

October 20, 2022



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Foreword

A civic ecosystem has been burgeoning for decades in the South and it offers a path to turn the tragedy of the pandemic into an opportunity to build prosperity and progress for all. Data and civic engagement will be critical for this to occur. 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 and Bipartisan Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act can use these findings to target disparities that ultimately undermine community resilience.

Much of the world is emerging from the worst of the Covid crisis.¹ The U.S. has reached a new record number of jobs and unemployment rates are low. But several non-economic measures reflect that hardships in the U.S. have been significantly more severe than in other wealthy nations. Meanwhile, inflation is high in nearly every country and economists are predicting much of the world may fall into recession in the next year or so.^{2,3,4} As we brace for the challenges ahead, our review of 25 indicators will highlight areas of opportunity, as well as areas of substantial suffering across the U.S., including:

Covid Though Covid death rates are well below the 2020 and 2021 peaks, roughly 400 people died of Covid each day in September — about 100 times more than flu-related deaths.

Comparing influenza's deadliest week in January 2018 to COVID's deadliest week in January 2021, COVID deaths have been 16-fold greater than flu deaths. In addition, an estimated 4 million Americans can't work because of Long Covid, which is more prevalent in the South.

Economy Jobs reached a new record of 153 million in September but not all adults have been able to work and the employment rate remains about 1 percentage point below the pre-pandemic February 2020 level. In this tight labor market, millions of workers have quit jobs in search of better wages and working conditions. Average hourly wages have increased by 5% but that is not enough to keep up with inflation (8.2%). At the same time, corporate profits ballooned from a record-high of \$2.7 Trillion in Q3 2020 to \$3.5 Trillion in Q2 2022, suggesting large companies could pay higher wages without raising prices which would contribute to inflation.

Health and mental health U.S. life expectancy declined the last two years, from 78.8 years in 2019 to 77.0 in 2020 to 76.1 in 2021. In contrast, peer nations experienced smaller decreases from 2019 to 2020 and have seen trends reverse with increases in life expectancy between 2020 and 2021. Health care is in short supply with 7 Southern states refusing Medicaid expansion which has contributed to hospital closures across the rural South. And 8 of the 10 states with the highest shares of residents carrying medical debt are in the South. U.S. maternal mortality rates are twice that of other developed countries and are highest in Southern states. U.S. anxiety rates have tripled since the pandemic hit and nearly half of all adults reported symptoms of anxiety or depression in AL, AR, MS, and LA in September. The majority of suicides involve a gun, with U.S. gun suicide rates at 5.7 per 100,000 in 2019, which was nearly 3 times higher than any other wealthy nation.

Climate and infrastructure In 2021, 92% of Southerners experienced at least 5 extreme heat days: when the heat index exceeded 100°F. This level of heat is dangerous, making air conditioning a literally life-saving measure. But lower-income Southerners are less likely to have air conditioning and many have poor home insulation, contributing further to high utility bills. Drinking water systems in Louisiana, Mississippi, and West Virginia, which are among the weakest in the nation, struggle to meet demand for potable water — as exemplified by the recent water crisis in Jackson, MS.⁵

Housing The United States has been experiencing a severe housing shortage since the Great Recession when new home construction dramatically declined — driving up home prices over the decade without commensurate increases in income. More than 1 in 4 Southern renters spends the majority of their income on housing, and increasingly Americans point to housing as their community's greatest challenge. In May 2022, the median monthly rent in the U.S.

exceeded \$2,000 for the first time. Despite that, only 68% of Emergency Rental Assistance funds have been distributed across the South.

Child care and well-being Women’s employment rates remain 1.2 percentage points below pre-pandemic levels in part due to child care being in short supply. Approximately 2 million parents of young children cut their work hours and 1 million couldn’t look for work due to lack of child care. The U.S. government invests significantly less in child care than other wealthy nations: only \$500 per child 0-2 years old compared to an average of \$14,000 annually. Child poverty — considered the greatest threat to children’s healthy brain development — has spiked again to 17% following the expiration of monthly Child Tax Credits.

Misinformation and democracy Misinformation about vaccines costs lives and misinformation about the 2020 election may cost our democracy. Despite no evidence of widespread voter fraud, more than 300 candidates running for election this November deny the results of the 2020 election, including the majority of Southern candidates for the U.S. House of Representatives. Some have said they will refuse the results of upcoming elections unless they win.^{6,7} More than half of all U.S. counties have no access to trusted local newspapers, including 75% of Southern counties, and nearly 1 in 10 Southerners lack broadband internet, leaving them reliant on polarized national media or misinformation-rich social media for their news.^{8,9,10}

The challenges are many, but state and local leaders have the tools and access to some of the funding they need to tackle these issues, if they choose to use them. Expediting the distribution of Emergency Rental Assistance funding and accepting Medicaid expansion could reduce human suffering and save lives. State and local governments can utilize the billions of dollars from the American Rescue Plan, Bipartisan Infrastructure Law, and Inflation Reduction Act to invest in community needs such as broadband access, affordable housing, climate action, and childcare. As threats to our democracy mount, improving and expanding civic engagement and voting enfranchisement will be essential for ensuring elected officials understand the hardships Americans are experiencing and execute policies to address them.



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ABOUT, AUTHORS, AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

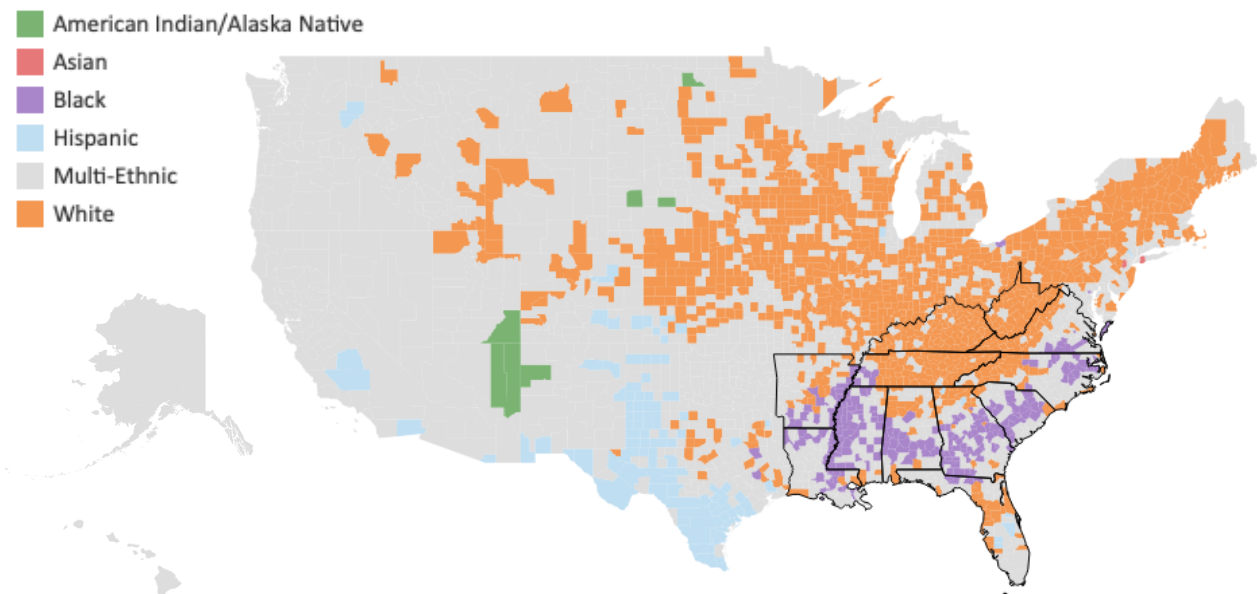
Defining the South

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.

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, which stretches from Virginia to Louisiana, has a unique demographic makeup — vestiges of a violent history of enslaving millions on cotton and tobacco plantations located 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.

Pandemic

Lives and Livelihoods

To recover from any disaster, an assessment of damages is essential. In the case of Covid, the damage is not related to a single event. Instead, the pandemic has exacerbated multidimensional health and economic trends. 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, including decreases in life expectancy. It also tracks key dynamics in the national economy.

In later sections of this report, these indicators serve as a backdrop for a unique analysis of the complex interactions between the pandemic, the nation's civic health, and Americans' well being, with deeper dives into mental health, housing insecurity, pregnancy-related deaths, and more.

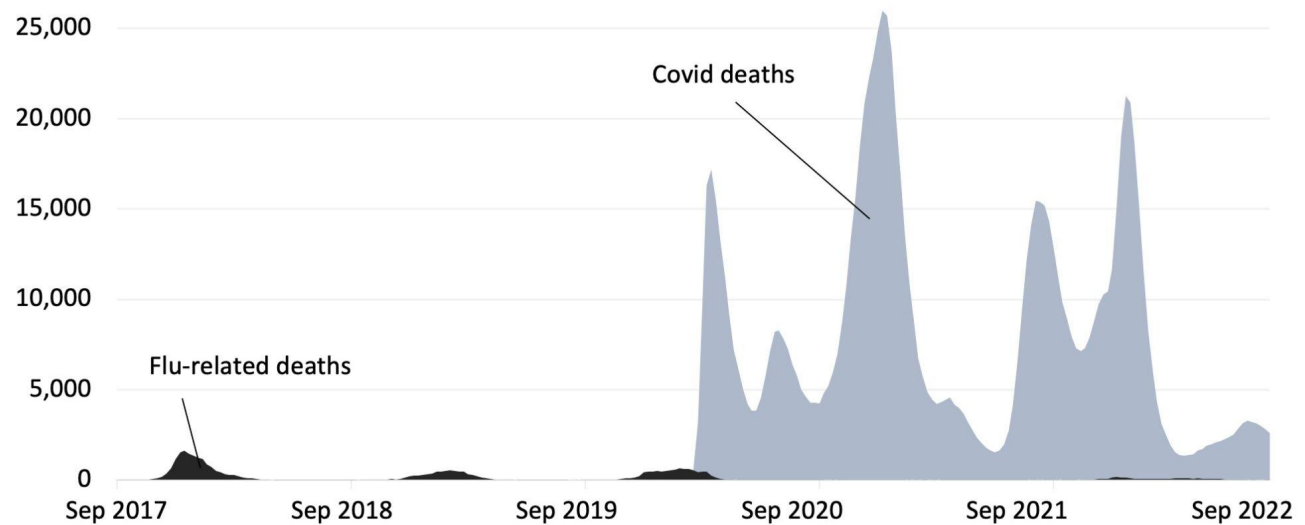
Indicators in this section

- Covid and flu deaths, by week
- Life expectancy, by state
- Long Covid estimates, by state
- Firearm suicide rates, by state
- Total jobs, by month
- Quits rate, by industry
- Extreme heat days, by county

Though Covid infections are trending downwards, Covid deaths remain high compared to flu-related deaths.

Weekly surveillance data on influenza deaths and Covid deaths

For weeks ending Oct 7, 2017- Sep 3, 2022



Source: [CDC](#). Notes: This weekly surveillance data is based on raw counts of influenza and Covid deaths collected from death certificate data from state vital statistics offices.

