



January 19, 2023

# 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, the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law, and the Inflation Reduction Act can use these findings to target disparities that ultimately undermine community resilience.*

Three years since Covid was first announced on U.S. soil, Americans’ general attitude towards the pandemic has shifted – with many utilizing fewer safety precautions like social distancing and masking. But Long Covid, which can be debilitating, has affected one-third of everyone infected, and may be taking a bite out of the American workforce. Moreover, the Covid crisis accelerated several pre-existing trends such as growing anxiety and depression and maternal mortality. And increasing working-age death rates are contributing to declining U.S. life expectancy. Job openings outnumber available workers and, although inflation is declining, supply chain issues and skyrocketing corporate profits will have to be addressed to fully reign it in. As we brace for the challenges ahead, our review of 25 indicators highlights areas of opportunity across the U.S. with a particular focus on the South.

**Health** Covid hospitalization rates are increasing once again, especially for Americans aged 70+, many of whom have not received the most updated bivalent booster shot. Moreover, the Covid crisis exacerbated increases in anxiety and depression, overdose deaths, pregnancy-related deaths, and traffic fatalities.<sup>1</sup> Because people of color experience discrimination in prenatal and

other medical care, benefit from fewer public investments in traffic safety, and receive lower wages and fewer employment opportunities, Hispanic, Black, and American Indian populations have been most impacted by these increasing death rates and have experienced the greatest declines in life expectancy.

**Economy** Jobs reached a new record of 153.7 million in December but the U.S. workforce has not kept pace, with 1.75 job openings for every job seeker. Americans are retiring in record numbers, roughly 1 million parents are sidelined because of lack of childcare, and up to 4 million workers may be unable to work due to Long Covid. The Bipartisan Infrastructure Law and the Inflation Reduction Act is projected to add millions of jobs in new industries and ensuring Americans have health care, family care, and relevant job skills will be essential for meeting employers' demand for labor.

**Health care** Across states that have not implemented Medicaid expansion – including AL, GA, FL, MS, NC, SC, and TN – 18% of adults lack health insurance, compared to 10% elsewhere. In addition, 10 of 12 Southern states have preempted localities from passing paid sick leave ordinances. Lack of paid sick leave reduces worker productivity, contributes to financial hardship, and increases overdose and suicide deaths. Working-age death rates from overdose, suicide, and other external causes were 33% higher in Southern states than non-Southern states.

**Corporate profits and wages** In 2022, wage growth (4.5%) did not keep up with inflation (6.5%). However, corporate profits skyrocketed from a record-high of \$2.5 trillion in Q3 2020 to \$3.0 trillion in Q3 2022. Recent inflation has been driven by several factors including supply chain disruptions, rising wages, and increasing corporate consolidation and profits. Policymakers can rein in inflation by curbing corporations' ability to raise prices through measures that increase competition. In stark contrast to this, 10 of 12 Southern states have preempted localities from raising the minimum wage as high as \$15/hr.

**Food and housing** Lack of affordable housing has become a chronic concern with one-fourth of all renters paying the majority of their income for rent. In MS, WV, and FL, about half of those who were late on rent or mortgage were afraid of impending eviction or foreclosure in December. And about 1 in 6 households in MS, KY, GA, LA, and WV had trouble putting food on the table.

**Climate and infrastructure** 75% of Southerners have experienced at least 1 disaster in the last 3 years compared to 64% of non-Southerners. Louisianans averaged 80 hours of power

interruptions in 2021, largely due to disasters. A more connected national power transmission system would reduce power outages by moving energy from unaffected areas to damaged areas. It would also allow new sources of renewable energy to move from parts of the country with ample wind and sun, to other parts of the country.

**Misinformation and democracy** 75% of Southern counties have 1 or no newspapers, leaving residents lacking trusted community information and transparency. 21% of Southern counties have poor internet access (compared to 6% outside the South) leaving them reliant on polarized national media or misinformation-rich social media. The 118th Congress is the most racially and ethnically diverse in the nation’s history but still lacks the diversity of the nation it represents. And nearly half of Southerners are represented by a House member who has denied the validity of the 2020 election results.

As Southern legislators convene over the next several months, these challenges should be at the forefront of their agendas. State and local governments can utilize the billions of dollars from the American Rescue Plan, the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law, and the Inflation Reduction Act to invest in community needs such as broadband access, affordable housing, and climate action. In response to the pandemic, Congress and two administrations have worked to address these challenges — efforts which highlight the need for and power of shared facts and shared data, which are vital to our system of democratic self-rule.



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## **REFERENCES**

## **ABOUT, AUTHORS, AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

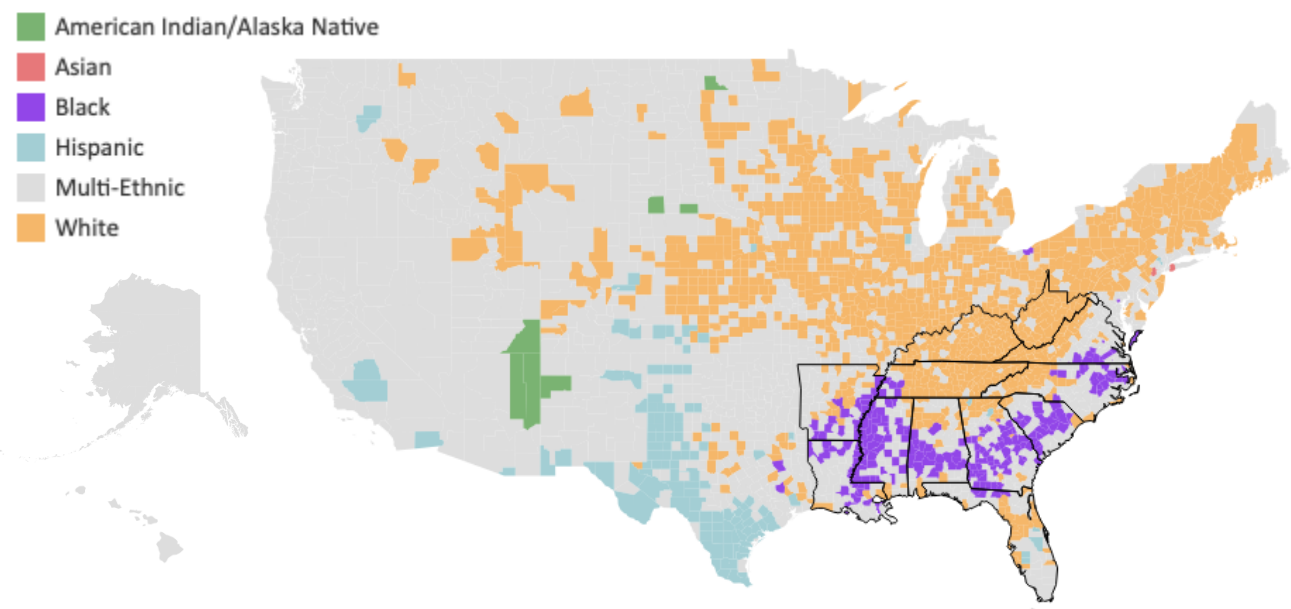
# Defining the South

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 217 of the 221 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, 2021



Source: [U.S. Census Bureau](https://www.census.gov). 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 its impact.

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 pregnancy-related deaths, housing affordability, mental health and more.

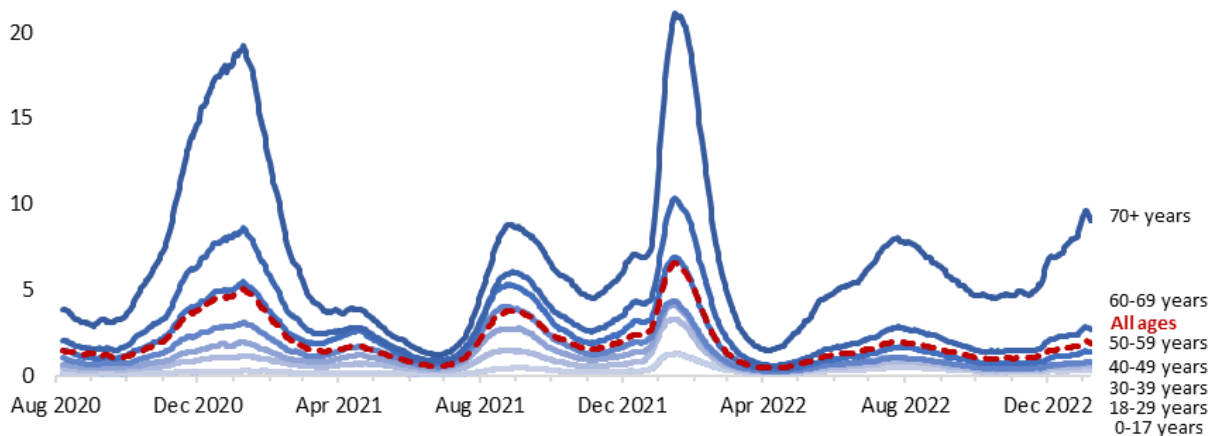
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- Long Covid estimates, by state
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- Total jobs, by month
- Quits rate, by industry
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- Disaster declarations, by county

## Covid-associated hospitalizations for U.S. seniors spiked in the most recent Covid surge.

### Covid-associated hospitalizations per 100,000 population by age, U.S.

Aug 1, 2020 - Jan 7, 2023



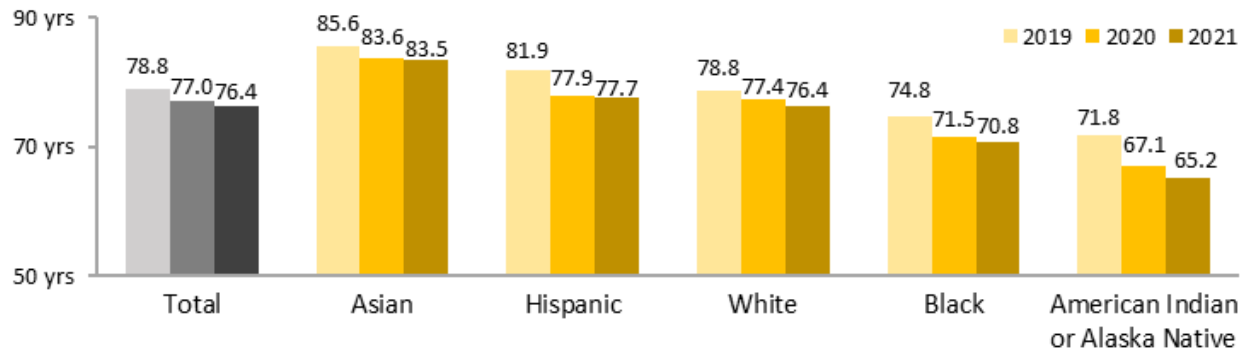
Source: [HHS Covid-19 datasets](#) and [Census Bureau Vintage 2021 PEP](#). Notes: 7-day average of new admissions for confirmed Covid cases. Based on reporting from all hospitals (n=5,317).

