APRIL 21, 2022

Executive Summary

A civic ecosystem has been burgeoning for decades in the South, and it offers a path to turn the tragedy of this pandemic into an opportunity to build prosperity and progress for all. Data and civic engagement will be critical. Together, the Southern Economic Advancement Project (SEAP) — which works to lift up policies that address particular vulnerabilities in the South — and Fair Count — whose work focuses on strengthening pathways to continued civic participation — partnered with the National Conference on Citizenship to document the state of the South during the pandemic. State and local governments prioritizing projects for the American Rescue Plan (ARP) can use these findings to target disparities that ultimately undermine community resilience.

The nation is nearing a grim milestone, with nearly 1,000,000 Americans dead of Covid. At the same time, more and more Americans are resuming activities of normal life, and their perspectives about the pandemic have shifted— now considering it to be a manageable problem.[1] The economy and jobs have been rapidly growing, and multiple federal programs are rolling out that can support the most vulnerable and build the nation's capacity for resilience.

Still, many impacts of the pandemic are just now becoming clear, including multiple manifestations of an ongoing mental health crisis, growing inequities, and increasing threats to our democracy. Our review of 28 indicators related to the Covid crisis and the nation's civic health revealed:

Covid impacts As Covid swept the nation, many patients were unable or afraid to seek treatment for their medical conditions. Moreover, alcohol-related deaths, overdose deaths, and even vehicle fatalities spiked. For every 3 known Covid deaths, there has been 1 additional excess death since March 2020. In addition, long Covid is affecting an estimated 10-30% of all Covid patients.

Economic impacts The economy recovered from the Covid crisis in record time, with job levels now likely to reach pre-Covid levels in Q2 2022. But the labor force has shrunk, giving workers newfound power, and quits rates are at all-time highs.[2] Employers have raised wages by 4.9% since last year, but inflation is up 8% and workers are demanding even greater wage increases. Such increases could lure retirees back to work, and help women who can't afford childcare to resume working, but long Covid may sideline an increasing number of workers as new variants of the coronavirus spread. Inability to rejoin the workforce plus inflation are contributing to food insecurity. In AR, FL, and MS, where officials have rejected emergency Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits, adults have reported among the highest rates of hunger in the nation.

Student loan debt In the 2 decades before Covid struck, a growing number of college students incurred student loan debt. By 2019, 30% of Black households had student loan debt. In March 2020, student loan payments were paused. Once student loan payments resume after August 2022, an estimated 18 million borrowers will lose $85.5 billion of their income annually.

Mental health and health care Anxiety and depression levels rose from 11% in 2019 to 32% in March 2022. In AL and WV, ⅓ of adults reported anxiety or depression, yet these states have far fewer mental health providers than the national average. Seven southern states have refused to expand Medicaid, leaving 15% of working-age Southerners without insurance and as high as 18-19% without in FL, GA, and MS. Many rural hospitals in these states have closed and, in 2021, 60% of rural counties had no pediatricians. In addition, by December 2020, credit bureau data revealed that 20% of Southerners had medical debt in collections. In some Southern counties, half of residents have medical debt in collections.

Housing The nation faced a severe housing shortage before Covid hit, such that 1 in 4 renters spent half their household income on housing. When Covid hit, the federal government declared an eviction moratorium but the Supreme Court struck it down in August 2021. Many states and localities have kept evictions low by quickly dispersing federal Emergency Rental Assistance funds. Southern states have lagged, distributing only 49% of these funds through Feb 2022 compared to 59% across non-Southern states. In March, among Southerners who were late on rent or mortgage, 35% were concerned about losing their housing. Moreover, 70% of Southerners live in a county that has had at least one climate disaster since March 2020, and housing prices tend to increase after disasters — highlighting the need for robust strategies to create and preserve housing across the South.

Information access 31% of Southern counties have poor internet access — meaning ¼ of households have no internet. In MS, 21% of households lack internet access entirely and in AR, LA, and WV, 18% of households have no internet access. In the South, 2 out of 3 counties are "news deserts," meaning they lack the local news that Americans count on for reliable information — allowing mis- and disinformation to spread.

Data quality The decennial census has persistently undercounted people of color. In 2020, undercounts for Black or African American people remained high at -3.3%. For Hispanic communities, the undercount more than tripled from -1.5% in 2010 to -4.9% in 2020. These undercounts reduce communities' political representation as well as the federal funding they'll receive for the next 10 years. For example, MS, GA, and LA had among the highest rates of undercount, causing their residents to lose between $20 million and $47 million in annual Medicaid funding. Similarly, the Census Bureau's American Community Survey (ACS) saw a dramatic decline in response, particularly among low-income households. The ACS response rate fell from 96% in 2015 to 71% in 2020.

Democracy In response to the pandemic, nearly every state moved to make voting easier, through mail-in voting, ballot drop-boxes, and increased early voting. Voter turnout was at 67%, a record high in the 2020 election with increases among both Democratic and Republican voters. Since then, rather than building upon that progress, 19 states enacted voting laws that make it harder for Americans to vote, including AL, AR, GA, FL, KY and LA. Also key to our democracy is the balance of power between executive, legislative, and judicial branches of government, which 35 states are trying to upset as legislators introduce bills to limit the power of state courts.

As disasters do, Covid has accelerated many pre-existing trends. To name just a few, drug overdoses have skyrocketed, housing insecurity has increased, and the share of Americans with medical debt is mounting.[3] In this rapidly changing context, leaders must be strategic with their investments. State and local leaders can boost economic recovery by prioritizing investments toward stabilizing middle and low-income families. Southern states that accept Medicaid expansion will increase access to medical services, reduce families' medical debt, and increase labor force participation.[4] In addition, flexible ARP funds can support families (and landlords) by providing renters with the resources to stay in their homes. The threat of more workers becoming debilitated by long Covid increases as the new Omicron subvariant BA.2 circulates. Public health officials can protect lives and livelihoods by reinstating protective measures as needed — a small sacrifice in the midst of a not-yet-resolved pandemic.

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Pandemic
Lives and Livelihoods

To recover from any disaster, an assessment of damages is a necessary first step. In the case of Covid, the damage is not related to a single event. Instead, the pandemic has caused mutli-dimensional health, economic, and mental health hardship. As such, tracking Covid-related damage requires monitoring a number of metrics, each of which may change as conditions change. Additionally, shocks and stressors such as extreme weather continue to compound the impact of the pandemic.

This section tracks a select number of highly-vetted indicators to examine the extent of Covid-related damage to lives and livelihoods across our nation. 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.

Much of the discussion about the Covid crisis is focused on 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 nation's civic health.

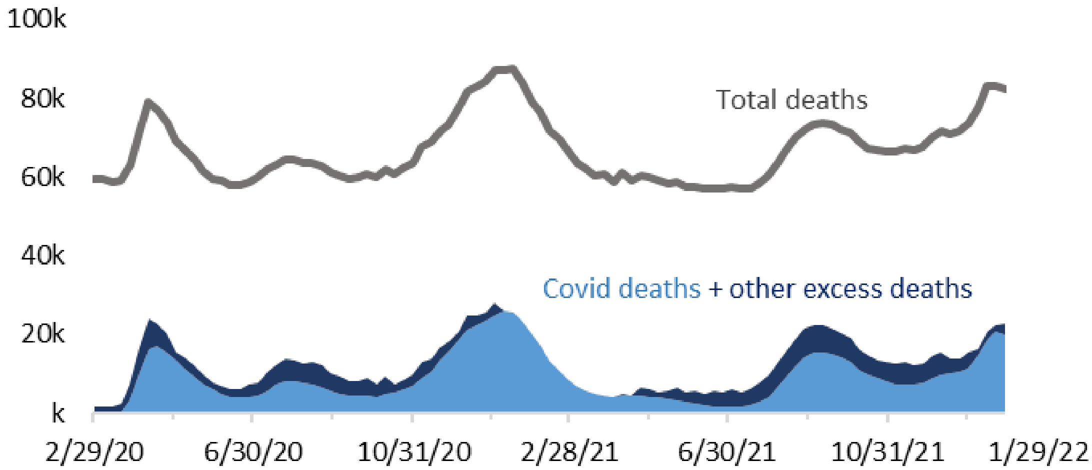
Indicators in this section

- Excess deaths
- Long Covid estimates, by state
- Drug overdose deaths, by race/ethnicity
- Change in jobs nationally
- Quits rate, by industry
- Disaster declarations, by county

From March 2020 through Jan 2022, Covid directly caused 923,000 deaths and contributed to an additional 338,000 excess deaths beyond expected levels.

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

Deaths above expected levels by week, Feb 29, 2020 - Jan 29, 2022



Source: CDC

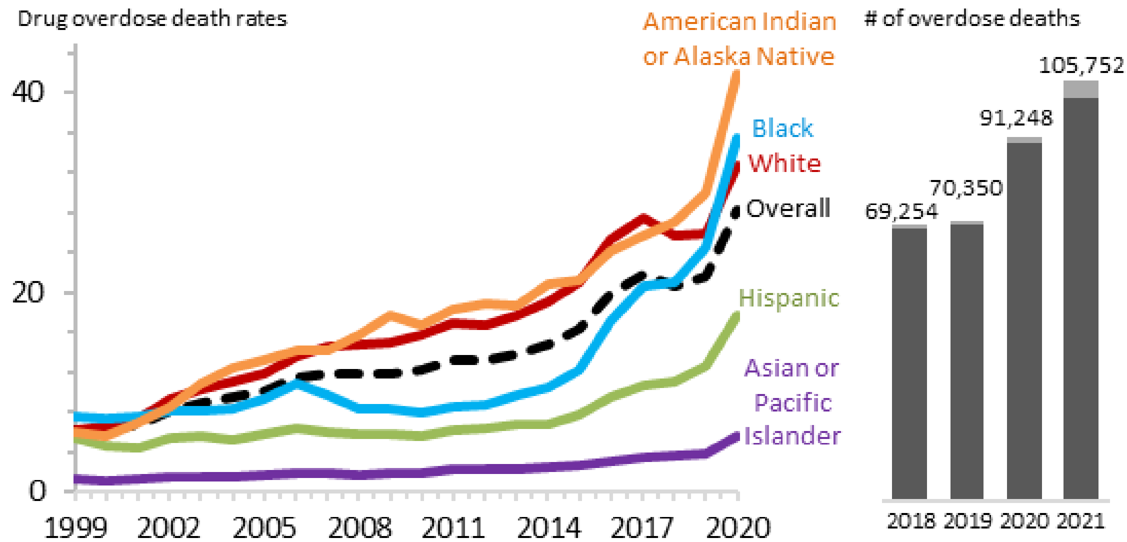
Deaths in the U.S. spiked in 2020, resulting in an increase of 22.9% between March 2020 and January 2021, a stark change from previous annual increases of 2.5% or less.[1] And in 2021, Covid continued its devastating toll. As of this writing, the country is nearing 1 million Covid-related deaths.

For every 3 known Covid deaths, there has been 1 additional excess death. Early in the pandemic, health care providers noticed their usual patients, fearful of Covid, canceling care for cancer treatment, orthopedic issues, chronic disease, and other documented illnesses.[2,3,4] New studies show additional previously hidden effects of the pandemic. The Journal of the American Medical Association released a study that found that alcohol-related deaths increased by 25.9% from 2019 to 2020.[5] By contrast, alcohol-related deaths only increased by about 2% annually from 1999 to 2017.[6] Moreover, the study indicates an increase in drug overdose deaths related to alcohol abuse (Drug Overdose Deaths). Deaths from vehicle crashes have also spiked, increasing by 5.1% from 2019 to 2020, and then by 12% from 2020 to 2021.[7] Related, preliminary data shows that pedestrian fatalities have also escalated, increasing by 17% from 2020 to 2021, though there is significant variation by state.[8] Experts believe that a number of these spikes are a result of poor mental health and the lack of care options across the nation (Mental Health Providers).[9,10] As the federal government shifts its focus to reducing only severe Covid cases and deaths, the risk grows of an escalating number of long Covid cases with debilitating effects (Long Covid).[11,12,13]

Drug overdose deaths spiked in 2020 and 2021. Overdose death rates are highest for American Indian/Alaska Native, Black, and White individuals.

Drug overdose death rates and total number of drug overdose deaths, U.S.

Rates are age-adjusted per 100,000 population, by race/ethnicity



Source: [CDC/ Wonder Mortality Data](). Notes: Race groups are non-Hispanic. Total number of drug overdose deaths are for the 12-month period ending October of each year. Light gray sections of bars represent provisional data.

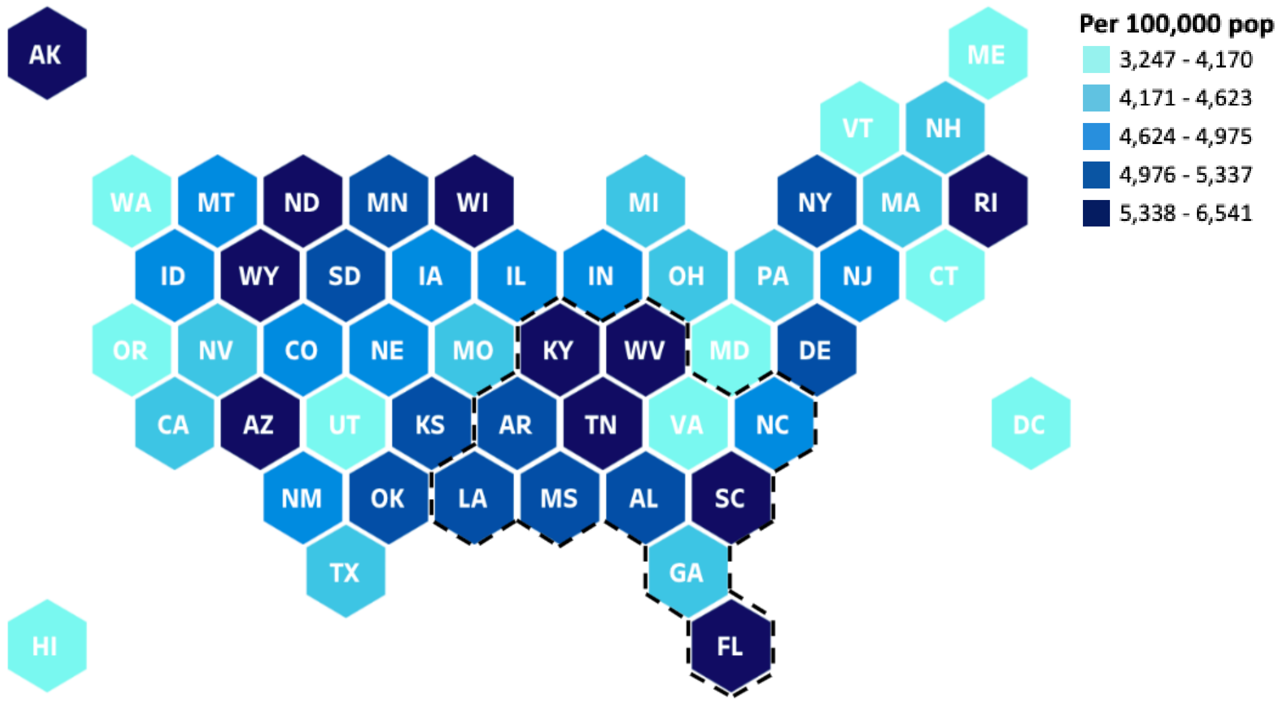
While the drug overdose crisis has grown over the last 20 years, fatal overdoses have skyrocketed over the course of the Covid-19 pandemic. Drug overdose deaths increased by 30% between 2019 and 2020, whereas the increase between 2018 and 2019 was only 1.6%. Preliminary data for 2021 shows a 16% increase from 2020. Many drug overdose analyses have focused on low-income white communities but the rate of fatal overdoses among American Indian/Alaska Native communities is often near or above that of their white counterparts.[1,2] American Indian/Alaska Native communities had the highest rate of drug overdose deaths (42 per 100,000) in 2020, while death rates among Black individuals (35 per 100,000) exceeded that of white individuals (33 per 100,000) for the first time in nearly 20 years.