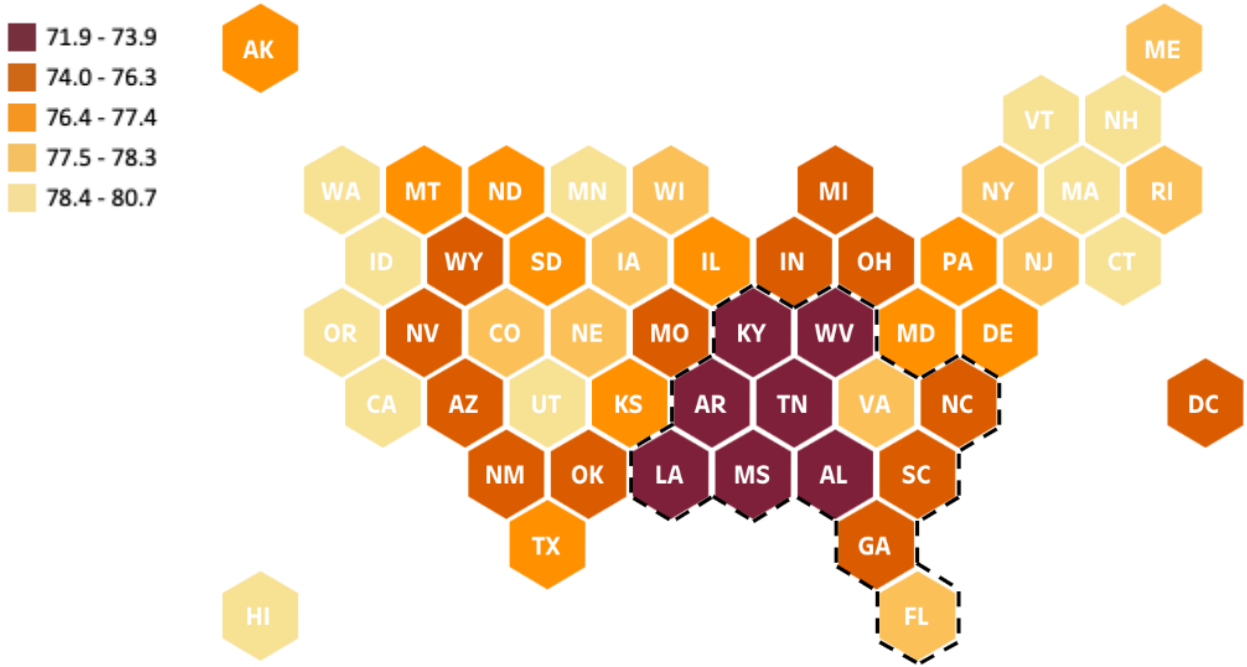
As the nation enters its third pandemic winter, Americans' general attitude towards the pandemic has shifted, with many returning to pre-pandemic norms and utilizing fewer safety precautions like social distancing and masking.¹ Though Covid case counts are trending downwards — with the caveat that many people using at-home tests are not reporting their results — Covid deaths were still high at roughly 400 daily in August and September 2022.^{2,3} In contrast, flu-related deaths averaged about 3 deaths per day in August 2022.⁴ At their peak, influenza deaths reached 232 per day (week 3 of 2018) while Covid deaths reached 3,710 per day (week 2 of 2021) — a 16-fold difference.^{5,6}

Recent reports of an increase in Covid infections in Europe, coupled with one of the worst flu seasons in Australia, lead experts to believe that a rise in either or both of these viruses is a near certainty for the U.S.^{7,8} Medical professionals continue to urge Americans to get both the flu and Covid vaccine, and to stay up to date with booster shots. The newest booster shot, which offers protection against the original Covid strain and the Omicron variant, became available in September 2022.⁹ A recent study by the Commonwealth Fund predicts that if 80% of the eligible U.S. population receives their booster shot by the end of the year, about 90,000 lives could be saved, 936,000 hospitalizations could be prevented, and \$56 million in direct medical costs could be averted.¹⁰

To date, only 68% of the nation is fully vaccinated, and just 38% have received their second booster.¹¹ In states like Arkansas, where the vaccination rate is only 58%, vaccine hesitancy and “diminished perceived risks” are main deterrents but experts continue to share information and inform their communities of the protection and minimized risk offered through vaccination.^{12,13}

Mississippians have the shortest life expectancy among all Americans, at 71.9 years. In comparison, Hawaiians have the longest, at 80.7 years.

Life expectancy at birth
2020



Source: [CDC](#). Notes: Life expectancy at birth is defined as how long, on average, a newborn can expect to live, if current death rates do not change. However, the actual age-specific death rate of any particular birth cohort cannot be known in advance.

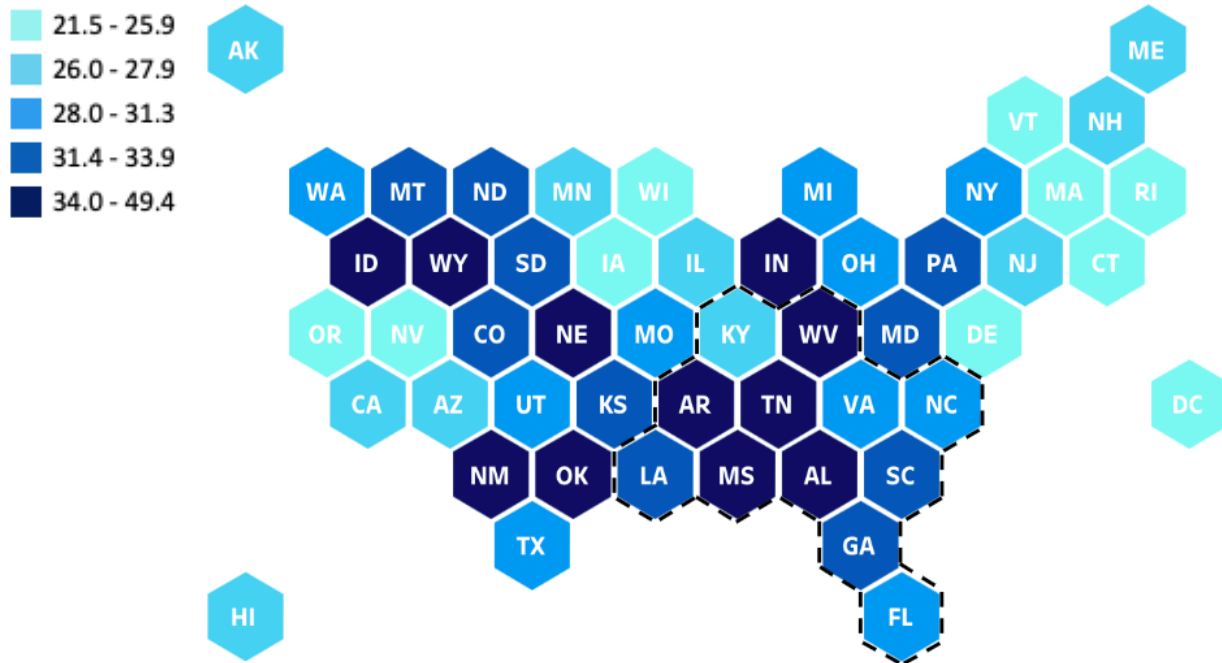
Life expectancy in 2020 declined by 1.8 years – from 78.8 years in 2019 to 77.0 in 2020.¹ This is the largest single-year drop in the U.S. since 1947. Mississippians have the shortest life expectancy among all Americans, at 71.9 years, as of 2020. After Mississippi, 6 more Southern states have the next shortest life expectancy (all below 74 years): WV, LA, AL, KY, AR, and TN. These same 7 Southern states also had the shortest life expectancy in 2019, and then had another 2-3 years knocked off life expectancy when the pandemic hit in 2020. In comparison, Hawaiians have the longest life expectancy at 80.7 years as of 2020, an insignificant change from 80.9 years in 2019.

While 9 of the 10 leading causes of death in 2019 remained the same in 2020, newly added Covid became the third highest cause of death in 2020, surpassed only by heart disease and cancer. Provisional 2021 data shows that life expectancy in the U.S. dropped for a second year in a row — losing 25 years of progress and reaching its lowest level (76.1) since 1996.² In comparison, studies show that peer nations had modest increases in life expectancy between 2020-2021.³

Among Southerners who previously had Covid, 1 in 3 currently suffer from Long Covid symptoms. In WV, it's 1 in 2.

Long Covid estimates, Sep 14-26, 2022

Percent of adults who previously had Covid, with symptoms lasting 3 months or longer



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

Among those who previously had Covid, 32% of Southerners (and 29% of non-Southerners) are currently experiencing prolonged symptoms, known as Long Covid.¹ Studies show that Long Covid largely affects immune and circulatory systems, as well as the brain and lungs.^{2,3,4,5} Nearly half (49%) of Covid survivors in West Virginia currently report Long Covid symptoms, which is the highest rate in the nation.

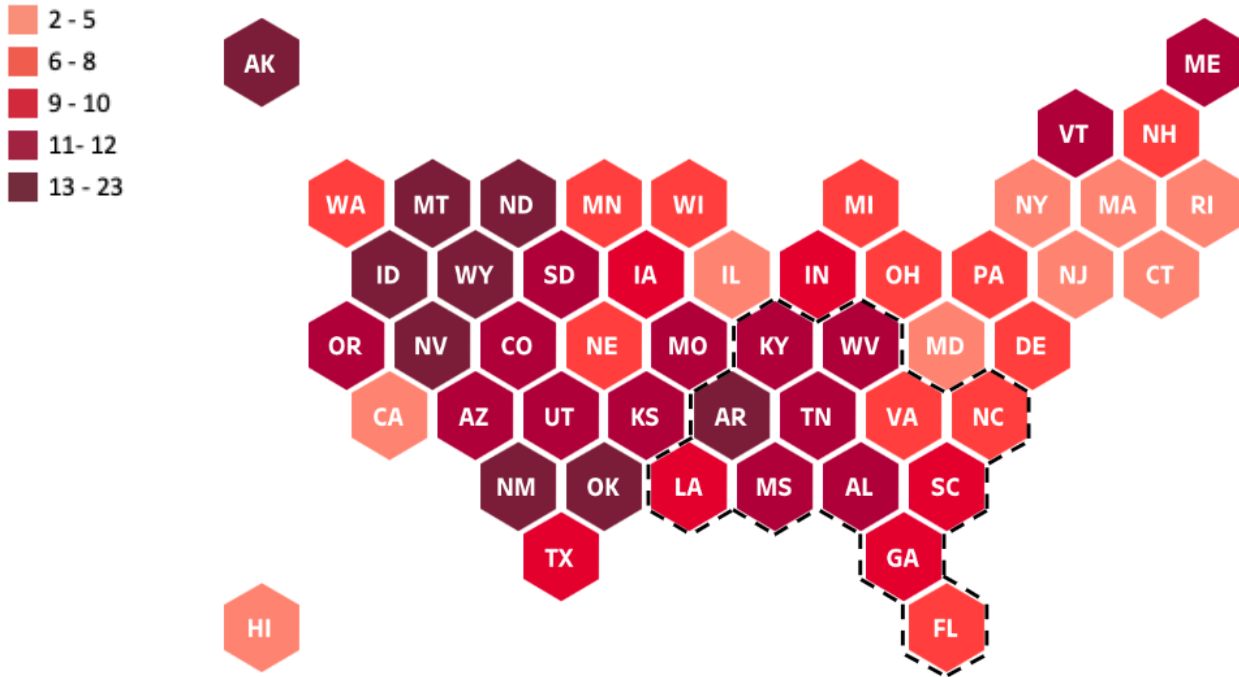
A large-scale Scottish study reported that symptomatic Covid patients were more likely to report Long Covid symptoms, most of which impaired daily activities.⁶ A separate study showed evidence of neurological changes in Long Covid patients, hypothesizing that those who are predisposed to certain neurological disorders (such as seizures, migraines, and Alzheimers) could be at an even higher risk of developing them.⁷

These findings could worsen already overwhelmed disability and health care services and a recovering labor force. A Brookings Institute study estimates that up to 4 million people are out of the workforce due to Long Covid, costing as much as \$235 billion in annual wage losses.⁸ Long Covid patients who reduced their work hours struggle with disability services that are unable to keep up with rapidly changing diagnoses. Stronger policies that focus on prevention and treatment, along with improved employer accommodations can help mitigate an impending crisis.

In 2021, there were 10 firearm suicides per 100,000 in the South, compared to 7 in the rest of the U.S.

Firearm suicide rates by state, 2021

Age-adjusted rates per 100,000 pop



Source: [CDC/ Wonder mortality data](#). Note: 2021 data is provisional.

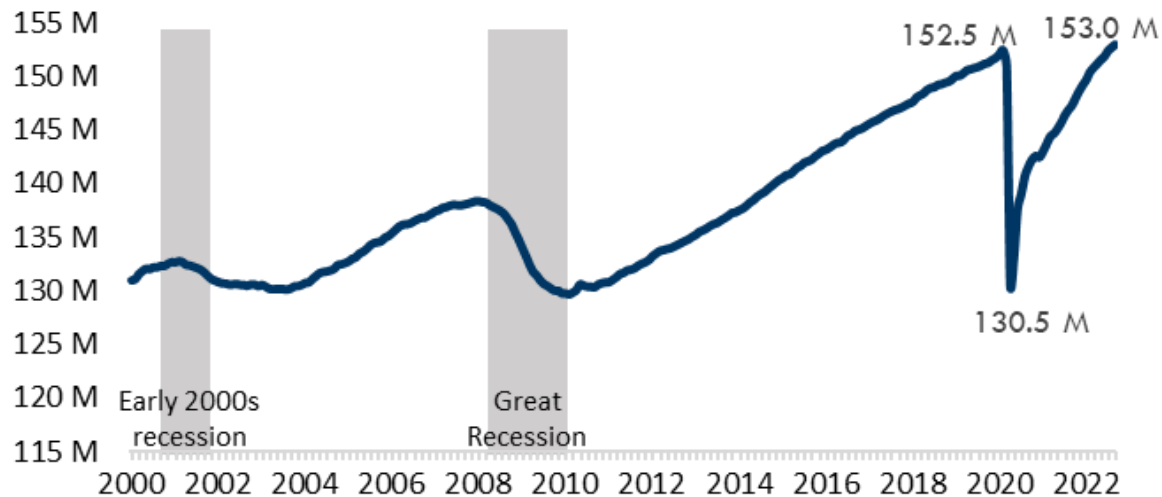
Suicides make up the majority of gun deaths each year (and the majority of suicides in the U.S. involve a gun.¹) but receive little news coverage. Firearm suicides accounted for 26,322 deaths in 2021 compared to 20,966 firearm homicides and 1,544 other firearm deaths. The number of firearm suicides increased from 23,941 in 2019 to 24,292 in 2020, and then to 26,322 based on 2021 provisional data.

