 12% to 17% reported sometimes or often not having enough to eat. Nationwide, adults with children were particularly likely to report food insecurity. In total, 15% of families with children did not have enough to eat in early March 2021, compared to 8% of households without children.[2]

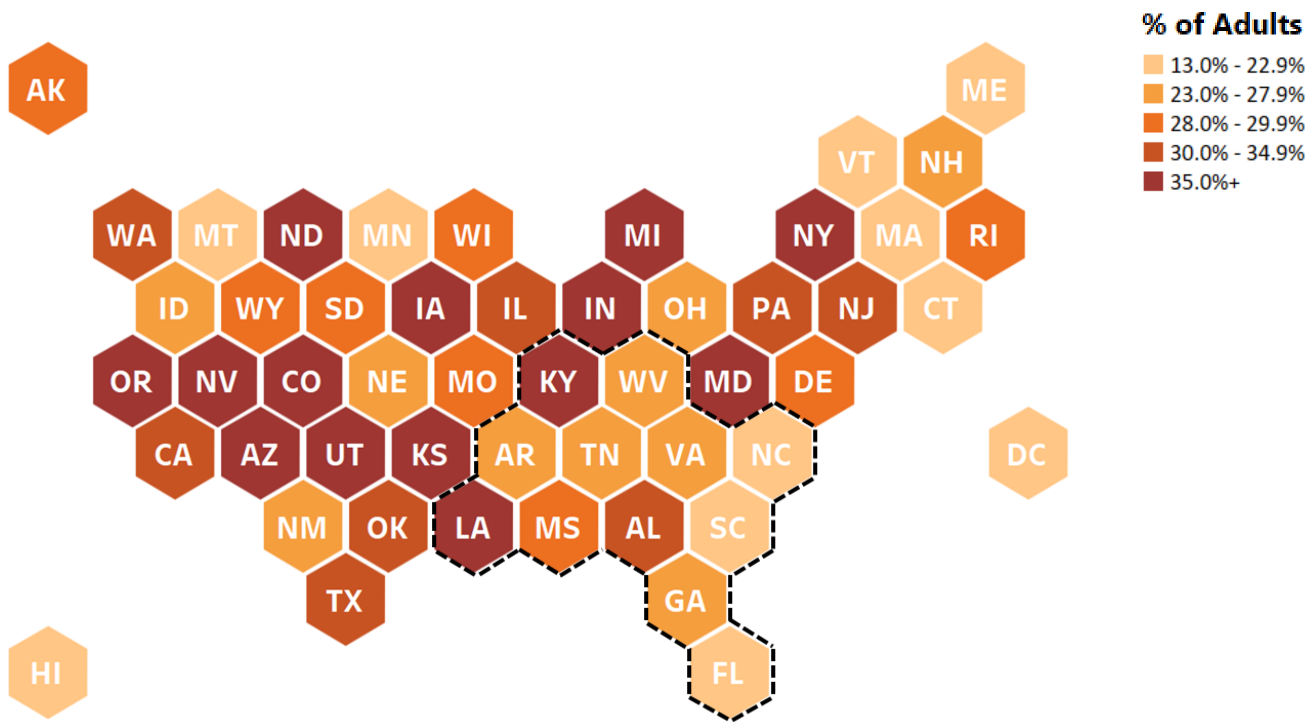
A SEAP survey of SNAP recipients across the South found that half of respondents had trouble accessing public assistance such as SNAP, unemployment benefits, or stimulus payments. Challenges included difficult websites, busy phone lines, and long wait times. Respondents in Mississippi reported the greatest difficulty accessing public food assistance benefits such as SNAP and P-EBT.[3]

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.[4]

Nationwide, nearly 1 in 3 adults who are late on rent or mortgage expect to be evicted or foreclosed upon in the next two months.

Likelihood of eviction or foreclosure by state, March 3 - March 15, 2021

Percentage of adults living in households not current on rent or mortgage where eviction or foreclosure in the next two months is either very likely or somewhat likely.



Source: [Census Bureau's Household Pulse Survey]

With 1.8 million fewer jobs across the South, many Southerners are uncertain they'll have housing beyond the next two months. Unemployment benefits during the pandemic have proven critical in keeping people in their homes.[1] But distribution of those benefits has not reached all eligible individuals—likely because states did not have the technological and administrative capacity to process a huge increase in claims.[2,3] In Kentucky and Louisiana, 39 and 36 percent of adults, respectively, report they are likely to be evicted or foreclosed upon in the next two months.

Landlords (and homeowners) struggling to pay their mortgage can ask their lender for forbearance. But landlords and renters will be obliged to repay missed payments when forbearance and/or eviction moratorium end.[4] The current federal moratorium on evictions for nonpayment of rent is effective until June 30th. And lawsuits against the ban have been heard in six federal courts, of which three struck it down.[5] Moreover the accumulated mortgages and rents due on that date could be enormous.[6]

The December Stimulus bill and the March American Rescue Plan include a combined $52 billion in rental assistance.[7] But this assistance is being doled out through hundreds of state and local emergency rental assistance programs that vary greatly. This large number and variety of programs is likely to make getting financial assistance to renters and landlords complicated and cumbersome.[8] States and localities will need to increase investments in staff and technology in order to get rental assistance to eligible applicants. This infrastructure will also be essential for transparently reporting on benefit distribution.

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About this series

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

Pandemic to Prosperity: South offers a comprehensive overview of the Covid-related impacts on our lives and livelihoods, governments, civic institutions, and overall well being, with a focus on the states of **Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, Virginia, and West Virginia**. This report series analyzes disparate data, adding top-level insights about the implications of each indicator, what each indicator reveals, and how the indicators are interrelated. It highlights mostly state-level metrics with breakdowns by race, gender, age, and income where available, relying on both public and private data sources.

Pandemic to Prosperity: South's thoughtfully-curated data serves to illuminate the challenges facing the South's most vulnerable. In addition, this reliable source of wide-ranging, impartial information will be valuable in aligning public and private sector efforts and reflect progress made, or the lack thereof, over time. The report will be updated quarterly 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 second edition of *Pandemic to Prosperity: South*. The *Pandemic to Prosperity* series is designed to enable a solid understanding of the damage to lives and livelihoods as the pandemic continues to unfold, especially as we enter the era of 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 and income 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) Founded by Stacey Abrams in 2019 and anchored in Georgia, Fair Count works to build long-term power in communities that have been historically undercounted in the decennial census, underrepresented at the polls, and whose communities are often torn apart in redistricting.

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

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

Authors

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This report is dedicated to all of the data heroes–in state, local, federal government, institutions, nonprofits and volunteer organizations–who make these types of analyses possible.

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