Though Covid hospitalizations are below the Omicron surge in early 2022, the CDC's Community Transmission map shows high levels of community transmission across the nation, meaning that many counties have 100 or more new cases per 100,000 persons *and* 10.0% or more positive diagnostic tests (NAATs).<sup>1,2</sup> The newest variant, XBB.1.5, is said to be highly transmissible and experts express concern as hospitalizations rates tick upwards for all ages in the 2022-2023 winter season.<sup>3,4,5,6</sup> For those ages 70 and up, the concerns are even greater. As of January 7, 2023, elderly people ages 70 and up were 9 times more likely to be hospitalized than adults between the ages of 18-59.

Vaccine take-up, while traditionally high for seniors, has been lower for the most recent updated booster shot. 94% percent of Americans ages 65 and up received a complete primary dosage but only 39% have gotten their updated bivalent booster shot.<sup>7</sup> Studies indicate that the updated bivalent booster shot is more effective than the initial vaccines in protecting against Covid.<sup>8,9</sup> Medical experts encourage communities to get boosted and get vaccinated in an effort to ease overwhelmed hospitals and health care workers.<sup>10,11,12</sup>

## Sparked by the Covid crisis, life expectancy has declined by 4+ years for Black, Hispanic, and American Indian populations.

Life expectancy at birth by race/ethnicity, U.S.  
2019-21



Source: CDC National Center for Health Statistics [Data Brief](#) and [Report](#). 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. Estimates for 2021 for race/ethnicity are provisional. Race is for the non-Hispanic population.

Life expectancy in the U.S. dropped in 2021 for a second year in a row, losing 25 years of progress and reaching its lowest level since 1996.<sup>1</sup> (In comparison, studies show that peer nations had modest increases in life expectancy from 2020 to 2021.<sup>2,3</sup>) Life expectancy declined from 78.8 years in 2019 to 76.4 in 2021, a loss of 2.4 years. Based on provisional 2021 data, the declines were greater for Black, Hispanic, and American Indian/Alaska Native (AIAN) populations. Black Americans saw a 4.0 year decrease, while AIAN saw a massive 6.6 year decrease from 2019 to 2021, bringing life expectancy to 70.8 years and 65.2 years, respectively. Though life expectancy for Hispanic populations (77.7 years) is still above the overall U.S. life expectancy, there was a 4.2 year decrease from 2019 to 2021. While Covid was a significant contributor in driving down life expectancy, health disparities rooted in discrimination and systemic racism have long impacted these populations.<sup>4,5,6,7,8</sup>

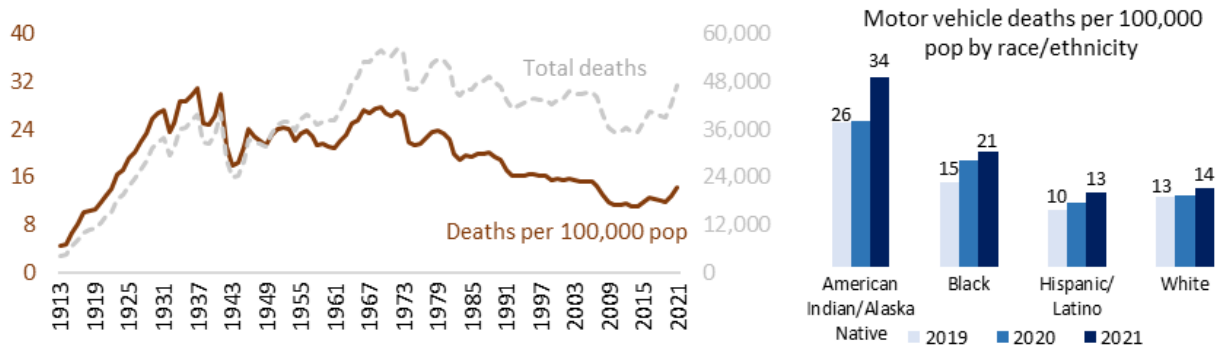
8 of the 10 leading causes of death in 2019 remained the same in both 2020 and 2021, with newly added Covid becoming the third highest cause, surpassed only by heart disease and cancer.<sup>9,10,11</sup> Over the last 3 years, the nation has seen 400,000 excess deaths among working-age Americans due to Covid as well as other causes such as overdoses, suicides, motor vehicle deaths, and pregnancy-related deaths ([Motor Vehicle Deaths](#), [Maternal Mortality](#)).<sup>12</sup>





**Motor vehicle fatalities reached 14.3 per 100,000 population in 2021, up from 11.9 in 2019. Rates spiked by 8, 6, and 3 percentage points for American Indian, Black, and Hispanic populations, respectively.**

**Motor vehicle deaths per 100,000 population, U.S. 1913-2021**



Sources: [CDC/ Wonder](#) and [National Safety Council](#). Notes: Motor-vehicle deaths include all deaths arising from a motor vehicle accident, including pedestrians and bicyclists struck by a motor vehicle, as well as non-traffic motor vehicle deaths occurring in parking lots, private roads, and driveways. Data for 2021 is provisional.

Motor vehicle death rates declined by more than half between 1969 and 2014, falling from 27.7 to 11.1 deaths per 100,000 population. From 2015 to 2019, rates hovered around 12. Then, although travel declined across the world at the start of the pandemic, motor vehicle death rates in the U.S. increased two consecutive years, reaching 14.3 in 2021. Comparatively, peer nations have maintained lower motor vehicle fatality rates, with fewer increases since 2019.<sup>1,2,3</sup>

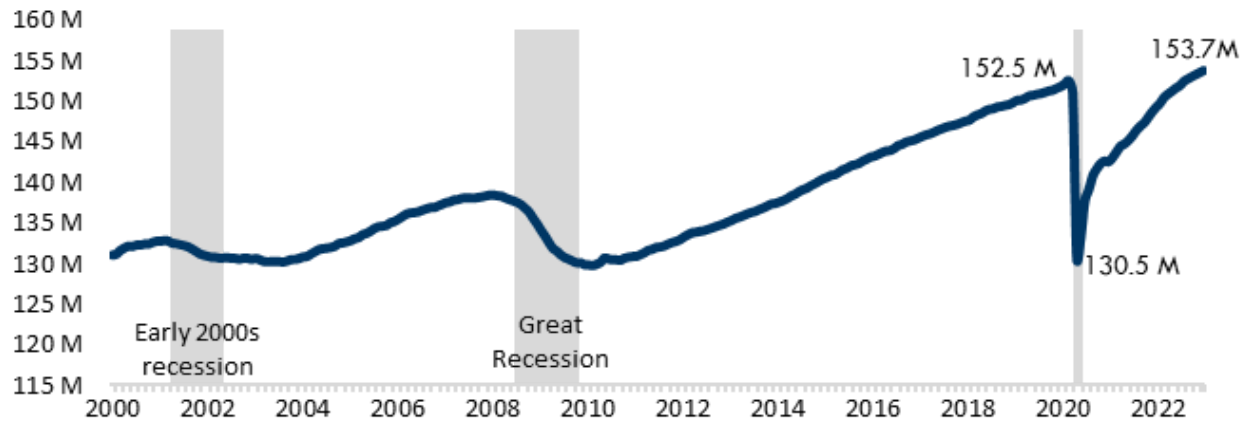
Non-white Americans saw the largest increases in motor vehicle death rates. Black populations saw a 37% increase in motor vehicle deaths per 100,000, with Hispanic populations seeing a 30% increase. In comparison, white and Asian populations had a much smaller increase — 12% and 9%, respectively. American Indian/Alaska Native (AIAN) populations historically have the highest rate of motor vehicle deaths, seeing a 32% increase from 2019 to 2021 and a rate of 34 deaths per 100,000 people in 2021. While studies traditionally point to alcohol and drug abuse as causes of high rates of motor vehicle fatalities, they tend to overlook the historical trauma and mistreatment of AIAN populations that are linked to these “diseases of despair”.<sup>4,5,6,7,8</sup>

Though the U.S. has made strides in creating safer motor vehicles and protecting those inside of them, transportation safety experts are concerned that not enough progress has been made to protect pedestrians and cyclists.<sup>9</sup> When accounting for differing levels of travel by race, studies show that Black and Hispanic Americans who are walking or cycling are more likely to be killed in a traffic fatality than white Americans.<sup>10</sup> This is particularly troubling as the higher risk for these physical activities could limit the health benefits for populations that would benefit the most.<sup>11</sup> The Bipartisan Infrastructure Law includes efforts to enact policies that will improve roadway safety and infrastructure.<sup>12,13</sup> Continued efforts to increase the safety of those inside and outside of vehicles are critical to reversing these trends.

## In December, U.S. jobs reached a record 153.7 million. About 250,000 new jobs were added every month during the last quarter of 2022.