An international comparison in 2019 found that the U.S. gun suicide rate of 5.7 per 100,000 was almost 3 times higher than any other wealthy nation. At 2.0, Finland had a firearm suicide rate that was a distant second to the U.S. among wealthy nations.² Even in Massachusetts which has the lowest gun suicide rate of any state at 1.8 in 2021, gun suicides are higher than almost all wealthy countries. Firearm suicide rates are highest in rural Western states followed by Southern states.

In September, U.S. jobs reached a record 153 million. Unlike the Great Recession, jobs have recovered quickly since the pandemic struck.

Total jobs by month, U.S.

Jan 2000 - Sep 2022



Source: [Bureau of Labor Statistics](#). Note: Seasonally adjusted. Data for Aug 2022 and Sep 2022 are preliminary.

While almost 22 million jobs were lost when Covid hit, they have now, some two years later, been fully recouped. In contrast, the Great Recession caused a loss of more than 8 million jobs, which took more than four years to recoup. The nation has reached a record 153 million jobs (500,000 more than the pre-pandemic February 2020 level) and an unemployment rate of 3.5% (which is equal to the pre-pandemic February 2020 level).^{1,2}

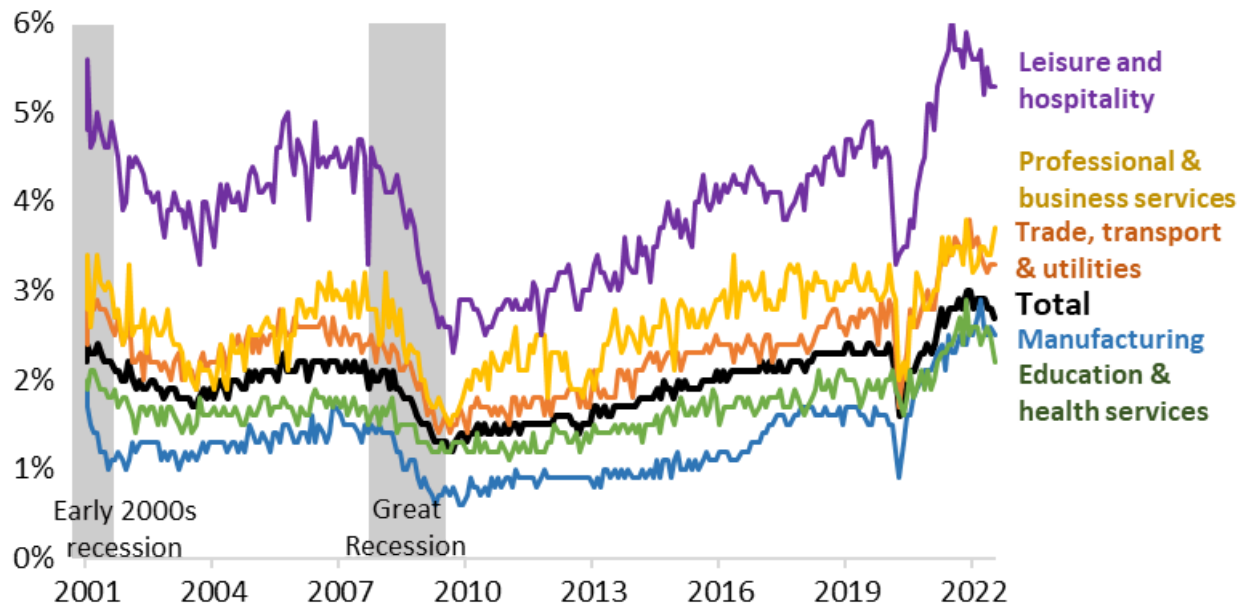
Together the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law and the Inflation Reduction Act are predicted to create over 2 million new jobs each year for 10 years.^{3,4} Importantly, these new jobs will encompass a large variety of occupations.⁵ Helping workers build the skills necessary to fill these jobs, and to transition from old industries to new sustainable industries will require substantial retooling of current workforce development systems, ramping up paid apprenticeships, and a host of new approaches to rapidly onboard new workers.^{6,7}

In addition, the labor force may need to grow to accommodate this increased job creation. Lack of child care currently hampers many parents of young children with some 2 million cutting work hours and another million unable to look for work in July/August ([Child Care Disruptions](#)). Moreover, experts estimate that as many as 4 million workers are sidelined each month because of Long Covid symptoms ([Long Covid Estimates](#)).⁸ Ensuring that Americans are healthy and have the skills and family care they need to take advantage of these jobs will be important for ensuring a sufficient supply of workers.

In July, quits remained higher than pre-pandemic, as workers pursued better wages and working conditions in a strong job market.

Quits rate by industry

Dec 2000 - July 2022



Source: [Bureau of Labor Statistics](https://www.bls.gov). 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. July 2022 data is preliminary.

Enabled by a strong job recovery, more than 4 million workers quit jobs in July 2022 in pursuit of new jobs with better wages and working conditions. The job quits rate was highest in leisure and hospitality (5.3% in July) and in retail (3.7% in July) where wages are typically low and job growth has been particularly strong after major job losses in 2020.¹

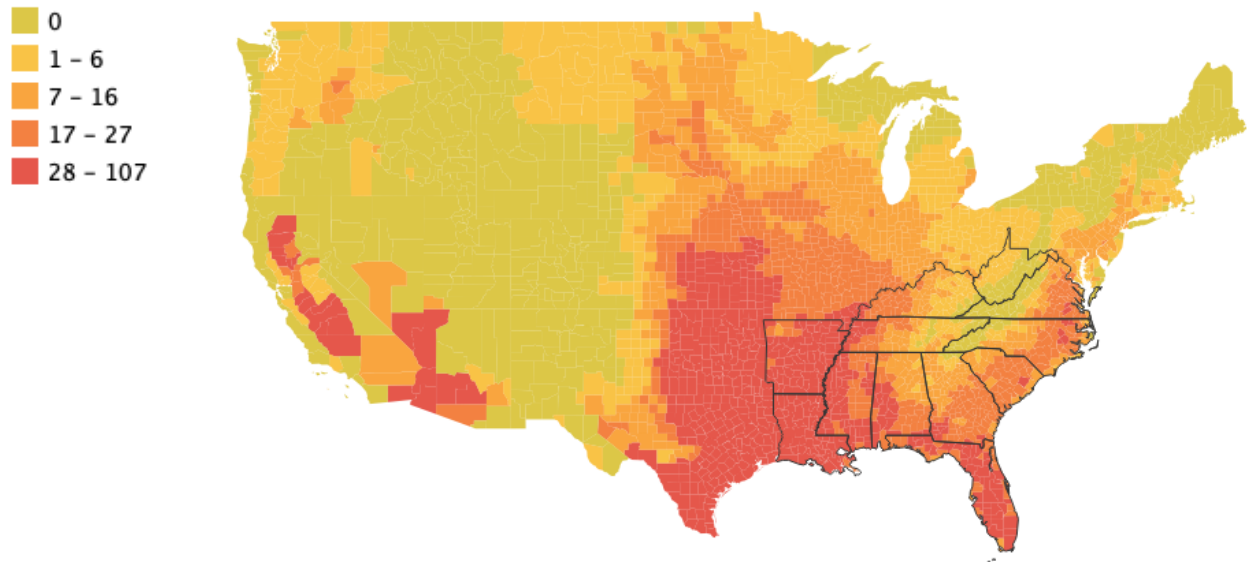
Average hourly earnings have nudged upward from \$30.92 in September 2021 to \$32.46 in September 2022.² But corporate profits have surged — growing from a then record-high of \$2.7 Trillion in Q3 2020 to \$3.2 Trillion in Q3 2021 to \$3.5 Trillion in Q2 2022 — suggesting that corporations have capacity to pay higher wages without contributing to inflation.^{3,4}

Buoyed by significant churn in the labor market, workers are increasingly demanding higher wages and better working conditions. A groundswell of grassroots activism has led to increased worker organizing across Starbucks and Apple stores and Amazon warehouses.^{5,6,7} In addition to higher wages, greater union membership could contribute to more stable employment and reduced churn in the labor market over time.

In 2021, 92% of Southerners experienced at least 5 extreme heat days, and 64% experienced 15+ extreme heat days.

Number of extreme heat days (100°F Heat Index)

May - September 2021



Source: [CDC/ NASA](#). Notes: Data not available for Hawaii or Alaska.

Hot days that are more humid actually feel hotter. The National Weather Service regularly reports the “heat index” – which is the temperature that the human body experiences on hot and humid days. A heat index of 100°F is considered an extreme heat day. Older adults, young children, and pregnant women can experience damage to vital organs and even die from extreme heat.¹

Southerners are more likely to experience extreme heat days. In 2021, 92% of Southerners (versus 61% of non-Southerners) were exposed to 5+ days of extreme heat, and 64% of Southerners (versus 28% of non-Southerners) were exposed to 15+ days of extreme heat. In Arkansas, Florida, Louisiana, and Mississippi, 99-100% of the population experienced 15+ days with heat indexes of 100°F.

Air conditioning is critical for keeping vulnerable people safe during extreme heat days. But lower-income households and renters are less likely to have air conditioning, even in the South where air conditioning is more widely available.² Families with lower incomes also tend to live in older buildings with poor insulation leading to higher utility bills. The Inflation Reduction Act includes substantial funding that can be used for home weatherization, but only via tax credits for homeowners. Ensuring renters have homes that protect them from extreme heat and have affordable utility bills will be an important focus for communities and policymakers.³

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 continue to recover 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 sex.

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 also include measures of the distribution of rental aid and an assessment of the quality of drinking water infrastructure. This section ends with indicators on voting access, and the number of current candidates who deny the validity of the 2020 election.

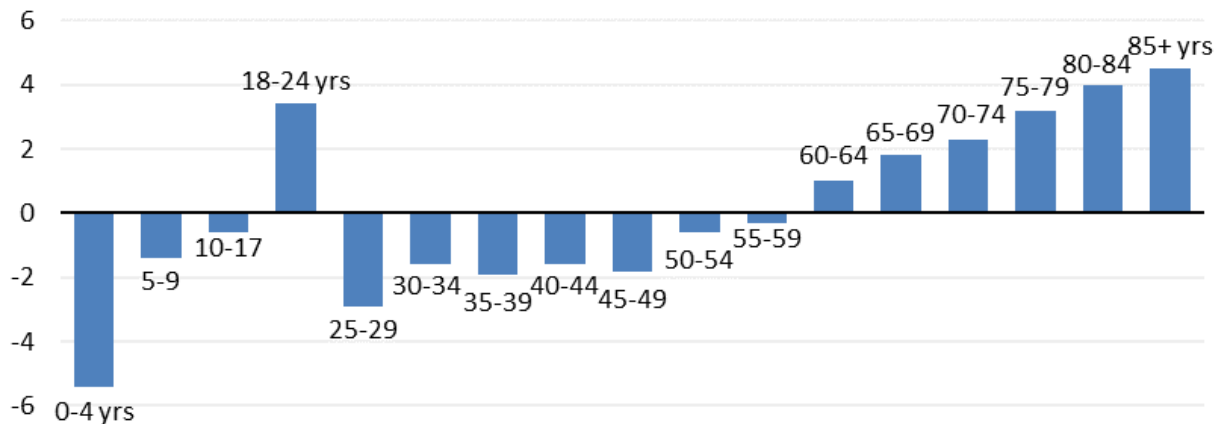
Indicators in this section

- 2020 Census net coverage error, by age
- Emergency Rental Assistance distribution, by state
- Drinking water infrastructure, by state
- Voting access, by state
- 2020 election deniers among U.S. House of Representative candidates

The 2020 Census undercounted children (ages 0-17) but the largest undercount was young children. The 2020 Census missed one in 20 children ages 0-4.

Net coverage error by age groups, U.S.