Several Southern states are among those with the highest drug overdose death rates. In West Virginia, the drug overdose death rate skyrocketed from an already elevated level of 52.8 deaths per 100,000 population in 2019 to 81.4 in 2020. Kentucky, Tennessee, and Louisiana were also among states with the highest drug overdose death rates in 2020 at 49.2, 45.6, and 42.7 deaths per 100,000 population, respectively.[3]

Economic burdens, isolation, and limited access to treatment and care throughout the pandemic have exacerbated the underlying drug overdose crisis.[4]

Experts estimate between 7.9 and 23.8 million Americans have been infected with "long Covid."

Estimates of long Covid infections per 100,000 population
Cumulative, February 1, 2020 - April 10, 2022



Source: AAPM&R Dashboard, Census Bureau: Population Estimates. NOTES: This map uses Post-Acute Sequelae of Sars-Cov-2 (PASC, or "long Covid") estimates at 20% of the surviving Covid-19 cases (confirmed cases less deaths).

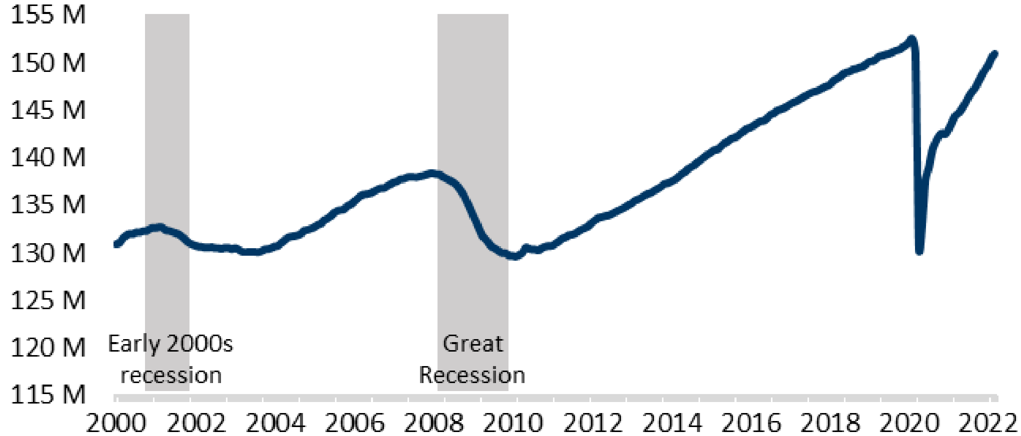
Though the number of severe Covid cases has declined since the Omicron peaking early 2022, experts warn that "long Covid" may impact anywhere between 10% and 30% of Covid-19 patients, or 7.9 to 23.8 million Americans. Long Covid has a range of symptoms that do not necessarily correspond to severe Covid-19 cases.[1] Medical experts are still understanding the diagnosis, but recent studies show that long Covid largely affects immune and circulatory systems, as well as the brain and lungs.[2,3,4,5] This can result in additional sickness, exhaustion, brain fog, and shortness of breath. 10 out of 12 Southern states have among the highest rates of possible long Covid infections.

The potential impacts of long Covid are concerning. While long Covid has been added as a disability under the Americans with Disabilities Act, long Covid patients struggle to get the care, rest, and financial resources they need to fully recover. One Louisville resident was denied full disability benefits multiple times after 2 years of sustained long Covid symptoms.[6] As employers struggle to find workers, long Covid could account for a sizable portion of unfilled jobs and, without better care, more people could fall out of the workforce and into poverty.[7]

The U.S. added 1.7 million jobs in Q1 2022, with 1.6 million jobs still to go to reach the Feb 2020 pre-pandemic peak.

Total jobs by month, U.S.

Jan 2000 - Mar 2022



Source: Bureau of Labor Statistics. Note: Seasonally adjusted. Data for Feb 2022 and Mar 2022 are preliminary.

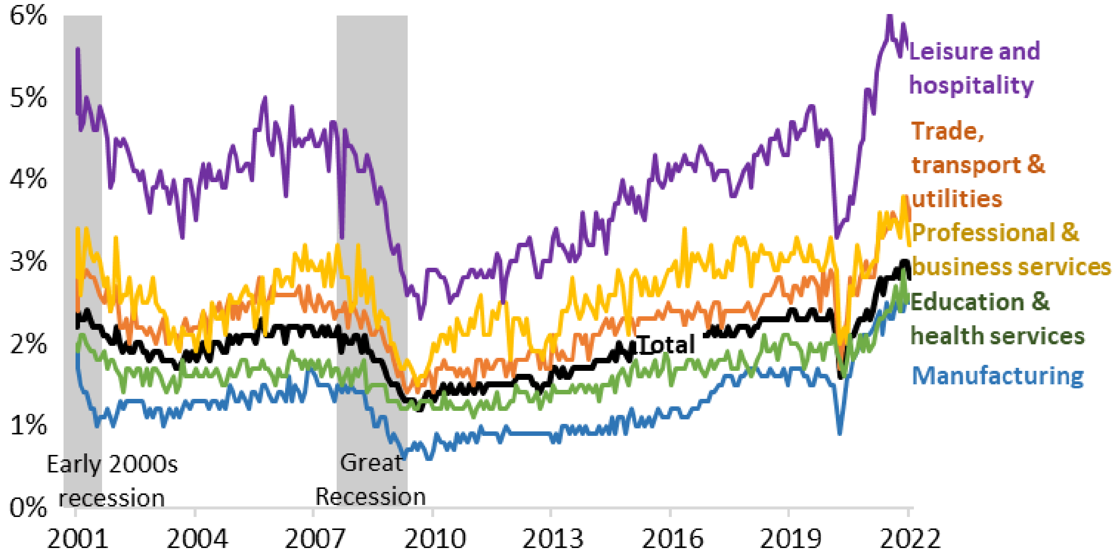
The Covid recession sparked the loss of almost 22 million jobs, which have been largely recouped only two years later. In contrast, the Great Recession resulted in a loss of more than 8 million jobs, which took more than four years to recoup. Though the nation still has 1.6 million fewer jobs than at its pre-Covid peak in February 2020, enough people have dropped out of the labor force that the March 2022 unemployment rate of 3.6% on par with the pre-Covid low.[1] Since Covid hit, workers have retired in record numbers (Quits Rates), and others have had to quit jobs due to lack of childcare (Child Care Disruptions). Employers have responded with wage increases (up 4.9% compared to one year ago) but it's not clear these increases are enough for sidelined workers to pay for needed child and elder care — particularly when wage increases have not kept up with inflation, which grew 8% over the last year.[2] Meanwhile, corporate profits increased 25% in 2021, suggesting capacity to increase wages even higher.[3,4,5,6]

Among Southern states, 5 now have more jobs than they did in February 2020 before the pandemic hit. AR has 0.9% more jobs, TN has 1.4% more, GA has 1.6% more, FL is up 1.7%, and NC is up 2%. But 7 Southern states still have fewer jobs than in February 2020. Most notably, WV has 3.4% fewer jobs and LA has 4.4% fewer jobs.

The rate at which workers are quitting jobs is at all-time highs. Since January 2021, 56 million workers have quit jobs.

Quits rate by industry

Dec 2000 - Feb 2022



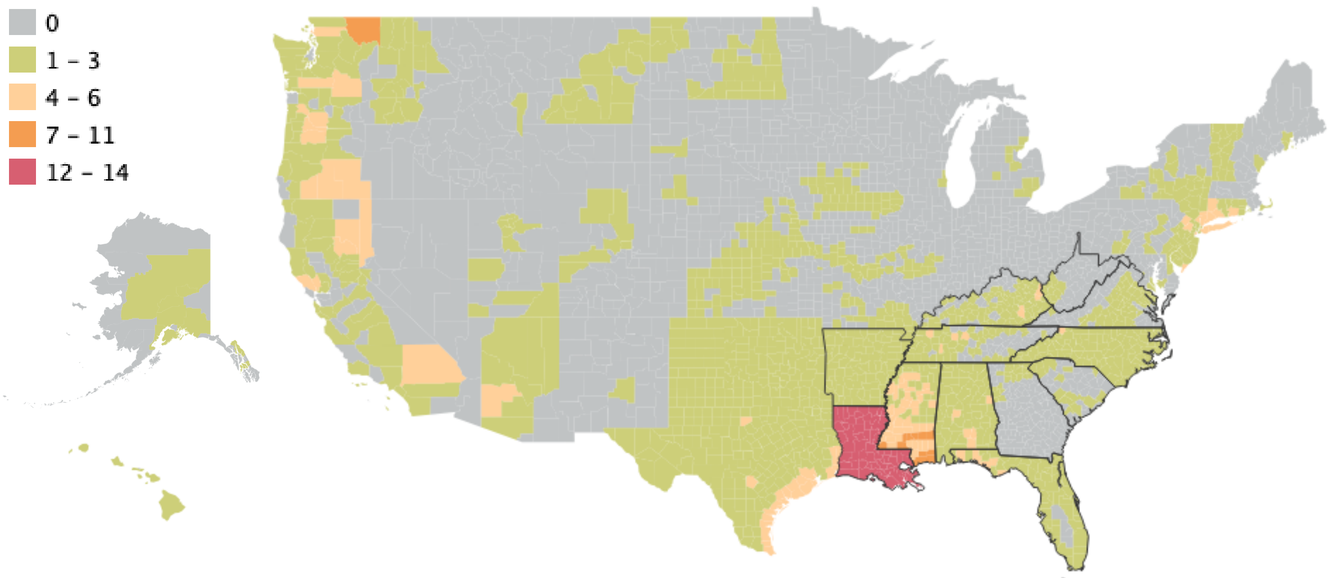
Source: Bureau of Labor Statistics. Notes: The quits rate is the number of quits during the entire month as a percent of total employment. Quits include employees who left voluntarily except retirements or transfers to other locations. Data is seasonally adjusted. Feb 2022 data is preliminary.

Since June 2021, more than 4 million employees have quit their jobs every month. The quits rate has been highest in leisure and hospitality (5.6% in February) and in retail (4.9% in February). Workers are retiring in larger numbers than would be normal given the aging of the baby boomers. An estimated 2.4 million “excess” retirements occurred between the beginning of the pandemic and August 2021.[1] Many of these are women over 65 who may have retired due to fears of Covid or due to in-home elder care responsibilities.[2,3] In addition, 1 million parents of young children quit jobs in March due to lack of childcare and an estimated 1.6 million workers are sidelined each month because of long Covid symptoms (Child Care Disruptions).[4] 10 out of 12 Southern states have among the highest estimated long COVID infection rates (Long Covid). With fewer people in the labor market, workers are increasingly demanding higher wages and better working conditions.[5] A groundswell of grassroots organizing has led to workers voting to organize across Starbucks stores and Amazon warehouses.[6,7,8]

70% of Southerners live in counties that have experienced disasters in the last two years, compared to 57% of non-Southerners.

Number of FEMA county-level disasters

Mar 1, 2020 - Mar 31, 2022



Source: [FEMA](). Notes: Excludes COVID declarations and statewide declarations.

Climate disasters have compounded the nation's misery since the pandemic struck. 70% of Southerners live in a county that has had a disaster since March 2020 compared to 57% of non-Southerners. Many Americans have experienced more than one disaster in that short time frame. In Louisiana, every county (parish) has experienced 12 or more FEMA-declared disasters since March 2020.

The map above depicts the number of county-level disaster declarations including hurricanes, fires, floods, tornadoes, levee breaks, landslides, earthquakes, severe ice storms, and other severe storms. (Although Covid was a declared FEMA disaster, it is excluded from this analysis.)

From 1980 to 2020, the U.S. averaged 7 climate disasters per year that caused a billion dollars in damages.[1] Yet, in 2021, there were 20 such large-scale disasters.[2] In 2020 and 2021, federal spending on Disaster Relief more than doubled compared to 2018 or 2019.[3] But the time- and document-intensive FEMA application process has been shown to increase inequity because it is too burdensome for smaller/rural municipalities and people with low-incomes.[4] Moreover, housing prices increase after disasters[5] and, as such, will likely contribute to increased housing insecurity in many Southern communities going forward (Severe Housing Cost Burden).

Prosperity

The previous section examined how the pandemic has affected the lives and livelihoods of Americans. The next section moves from “damage assessment” to tracking measures that will be important as we shift 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

With substantial new federal funding being disseminated to local and state governments and families, tracking these funding streams and their impact will be essential going forward. This section examines key assessments of the accuracy of demographic data used to disseminate funding. We include measures of the distribution of rental aid. This section ends with indicators on new voting laws passed by states, and legislative attempts to curtail the authority of state courts — both keys to the health of our democracy.