### Total jobs by month, U.S.

Jan 2000 - Dec 2022



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

While 22 million jobs were lost when Covid hit in 2020, they were all fully recouped by August 2022. By the end of 2022, the nation had reached a new record of 153.7 million jobs (1.2 million more than the pre-pandemic February 2020 level) and had an unemployment rate of 3.5% (equal to the pre-pandemic February 2020 level).<sup>1,2</sup>

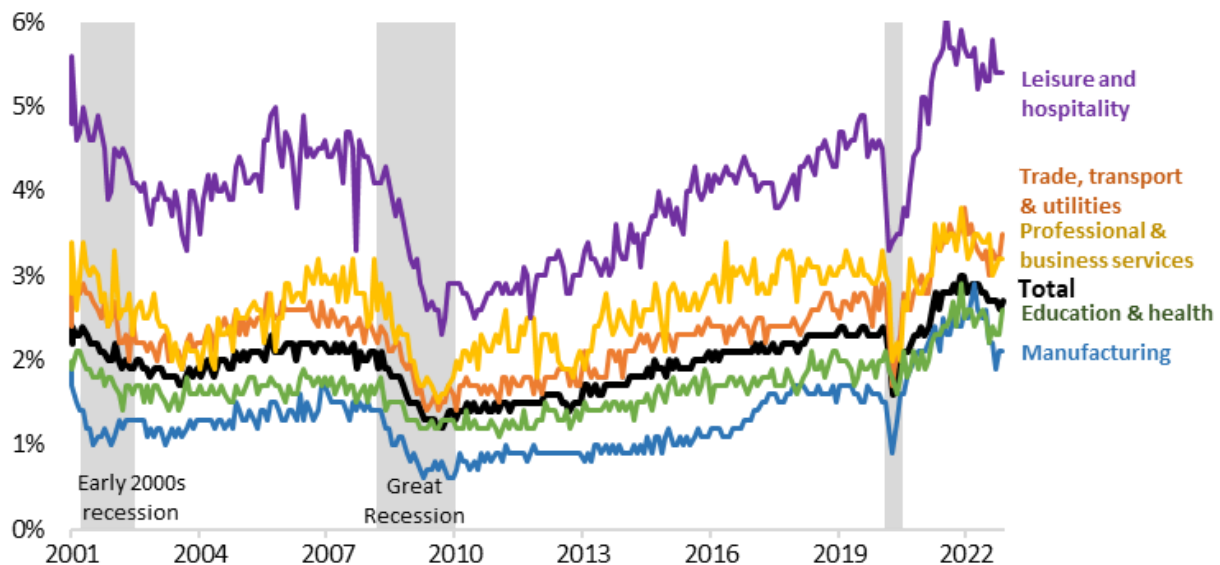
But the U.S. workforce hasn't grown enough to accommodate this job growth. In November 2022, there were 10.5 million job openings and only 6 million job seekers.<sup>3,4</sup> A number of factors have contributed to a reduced American labor force. The country has seen 400,000 excess deaths among the working-age population in the last 3 years due to Covid as well as other causes such as overdoses, suicides, motor vehicle deaths, and pregnancy-related deaths ([Motor Vehicle Deaths](#), [Maternal Mortality](#)).<sup>5,6</sup> Long Covid has reduced the workforce by an estimated 1.3 to 4.3 million workers ([Long Covid Estimates](#)).<sup>7</sup> Americans are retiring at higher than average rates and restrictions on immigration have saddled the country with a million worker deficit.<sup>8</sup> Additionally, lack of child care kept a million parents of young children from looking for work in 2022.<sup>9</sup>

Together, the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law and the Inflation Reduction Act are predicted to create over 2 million new jobs each year for 10 years.<sup>10,11</sup> Ensuring that Americans are healthy and have the child and elder care they need to be able to take advantage of these jobs will be important for ensuring a sufficient supply of workers. In addition, these new jobs will encompass a large variety of occupations.<sup>12</sup> Helping workers build the skills necessary to fill these jobs and to transition from old industries to new 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.<sup>13,14,15</sup>

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

### Quits rate by industry, U.S.

Dec 2000 - Nov 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. Nov 2022 data is preliminary.

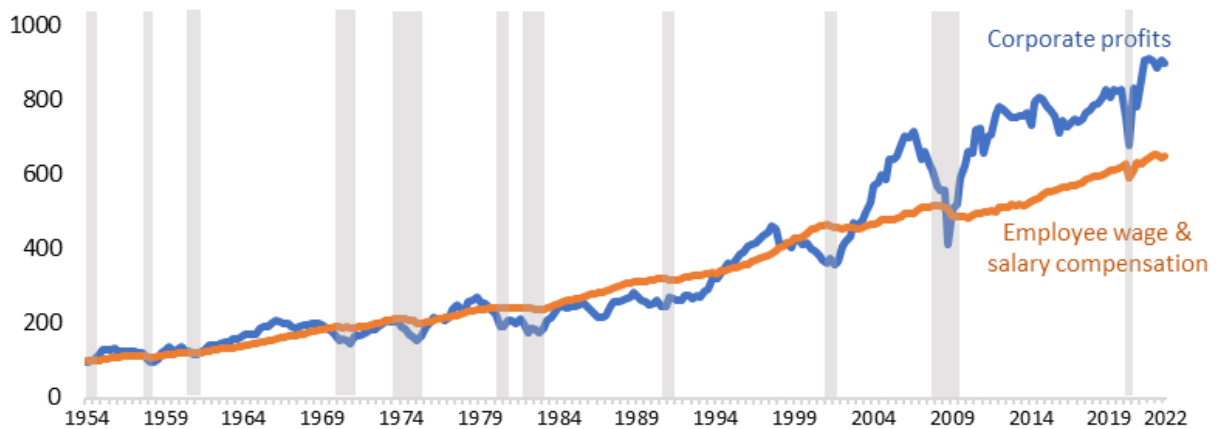
Enabled by a strong economy and a tight labor market, more than 4 million workers quit jobs in November 2022 in pursuit of better jobs. The job quits rate was highest in leisure and hospitality (5.4% in November) and in retail (3.9% in November) where wages are typically low. A groundswell of grassroots activism has led to increased worker organizing across Starbucks and Apple stores, as well as Amazon warehouses.<sup>1</sup> In addition to higher wages, greater union membership could contribute to more stable employment and reduced churn in the labor market over time.<sup>2</sup>

But these gains could be undercut as the Federal Reserve works to tame inflation by dramatically increasing interest rates with the intention of reducing demand and increasing unemployment.<sup>3</sup> When unemployment increases, low-wage workers historically bear the brunt of job losses. Moreover, recent inflation has been driven by several factors including supply chain breakdowns and corporate profits surging – neither of which will be corrected through rising interest rates ([Corporate Profits](#)).<sup>4</sup> The Inflation Reduction Act and the CHIPS and Science Act aim to reduce inflation by addressing supply chain issues, while containing key healthcare costs.<sup>5</sup> Inflation grew more slowly in the last half of 2022 and actually decreased in December 2022 to an annual rate of 6.5% — down from a high of 9.1% in June 2022.<sup>6,7</sup>

## Corporate profits have increased far more than labor income during the pandemic, continuing a trend that began in the mid-2000s.

### Corporate profits and employee wage & salary compensation, U.S.

Indexed to 1954



Sources: [Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis](#) and [Bureau of Economic Analysis \(BEA\)](#). Notes: Corporate profits (also known as “profits from current production”) are before tax and include the inventory valuation adjustment and capital consumption adjustment. Both corporate profits and employee wage & salary compensation are adjusted for inflation using the GDP implicit price deflator, and indexed to 100 in 1954. Gray bars= recessions.

Historically, corporate profits and employee compensation have tended to fall during recessions and rebound afterward, with corporate profits swinging more widely than employee compensation. But since 2000, the growth in corporate profits has greatly outstripped growth in employee compensation.<sup>1</sup> Experts attribute these unprecedented increases to increased “corporate market power.” As corporations have consolidated and purchased smaller companies, they have less competition, which allows them to demand higher prices of consumers. This, in turn, contributes to inflation.<sup>2</sup>

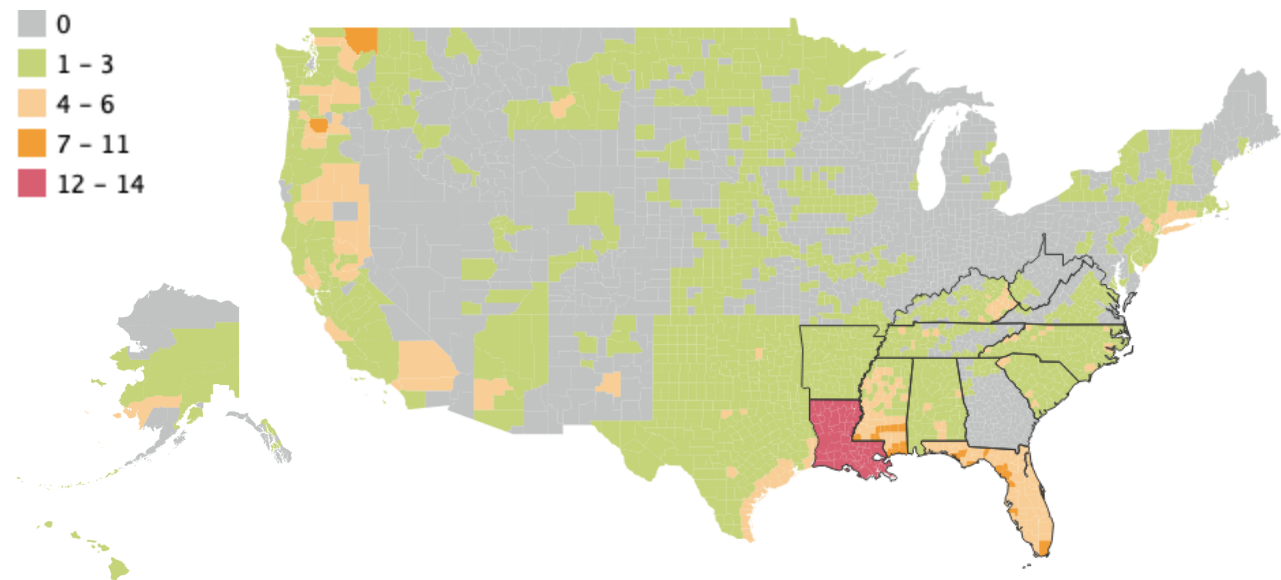
Average hourly earnings have nudged upward from \$31.38 in December 2021 to \$32.82 in December 2022.<sup>3</sup> But corporate profits have surged — growing from a then record-high of \$2.5 trillion in Q3 2020 to \$3.0 trillion in Q3 2022.<sup>4</sup> If the labor market continues to be tight, and workers continue to push for higher wages, weak competition among corporations will allow companies to pass on these costs by raising prices further to maintain high profit margins.