Percent of under- and overcounts, 2020 Census



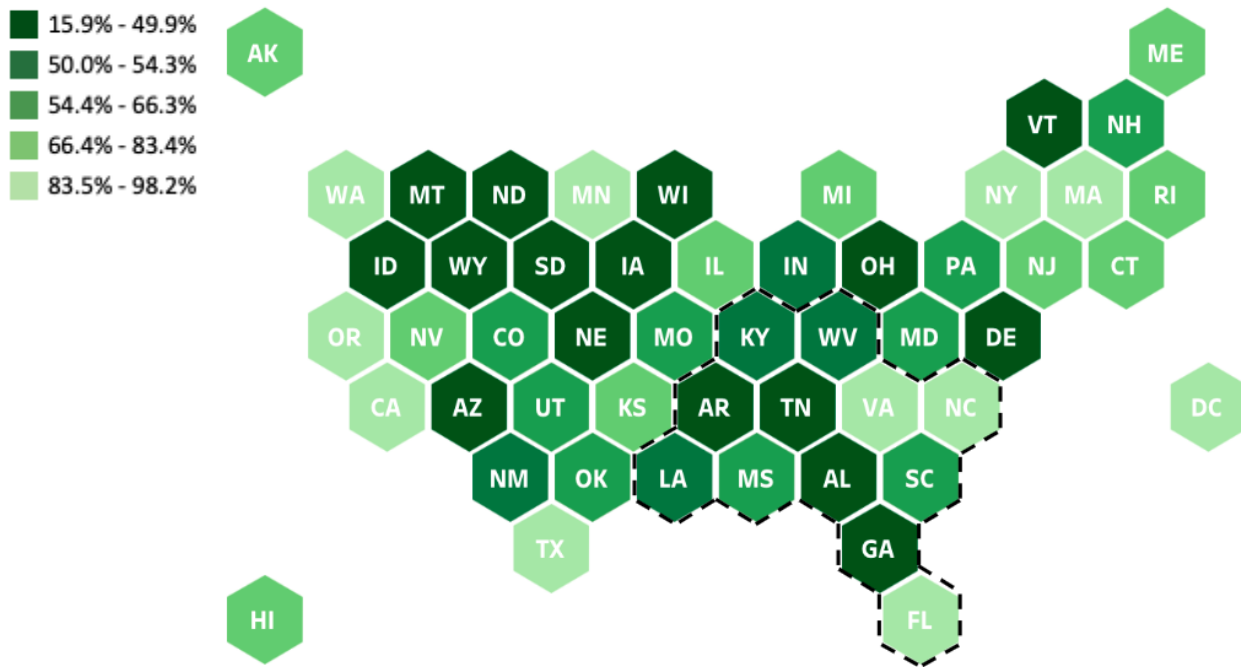
Source: [Census Bureau: 2020 Demographic Analysis](#). Notes: “Middle series” estimates of net coverage error.

For many decades, the U.S. Census has undercounted children. The 2020 undercount of young children 0-4 years old was larger than any Census since 1970.¹ These undercounts reduce both political representation and funding for children nationwide. The reduction in funding is particularly concerning as census numbers serve as the base for updated annual estimates. These annual population estimates in turn determine the federal resources that will be provided for such areas as food, housing, education, and medical programs for each year until 2030. At least \$1.5 trillion in federal funding is distributed each year based on these annual estimates.²

Efforts to mitigate these undercounts in the annual population estimates are under way at the Census Bureau. The Bureau adjusted the 2020 data (that serves as a base for the subsequent annual estimates) by incorporating counts of children based on birth certificates – thus mitigating the undercount of children at the national level. Next the Bureau will need to research methodologies for distributing the estimates of children accurately geographically. The Bureau has established the Base Evaluation and Research Team to determine how they can mitigate undercounts in the 2020 data used as the “base” for the annual population estimates.³ The Census Scientific Advisory Committee recommended that the Bureau increase resources to this effort to support a continuous year-round improvement effort throughout the decade.⁴

68% of Emergency Rental Assistance funds have been distributed to renters across the South, compared to 75% in non-Southern states.

Percent of Emergency Rental Assistance funds distributed
Jan 1, 2021 - Jun 30, 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. "Percent distributed" is calculated as the sum of assistance to households divided by 90% of the ERA1 and ERA2 allocation amount.

Though the economy now offers more jobs than before Covid, the median monthly rent in the U.S. exceeded \$2,000 for the first time in May 2022.¹ Workers would need a salary of \$80,000 annually to afford \$2,000 per month in rent.²

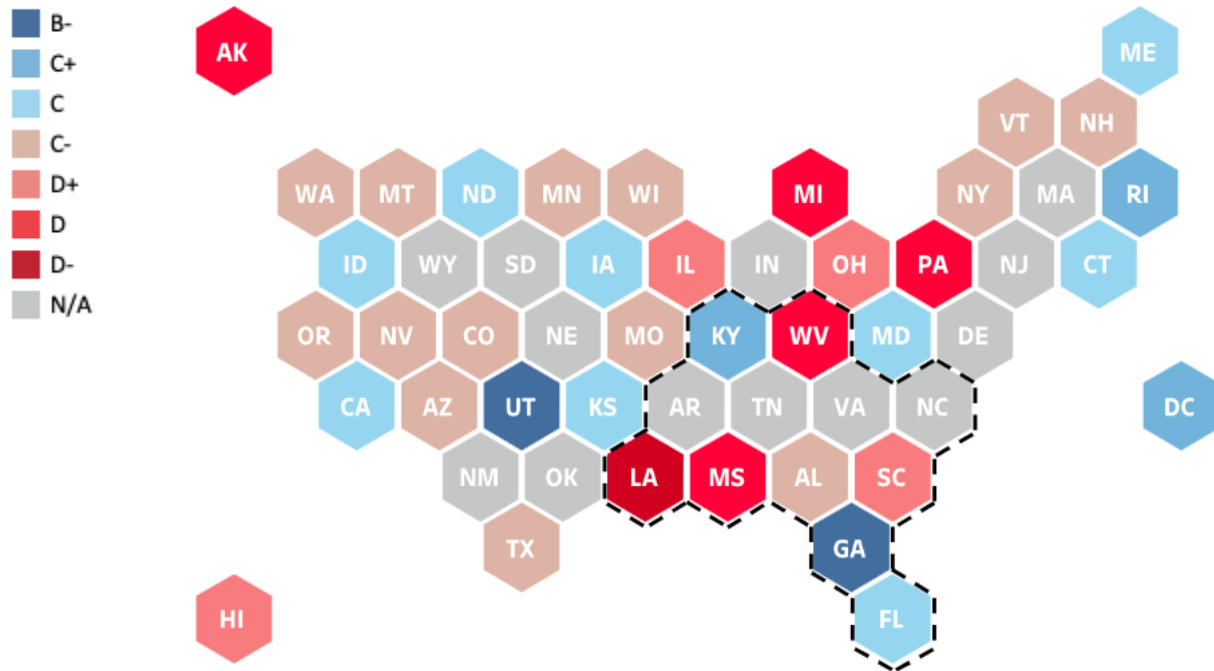
The Covid recovery bills included a combined \$45 billion in Emergency Rental Assistance (ERA) funds.³ Many Southern states have been slow to distribute these funds, including Alabama and Tennessee where only 41% of ERA funds have been spent, Arkansas where only 43% has been spent, and Georgia where only 46% has been spent. The Governor of Arkansas actually declined some of the ERA funds available to Arkansas, claiming that the economy was strong enough such that renters didn't need assistance, despite evidence that Arkansas eviction rates in 2022 are higher than before the pandemic.⁴

An October 2021 Pew Research Center survey found that nearly half of all Americans feel a lack of affordable housing is a major problem in their community.⁵ Respondents to a November 2021 survey of Alabama, Georgia, Mississippi, and New Orleans, Louisiana by the Southern Economic Advancement Project said affordable housing was their community's greatest challenge.⁶

Drinking water systems in Louisiana, Mississippi, and West Virginia are some of the oldest and most underfunded in the nation.

Drinking water infrastructure grades

Report Card for America's Infrastructure



Source: [American Society of Civil Engineers](#). Notes: State infrastructure grades based on state reports in varying years between 2017 and 2022. N/A: Report cards not yet available for 13 states.

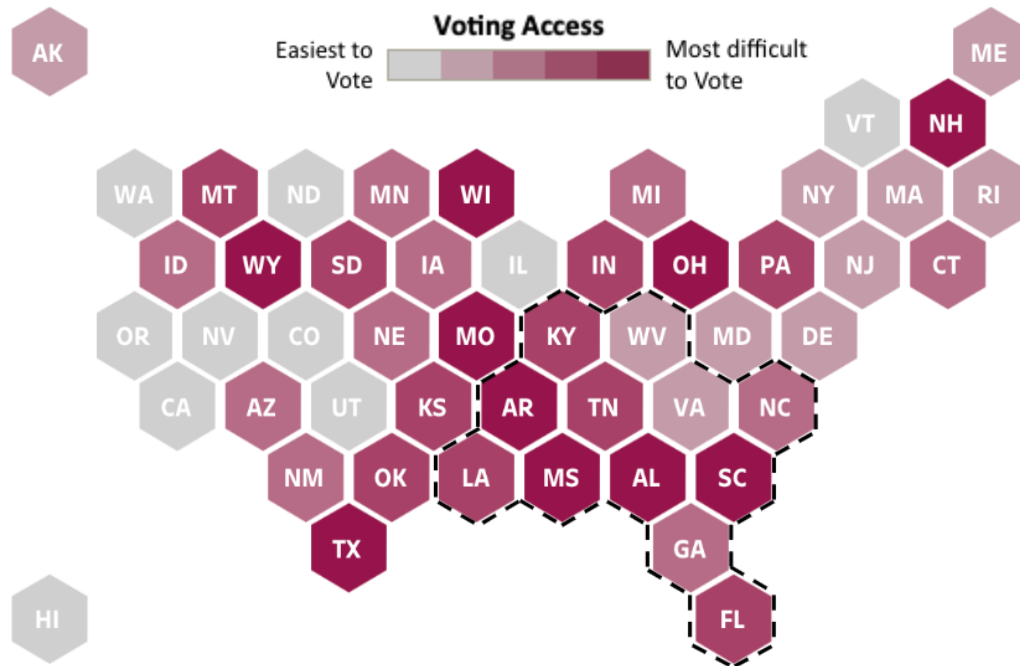
The water crisis in Jackson, MS has brought much needed attention to the public health implications of our aging water infrastructure.¹ As early as 1988, the National Council on Public Works Improvements concluded that the nation's infrastructure was barely adequate for needs of the day, and would not be sufficient for future population and job growth.² More recent state-by-state report cards gave Mississippi a grade of "D," highlighting that its aging water infrastructure has leaks and breaks that result in the loss of 30-50% of its treated water. Similarly, West Virginia's report card (D) revealed that half of its treated water was lost through leaks in its struggling system. Louisiana received the lowest grade in the nation (D-). Louisiana's deteriorating systems frequently struggle to meet demand for potable water.

In contrast, Georgia received a grade of "B-," with widespread use of new technologies such as smart pressure reducing valves, and pressure data loggers. But some Georgia towns are now learning drinking water is contaminated with "forever chemicals" run off from nearby industry.³ The Bipartisan Infrastructure Law includes important new investments in water infrastructure — replacing lead pipes, addressing contaminants, and more — most of which will be channeled through state programs.⁴

Barriers to voting remain high, particularly in Southern states.

State rankings based on Cost of Voting Index (COVI) scores

2022



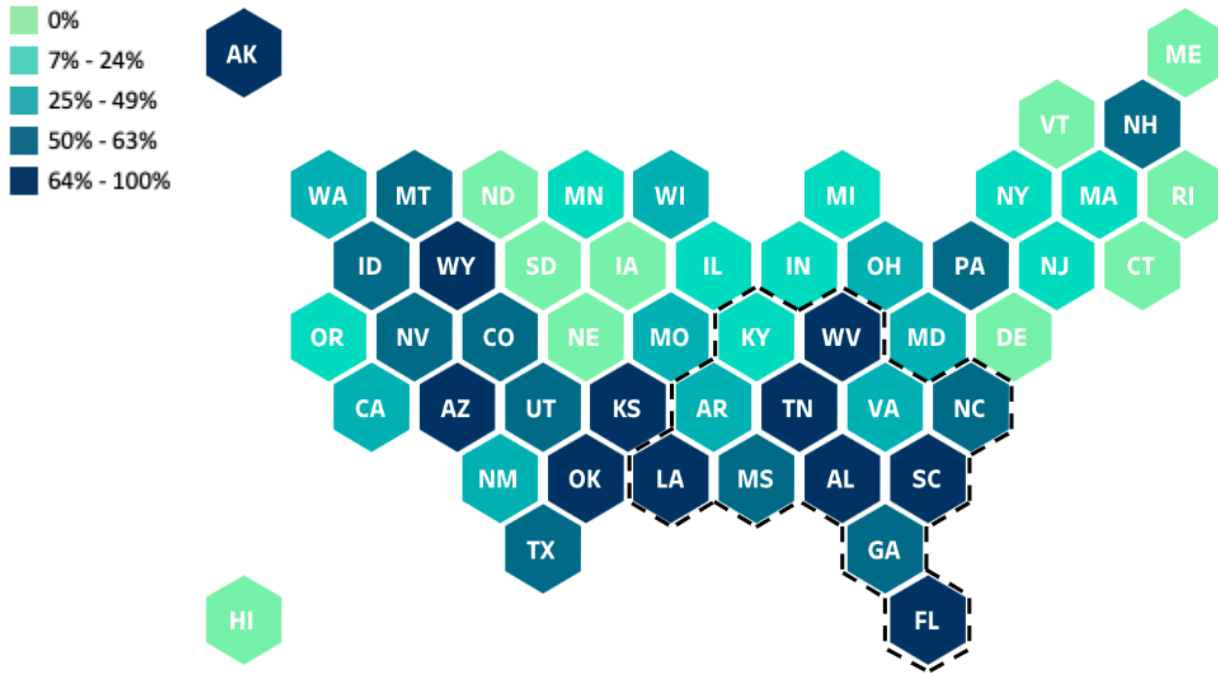
Source: [Cost of Voting in the American States: 2022*](#).