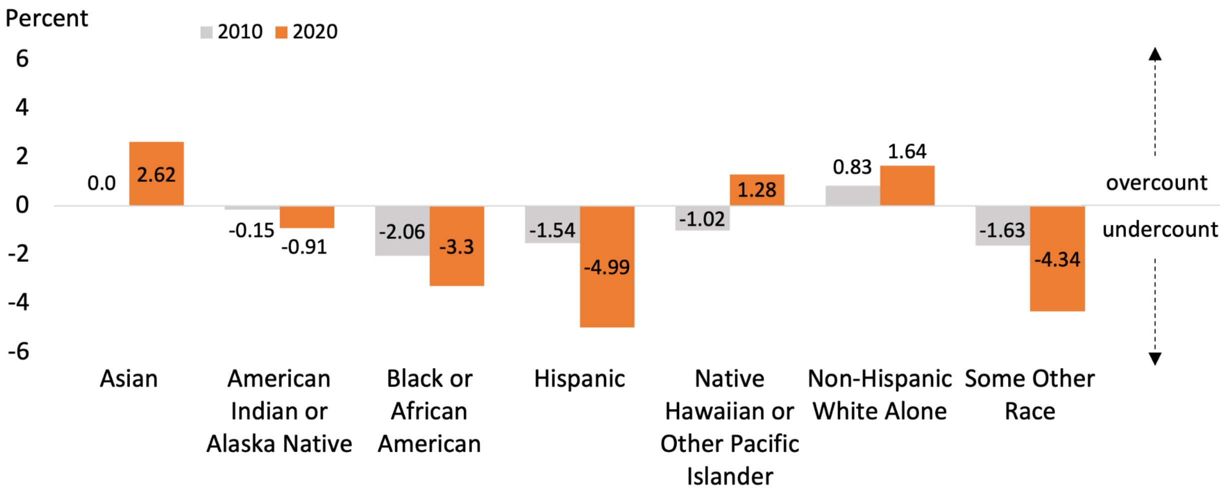
Indicators in this section

- 2020 Census differential undercounts
- 2020 Census undercounts, by state
- ACS response rates, by state
- Emergency Rental Assistance distribution, by state
- New voting laws, by state
- Legislative efforts that weaken state courts

Though the 2020 Census count was better than anticipated, undercount problems persisted or grew worse for Black, Hispanic, and other race groups.

Net coverage error by race and ethnicity, U.S.

Percent of under- and overcounts, 2010 and 2020 Census PES data



Source: [Census Bureau: Post-Enumeration Survey (PES)](#).

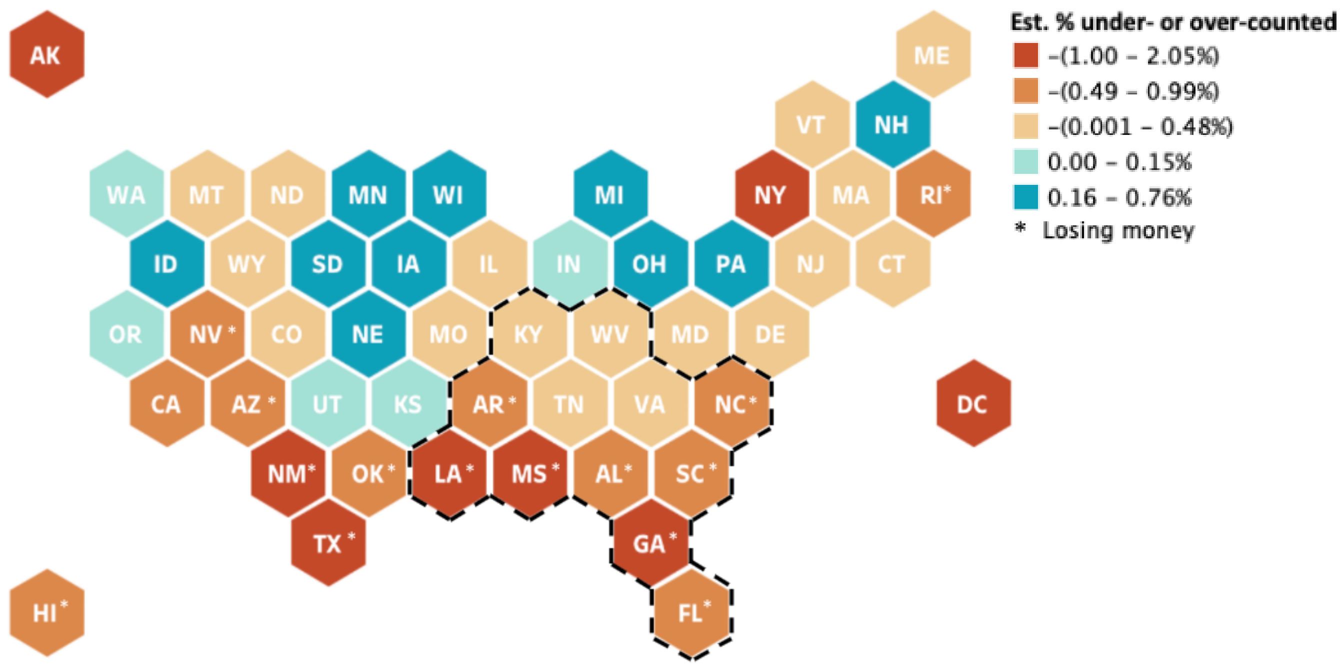
The 2020 Census faced many challenges as census-takers dealt with the pandemic along with climate disasters across the country. Census data has historically undercounted communities of color, with gaps widening this year for some groups. The Census Bureau's first assessment of accuracy for racial groups, the Post-Enumeration Survey, found that, in 2020, undercounts for Black or African American people remained high at -3.3%. American Indians/Alaska Natives were undercounted by about -1%, but a subgroup — those who live on reservations — had the largest undercount at -5.6%. For Hispanic communities, the undercount more than tripled from -1.5% in 2010 to -4.9% in 2020, and for those of "some other race," undercounts increased from -1.6% to -4.3%. Importantly, the Census Bureau's second assessment, the Demographic Analysis, to be released later this year, may reveal even larger disparities. These undercounts reduce political representation and funding for affected communities nationwide. The reduction in funding is particularly concerning as census numbers set the amounts for federal resources such as food, housing, education, and medical programs over the next 10 years. At least $1.5 trillion in federal funding is distributed each year based on this data.[1]

In response to these persistent undercounts of communities of color, the Census Bureau has committed to researching methods for overcoming these undercounts in annual estimates going forward. To do so effectively, the Bureau will need to look at data available from states and localities that is known to better target undercounted groups.[2] These efforts to improve annual population estimates will be critical for rightsizing federal funding flows for the remainder of the decade.

Many states with high census undercounts will not receive their fair share of Medicaid funding. But states can still inform federal funding distribution by engaging in new census review programs.

Estimated miscounts in total population by state, 2020 Census

States losing out on rightful share of Medicaid funding over the next decade



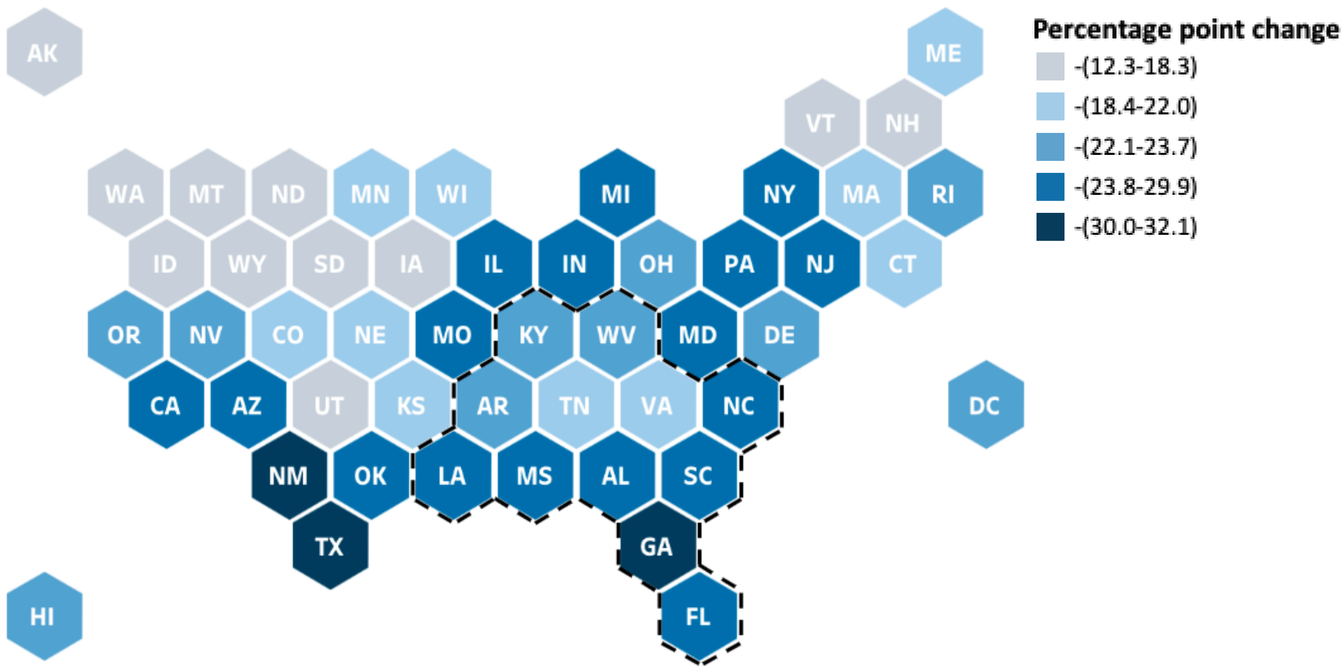
Source: Urban Institute Center on Labor, Human Services, and Population.

While the Census Bureau has not released official state-by-state quality assessments yet, an innovative quality check by the Urban Institute suggests there was variation in the accuracy of counts by state. Undercounts (and overcounts) affect state and federal political representation and funding for necessities such as infrastructure, children's programs, and health care. Mississippi, Georgia, and Louisiana had among the highest rates of undercount, causing their residents to lose out on $20 million, $47 million, and $46 million in annual Medicaid funding, respectively.[1]

States and localities have an opportunity to improve this data, which will inform federal funding distribution for the next 10 years, by actively engaging in the Count Question Resolution program and the new Post Census Group Quarters Review. These programs allow tribal, state, and local governments to identify and submit evidence of omissions or mistakes in the 2020 Census to correct the count for federal funds.[2,3]

Response rates for the American Community Survey declined 25 percentage points (from 96% to 71%) between 2015 and 2020. Response rates declined the most in Georgia, New Mexico,, and Texas.

Declines in American Community Survey response rates by state
Percentage point change, 2015 to 2020 (housing units)



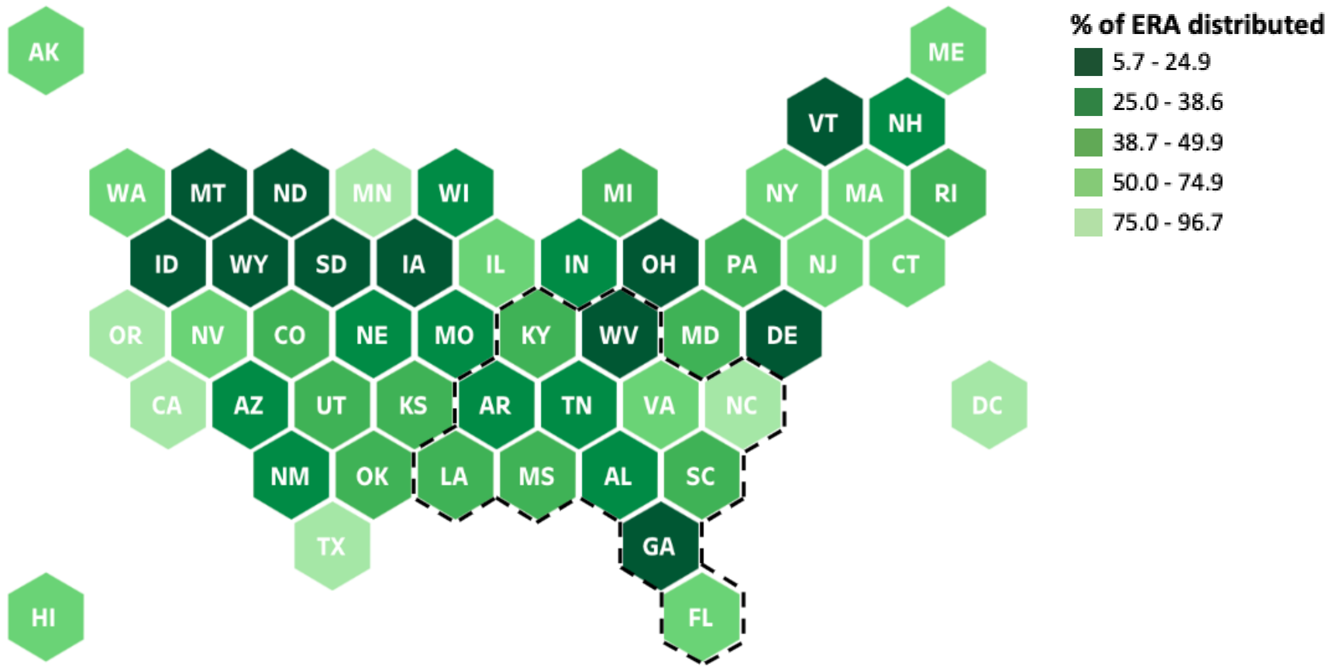
Source: U.S. Census Bureau.

Survey research and, most glaringly, political polls have become less reliable and predictive in recent years due to declining response rates and because those who respond may have different attributes than those who do not.[1,2,3] One survey of such size and mandate that it should not suffer from these issues is the American Community Survey (ACS). As the nation's largest household survey, with more than 2 million households responding per year, the ACS is the source of the most accurate, up-to-date, and detailed information about U.S. communities of any size. Its response rate has typically been well over 90 percent. But the unique challenge of the Covid pandemic pushed ACS response rates lower, particularly among lower-income households.[4,5,6] The response rate was so low in 2020 that the Census Bureau concluded the results did not meet statistical quality standards, and published the data only at the state level, marking it "experimental." Because disasters accelerate pre-existing trends, overall survey response rates may continue to drop. Thus, the likelihood of lower-income households and other consistently-missed populations responding may remain diminished, requiring weighting and sample enlargement, as well as overdue investment in data infrastructure.

Only 49% of Emergency Rental Assistance funds have been distributed to renters across the South, compared to 59% in non-Southern states.