Recent inflation has been driven by several factors, including rising wages, corporate market power, and supply chain disruptions.<sup>5</sup> Policymakers interested in reining in inflation while minimizing the ill effects of increasing unemployment among low-wage workers can focus on measures that increase competition, thereby curbing corporations’ ability to raise prices.<sup>6</sup>

## 75% of Southerners live in counties that have experienced disasters in the last 3 years, compared to 64% of non-Southerners.

### Number of FEMA county-level disasters

Mar 1, 2020 - Jan 9, 2023



Source: [FEMA](#). Notes: Excludes COVID declarations. Includes all other disasters, for example: hurricanes, fires, floods, tornadoes, levee breaks, landslides, earthquakes, and severe ice storms.

Over the last three years, climate disasters have compounded the nation’s misery. The nation experienced an average of 20 “billion-dollar” climate disasters annually from 2020 to 2022 — up from an average of 7 annually in the two previous decades.<sup>1</sup> Southerners have been most likely to experience a disaster, with 75% of Southerners living in a county that has had a disaster since March 2020 compared to 64% of non-Southerners. In 7 of 12 Southern states (AL, AR, FL, LA, MS, NC, and SC), 100% of the population live in a county that has experienced a disaster since March 2020.

51% of Americans have experienced multiple disasters since March 2020. In Louisiana, every county (parish) has experienced 12 or more FEMA-declared disasters since March 2020.

As a result, federal spending on disaster relief more than doubled in 2020 and 2021 compared to 2018 or 2019.<sup>2</sup> 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.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, the supply of available housing diminishes, and housing costs (including insurance) increase after disasters.<sup>4</sup>

## 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 distributed 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 distribute funding. We also include a measure of the reliability of electrical infrastructure in each state. This section ends with indicators on diversity in the 118th U.S. Congress, and the number of candidates elected to the U.S. House of Representatives who denied the validity of the 2020 election.

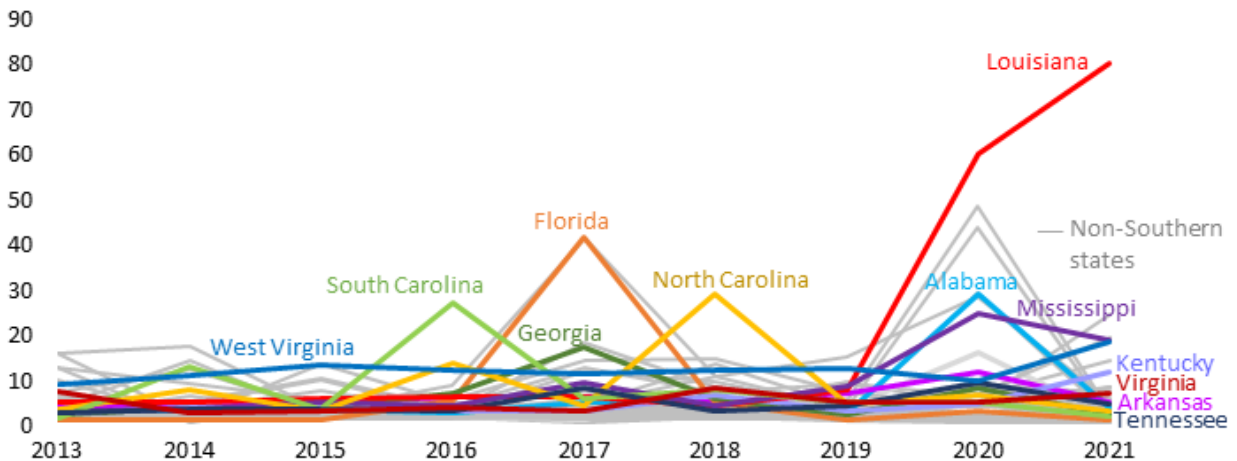
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- Average annual duration of electric power interruptions, by state
- U.S. Census Bureau Population Estimates Program
- Demographics of 118th Congress compared to U.S. population
- 2020 election deniers in the U.S. House of Representatives

## Louisiana customers averaged 80 hours of power interruptions in 2021, compared to 7 hours for the average U.S. customer.

### Average annual duration of electric power interruptions, by state

Hours per customer



Source: [U.S. Energy Information Administration](https://www.eia.gov). Notes: "Momentary" interruptions that last 5 minutes or less are generally omitted. Data reported by utilities using IEEE standard as well as any other method.

Winter Storm Elliott, which struck much of the country in December 2022, left hundreds of thousands of Southern homes without power and was a stark reminder of the fragility of America's power grids.<sup>1</sup> Extreme weather events tend to cause the longest interruptions.<sup>2</sup> And as weather events become larger, affecting a wide swath of the country, the nation's balkanized power grid means energy cannot travel to affected areas from unaffected areas.<sup>3</sup> A more unified system would make the U.S. energy infrastructure more resilient. Such a system will also be critical for ensuring new sources of renewable energy generated in one part of the country can be transmitted to parts of the country with less wind and solar energy supplies.<sup>4</sup> The Inflation Reduction Act includes funding to increase the development of U.S. electricity transmission infrastructure.<sup>5</sup> From 2013 to 2021, Louisiana had the highest cumulative hours (183) of power interruptions of all states, and West Virginia had the third highest hours of interruptions (111).

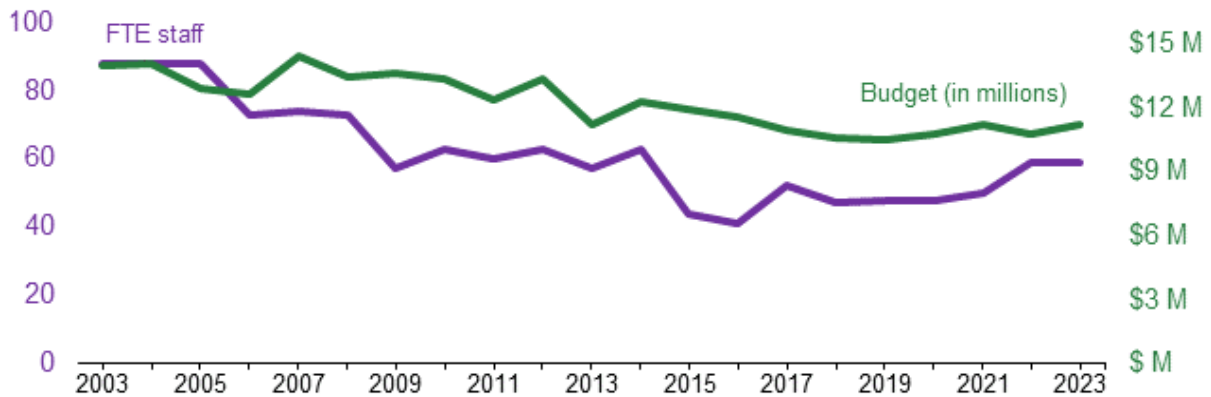
Greater security for electric utilities is also needed. A December shooting attack on a North Carolina electrical substation left tens of thousands of people without power for nearly a week. The Department of Homeland Security has warned that domestic terrorists consider the U.S. power grid to be an attractive target due to lax security regulations.<sup>6</sup>



## The Census Bureau’s annual population estimates can make up for some problems in the 2020 Census but budget and staff are down.

### U.S. Census Bureau Population Estimates Program

Full-time equivalent staff and annual budget (2022 dollars, in millions)



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Intercensal Estimates budgets, as compiled by Ron Prevost, Ph.D., Research Professor, Massive Data Institute, Georgetown University. Notes: Years represent fiscal years. FTE= Full-time equivalent.

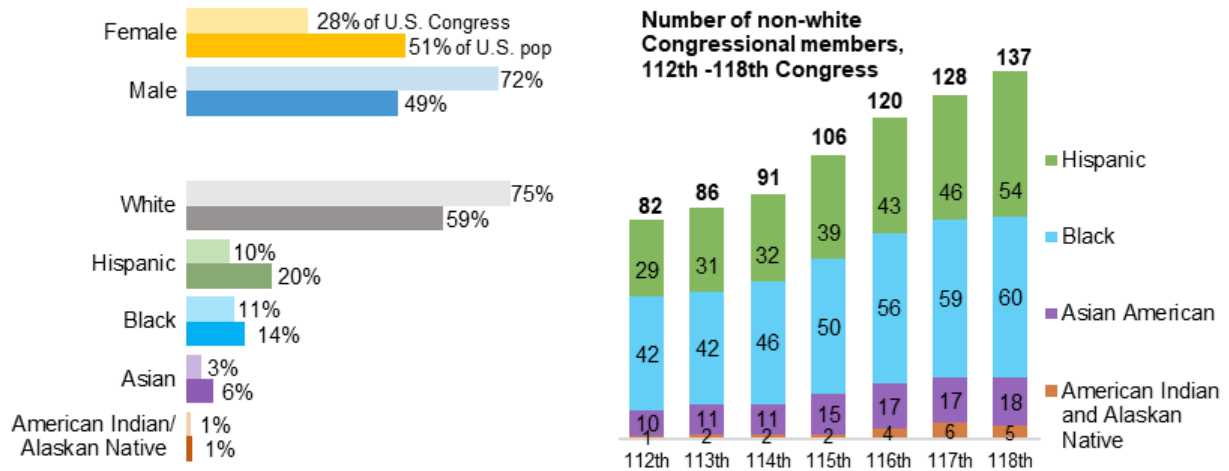
Each year, the Census Bureau produces a series of population estimates through the Population Estimates Program, an update of the once-every-ten-year population counts for states, cities and counties. These estimates are used in data products like the American Community Survey and help determine the distribution of \$1.5 trillion in population-based federal aid.<sup>1</sup>

Improving the Population Estimates Program could mitigate issues in the 2020 Census, which undercounted people of color, the very young, and the population of 6 states, according to the Census Bureau’s own measures of accuracy. (Populations of 8 states, white people, and older Americans were overcounted.) These measures found the 2020 Census missed close to 5% of people of Hispanic origin (triple the rate in 2010), children up to age 4 (the most in 50 years), and residents of Tennessee and Arkansas.<sup>2</sup> These miscounts leave some communities receiving less than their fair share of population-based funding.

Census Bureau Director Robert Santos has appointed a team to investigate improving the estimates.<sup>3</sup> Professor Ron Prevost of the Massive Data Institute at Georgetown, a member of the Census Scientific Advisory Committee, researched one potential obstacle: The estimates budget, down 20% since 2003, and staffing levels, down 33%.