As the nation prepares for the November midterm election, voters in many states will face new and increased barriers to casting their ballots. Southern states rank among the most difficult to vote, with South Carolina (43rd), Alabama (45th), Arkansas (48th), and Mississippi (49th) having some of the highest barriers to voting access.

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 Voter turnout reached a record high amid an increase in new voters for both parties.² However, since 2020, many states have reversed those temporary provisions and 21 states, including 6 Southern states, have since enacted restrictive voting laws.³ This year, Mississippians will face the second highest personal cost in the country in terms of the time and effort required to cast a ballot. The state has a longstanding legacy of disenfranchising Black voters and has failed to keep pace with reforms like early voting, online voter registration, no excuse absentee voting, and automatic voter registration, which have been adopted by other states.^{4,5}

58% of Southerners and 33% of non-Southerners will have a “2020 election denier” on the ballot this fall.

Percent of U.S. House of Representatives races with a “2020 election denier” on the ballot 2022



Source: [FiveThirtyEight](#), [Brookings](#). Notes: “2020 election denier” is defined as someone who has fully denied the results of the 2020 election, having clearly stated (in media interviews, public debates, campaign materials, social media and/or through direct outreach from FiveThirtyEight) that the 2020 election was stolen from Donald Trump or taken legal action to overturn the results. Brookings assessed candidates for state, congressional, and state legislative races across the country and found 345 candidates that are 2020 election deniers.

Despite there being no evidence of widespread fraud in the 2020 election and expert consensus that it was secure, more than 300 candidates across the country running for election this November have denied the results of the 2020 election, all Republicans.^{1,2,3} In the South, 58% of candidates for the U.S. House of Representatives have made these claims.⁴ In addition, nearly 50 gubernatorial, secretary of state, and attorney general candidates across the country have expressed denialist sentiments, while running for offices that play a critical role in determining how state elections are run in their state.

These claims by candidates at the national, state, and local levels are a continuation of the surge of misinformation and disinformation since 2020 — especially on the topics of election integrity and the Covid pandemic. This misinformation can have a significant impact on public confidence in the political system. A 2022 survey found that 64% of Americans believe that U.S. democracy is in crisis and is at risk of failing.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 three years ago. We also examine child care disruptions to assess our institutions' availability to educate and care for our young children. Finally, we look at the availability of health insurance to identify gaps in resources critical for helping Americans be healthy and productive.

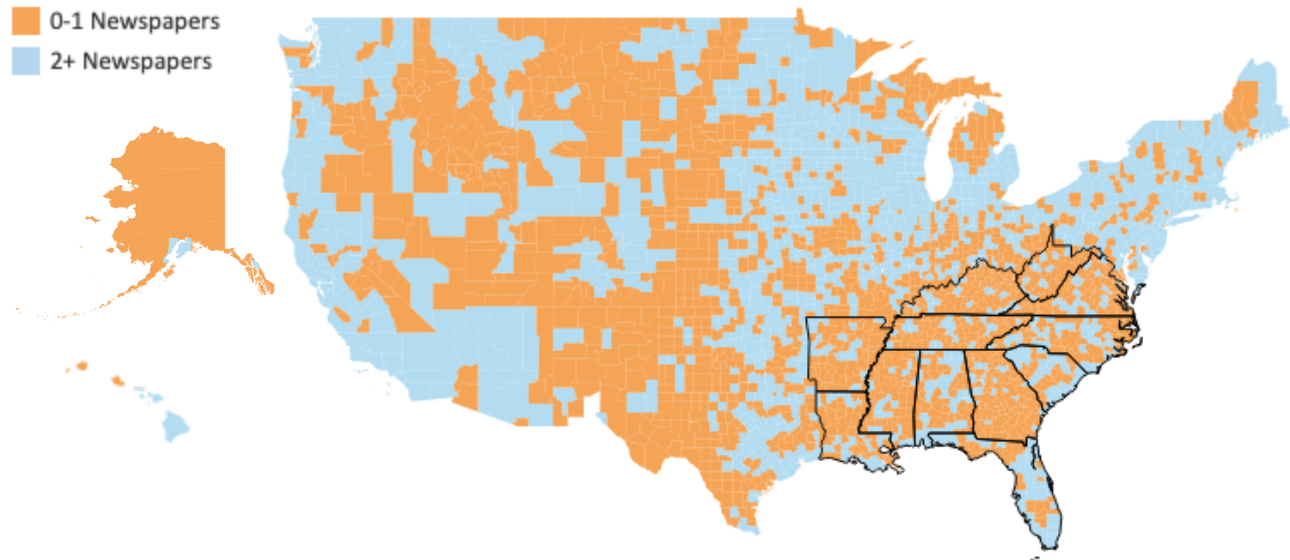
Indicators in this section

- News deserts, by county
- Lack of broadband internet, by state
- Child care disruptions
- Lack of health insurance coverage, by state

Southern counties are more likely to have only one or no newspaper reporting trusted local news, compared to non-Southern counties.

Counties with no or only one newspaper (“news deserts”)

News deserts as of 2022



Source: [Northwestern Medill Local News Initiative](#).

The steady decline of local newspapers across the nation has accelerated since the start of the pandemic, with over 300 news sources closing their doors.¹ More than half of U.S. counties are what experts call “local news deserts” that have either no newspaper or only one (often a weekly or a thinly staffed daily). Southerners are more likely to live in news deserts, as 75% of Southern counties are news deserts, compared to 50% of non-Southern counties.

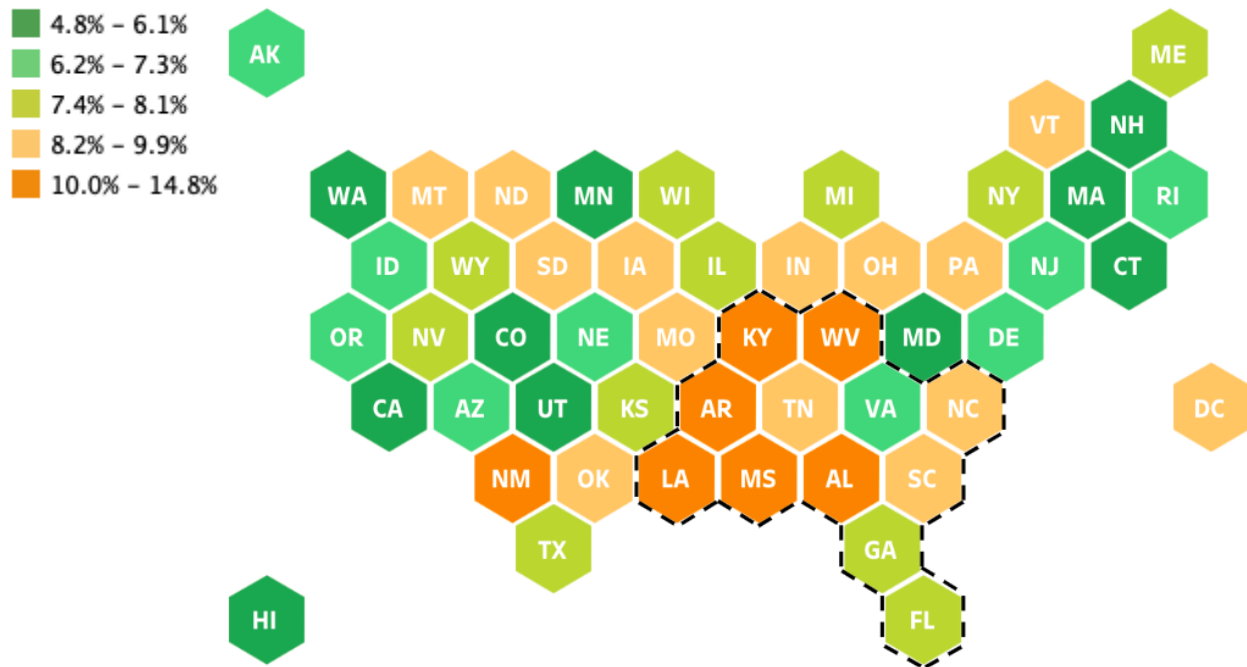
Declining news sources can further exacerbate the political, cultural, and digital divides across the nation. Studies by the Medill Local News Initiative at Northwestern University found that local news deserts tend to be communities that are older, poorer, less educated, and lacking the infrastructure for strong broadband — a crucial means for digital news to fill the gap left by closing print-based newspapers ([Lack of Internet, by Race](#)).² In North Carolina, the *Carolina Public Press* responded to the digital divide by launching a project to discover the needs and distribution preferences for those without reliable digital access, aiming to share their methodology and learnings widely, in an effort to close the growing gap.³

Nationally, newsroom staff has been cut by 60%.¹ Experts are pushing industry leaders to rethink the field of journalism, placing efforts on diversifying and broadening the current scope of journalism. Suggestions include bringing back the role of “community correspondents” to help cover the vast range of community-related issues and events, as well as implementing strategic plans to hire and retain journalists of color in local newsrooms.^{4,5}

Six of the 7 states with the worst internet access are in the South. In Mississippi, 1 in 7 people lack broadband internet or a computer.

Lack of broadband internet by state, 2021

Percent of individuals without a computer, or without a broadband internet subscription



Source: [Census Bureau's American Community Survey 2021](#).

Southern states have less broadband internet access as a whole than the nation. Nearly 1 in 10 Southerners lacks broadband or a computer, including 1 in 7 Mississippians. This is particularly concerning for families with school-age children who increasingly need computers and broadband access to complete homework assignments. In 2018, a majority of eighth graders reported using the internet to do homework but this was most common among suburban students (65%) and least common among rural students (44%).¹

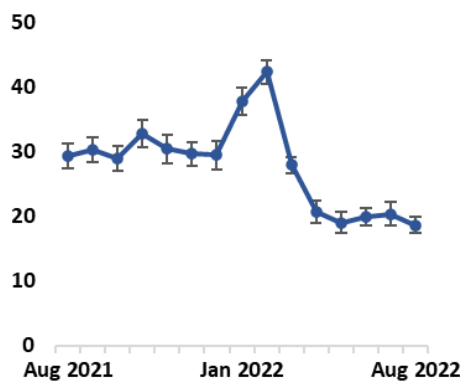
In 2019, 6% of children had internet access only through a smartphone, which is cumbersome for writing documents and completing many homework assignments. Having internet access only through a smartphone was more common among families with lower incomes and differed by race. Having access only through a smartphone was most common for Pacific Islander (13%), Hispanic and Black (11%), American Indian or Alaska Native children (10%) and less common for white (4%) and Asian children (2%).²

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.³ 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.⁴

Child care disruptions continue to affect 1 in 5 families, forcing 1.3 million adults to leave their jobs between July and August.

Child care disruptions, Jul 27 - Aug 8, 2022

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



How families responded to childcare disruption:	Number
Took unpaid leave to care for children	1,611,187
Used vacation/sick days or paid leave to care for children	2,172,847
Cut work hours to care for children	1,965,276
Left a job in order to care for children	1,352,228
Lost a job because of time away to care for children	365,252
Did not look for a job in order to care for children	1,067,408
Supervised one or more children while working	1,601,989

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 dramatically declined since early 2022, the share of families with children under 5 who experience child care disruptions has held relatively steady since May 2022. Nearly 1 in 5 adults experienced a child care disruption at some point during the 4 weeks ending August 8, 2022. Due to disruptions in child care, 1.9 million parents cut work hours, 1.6 million parents took unpaid leave, 1.3 million left their jobs, and another 365,000 lost a job.