Percent of Emergency Rental Assistance funds distributed

Jan 1, 2021 - Feb 28, 2022



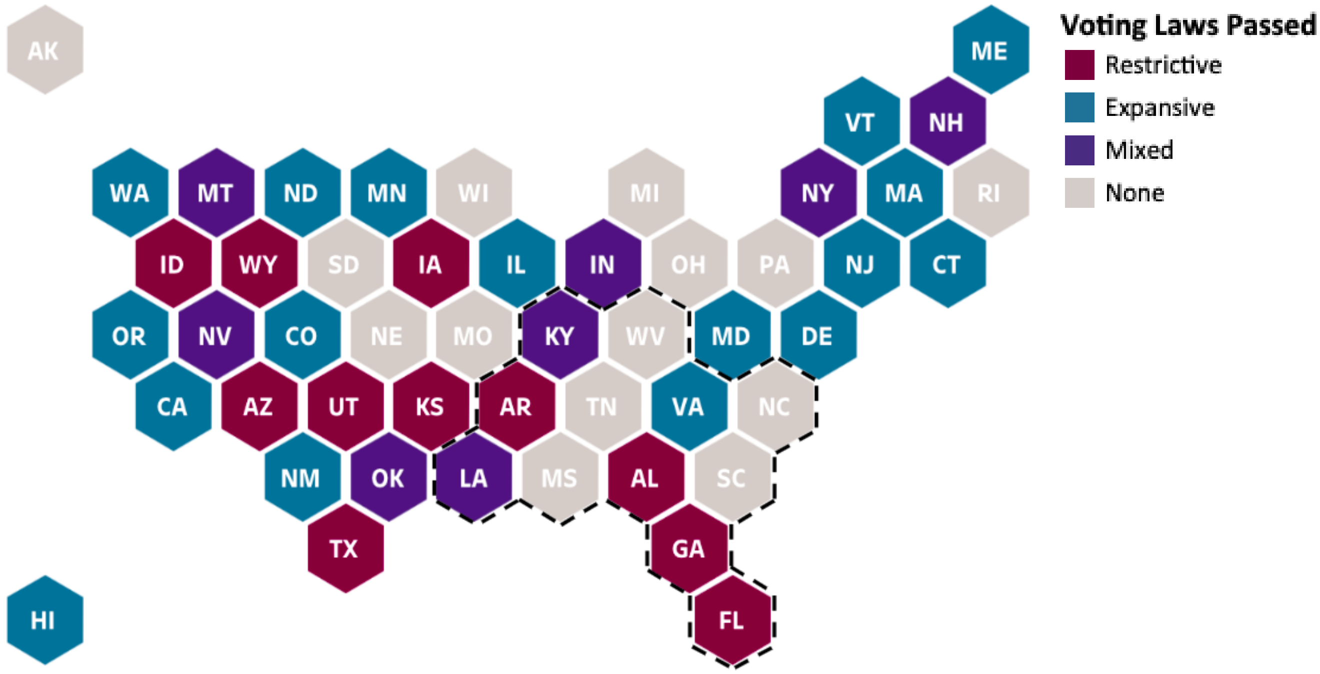
Source: U.S. Department of the Treasury. Notes: Assistance to households is the total dollar amount of ERA1 and ERA2 award funds paid to or for households, including payments for rent, rental arrears, utility/home energy costs, utility/home energy arrears, and other eligible expenses. This does not include funds paid for Housing Stability Services. "Percent distributed" is calculated as the sum of assistance to households divided by 90% of the ERA1 and ERA2 allocation amount.

The December 2020 stimulus bill and the March 2021 American Rescue Plan (ARP) include a combined $45 billion in Emergency Rental Assistance (ERA) funds, and a portion of these funds can be used for housing counseling and eviction diversion programs.[1] This, plus a surge of volunteer legal assistance from 99 law schools across the country, have been credited with keeping eviction filings low, despite the Supreme Court’s ruling against the eviction moratorium in August 2021.[2]

Grantees who fail to spend 50% of their ERA allotment may find some of their funds reallocated to ensure all funds are spent by September 2022. Kentucky and Virginia increased their distribution of ERA funds by reducing documentation burdens for accessing this aid.[3] But many Southern states are lagging including WV where only 20% of ERA funds have been spent, GA and TN only 25%, and AL only 27%. States and localities that are quickly expending their ERA allotment may use flexible ARP funds to provide additional rental relief, and this may trigger additional allocations of ERA funds.[1] In other states, like Texas, landlords who received the rental relief, illegally evicted their tenants anyway, without prosecution.[4]

Despite gains made in voter turnout in 2020, 19 states passed laws restricting voter access in 2021.

Voting laws passed
Jan 1 - Dec 7, 2021



Source: Brennan Center for Justice.

In anticipation of the 2020 election and in response to the pandemic, nearly every state did something to make voting easier, such as temporarily expanding access to mail-in voting, establishing ballot drop-boxes, or increasing the availability of early voting.[1] Despite concerns that the pandemic might depress voting rates, voter turnout was at a record high in the 2020 election with national voter participation jumping to about 67% amid an increase in new voters from both parties.[2,3]

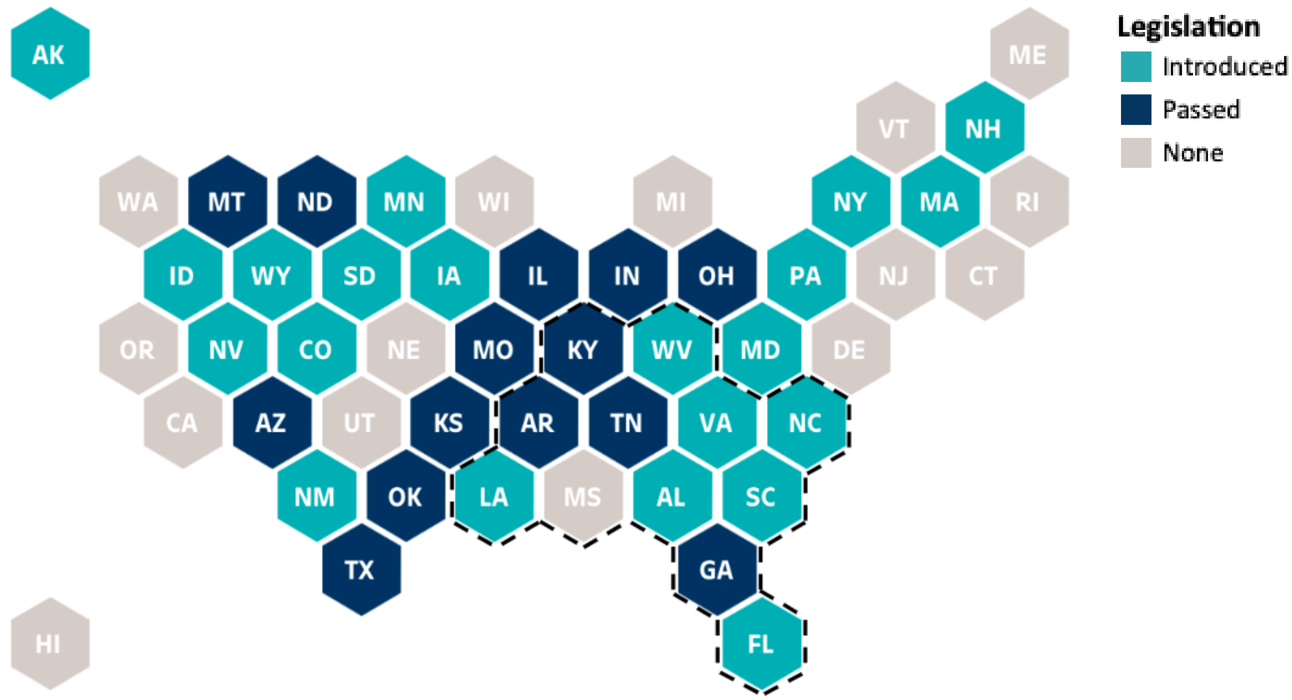
Since the 2020 election, there have been a deluge of new voting laws passed in states across the nation. In 2021, 11 states enacted voting laws that make it harder for Americans to vote.[4] 17 states passed expansive voting laws in 2021, and 8 states passed a combination of both expansive and restrictive voting laws. In states' 2022 legislative sessions, lawmakers in 27 states are already considering more than 250 bills with restrictive provisions — including bills carried over from 2021 and at least 96 new bills.[5]

Among the one-third of voters who did not participate in the 2020 election, the Current Population Survey found that 8% did not vote because of structural barriers. Rather than building on the progress made in 2020, states' efforts to further restrict voting access could have a significant impact on participation in future elections, including the upcoming 2022 and 2023 midterm elections.

Legislators in 35 states introduced bills that would weaken the power and independence of state courts.

Legislative efforts to weaken state courts

Jan 1 - Dec 10, 2021



Source: [Brennan Center for Justice](#).

State judiciaries constitute a critically important institution within American democracy, handling more than 90% of all cases in the United States.[1] Like many public services, state courts have been impacted greatly by the pandemic and, in many cases, have had to rapidly change operations including adopting new technologies like teleconferencing and e-filings at unprecedented speed and scale.[2] At the same time, legislators have targeted state courts across the country.

In 2021, legislators introduced more than 150 bills in 35 states that would weaken the power and independence of state courts, more than any year in recent decades.[3] These bills included legislative efforts such as limiting judicial review of state election laws, gerrymandering or creating new courts, and limiting the enforcement of court rulings on particular issues. Of these, legislators successfully passed laws weakening state judiciaries in 14 states.

In North Carolina, these efforts have been heightened by an ongoing legal battle over redistricting. In March, state lawmakers asked the U.S. Supreme Court to curtail state courts' powers to intervene in the drawing of congressional districts, despite longtime reluctance from the U.S. Supreme Court to weigh in on redistricting issues, including a 2019 decision that federal courts cannot review partisan gerrymandering claims.[4,5]

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 sufficiently available.

This issue of *Pandemic to Prosperity* examines 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 two years ago. We also examine child care disruptions and pediatricians to understand our institutions' ability to educate and care for our children during the pandemic. Finally, we look at the availability of health insurance and mental health providers, and identify gaps in these resources critical for helping Americans be healthy and productive.

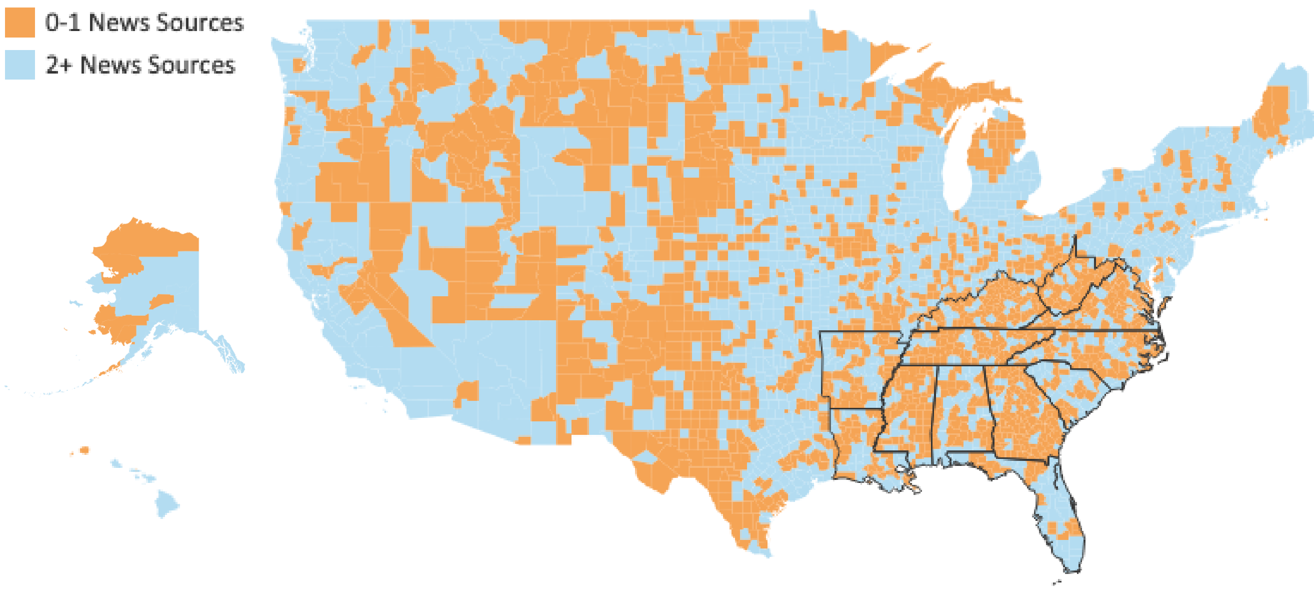
Indicators in this section

- News deserts, by county
- Lack of internet access, by state
- Child care disruptions
- Health insurance coverage, by county
- Mental health providers, by state
- Pediatricians, by county

Newsroom and newspaper closures across the nation mean limited access to trusted information, particularly for small communities.

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.

The steady decline of local newsrooms since 2004 has accelerated since the beginning of the pandemic, with over 100 local newsrooms closing entirely since the start of 2020.[1] 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).[2] In the South, 2 out of 3 counties are likely to be news deserts.[3]

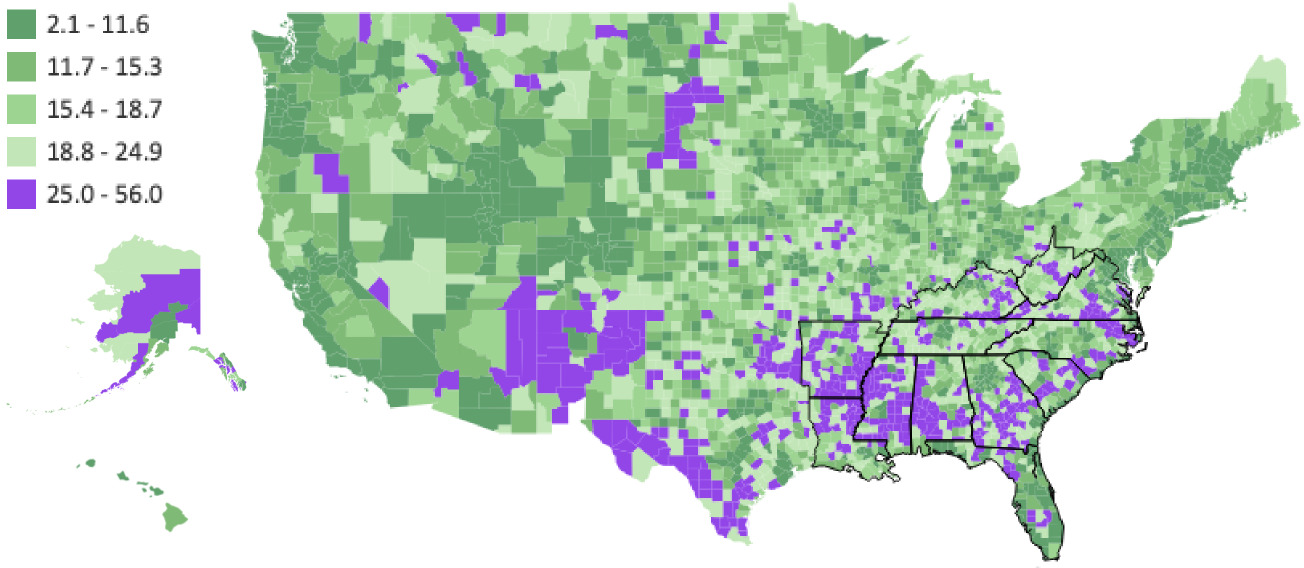
Local news sources are an essential platform for both transparency and community input in small communities, and many understand what is lost without them. The absence of local news has allowed misinformation and disinformation campaigns to flourish, with no reliable sources to fill information gaps. A 2021 study finds that areas with local news closures have an increase in corporate misconduct, highlighting a crucial role that newsrooms play to ensure democratic values.[4]

Yet, journalists and community members are finding innovative ways to fill information gaps and adapt. In north central Florida, surrounding newspapers are sending journalists to local news deserts like Gilchrist County, where its last local newspaper of 91 years recently closed its doors.[5] The Gulf State Newsroom, a regional news collective, provides support to local journalists across areas with news deserts to help fill the news void.[6] A research team out of Presbytarian College in South Carolina plans to survey local news organizations across the state to understand their challenges, and identify recommendations for sustainable success.[7]

31% of Southern counties have poor internet access (defined as one-quarter of households without internet) compared to only 9% of counties outside the South.