## Despite being the most racially and ethnically diverse Congress in U.S. history, the 118th Congress still lacks the diversity of the U.S. populace.

### Demographics of 118th Congress compared to U.S. population



Source: [Pew Research Center](#) and [Census Bureau](#). Notes: Data reflects the 534 voting members of the 118th Congress as of Jan. 3, 2023. Data does not include non voting delegates or commissioners. White population is non-Hispanic. Members with more than one racial/ ethnic identity are counted in each applicable group.

The 118th Congress, convened on January 3rd, is the most racially and ethnically diverse Congress in American history, with more than a quarter of current members of Congress identifying as non-White and/or Hispanic. This continues a trend of increasingly racially and ethnically diverse representation in Congress, with the 118th Congress being the seventh Congress to break the record set by the one before it. The vast majority (80%) of racial and ethnic minority members in the new Congress are Democrats, while 20% are Republicans — similar to the previous Congress.<sup>1</sup> Additionally, 129 women hold seats in Congress — more than ever before — and there are a record-breaking 13 lesbian, gay, or bisexual members of Congress.<sup>2,3</sup>

Despite these gains, Congress still lacks the diversity of the country’s population. Women make up 51% of the U.S. population but hold only 28% of the seats in Congress. 10% of the members of Congress are Hispanic, compared to 20% of the nation’s population. Black and Asian representation in Congress both lag by 3 percentage points. Additionally, this Congress is, on average, one of the oldest in the last century — with a median age of 63.9 years in the Senate and 57.5 years in the House.<sup>4</sup>



# Prosperity

## Institutions

Beyond governments, American society has always depended on a wide array of civic institutions to provide critical information to constituents, hold governments accountable, and 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.

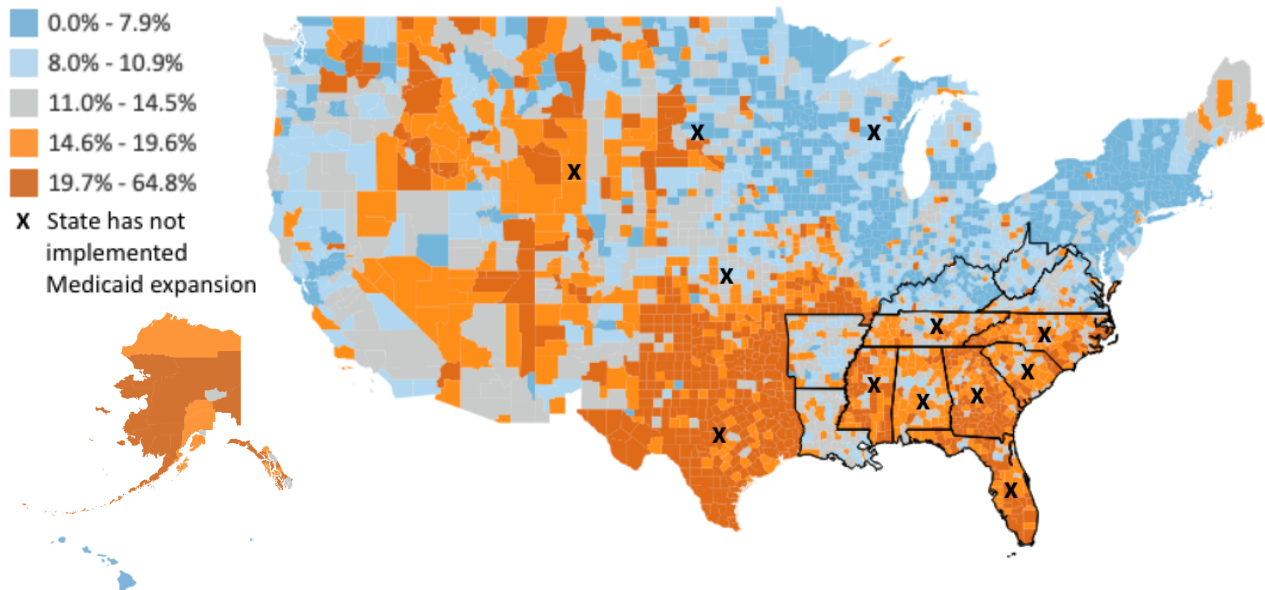
This section of *Pandemic to Prosperity* examines local news and internet access to assess communities' ability to receive critical information and remain connected in a world that is dramatically more digital than just three years ago. We also look at the availability of health insurance to identify gaps in resources critical for helping Americans be healthy and productive.

### Indicators in this section

- Lack of health insurance coverage, by county
- News deserts, by county
- Lack of internet access, by county

**In states that have not implemented Medicaid expansion, 18% of the population lacks health insurance, compared to only 10% in states that have expanded Medicaid.**

**Lack of health insurance coverage by county, 2017-21 (5-yr average)**  
Percent of population age 19-64



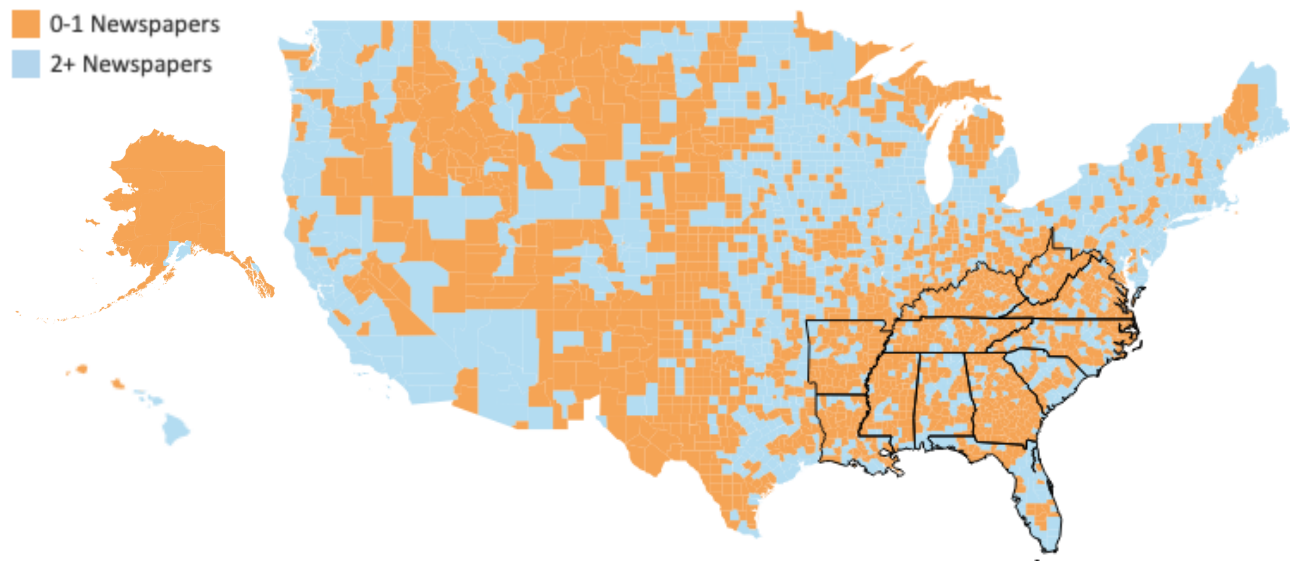
Sources: [Census Bureau's American Community Survey 2017-21](#) and [Kaiser Family Foundation](#). Note: South Dakota has adopted but not yet implemented Medicaid expansion. Wisconsin has partially expanded Medicaid (under a Medicaid waiver) to include all adults under 100 percent federal poverty level, but did not adopt the ACA expansion.

Americans without health insurance are less likely to get the medical care they need. When they are injured they don't get the follow-up care prescribed for them, and those that have chronic conditions often go untreated until they appear in emergency rooms. In 2010, the Affordable Care Act began to dramatically reduce the number of uninsured people across the country through Medicaid expansion as well as through new subsidies for health insurance "marketplaces." Despite substantial new federal subsidies, 11 states (7 of them in the South) have still not adopted Medicaid expansion. In many counties in these non-expansion states, 30, 40, or even 50% of the population is uninsured. 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.<sup>1,2</sup> Texas (one of the 11 states that has not adopted Medicaid) had the highest uninsured rate in the U.S. at 24% during 2017-21. Florida, Georgia, and Mississippi also had very high uninsured rates, of 19%, 18%, and 18%, respectively. Those uninsured individuals that do get medical treatment are likely to incur medical debt ([Medical Debt](#)).

## 75% of Southern counties (50% of non-Southern counties) have one or no newspaper, meaning limited access to critical information.

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

News deserts as of 2022



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

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. 75% of Southern counties are news deserts, compared to only 50% of non-Southern counties. 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.<sup>1</sup>

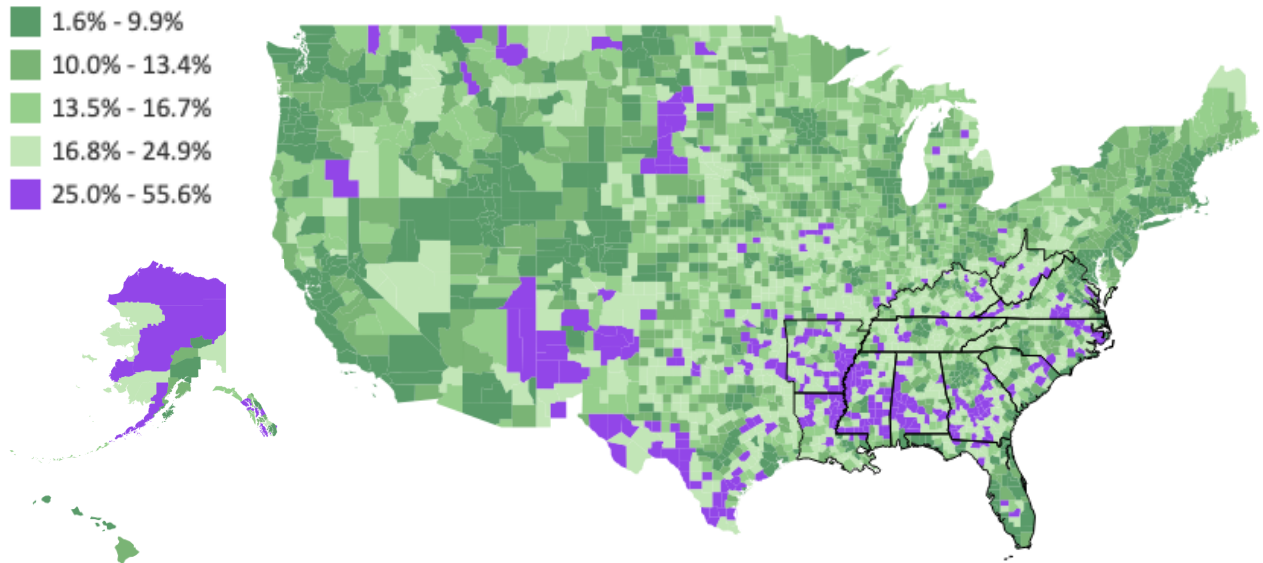
Local news is essential for community transparency and information, both crucial ingredients for an effective democracy. A Brennan Center report found that 2.7 million adults of voting age live in news deserts, with 700,000 living in battleground states.<sup>2</sup> Lack of local news can and has allowed misinformation and disinformation to flourish.<sup>3</sup> Mis- and disinformation circulated prior to the 2022 midterm elections, ranging from false information campaigns in multiple languages to candidates falsifying or embellishing their backgrounds, with little to no community accountability.<sup>4,5,6,7,8</sup> As local news sources close their doors or struggle to keep them open, an essential platform for democracy is rapidly disappearing.