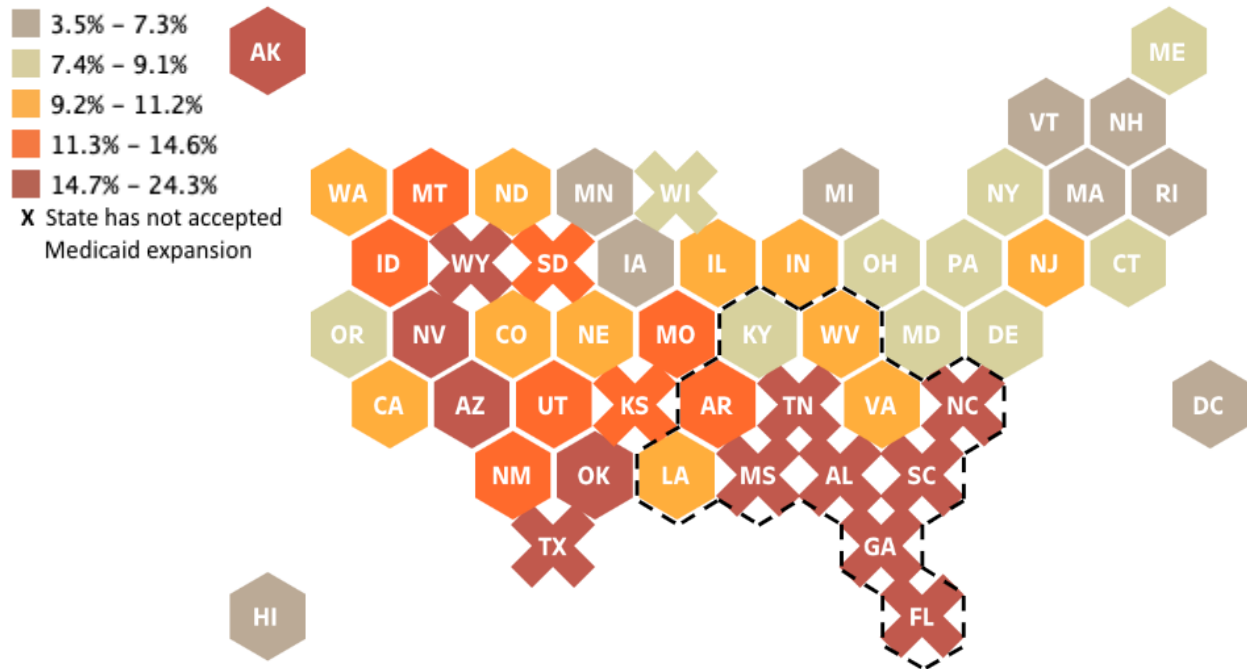
As employment rates near pre-pandemic numbers ([Employment Rate, By Sex](#)), many families have struggled to keep up with fluctuating child care availability.¹ A new study finds that while parenting time increased for both men and women from 2019 to 2020, women spent 20% more of their time parenting while juggling work or other responsibilities.² For working women, the amount of time they spent parenting and working increased by double that of men — by 98 minutes compared to 46 minutes, respectively.

Leaders in the child care sector remain deeply concerned about child care staff shortages and waning funding to keep doors open.³ The child care industry still has 10% fewer workers than before the pandemic. Child care workers face high levels of burnout and stress coupled with low wages, often resulting in high turnover.^{4,5,6} Operating costs for child care centers are nontrivial, leaving little in the budget to increase wages.⁷ American Rescue Plan dollars to support these costs are only a temporary relief, as experts say the sector has been underfunded for decades.⁸ A long-term investment in child care will be a critical step in stabilizing the sector.

In all 7 Southern states that have refused Medicaid expansion, 15% or more of the working-age population is uninsured.

Lack of health insurance coverage by state, 2021

Percent of population age 19-64



Sources: [Census Bureau's American Community Survey 2021](#) and [Kaiser Family Foundation](#). Note: Wisconsin has partially expanded Medicaid (under a Medicaid waiver) to include all adults under 100 percent federal poverty level, but did not adopt the ACA expansion.

Starting in 2010, the rates of the uninsured dramatically dropped with the implementation of the Affordable Care Act. Despite substantial federal subsidies, seven states in the deep South (AL, FL, GA, MS, NC, SC, and TN) have not adopted Medicaid expansion. As a result, 15% of working-age Southerners lack health insurance compared to 11% in the rest of the United States. In Texas, 24% of the working-age population lacked coverage, as did 18% in Florida, Georgia, and Mississippi. In comparison, only 3% in Massachusetts were without coverage.

People without health insurance are less likely to get the medical care that doctors advise for them. When they are injured they don't get the follow-up care they need, and those that have chronic conditions often go untreated until they appear in emergency rooms. Hospitals in communities with high rates of uninsured patients become financially strapped, and high uninsurance rates have led to many closures of rural hospitals across the South.^{1,2} Those uninsured individuals that do get medical treatment are likely to incur medical debt. By February 2022, credit bureau data revealed that nearly 1 in 5 Southerners had medical debt, compared to about 1 in 10 non-Southerners ([Medical Debt](#)).

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 including current data on employment rates by race and sex, medical debt, child poverty, and food and housing insecurity. It includes key measures of well-being: maternal mortality rates, and anxiety and depression levels.

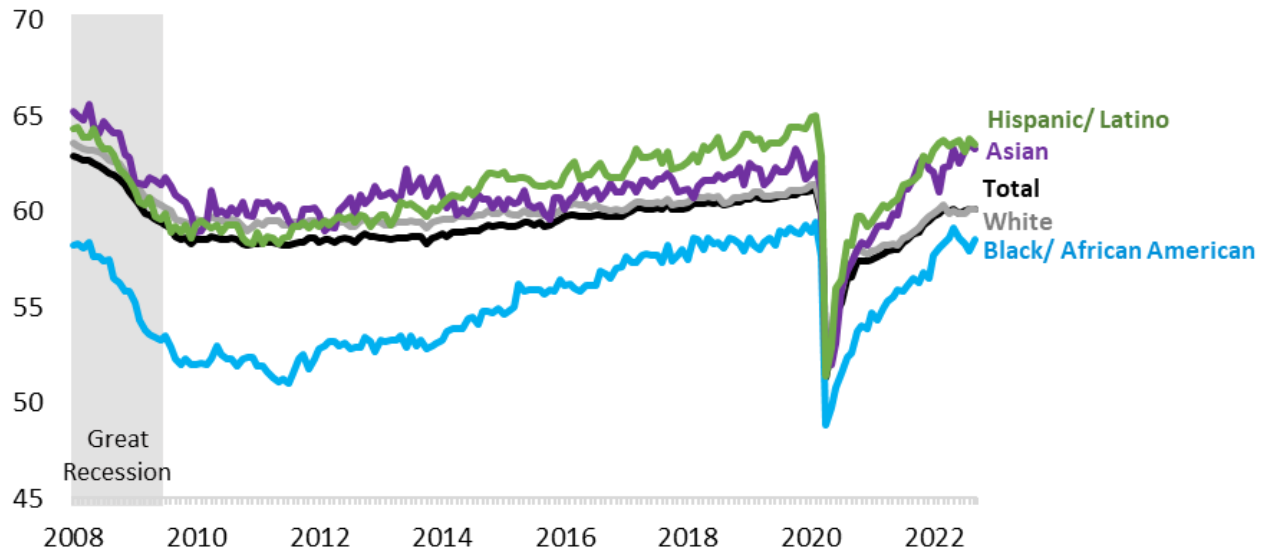
Indicators in this section

- Employment rate, by race/ethnicity
- Employment rate, by sex
- Maternal mortality rates, by state
- Medical debt, by county
- Renters with severe housing cost burdens, by state
- Likelihood of eviction or foreclosure, by state
- Food insecurity, by state
- Monthly child poverty rates
- Symptoms of anxiety or depression, by state

For the White, Black, and Hispanic populations, the employment rate is about 1 percentage point lower than the pre-pandemic Feb 2020 level.

Employment rate by race/ethnicity, U.S.

Jan 2008 - Sep 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.

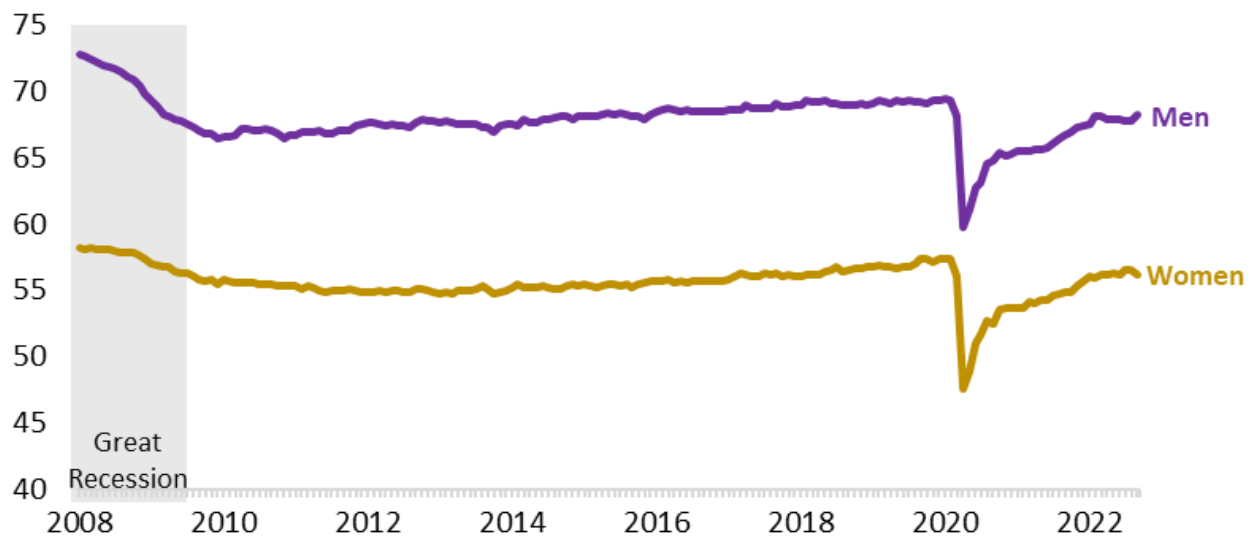
At 60.1%, the September employment rate is hovering about 1 percentage point below the pre-pandemic February 2020 level. Among people 16 years of age and older, the employment rate is down 0.9 points for the Black population, 1.3 points for the White population, and 1.5 points for the Hispanic population. It is up 0.8 points for the Asian population.

The U.S. economy is rapidly growing jobs, yet not all adults are able to work. Among other barriers, experts estimate that as many as 4 million workers are sidelined each month because of Long Covid symptoms ([Long Covid Estimates](#)).¹ Even for those with employment, annual wage growth in September (5%) has not kept up with inflation (8.2%) — but corporate profits have not been squeezed.^{2,3} Instead, profits have grown from \$3.2 trillion in Q3 2021 to \$3.5 trillion in Q2 2022 — indicating that corporations have capacity to pay higher wages without contributing to inflation.^{4,5} Meanwhile, many families are struggling to pay for food and housing ([Likelihood of Eviction or Foreclosure](#), [Food Insecurity](#)).

For men and women, the employment rate is about 1 percentage point lower than the pre-pandemic Feb 2020 level.

Employment rate by sex, U.S.

Jan 2008 - Sep 2022



Source: [Bureau of Labor Statistics](https://www.bls.gov). 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 is down 1.1 points for men and 1.2 percentage points for women compared to the pre-pandemic February 2020 level. The female employment rate remains about 12 percentage points below the male employment rate.

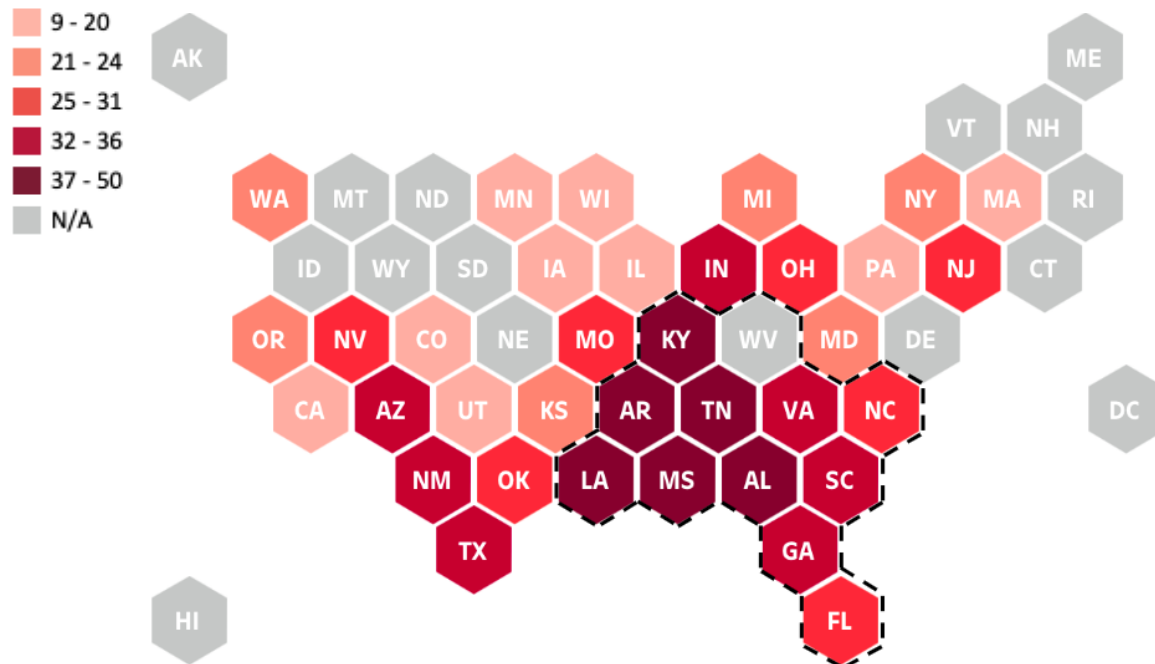
Child care and elder care remain significant impediments to women’s ability to return to work. From late July through early August, over 1 million parents didn’t look for work due to lack of child care ([Child Care Disruptions](#)). Women are twice as likely as men to point to child care responsibilities as their barrier to seeking work.¹

But child and elder care are in short supply in the U.S. Together, these industries have 500,000 fewer jobs than in February 2020.^{2,3} Yet, without sufficient child care and elder care, many women will remain unable to work. The U.S. federal government invests significantly less in child care than other wealthy nations: only \$500 per child 0-2 years old in the U.S. compared to an average of \$14,000 annually.^{4,5,6} It is not surprising then, that, in other developed countries, women have higher labor force participation rates.⁷

The pregnancy-related death rate is 66% higher in the South than in the rest of the nation. Mississippi, Tennessee, Louisiana, Alabama, Arkansas, and Kentucky have the highest maternal mortality rates.