Lack of internet access by county, 2016-20

Percent of households without internet access



Source: Census Bureau's American Community Survey 2016-20. Note: Internet access is defined as any form of internet subscription, including cellular data plans only, as well as having internet access with no subscription.

Broadband internet access has become an essential utility for every American family. Yet, according to new data, 31% of Southern counties have poor internet access (25% or more of households lack internet) compared to 9% of non-Southern counties. Looking at rural America, 24% of rural counties have poor internet access compared to only 5% of non-rural counties.

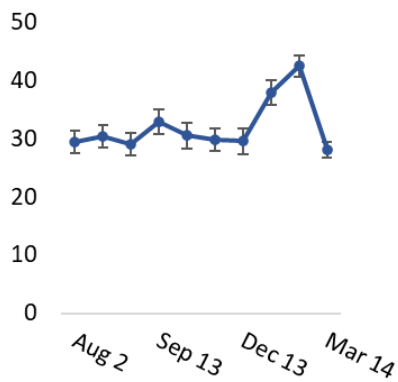
In Mississippi, 21% of households lacked internet access entirely and in Arkansas, Louisiana, and West Virginia, 18% of households lacked internet access. In fact, eight of the ten states with the worst internet access are in the South.

During the pandemic, Congress approved funding for subsidies for devices and broadband service but the funding was limited and only served roughly 6 million households.[1] The Bipartisan Infrastructure Law will send $42.45 billion directly to states to collaboratively plan and execute broadband expansion in partnership with local and regional communities.[2] The goal will be to bring reliable, affordable high-speed internet to all residents and will require broadband providers that receive funding to offer at least one affordable service plan.[3]

Child care disruptions have declined since the Omicron surge but 28% of adults with young children still reported a disruption last month.

Child care disruptions, March 2 - 14, 2022

Percent of households where children < 5 years were unable to attend child care in last 4 weeks



How families responded to childcare disruption:	No. of families:
Took unpaid leave to care for children	1,920,184
Used vacation days/sick days/ paid leave to care for children	2,545,972
Cut work hours to care for children	2,277,709
Left a job in order to care for children	962,229
Lost a job because of time away to care for children	354,994
Did not look for a job in order to care for children	1,124,421
Supervised one or more children while working	1,865,445

Source: Census Bureau's Household Pulse Survey. Note: Universe is adults in households with children under 5 years of age.

Though child care disruptions have declined, families with children under 5 still face difficult child care decisions. Nearly 3 in 10 adults experienced a child care disruption at some point during the 4 weeks ending March 14, 2022. While more than 2 million parents cut their work hours to care for children, and 1.9 million parents took unpaid leave, nearly 1 million left a job, and another 355,000 lost a job because of child care disruptions.

The impact on careers, the workforce, and mental health for both parents and children are not trivial. Women have disproportionately managed households and child care concerns during the pandemic and were more likely to cut hours and leave their jobs (Employment Rate, By Gender).[1] A daycare center in Louisville, Kentucky saw enrollment drop by half as women leaving the workforce no longer needed care or lost their eligibility for it.[2] As disruptions became common, children were more likely to experience behavioral issues, at least partly in response to parental stress and anxiety from the increased difficulty of balancing work and family (Mental Health Providers).[3]

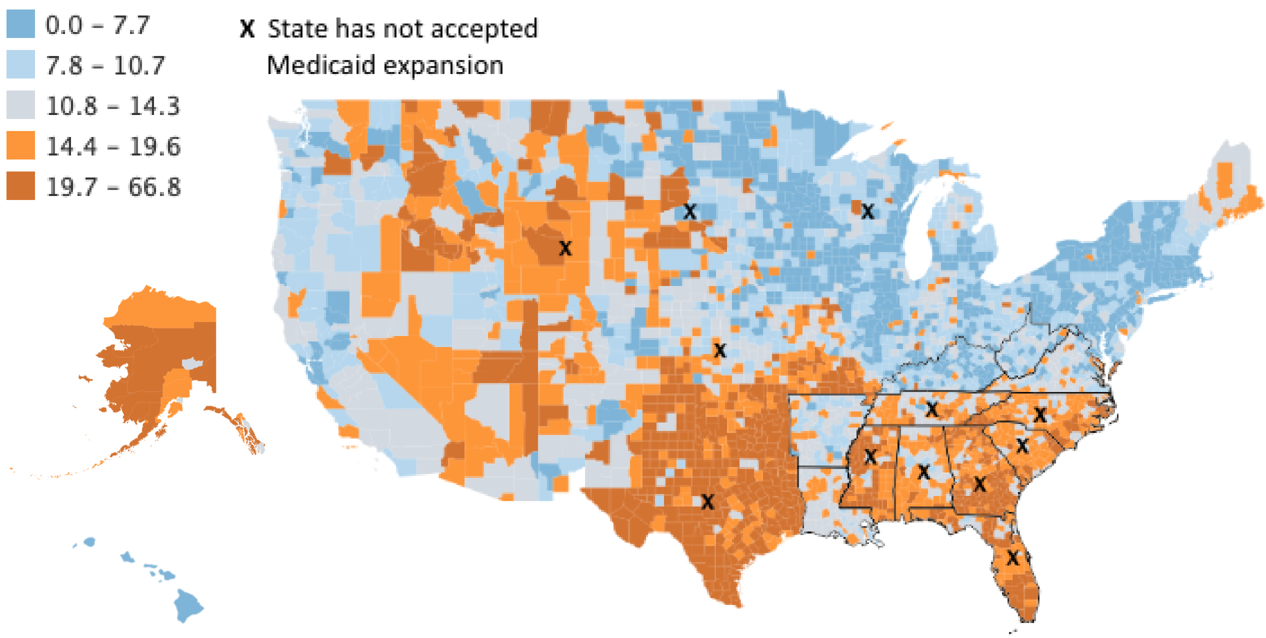
Child care disruptions due to the pandemic have heightened the inequities faced by low income families. Soaring child care costs and daycare closures have been hardest on low-income families, who were also more likely to experience job loss at the start of the pandemic.[4,5,6] In interviews with the Washington Post, parents from low-income families describe a series of consequences due to child care disruptions, including unpaid leave from low-wage hourly jobs, using credit cards and other forms of debt to make ends meet and, in some cases, being let go from work.[7]

While Covid relief dollars have helped to shore up the sector, these are only temporary solutions. Long-term investments in child care are a critical step in stabilizing the workforce.

States refusing Medicaid expansion contributed to a 15% uninsured rate for working-age Southerners compared to 11% outside the South.

Lack of health insurance coverage by county, 2016-20

Population age 19-64



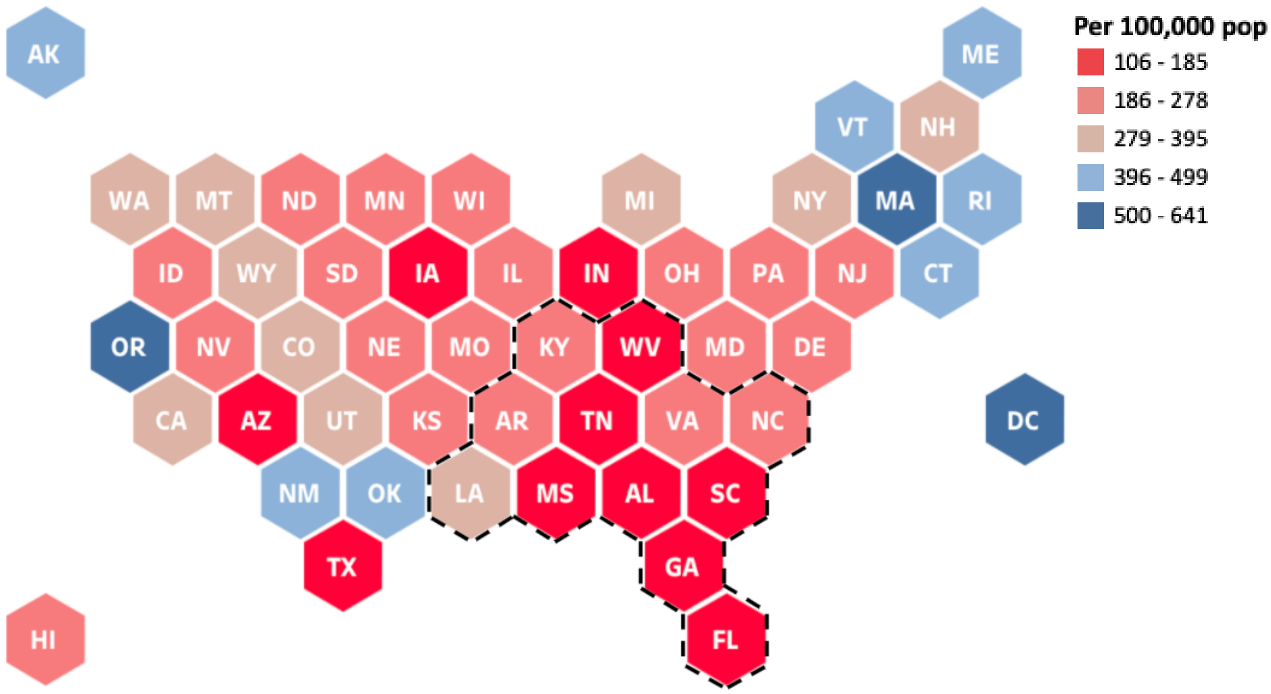
Source: [Census Bureau's American Community Survey 2016-20](). Note: WI has partially expanded Medicaid (under a Medicaid waiver) to include all adults under 100 percent federal poverty level.

Seven states in the deep South (MS, AL, GA, FL, SC, NC, and TN) have not adopted Medicaid expansion. As a result, according to the most recent data (2016-2020), 15% of working-age Southerners lack health insurance compared to 11% in the rest of the United States. The highest uninsured rate is in Texas — another state that has not expanded Medicaid — at 23%. States with the next highest rates of the uninsured working age population were Oklahoma at 21%, Florida at 19%, and Georgia and Mississippi at 18%. In comparison, only 4% in MA were without coverage.

Lack of health insurance coverage is particularly common in rural counties in the South. Looking at Southern counties with particularly high rates of uninsurance (15% or more of all working-age adults lacking health insurance), ⅔ of these counties were completely or mostly rural. The implications of not expanding Medicaid are severe for rural communities. Without Medicaid expansion, hospitals don't receive sufficient reimbursement for the care they provide to an increased number of uninsured patients and, as a result, oftentimes must close for financial reasons. Lack of health insurance also means many people incur medical debt. By December 2020, credit bureau data revealed that about 20% of Southerners had medical debt compared to 13% for non-Southerners (Medical Debt). States that expanded Medicaid by 2014 saw a greater decline in medical debt among their residents than did states that failed to expand Medicaid.[1]

Mental health providers are in short supply in many Southern states. Alabama has only 106 providers per 100,000 people and West Virginia has only 138 – well below the national average of 259.

Mental health providers per 100,000 population, 2020
Registered mental health providers



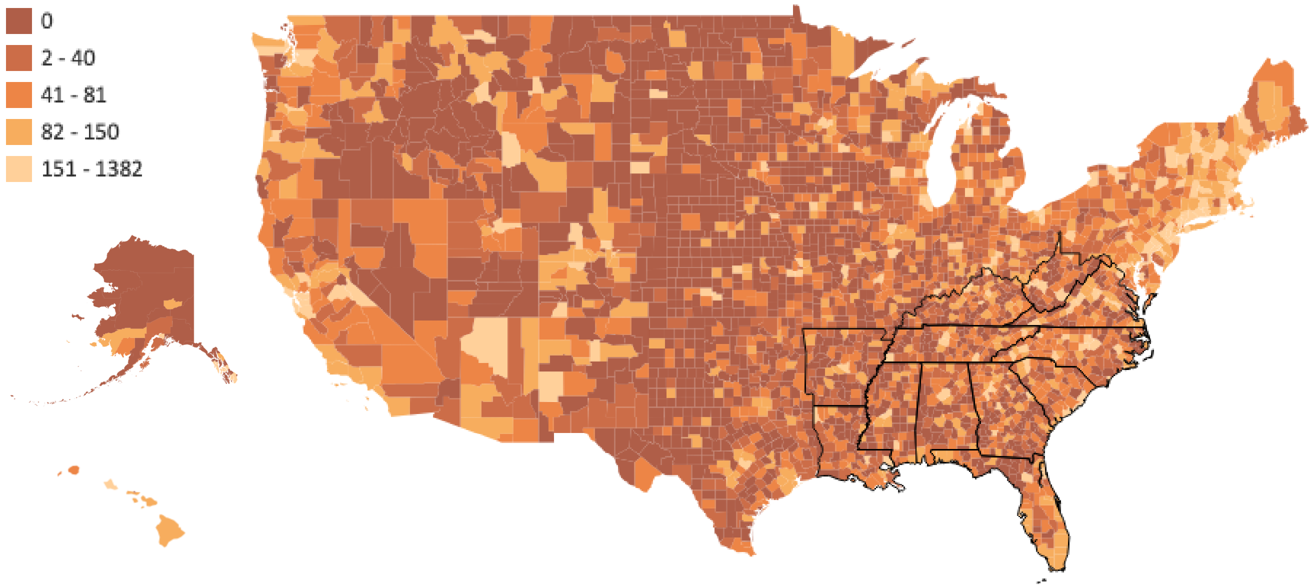
Source: County Health Rankings & Roadmaps and Census Bureau Vintage 2020 PEP. Notes: Mental health providers include psychiatrists, psychologists, licensed clinical social workers, counselors, marriage and family therapists, advanced practice nurses specializing in mental health care, as well as those treating alcohol and other drug abuse.