Solutions at both the community and national level are crucial to reviving trusted local news. In news deserts across the U.S. Gulf state region, a news collective called the Gulf State Newsroom provides support to local journalists to help fill the void.<sup>9</sup> The Local Journalism Sustainability Act, a bipartisan bill supported by 77 representatives, including from six Southern states (GA, MS, NC, VA, TN, and WV), would provide tax credits for subscriptions and employment at local news organizations.<sup>10,11</sup>

**21% of Southern counties have poor internet access (defined as one-quarter of households without internet) compared to only 6% of counties outside the South.**

**Lack of internet access by county, 2017-21 (5-yr average)**

Percent of households without internet access



Source: [Census Bureau's American Community Survey 2017-21](#). 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 has become an essential utility for every American family. Yet, according to new data, 21% of Southern counties have poor internet access (defined as at least 1 in 4 households lacking internet) compared to 6% of non-Southern counties. Across Mississippi, 19% of households lacked internet access and in Arkansas, West Virginia, and Louisiana, 16% of households lacked internet access. Eight of the ten states with the worst internet access are in the South.

The Bipartisan Infrastructure Law is sending \$42.45 billion directly to states to collaboratively plan and execute broadband expansion in partnership with local and regional communities.<sup>1</sup> Expanding internet access in rural communities is often expensive because residents are scattered across large areas. Municipal and regional utility companies were established and are well positioned to deliver essential services including broadband to underserved communities, but due to lobbying efforts from private telecom companies, many states have passed laws preempting localities from building and operating their own internet infrastructure.<sup>2</sup>

# Prosperity

## People

At the end of the day, governments and institutions are responsible for ensuring the well-being of the communities they serve. This section examines key metrics of economic well-being including current data on employment rates by race and ethnicity, medical debt, child poverty, and food and housing insecurity. It includes key measures of health: working-age death rates, maternal mortality rates, and anxiety and depression levels.

### Indicators in this section

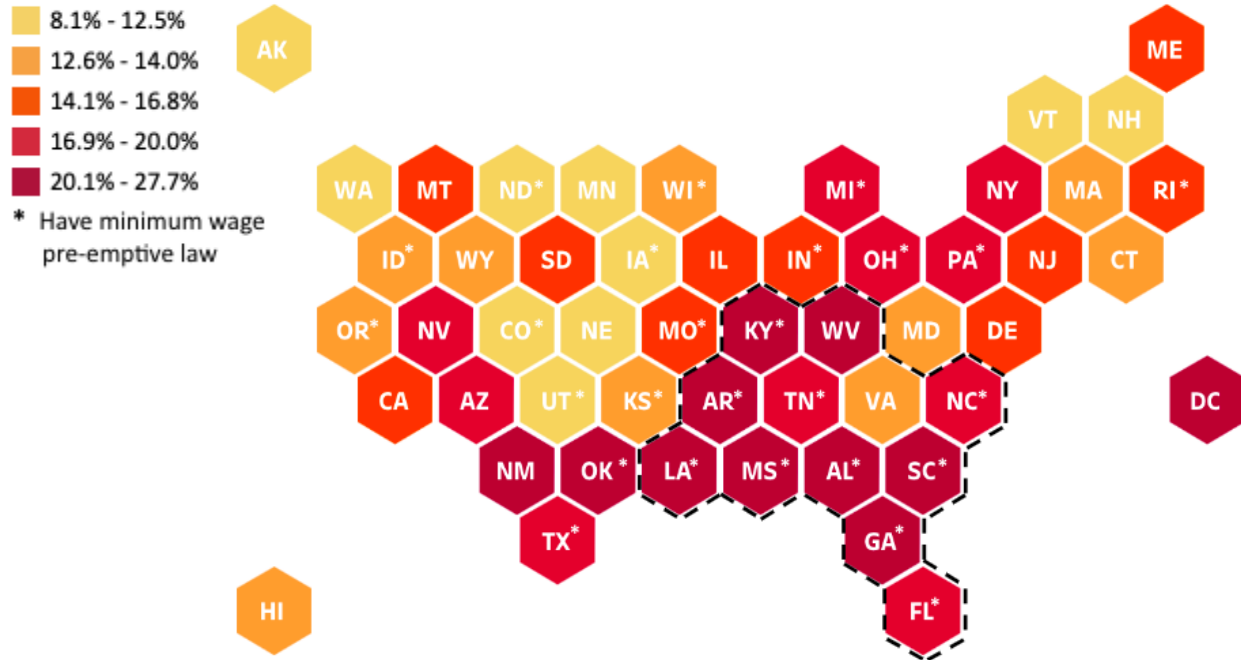
- Child poverty rates, by state
- Working-age death rates from external causes, by state
- Pregnancy related death rates, by race/ethnicity
- Employment rate, by race/ethnicity
- Medical debt, by state
- Renters with severe housing cost burdens, by county
- Likelihood of eviction or foreclosure, by state
- Food insecurity, by state
- Symptoms of anxiety or depression, by state



**19% of Southern children live in poverty, compared to 16% of children outside the South. 10 Southern states have passed laws preempting localities from passing increased minimum wage ordinances.**

**Child poverty rates, 2021**

Percent of children under 18 years old living below the poverty level



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

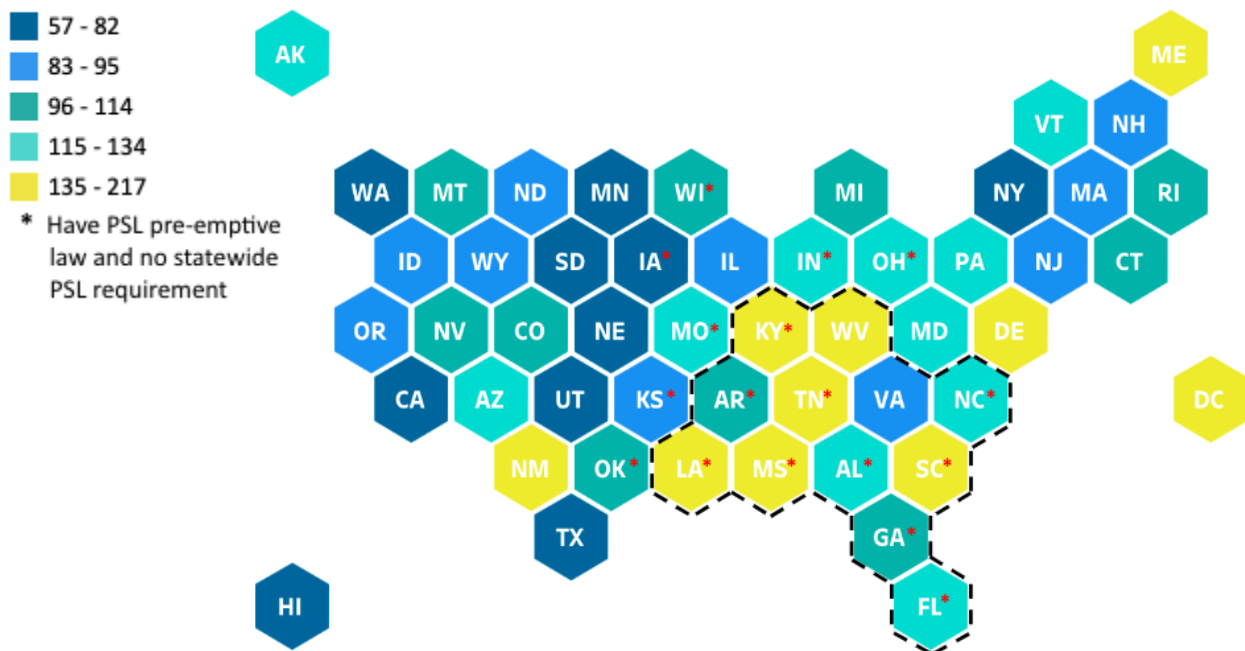
The Congressional Budget Office found that 500,000 children could be lifted out of poverty if the U.S. minimum wage were lifted to \$15.<sup>1</sup> Yet at \$7.25/hr the federal minimum wage remains less than half of that target. Thirty states have set a minimum wage above \$7.25 but only three non-Southern states plus D.C. have a minimum wage as high as \$15 (effective Jan 1, 2023). Those states that have increased their minimum wage have an average minimum wage of only \$12.45/hr. In addition, 26 states have passed laws that prohibit localities from passing minimum wage ordinances higher than the state minimum wage – effectively barring localities from setting a minimum wage as high as \$15/hr.<sup>2,3</sup>

28% of Mississippi children and 27% of Louisiana children live below the poverty level — the highest rates of child poverty in the nation. Mississippi and Louisiana are among the 20 states that do not have a statewide minimum wage that is higher than the federal minimum of \$7.25 per hour. Mississippi and Louisiana are also two of the 26 states that preempt local governments from establishing higher minimum wages locally that would help alleviate poverty within their communities.<sup>4</sup>

## Working-age death rates from external causes were 33% higher in Southern states compared to non-Southern states.

Working-age deaths from external causes per 100,000 population, 2021

Population age 25-64



Source: [CDC Wonder](#), [NCSL](#), and [EPI](#). Notes: PSL= paid-sick leave. External causes of death include: suicide (X66-X84, Y87.0), homicide (X86-X99, Y00-Y09, Y87.1), drug poisoning (X40-44, X60-X64, X85, Y10-Y14), acute alcohol poisoning (X45, X65, Y15), and transport accidents (V01-V99, Y85). Data is provisional and age-adjusted.