Maternal mortality rates, 2019-21

Pregnancy-related deaths per 100,000 live births



Sources: [CDC Provisional Mortality Statistics](#) (deaths) and [CDC National Vital Statistics System](#) (births). Notes: Data are a three-year average. State rates based on fewer than 20 deaths are suppressed (not available) because of reliability and confidentiality. A maternal death is defined as the death of a woman while pregnant or within 42 days of termination of pregnancy, from any cause related to or aggravated by the pregnancy or its management, but not from accidental or incidental causes.

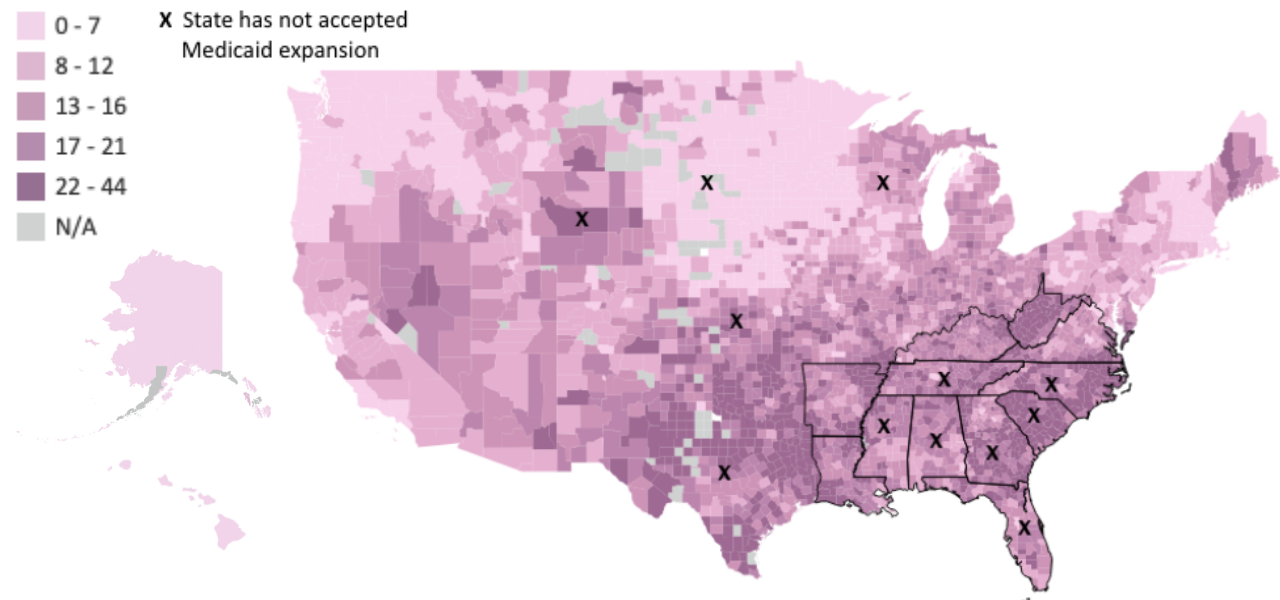
Giving birth can be life-threatening and pregnancy-related deaths are more common in the South than in the rest of the nation. There were 1,031 pregnancy-related deaths in the South during 2019-2021, a rate of 36 deaths per 100,000 live births. During the same period, the maternal mortality rate was 22 deaths per 100,000 live births in the rest of the nation. Mississippi had the highest rate of pregnancy-related deaths per 100,000 live births (50 maternal deaths) followed by Tennessee (47), Louisiana (44), Alabama (43), Arkansas (43), and Kentucky (38).

Nationwide, by 2018, more than 17 women died per 100,000 births — twice the rate of other developed countries. The U.S. has a shortage of obstetrician-gynecologists and midwives compared to these countries. White women in the U.S. experience maternal mortality at rates higher than women regardless of race in other wealthy countries, and Black women experience rates 2.5 times that of white women in the U.S.^{1,2}

Nearly one in five Southerners holds medical debt in default. In some Southern counties, as many as 44% of adults hold medical debt.

Share of individuals with medical debt in collections

February 2022



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.

As of February 2022, credit bureau data revealed that 17% of Southerners had medical debt, compared to 11% for non-Southerners. In some Southern counties, up to 44% of individuals had medical debt in collections. In fact, 8 of the 10 states with the highest percentages of residents with medical debt were Southern: West Virginia (24%), South Carolina (22%), North Carolina (20%), Louisiana (18%), Arkansas (18%), Tennessee (18%), Georgia (17%), and Kentucky (17%).

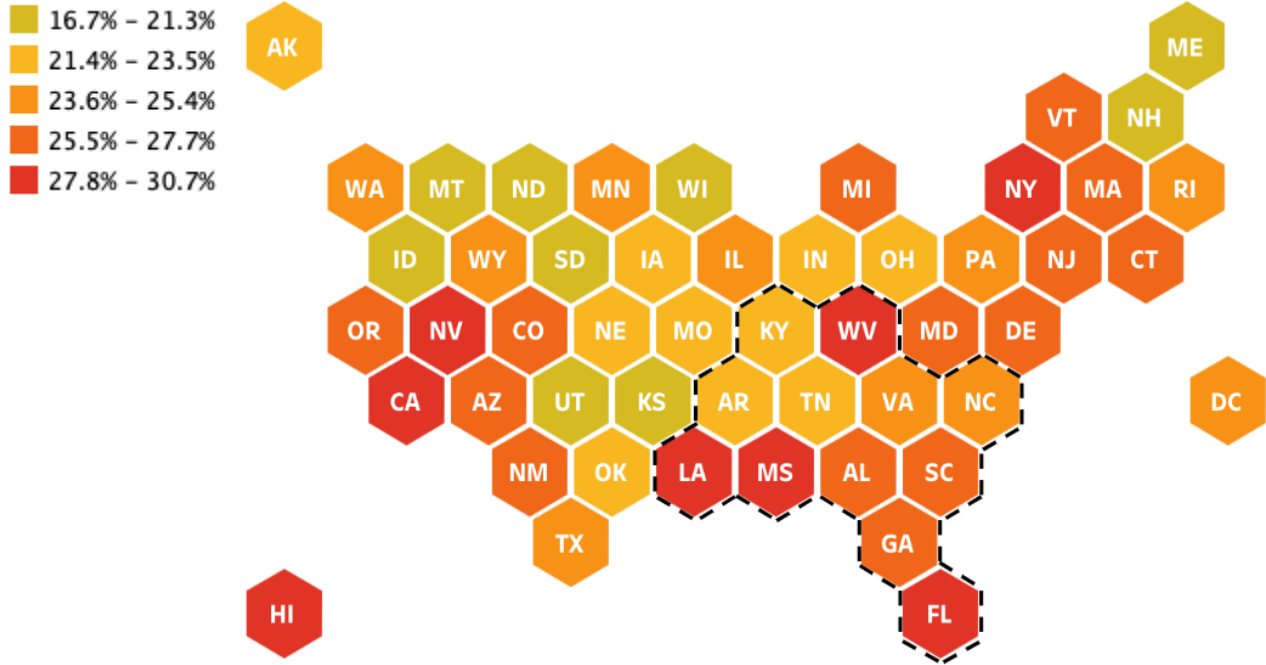
When the Covid health emergency officially ends, many people will lose their public health insurance.¹ Residents of states that have not expanded Medicaid are particularly at risk. A recent analysis finds that residents of states that refused Medicaid expansion were 40% more likely to have medical debt than those in Medicaid-expanded states.² Medical debt forces residents to make tough decisions everyday, ultimately worsening both housing and food insecurity ([Likelihood of Eviction or Foreclosure](#), [Food Insecurity](#)).^{3,4}

The 7 Southern states that have not expanded Medicaid (AL, GA, FL, MS, NC, SC, and TN) can reduce medical debt levels by adopting Medicaid expansion. States that expanded Medicaid by 2014 saw a greater decline in medical debt among their residents than did states that failed to expand Medicaid.⁵

In Florida and Louisiana, nearly 1 in 3 renters spend the majority of their household income on housing costs.

Severe housing cost burdens by state, 2021

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



Source: [Census Bureau’s American Community Survey 2021](#).

In 2021, 31% of renters in Florida and 30% in Louisiana paid at least half of their total household income toward housing costs. West Virginia and Mississippi were close behind at 28%. Having to spend the majority of their income on rent puts many families in a precarious situation, causing frequent moves, frequent school changes, and school absenteeism. Children without stable housing are also susceptible to trauma and developmental delays.^{1,2,3}

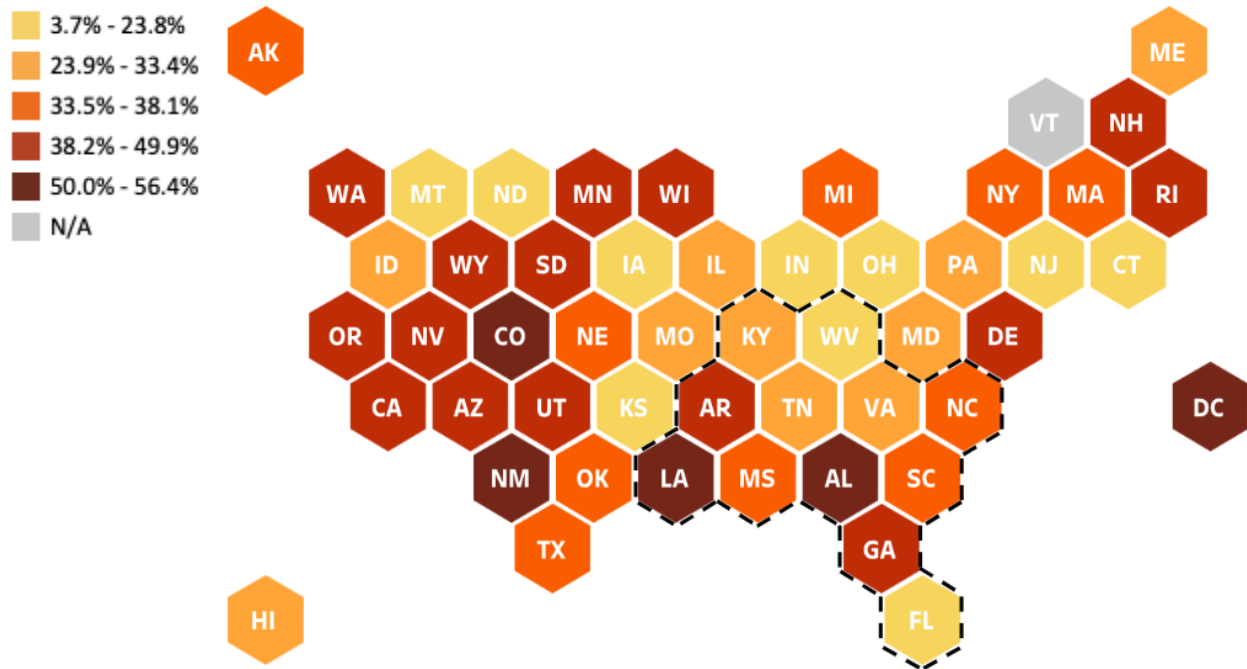
The United States has been experiencing a severe housing shortage since the Great Recession when new home construction dramatically declined — driving up home prices over the decade without commensurate increases in income.^{4,5} Respondents to a Southern Economic Advancement Project (SEAP) survey in Alabama, Georgia, Mississippi, and New Orleans, Louisiana said affordable housing was their community’s greatest challenge.⁶

Across Southern states, only 1% of American Rescue Plan funds have been dedicated to housing as of August 2022, compared to 12% across the rest of the nation.⁷

1 in 3 Americans who are late on rent/mortgage said they were at risk of losing their home. In Louisiana and Alabama, it is 1 in 2.