In March 2022, Americans experienced anxiety and depression at rates nearly triple what they were in 2019 but many weren't able to find the care they needed. The majority of psychologists have seen their waiting lists grow since the pandemic hit.[1] And many Americans are turning to crisis hotlines, which are seeing ballooning demand.[2] In Alabama and West Virginia, ⅓ of adults reported symptoms of anxiety or depression in March. (Symptoms of Anxiety or Depression) Yet these states have far fewer mental health providers than the national average. This mental health crisis may be contributing to increasing incidents of road rage, vehicular fatalities, domestic and child abuse, drug overdose deaths and violent crime (Drug Overdose Deaths).[3,4,5,6,7]

Some communities are adopting innovative approaches, such as mobile crisis response services funded by American Rescue Plan and Medicaid dollars.[3] Still, many Americans need ongoing care and most states have few plans for expanding the supply of mental health providers.[8]

The South faces a shortage of pediatricians with only 101 per 100,000 children, compared to 112 per 100,000 in the rest of the nation.

General pediatricians per 100,000 children age 0-14, 2021
General pediatricians ever certified, age 70 and under



Source: [The American Board of Pediatrics]() and [Census Bureau Vintage 2020 PEP.]() Notes: Includes all general pediatricians age 70 and younger who have become board certified at some time in their career. Pediatric subspecialists are excluded. For more notes, see the Pediatric Physicians Workforce Data Book at link provided.

Pediatricians are woefully lacking in many Southern states. Mississippi has only 67 pediatricians per 100,000 children, Arkansas has only 80, Alabama has only 88, and West Virginia has only 90 pediatricians per 100,000 children (0-14 years old). States in the Northeast have the most pediatricians, while states in the West and South have the fewest per 100,000 children.

Pediatricians are an important source of behavioral and mental health care for children and recent polls reveal they are parents' most trusted source of information on the Covid vaccine for children.[1,2] But the majority of rural counties in the U.S. have no pediatricians at all. 88% of completely rural counties and 43% of mostly rural counties have no general pediatricians, compared to 10% of urban counties and 14% of mostly urban counties.

Children are more prone to illness and injury than adults and, without access to care, illnesses can go untreated and have lifetime effects.[3,4] Without health care, children's physical health, emotional health, and development can be compromised, undermining their ability to become fully productive adults.[5]

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 key metrics of economic well-being from even before the pandemic struck, including student loan and medical debt levels, and unaffordable rents. Then it examines current employment rates by race and gender. It includes measures of food and housing insecurity, difficulty paying basic expenses, and anxiety and depression symptoms from the Census Bureau's Household Pulse Survey. And it ends with an assessment of the well-being of the LGBT population.

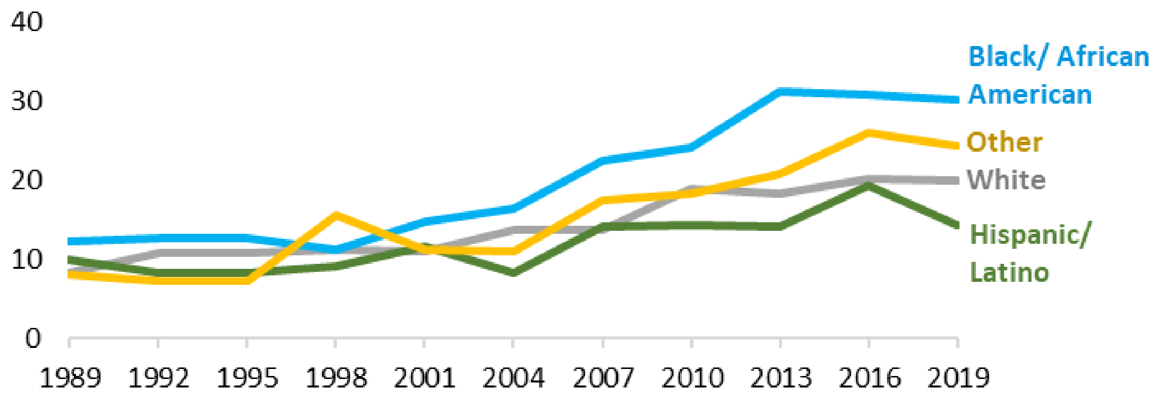
Indicators in this section

- Student loan debt
- Renters with severe housing cost burdens, by county
- Medical debt, by county
- Employment rate, by race/ethnicity
- Employment rate, by gender
- Difficulty paying household expenses
- Food insecurity, by state
- Likelihood of eviction or foreclosure, by state
- Symptoms of anxiety or depression, by state
- Well-being of LGBT population

Before Covid hit, 1 in 5 U.S. families were saddled with student loan debt. Black households were most likely to have student loan debt at 30% – up from 12% in 1989.

Education installment loans, 1989 - 2019

Percent of households holding education loans by race/ethnicity



Source: [Survey of Consumer Finances]

In March 2020, the federal government paused student loan repayments in response to the economic toll of the pandemic. The pause on student loan payments saved borrowers an average of $393 a month, an essential support as many struggled with unstable income over the course of the pandemic. Once student loan payments resume, it is estimated that roughly 18 million borrowers will lose $85.5 billion of their income annually.[1] This impact falls disproportionately on Black households, of whom 30% held student loan debt in 2019.

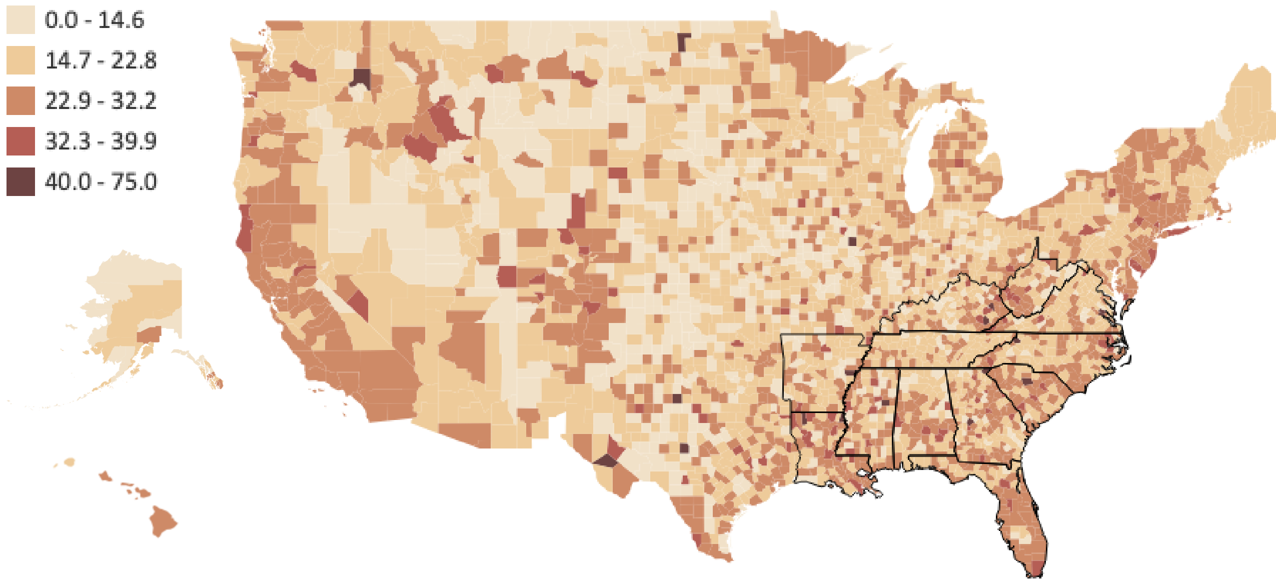
Under an income-driven repayment (IDR) plan, many borrowers' student debt continues to mount because payments don't cover monthly interest. One Black borrower accepted $24,000 in loans in 1990, yet after making 31 years of payments, owes $125,000 today — their story is not unusual.[2] A 2020 study by the American Council on Education revealed that twelve years after beginning college, Black graduates with a bachelor's degree owed 115% of their original loan amount, while Hispanic graduates owed 80% and white graduates owed 51%.[3] And while the IDR program promises loan forgiveness after 20 years of payments, only 32 people have actually received loan cancellations out of at least 2 million eligible.[4]

A study of CUNY graduates with a bachelor's degree found that, by age 30, Black and Hispanic graduates were more likely to have student debt and less likely to hold mortgages than white graduates, suggesting that student debt is also delaying homeownership, a primary means of building wealth in the U.S.[5] Though higher education was promised to close the racial wealth gap, student loan debt has contributed to widening it.[6] While the U.S. Department of Education has taken steps towards addressing these historical failures, more substantial policy responses such as student loan debt cancellation up to $50,000 per borrower would immediately increase the wealth of Black Americans by an estimated 40%, while adding $174 billion to the nation's GDP in the first year.[1,7]

1 in 4 renters pay half of household income on housing costs.

Severe housing cost burdens by county, 2016-20

Percent of renter households paying half or more of household income on housing costs



Source: [Census Bureau's American Community Survey 2016-20]

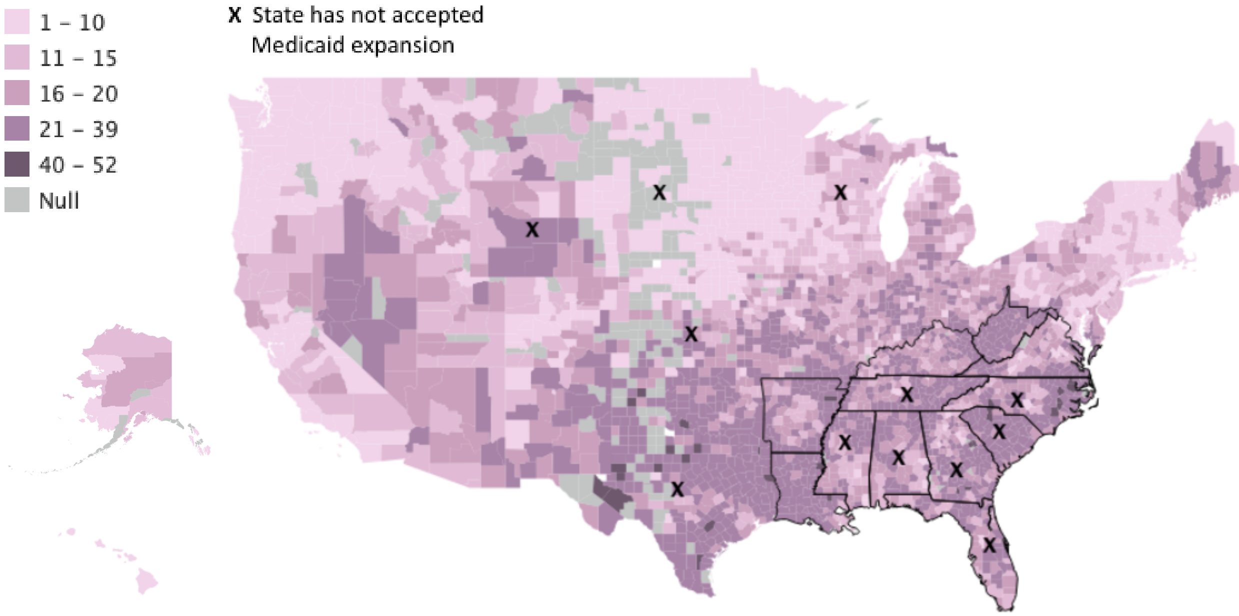
The nation was facing a severe housing shortage when the pandemic struck in 2020. Following the Great Recession, new home construction dramatically declined — driving up home prices over the decade without commensurate increases in income.[1,2] Paying half one's household income on rent puts many families in a precarious situation.[3] Not surprisingly, this level of housing insecurity can cause frequent moves which lead to frequent school changes, absenteeism, and lower test scores for children.[4] Children without stable housing are also susceptible to mental health issues, developmental delays, and trauma.[5] Before Covid, Florida and Louisiana had the highest rates of severe housing cost burden, at 29% and 28% of renters, respectively. In some Southern counties, more than 40% of all renters reported they were severely cost burdened.

Then the pandemic struck and lower interest rates pushed housing prices even higher.[6] A Southern Economic Advancement Project (SEAP) survey of 3,500 Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) recipients in Alabama, Georgia, Mississippi, and New Orleans, Louisiana in November 2021 revealed that 34% had difficulty accessing or maintaining housing during Covid. More than half said affordable housing was their community's greatest challenge.[7] As recently as March 2022, ⅓ of Southerners who are late on housing payments fear they may soonl be evicted or foreclosed upon (Likelihood of Eviction or Foreclosure).

One in five Southerners hold medical debt in default, reaching up to 40-50% of residents in some Southern counties.

Share of individuals with medical debt in collections

December 2020



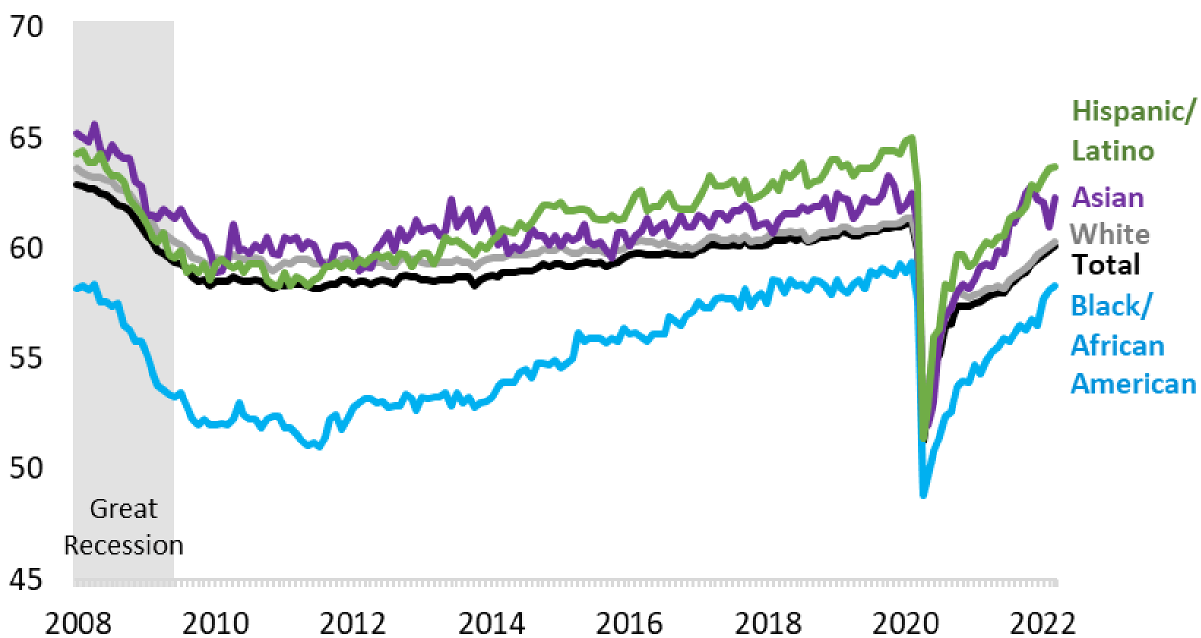
Source: [Urban Institute], [Kaiser Family Foundation]. Note: Universe is people with a credit bureau record. Debt in collections includes past-due credit lines that have been closed and charged-off on the creditor's books as well as unpaid bills reported to the credit bureaus that the creditor is attempting to collect.