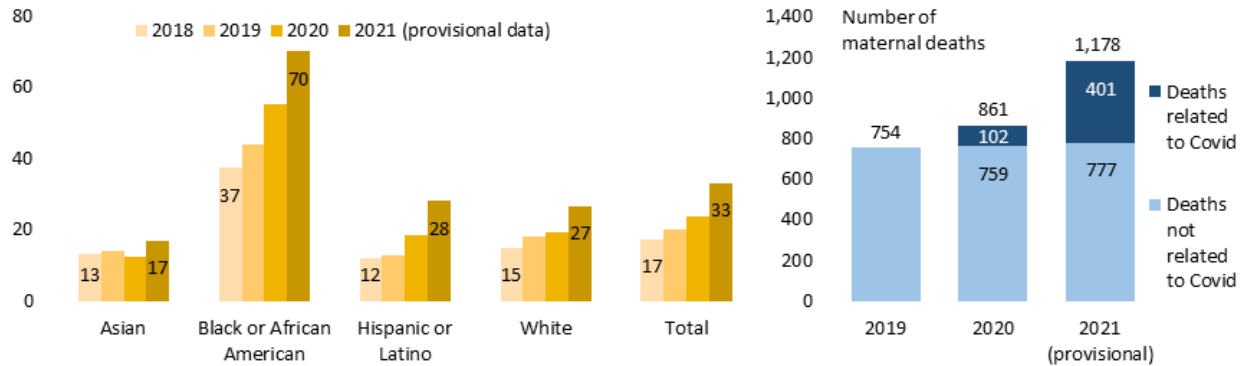
Since 2010, working-age mortality rates have been increasing, largely due to drug overdoses, alcohol poisoning, suicide, homicide, and traffic accidents ([Motor Vehicle Deaths](#)). In 2021, working-age death rates from “external causes” were 33% higher in Southern states than elsewhere in the U.S. Researchers have found that paid sick leave reduces deaths from these “external causes.”

The U.S. is the only wealthy country that does not mandate paid sick leave for workers.<sup>1</sup> Paid sick leave reduces the spread of infections at workplaces and increases worker retention. Workers without paid sick leave are less productive and more likely to be injured at work. Moreover, workers without paid sick leave experience greater financial stress, and subsequently are more likely to overdose on drugs and to commit suicide.<sup>2,3</sup> More than 35 U.S. cities or counties have passed paid sick leave ordinances, but several states have stepped in to outlaw such local ordinances.<sup>4</sup> In 2010, only 1 state (Georgia) prohibited localities from mandating paid sick leave. By 2019, 23 states had passed laws that preempted localities from mandating paid sick leave.<sup>5</sup> Every southern state (except Virginia and West Virginia) has preempted localities from passing paid sick leave ordinances and does not mandate it statewide — effectively prohibiting paid sick leave across the state.

## Pregnancy-related deaths spiked during the pandemic. The mortality rate for Black women is more than 2 times the rate for white women.

### Maternal mortality rates by race/ethnicity, U.S.

Pregnancy-related deaths per 100,000 live births



Sources: [CDC Provisional Mortality Statistics](#) (deaths) and [CDC Natality Information](#) (births) and [GAO](#). Notes: 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 U.S. than in any other developed country. In 2020, the U.S. had 24 maternal deaths for every 100,000 live births — more than 3 times the rate of other high income countries.<sup>1</sup> Provisional data for 2021 shows that maternal deaths per 100,000 live births in the U.S. spiked to 33. Among maternal deaths, racial disparities persist. Pregnancy-related deaths in the U.S. were 2.6 times more likely for Black people (70) than for white people (27) during 2021. Black women have historically faced racial discrimination, bias, and inequity in health care systems, for pregnancy-related and other care.<sup>2,3,4,5,6,7</sup>

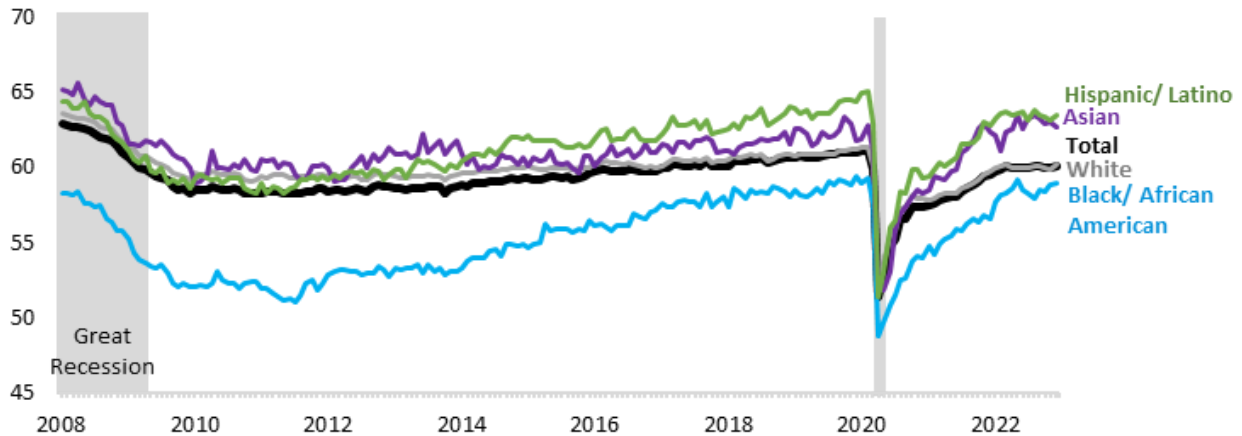
According to GAO estimates, 25% of pregnancy-related deaths that occurred in 2020 and 2021 listed Covid as a contributing cause of death. Covid complications were a driver of the spike in maternal deaths, with experts expressing the need for more research on the impact of Covid-19 in pregnant people.<sup>8,9,10</sup> Black and Hispanic communities were disproportionately impacted by Covid, facing barriers to quality health care, economic and community safety, transportation and more.<sup>11,12,13</sup>

Maternal morbidity — short- or long-term health problems related to pregnancy, birth, or postpartum period — is largely overlooked in the U.S. It affects 50,000-60,000 people annually, with similar racial, regional, and age disparities as maternal death rates.<sup>14,15</sup> Among efforts to reduce maternal health disparities, the 2021 American Rescue Plan Act included a 12-month postpartum coverage extension option that expanded Medicaid postpartum coverage from 60 days to 12 months after giving birth.<sup>16,17</sup> 27 states have implemented the extension, 9 of which are Southern states (FL, GA, KY, LA, NC, SC, TN, VA, WV).<sup>18</sup>

**At 60.1%, the Dec. employment rate is 1 percentage point below the pre-pandemic February 2020 level. But employment rates vary from a low of 58.9% for Black adults to a high of 63.5% for Hispanic adults.**

**Employment rate (age 16+) by race/ethnicity, U.S.**

Jan 2008 - Dec 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 16 years and older. Data is seasonally adjusted.

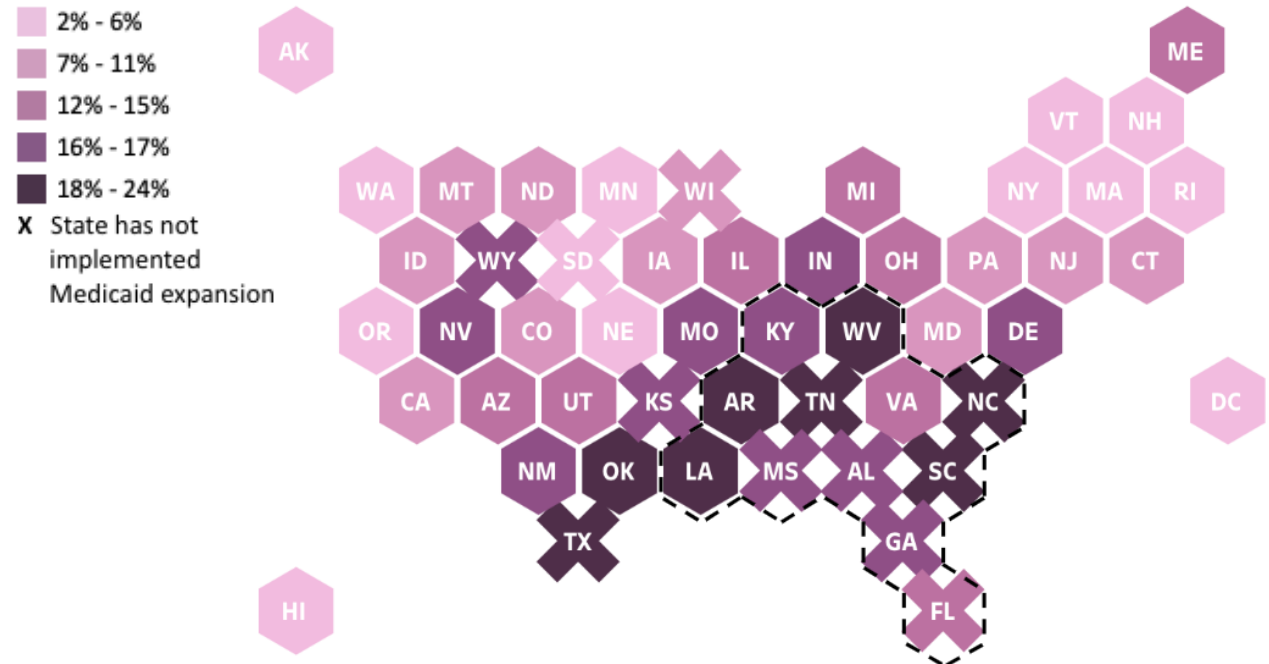
While jobs have surpassed pre-pandemic levels, the share of the population age 16+ with employment remains 1 percentage point below February 2020. Several factors may be contributing to fewer people seeking employment, including lack of available and affordable child care, Americans retiring in higher than projected numbers, and an estimated 1.3 to 4.3 million Americans sidelined by Long Covid ([Long Covid Estimates](#)).<sup>1,2,3</sup>

Annual wage growth in December (4.5%) did not keep up with inflation (6.5%).<sup>4,5</sup> Meanwhile, corporate profits have skyrocketed — growing from a then record-high of \$2.5 trillion in Q3 2020 to \$3.0 trillion in Q3 2022 — indicating that corporations have capacity to pay higher wages and draw workers in from early retirement, without contributing to inflation.<sup>6,7,8</sup>

## About 17% of Southerners hold medical debt in default, compared to 11% of Americans outside the South.

### Share of individuals with medical debt in collections

February 2022



Source: [Urban Institute](#) and [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. South Dakota has adopted but not yet implemented Medicaid expansion.