Likelihood of eviction or foreclosure, Sep 14-26, 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](#). Note: Estimate not available for Vermont.

In May 2022, the median rent in the U.S. reached a record high of \$2,002 per month.¹ As housing prices have increased, so has the fear of losing one’s home. 1 in 3 Americans who are past-due on rent/ mortgage fear that eviction or foreclosure is likely. Fears are particularly high in Louisiana (56%), Colorado (56%), Alabama (55%), New Mexico (55%), and Washington D.C. (51%).

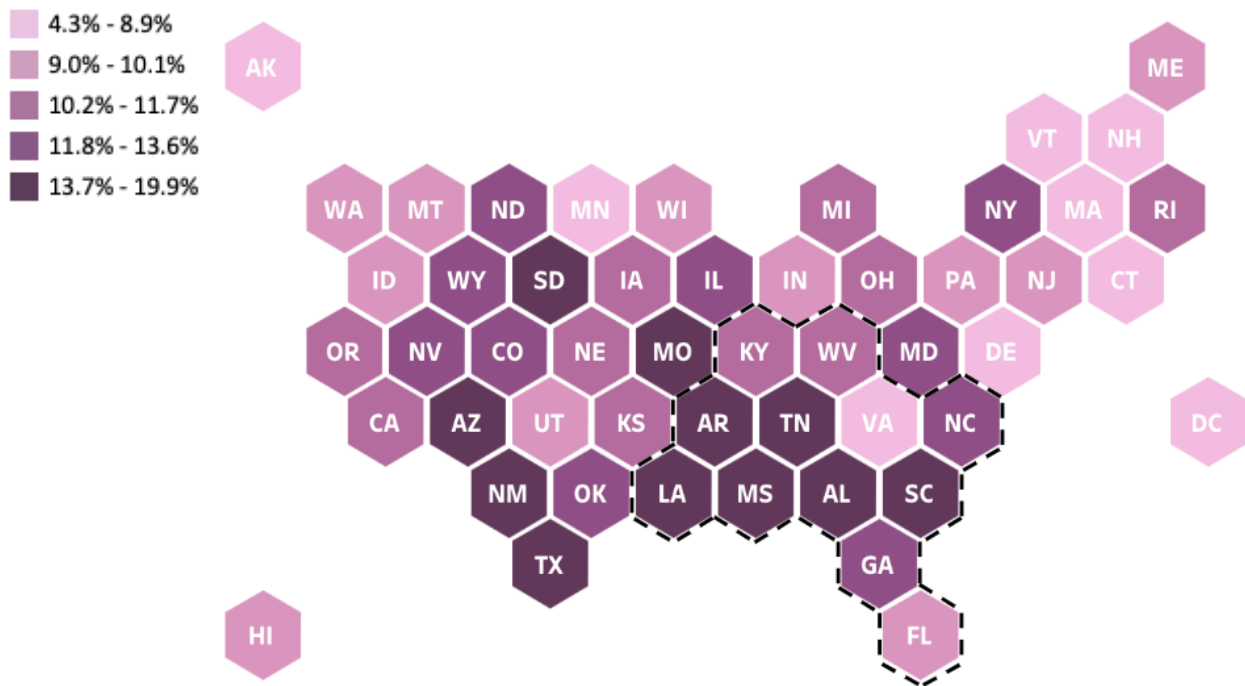
More than 1 in 4 Southern renters have to spend the majority of their household income on rent and utilities ([Severe Housing Cost Burden](#)). Growing housing prices are a chronic problem across the U.S. And a fast increasing share of Americans (now almost half) say lack of affordable housing is a major problem in their area.²

State and local officials that speed up the distribution of Emergency Rental Assistance (ERA) funds can stabilize renters and landlords alike, but many Southern states including Alabama, Tennessee, Arkansas and Georgia have distributed less than half of their federal ERA funds ([Emergency Rental Assistance](#)).

One in five Louisianans and Mississippians said their household went hungry in September.

Food insecurity, Sep 14-26, 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 September 2022, 11.5% of Americans reported that their household did not have enough food. In the South, 12% of households sometimes or often went hungry. Food insecurity was most severe in Louisiana (20%), Mississippi (19%), Arizona (16%), and Arkansas (15%).

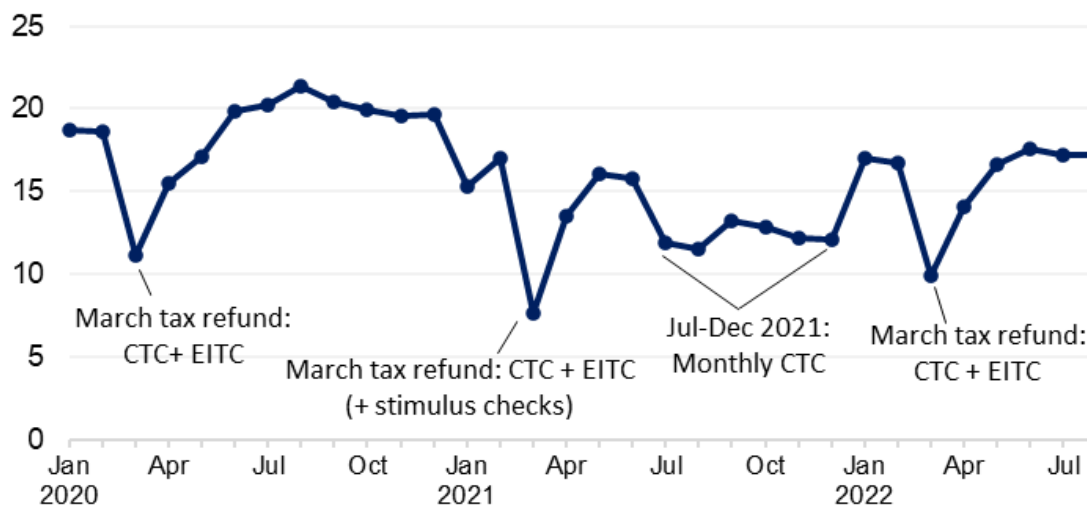
A multitude of coinciding factors make it difficult for Americans to have accessible and affordable food options. Rising inflation rates have impacted the cost of groceries, increasing at an annual rate of 13% as of September 2022.¹ Several Southern states including AR, FL, GA, KY, MS, and TN rejected and stopped distributing emergency Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) allotments prior to its end in September 2022.² In VA, however, where food insecurity is lowest in the South, emergency SNAP benefits were recently extended through the month of October.³ Food banks are experiencing increased demand due to inflation and the elimination of these SNAP benefits and are struggling to keep up with the demand as they operate on tight budgets and receive fewer donations.^{4,5,6,7,8}

The Biden Administration has recently taken steps towards reducing food insecurity, including: a nearly \$2 billion investment from the United States Department of Agriculture to food banks and schools purchasing American-grown foods; hosting the first White House Conference on Hunger, Nutrition, and Health in over 50 years; and permanently increasing food stamp benefits by 25% beginning October 2022.^{9,10,11}

The child poverty rate increased to 17% for most of 2022 because an important tax benefit for families with children ended in Dec 2021.

Monthly child poverty rates, U.S.

Jan 2020-Aug 2022



Source: [Center on Poverty and Social Policy at Columbia University](#) and [Census Bureau, PEP](#). Notes: These monthly estimates are based on the [supplemental poverty rate](#), which includes after-tax income, in-kind benefits, and transfers such as earned income tax credits (EITC), child tax credits (CTC), stimulus checks, and other gov't benefits.

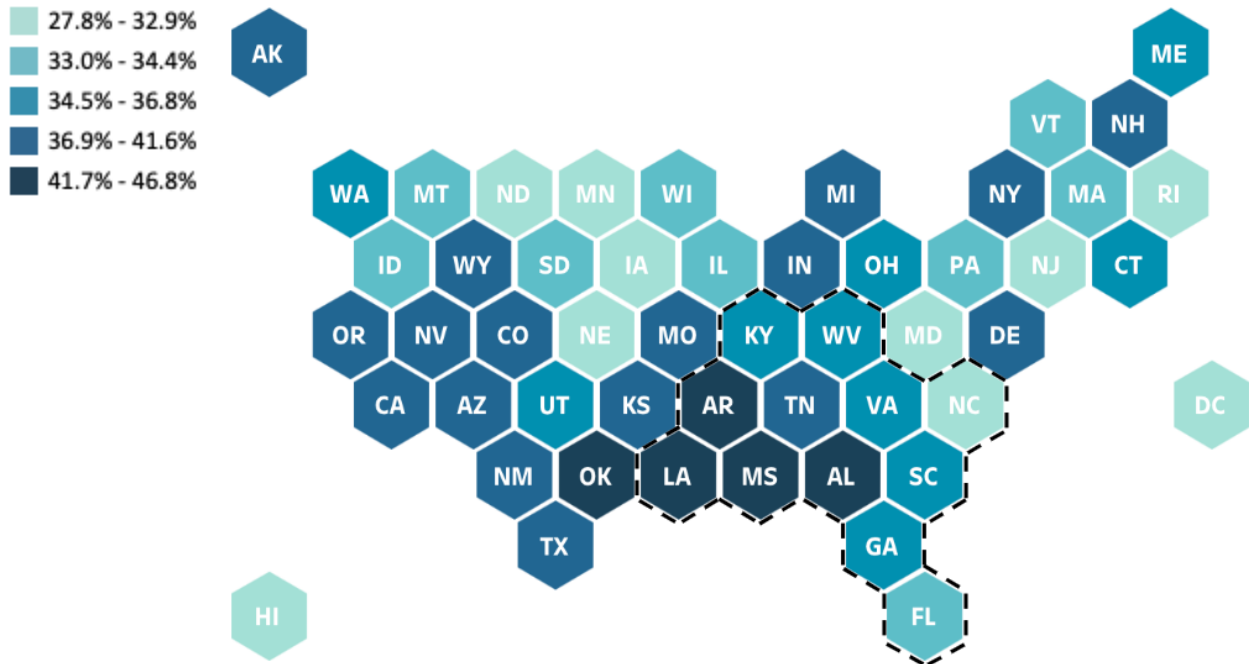
From July through December 2021, the American Rescue Plan provided low and middle-income families with monthly Child Tax Credit (CTC) payments. The majority of these families spent these funds on essentials such as housing, utilities, healthier foods, clothing and school supplies.¹ But after the CTC expiration in December 2021, child poverty spiked to 17% in January 2022, where, according to the most recent monthly estimates, it remains (after a dip in March/April when families received tax refunds). Just last month, the U.S. Census Bureau published an annual child poverty rate for 2021, which also reflected the positive effects of the monthly child tax credit payments at the end of 2021. However, the 12-month poverty rate fails to capture month-to-month income volatility for low income families.

The chronic stress that impoverished children experience actually disrupts the development of the brain. The accumulated burdens of economic hardship — including uncertainty about whether there will be enough food to eat each day, frequent home moves, exposure to violence, and lack of supervision when parents work irregular schedules in low-wage jobs — lead to chronic stress that adversely impacts brain architecture.^{2,3} Children living in poverty develop less gray matter volumes which, in turn, negatively impacts their school readiness, and results in later difficulties in memory and self-regulation.⁴ Large-scale, long-term studies have found that increasing government support for children boosts their academic achievement, increases their earnings as adults, decreases their likelihood of needing government support as adults, and reduces their likelihood of becoming incarcerated.^{5,6}

36% of Americans report symptoms of anxiety or depression, up from 11% in 2019. Southern states have the largest share of adults reporting symptoms: 47% in MS, 46% in LA, 43% in AL, and 42% in AR.

Symptoms of anxiety or depression, Sep 14-26, 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.

The number of adults in the U.S. reporting symptoms of anxiety and depressive disorder has tripled from 11% in 2019 to 36% in September 2022. Four out of the five states with the highest rates were in the South: 47% in Mississippi, 46% in Louisiana, 43% in Alabama, and 42% in Arkansas.

As a step towards tackling the growing mental health crisis, the U.S. Preventive Services Taskforce recommends that Americans between the ages of 8 and 65 be screened for anxiety and depression.^{1,2} But mental health providers are in short supply across the nation. Alabama and Mississippi, where residents experience some of the highest rates of anxiety and/or depression, have well below the national average of 280 providers per 100,000 people – 115 and 185, respectively.^{3,4}

The effects of this mental health crisis continue to unfold, with increasing incidences of drug overdose deaths, road rage incidents, violent crime, child abuse, and firearm suicides ([Firearm Suicides](#)).^{5,6,7,8,9,10} Bolstering services like the updated national Suicide and Crisis Hotline “988” will be critical in supporting growing needs in long-term mental health care.^{11,12}

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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 eighth 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.

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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.