Before Covid struck, 18% of Americans carried medical debt, with Southerners carrying the highest average medical debt amounts. States that expanded Medicaid by 2014 saw a greater decline in medical debt among their residents than did states that failed to expand Medicaid.[1] By December 2020, credit bureau data revealed that 20% of Southerners had medical debt, compared to 13% for non-Southerners. In some Southern counties, 40-50% of individuals have medical debt in collections. Three Southern states topped the list with the highest percent of individuals reporting medical debt: 27% in West Virginia, 25% in South Carolina, and 23% in Louisiana (where Medicaid expansion happened in 2016 — later than other states).

Southern Economic Advancement Project's (SEAP) November 2021 survey found that more than half of respondents had experienced challenges with debt during Covid.[2] Individuals with debt in collections often struggle to get credit for other purchases and are sometimes barred from employment opportunities.[3] The largest credit agencies recently announced most medical debt would no longer appear on credit reports.[4] This month, the White House announced new efforts to diminish the negative impacts of medical debt, including no longer considering medical debt when individuals apply for federally-backed home loans and by scrutinizing the collection efforts of those medical providers that receive federal funding.[5]

The March 2022 employment rate of 60.1% is 1.1 percentage points below Feb 2020. Disparate access to jobs has narrowed recently.

Employment rate by race/ethnicity, U.S.
Jan 2008 - Mar 2022



Source: Bureau of Labor Statistics. Note: The employment rate is officially known as the "employment-population ratio." Here it is calculated for the population 16 years and older. Data is seasonally adjusted.

As jobs increase, the employment rate has inched up to 60.1% but remained below its February 2020 level before the pandemic hit. The employment rate for Black adults was lowest at 58.3%.

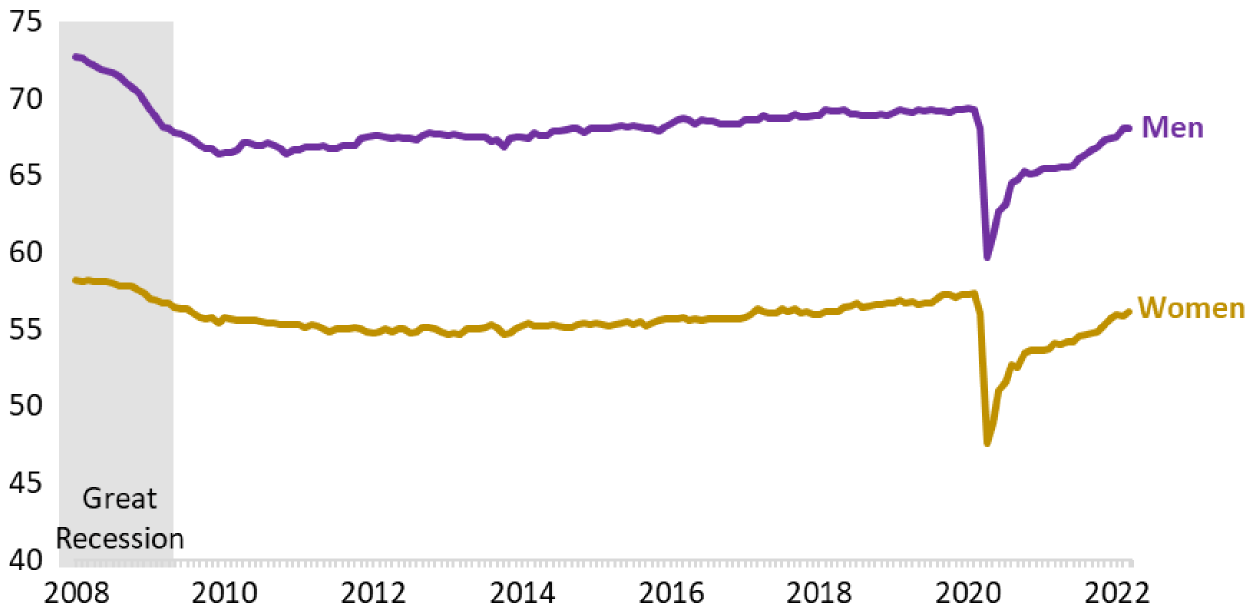
While many employers report difficulty finding workers, the number of total jobs has still not rebounded to pre-pandemic levels. Instead, workers are quitting at record levels. A record number of people have retired since Covid hit — well beyond the number projected as the baby boomers age.[1] In addition, some 1.1 million parents were unable to look for a job in March because of lack of childcare and low-income households have been more likely to experience childcare disruptions during Covid (Child Care Disruptions).[2] Additionally, long Covid may be taking a significant bite out of the workforce.

Long Covid is estimated to affect 10%-30% of all Covid-19 patients and can be debilitating (Long Covid). A recent study concluded that, of the 100 million working-age Americans who have contracted Covid, about one-fourth to one-third experience symptoms such as shortness of breath, chest pain, fatigue, and "brain fog" for months after infection.[3,4] With some of these adults out of work and others reducing work hours, an estimated 1.6 million full-time equivalent workers may be out of the workforce any given month due to long Covid. This would account for 15% of the 10.6 million unfilled jobs in December.[5]

The March 2022 employment rates for both men and women are 1.2 percentage points below February 2020 levels.

Employment rate by gender, U.S.

Jan 2008 - Mar 2022



Source: Bureau of Labor Statistics. Note: The employment rate is officially known as the "employment-population ratio." Here it is calculated for the population 20 years and older. Data is seasonally adjusted.

The employment rate for women inched up to 56.2% in March 2022, while the employment rate for men stayed at 68.1%. Overall, both men and women are 1.2 percentage points below their respective (February 2020) pre-pandemic levels. Employment rates for women remain about 12 points below that for men.

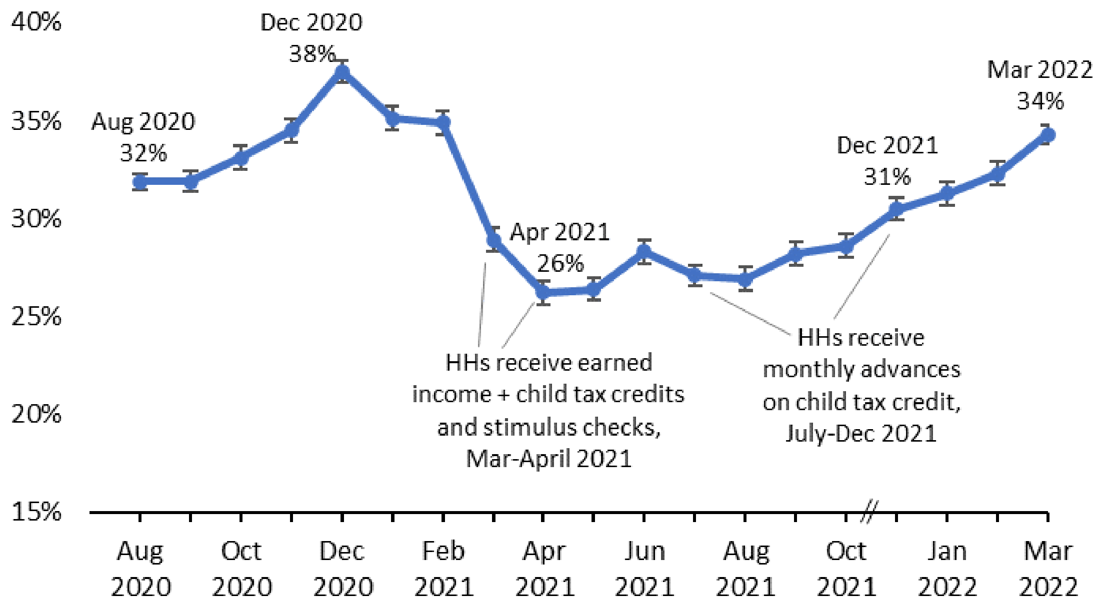
Child care and elder care remain significant impediments to women's ability to return to work. In March, nearly 1 million parents left a job, another 355,000 lost a job, and 1.1 million didn't look for a job because of child care disruptions. (Child Care Disruptions) And mothers of children under 6 have been most likely to consider leaving their job or cutting back on hours.[1] An estimated 2.4 million "excess" retirements occurred between the beginning of the pandemic and August 2021.[2] Many of these are women who may have retired early due to in-home elder care responsibilities or fear of Covid.[3,4]

Women are more likely to be affected by long Covid (which can include shortness of breath, fatigue, brain fog months after infection), and long Covid accounts for an estimated 1.6 million adults out of the workforce each month (Long Covid).[5,6]

With the end of monthly advances of the child tax credit and rising inflation, 34% of Americans had difficulty paying household expenses in March 2022.

Percent of adults having difficulty paying for usual household expenses

Adults in households where it has been somewhat or very difficult to pay for usual household expenses in the last 7 days



Source: Census Bureau's Household Pulse Survey.

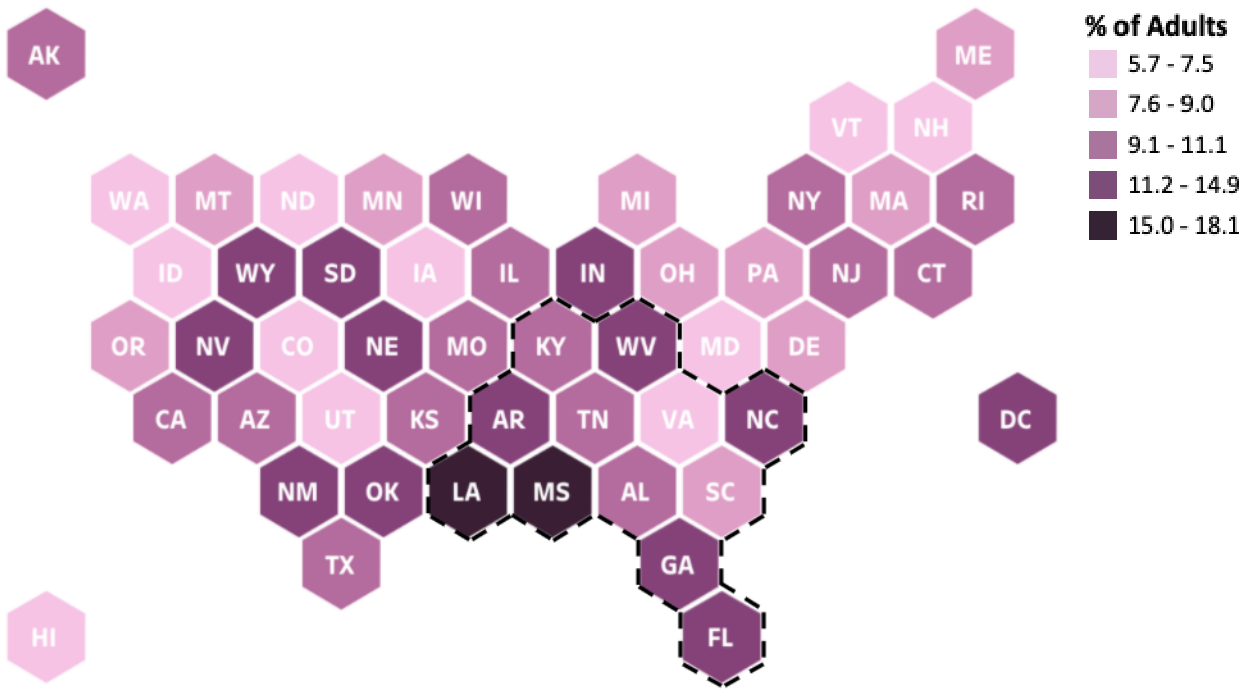
The end of stimulus and child tax credits combined with inflation meant 34% of Americans had difficulty paying household expenses in March 2022, up from 26% in April 2021. Fully 37% of Southerners reported difficulty paying usual household expenses in the last 7 days, compared to only 33% of non-Southerners. The three states with the highest percentage of adults reporting difficulty were in the deep South: 46% in Louisiana, 45% in Mississippi, and 42% in Arkansas.

Southern Economic Advancement Project's (SEAP) November 2021 survey of 3,500 Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) recipients in Alabama, Georgia, Mississippi, and New Orleans, Louisiana, revealed that 52% had difficulty paying utility bills and 34% experienced challenges accessing or maintaining housing during Covid. More than half of respondents (55%) considered affordable housing to be their community's greatest challenge, and 43% selected affordable utilities as the greatest challenge.[1] State and local officials can speed the delivery of Emergency Rental Assistance funds by reducing documentation burdens and they can dedicate flexible ARP funds to rent and utilities assistance and eviction diversion programs to help ease constituents' challenges making ends meet (Emergency Rental Assistance).

In the South, 12% of adults reported their households went hungry in March. Four Southern states — MS, LA, AR, and FL — reported the highest rates of hunger in the U.S., topping out at 18% in MS.

Food insecurity, Mar 2-14, 2022

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



Source: Census Bureau's Household Pulse Survey.