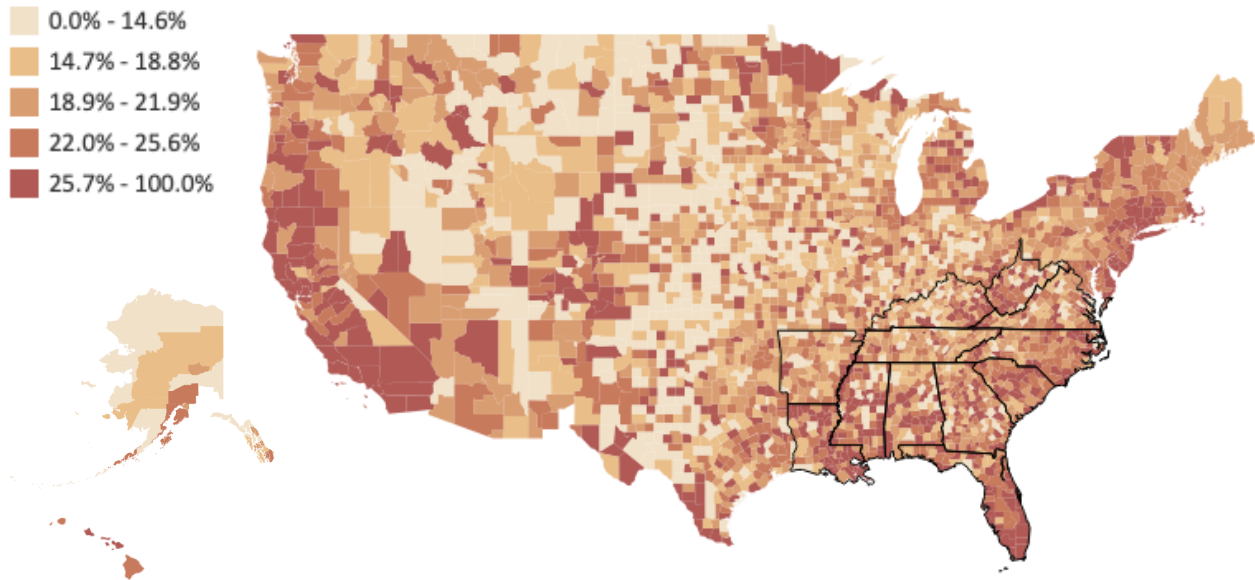
Based on February 2022 credit bureau data, about 17% of Southerners had medical debt in collections compared to only 11% for non-Southerners. Most states in the deep South have failed to implement Medicaid expansion or were late to implement it, thus contributing to higher medical debt for their residents.<sup>1</sup> In fact, 8 of the 10 states with the highest shares 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%).

Medical debt often means families forgo medical care or make tough tradeoffs between paying for food, rent, or medical expenses, worsening both housing and food insecurity ([Likelihood of Eviction or Foreclosure](#), [Food Insecurity](#)).<sup>2,3</sup> Seven Southern states (AL, GA, FL, MS, NC, SC, and TN) can reduce medical debt levels by adopting Medicaid expansion. Southern states and localities can go further by paying off residents' medical debt. The New Orleans City Council has set aside \$1.3 million of its federal American Rescue Plan funds to erase \$130 million in medical debt for New Orleans residents. The money would go to RIP Medical Debt, a national nonprofit that buys medical debt in collections and then forgives the debt.<sup>4</sup>

## 25% of U.S. renters pay the majority of their household income on housing costs. In Louisiana and Florida, it's 29% of renters.

### Severe housing cost burdens by county, 2017-21 (5-yr average)

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



Source: [Census Bureau's American Community Survey 2017-21](#).

From 2017-21, at least 1 in 4 renters in several Southern states (Louisiana: 29%, Florida: 29%, West Virginia: 25%, Mississippi: 25%, and South Carolina: 25%) paid at least half of their total household income toward housing costs. Median rent prices reached record highs in 2022, peaking in August at \$2,053 per month.<sup>1</sup> Having to spend the majority of their income on rent means less resources for families to cover food, clothing, medical care, educational needs, and other necessities.<sup>2,3</sup> The growth in rent prices has drastically outpaced growth in household income. Between 2001 and 2021, median household income increased by only 3%, whereas median rent prices increased by 18%, more than 6 times that amount.<sup>4</sup> As more families are burdened with rent costs and limited savings, home ownership, a crucial means to building household wealth, becomes a distant part of the American Dream.<sup>5</sup>

Housing costs burdens disproportionately affect Black and Hispanic renters. Since 2001, these renter households hold the highest share of those who spend a significant portion of their income on rent, both hovering around 50-60% over the years. In comparison, about 40% of white renters are considered cost burdened.<sup>6</sup> Evidence of housing discrimination in the U.S. still remains. A 2018 study found that Black households were more likely to pay higher rent prices than their white counterparts for identical housing in the same neighborhoods.<sup>7</sup>



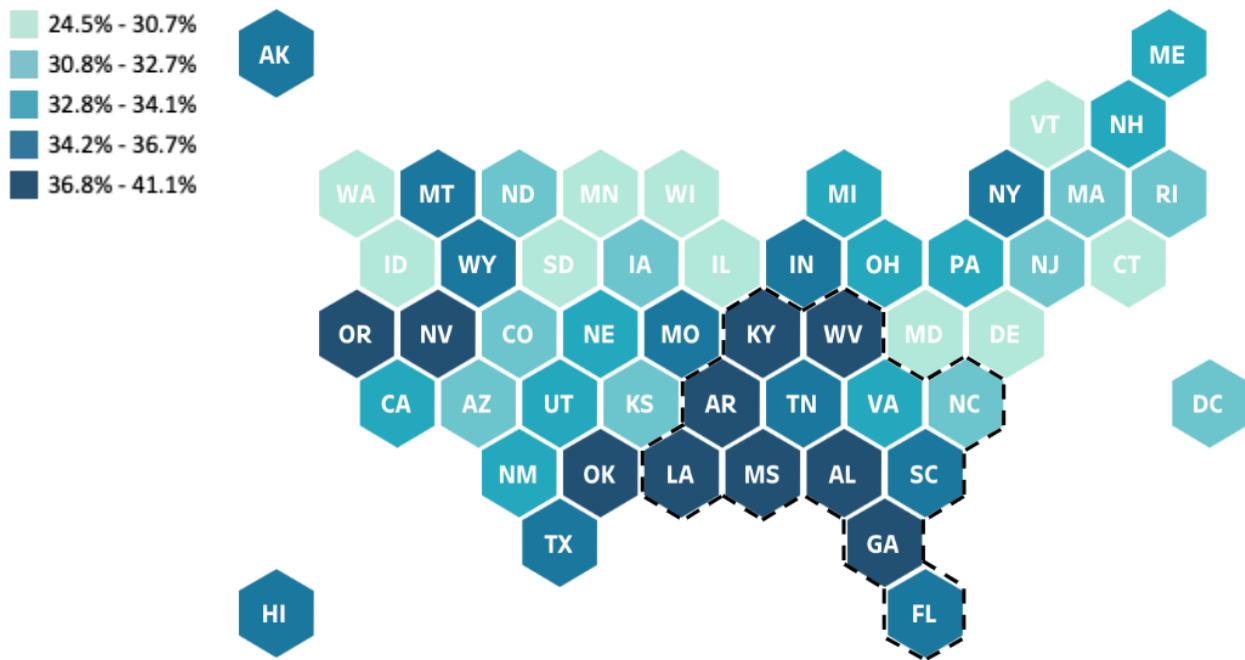




## 34% of Americans report symptoms of anxiety or depression, up from 11% in 2019. The South had 4 of 5 states with the highest rates.

### Symptoms of anxiety or depression, Dec 9-19, 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 percent of adults in the U.S. reporting symptoms of anxiety and depression has tripled from 11% in 2019 to 34% in December 2022. 4 out of the 5 states with the highest rates were in the South: 40% in Louisiana, 39% in West Virginia, 38% in Kentucky, and 38% in Mississippi. Though pandemic concerns have eased, Americans face a growing mental health crisis.

Economic, racial, political, and cultural tensions were exacerbated by the pandemic, leaving Americans with higher levels of psychological distress.<sup>1,2</sup> LGBT adults consistently experience higher rates of anxiety and depression compared to non-LGBT adults.<sup>3</sup> The mental health of Black, Hispanic, and Asian adults has also worsened throughout the pandemic, relative to white adults.<sup>4</sup> Several factors, such as anti-transgender legislation, mass shootings, and increases in hate crimes have many feeling unsafe and anxious.<sup>5,6,7</sup>

As mental health worsens, mental health providers are in high demand. 60% of psychologists have full caseloads, and nearly half report feeling burned out.<sup>8</sup> Policies that target specific stressors could help ease this burden. For example, a recent study found that the expanded Child Tax Credits helped lower anxiety symptoms for low-income families, and increased mental health benefits for Black and Hispanic adults ([Child Poverty](#)).<sup>9</sup>

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## About this series

History has shown that large-scale crises accelerate pre-existing trends, exacerbate inequities, and permanently change societies and civic life. 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 ninth edition of *Pandemic to Prosperity: South*.

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

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

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



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