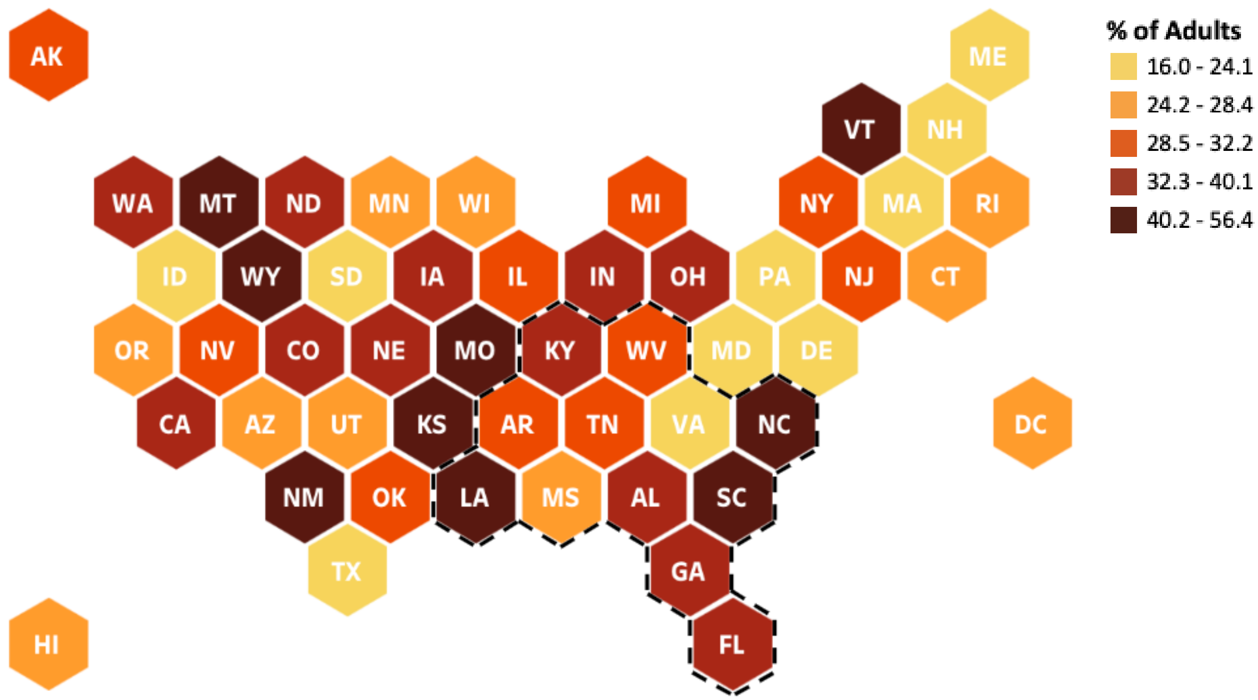
In March 2022, 1 in 10 adults reported their household didn't have enough to eat. Food insecurity was even more severe in MS, LA, AR, FL, and OK where 15% to 18% of adults reported not being able to put food on the table. As of February 2022, the cost of groceries had increased 8.6% compared to February 2021.[1] Meanwhile, several Southern states including AR, FL, MS, and TN have rejected and stopped distributing emergency Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) allotments. Food banks are experiencing increased demand due to inflation and the elimination of these SNAP benefits.[2,3,4,5] Yet many families cannot reach food banks because they lack access to vehicles.

Low-income residents of Alabama, Georgia, Mississippi, and New Orleans, Louisiana surveyed by Southern Economic Advancement Project (SEAP) in November 2021 ranked basic needs of affordable housing, utilities, and food as the top three priorities that leaders should focus Covid recovery money on in their communities.[6] State and local officials can dedicate flexible ARP funds to increase food access to marginalized communities. Meanwhile, food banks are appealing to their communities for greater donations.[7] Philanthropist MacKenzie Scott made no-strings-attached "mega gifts" to dozens of food banks across the country.[8]

56% of South Carolinians who are late on rent or mortgage payments expect to lose their home in the next two months.

Likelihood of eviction or foreclosure, Mar 2-14, 2022

Percent of adults living in households not current on rent or mortgage where eviction or foreclosure in the next two months is “very likely” or “somewhat likely”



Source: Census Bureau’s Household Pulse Survey.

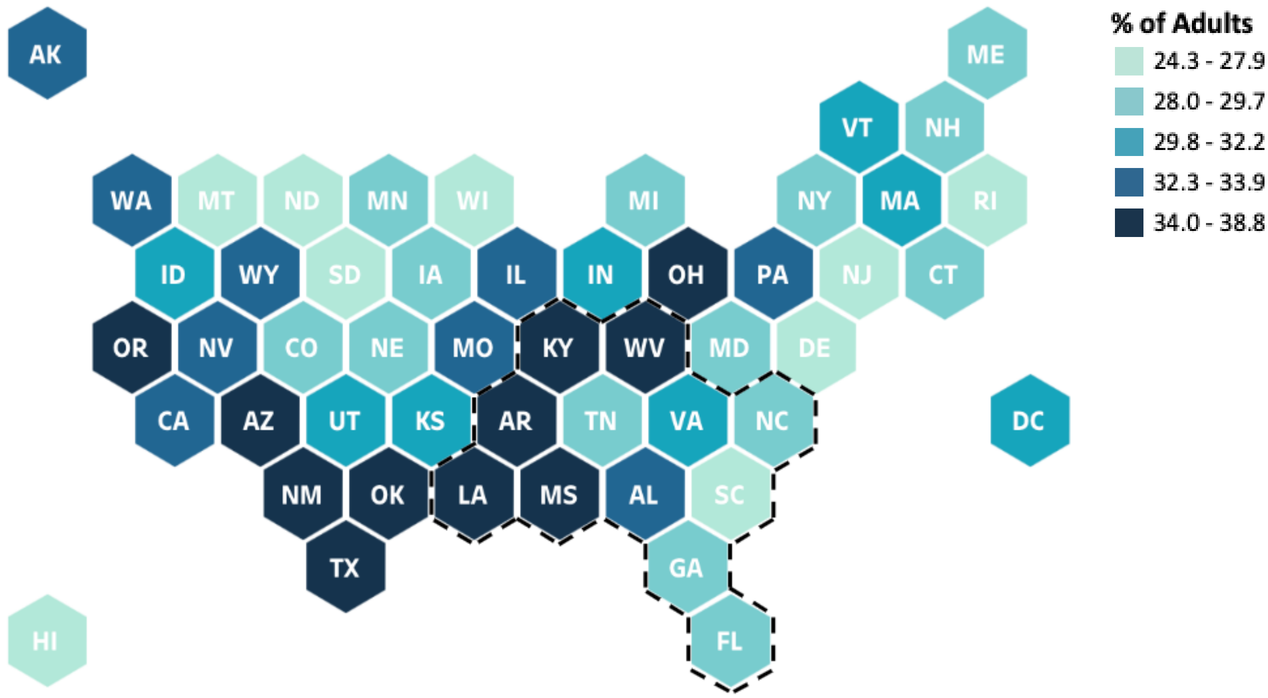
Before Covid, 1 in 4 renters spent more than half their household income on housing (Severe Housing Cost Burden). When Covid struck, lowered interest rates prompted investors to snatch up housing,pushing prices upward.[1] Increased housing prices combined with massive job losses prompted a federal eviction moratorium in March 2020.[2]

After the Supreme Court struck down the Covid eviction moratorium in August 2021, eviction filings increased but did not rebound to historical levels. Princeton eviction experts credit the mobilization of federal resources as well as the contributions of 2,100 law students who assisted courts with eviction diversion programs and helped families complete Emergency Rental Assistance applications.[3] Still, high housing prices continue to push renters toward eviction.[4] As recently as March 2022, 35% of Southerners (and 30% of non-Southerners) who are late on rent or mortgage payments were fearful of losing their homes. State and local officials that speed up the distribution of Emergency Rental Assistance funds can stabilize renters and landlords alike (Emergency Rental Assistance).

32% of adults nationwide report symptoms of anxiety or depression, up from 11% in 2019. Southern states have the largest share of adults reporting symptoms, at 39% in AR and 38% in OK, LA, and MS.

Symptoms of anxiety or depression, Mar 2-14, 2022

Percent of adults who experienced symptoms of anxiety or depression in the last two weeks



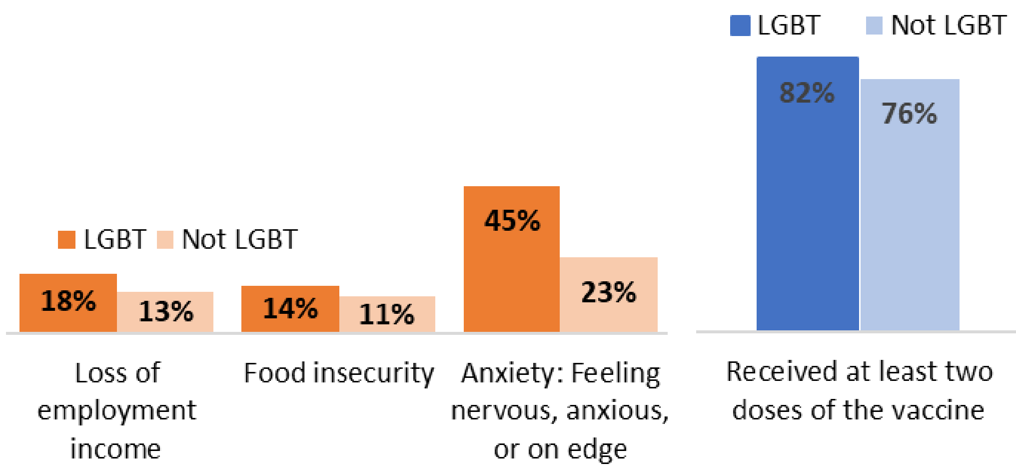
Source: CDC and Census Bureau's Household Pulse Survey. Notes: This indicator is based on self-report of the frequency of anxiety and depression symptoms, derived from responses to the first two questions of the eight-item Patient Health Questionnaire (PHQ-2) and the seven-item Generalized Anxiety Disorder (GAD-2) scale.

Uncertainty amplifies anxiety and stress, as do economic worries and social isolation.[1,2,3] When Covid struck, social isolation and uncertainty hit nearly every sector of society and economic woes deepened, particularly for low-wage workers. It is not surprising then that 32% of adults reported symptoms of anxiety or depressive disorder in March 2022, up from 11% in 2019.[4] In Arkansas, Oklahoma, Louisiana, and Mississippi, 38% to 39% of adults reported symptoms. Surveys of high school students reveal that more than ⅓ experienced anxiety, stress or depression during Covid.[4] The effects of this mental health crisis continue to become clear, with increasing incidence of drug overdose deaths, road rage incidents and other vehicular fatalities, domestic and child abuse, and violent crime[5,6,7,8,9] (Drug Overdose Deaths). With mental health providers in short supply, expansion of telehealth, school-based services, peer supports and other consumer-informed services will be critical to helping Americans make sense of the massive changes in our world and develop effective approaches for moving forward (Mental Health Providers).[10]

LGBT adults are more likely to experience lost income and anxiety than non-LGBT adults, and are more likely to be vaccinated.

Indicators of well-being for adult LGBT population, South

Mar 2 - Mar 14, 2022



Source: Census Bureau's Household Pulse Survey. Notes: Loss of employment income is % reporting a loss of employment income in the last 4 weeks for self or household member. Food insecurity is % of persons reporting "sometimes not enough to eat" or "often not enough to eat" in the last 7 days. Anxiety is % reporting frequency of symptoms is "more than half the days" or "nearly every day" in the last 2 weeks.

In the South, LGBT adults were more likely than non-LGBT adults to have recently lost employment income and experienced food insecurity. In addition, nearly twice as many LGBT adults experienced anxiety compared to non-LGBT adults. Many Southern states have advanced anti-gay legislation in recent months and a recent survey found these efforts have negatively impacted the mental health of LGBTQ youth.[1,2] The American Psychological Association specifically condemned Florida's "Don't Say Gay" bill stating that it stigmatizes and marginalizes many children, which can lead to depression, anxiety and even suicide.[3] In March, the U.S. Air Force announced it would provide mental health support as well as reassignment to other states for service members and their families affected by these laws.[4]

Notably, the recent Census Pulse Survey found that, in the South, LGBT adults were vaccinated at a higher rate than non-LGBT adults. Pre-pandemic research shows that LGBTQ people were more likely than non-LGBTQ people to delay seeking medical care because of out-of-pocket costs.[5] Several factors may have influenced LGBT individuals' greater uptake of the Covid vaccine, including previous experience organizing community care as a response to the HIV/AIDS epidemic,[6] as well as government efforts to make Covid vaccination free and accessible.

LGBTQIA+ people remain unseen in many official statistics but the Census Bureau, through its Household Pulse Survey, is providing needed visibility on the experience of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people in America during the pandemic.

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Foreword

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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. For decades, the American South has lagged on nearly every indicator of prosperity and equity, and similar patterns are emerging with the current crisis. Pandemic to Prosperity: South offers an 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.**

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 the progress made, or the lack thereof, over time.

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 sixth edition of *Pandemic to Prosperity: South*.

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

Allison Plyer is the Chief Demographer for The Data Center of Southeast Louisiana and a co-author of *The New Orleans Prosperity Index* which examines the extent to which economic outcomes have improved for black New Orleanians since the end of the Civil Rights era. She is also author of *The New Orleans Index* series, developed in collaboration with Brookings to analyze the state of the recovery post-Katrina and later to track the region's progress toward prosperity. She served as an editor for the Brookings Institution Press volume entitled *Resilience and Opportunity: Lessons from the U.S. Gulf Coast after Katrina and Rita*. Allison is an international expert in post–Katrina demographics and disaster recovery trends and frequently provides commentary on recovery and development to media such as NPR, the Associated Press, the New York Times, and USA Today. Allison received her Doctorate in Science from Tulane University and has an MBA from the Kellogg Graduate School of Management at Northwestern University.

Alysha Rashid is a policy and data consultant with a focus on building a more equitable society. She recently received her MPP with a certificate in Data Analytics from the University of Chicago. Prior to graduate school, Alysha's focus was on increasing college access and success for under-represented populations as the Director of Program and Operations for America Achieves and Bloomberg Philanthropies' CollegePoint initiative. In that capacity, she oversaw day-to-day programming and led the data operations, working closely with the research and evaluation team. She started her career as a college admissions counselor and subsequently developed a strong interest in supporting underrepresented students and populations. Alysha also currently leads an Anti-Racism Discussion Series that she co-developed for Outer Coast, a postsecondary institution in Sitka, Alaska.

Elaine Ortiz is the Lead Data Analyst for Pandemic to Prosperity. Elaine is an expert in economic and demographic data for applied research to support informed decision-making and more resilient communities. She has nearly 20 years experience in research design, implementation, data analysis, statistical methods, and writing on complex and technical topics for a lay audience. Elaine's work in data dissemination is grounded in the importance of user-centered design and strategic communications for reaching targeted audiences. She is an expert in federal statistics (e.g. ACS, Census) and private sources of data (e.g. EMSI, Moody's). Elaine has an MS in urban and regional planning from University of Iowa and a BA in economics from Hanover College.

Taylor Savell is a Policy and Research Analyst at the National Conference on Citizenship, where she focuses on 2020 Census issues such as data quality, and the use of census data for redistricting and federal funding. Prior to NCoC, Taylor worked at the Beeck Center for Social Impact and Innovation and co-authored the website USApportionment.org, which was the go-to resource for census watchers and journalists in the lead up to the release of the 2020 Census data for congressional apportionment. Taylor is a graduate of the Walsh School of Foreign Service at Georgetown University where she received her BS in International Politics.

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For More Information

Allison Plyer, Chief Demographer, The Data Center, allisonp@datacenterresearch.org

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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