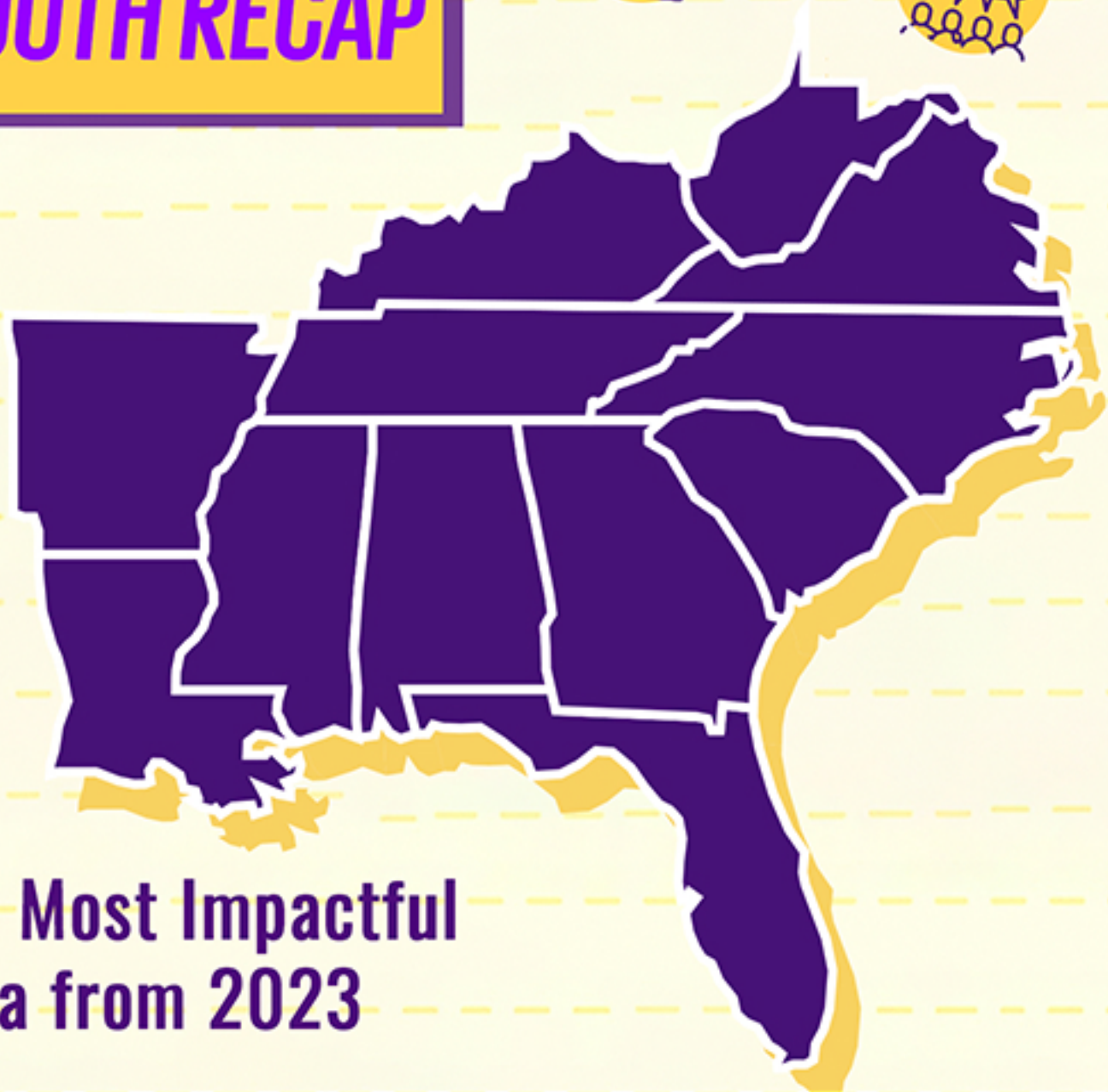


October 17, 2023



PANDEMIC *to* PROSPERITY

SOUTH RECAP



The Most Impactful
Data from 2023



National Conference on Citizenship

FOREWORD

PANDEMIC
 to
 PROSPERITY

This special issue of Pandemic to Prosperity highlights the most impactful data from our quarterly 2023 publications. 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 track the impacts of the pandemic with a focus on our lives and livelihoods, governments, civic institutions, and overall well-being.

The impacts of the Covid pandemic will be felt for generations. Not only did over 1.1 million Americans die, but the dual Covid health and economic crises exacerbated many pre-existing trends, and left Americans more vulnerable to emerging challenges. The American South has lagged on nearly every indicator of prosperity and equity for decades, and similar patterns have emerged following the Covid crises. As communities and governments come together to make decisions about how to invest remaining American Rescue Plan (ARP) funds, as well as new funds from the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law and the Inflation Reduction Act, these data points can be used to inform investments that support Southerners' ability to be resilient in the face of any shock.

Health The nation experienced 400,000 excess deaths among working-age Americans due to Covid as well as spikes in overdoses, suicides, motor vehicle deaths, and pregnancy-related deaths from 2020 to 2022.^[1] Maternal mortality shot up 60% in 2 years, with Black Americans 2.5 times more likely to die of pregnancy-related deaths than white Americans. AL, KY, LA, MS, TN, and WV experienced the highest overall death rates in the nation. In these same states, more than 30% of adults who previously had Covid have experienced Long Covid which affects lung and cognitive function.

Financial well-being Though inflation has fallen from 6.5% last year to 3.7% this year, accumulated price increases have contributed to economic hardships.^[2] 1 in 3 American households struggled to make ends meet in 2023 and 13% of Southern adults reported their households went hungry. Nearly half of all Black and Hispanic households struggled to cover basic expenses. Moreover, the U.S. is experiencing a severe housing shortage, which is keeping housing prices elevated. At least 1 in 4 renters in FL, LA, MS, SC, and WV spend the majority of their income on housing.

Children and Youth Extended remote learning had detrimental effects on children’s learning with reading and math scores falling for 4th and 8th graders from 2019 to 2022. Separately, gun deaths have swelled and are now the #1 cause of death for American children. These issues along with limited school resources, and anti-LGBTQ legislation have affected youth mental health. The share of all high school students who attempted suicide increased among all teens, but female students were twice as likely as male students to attempt suicide. And LGBTQ+ students attempted suicide at rates 4 times higher than heterosexual students.

Climate shocks The number of “billion dollar” climate disasters have increased from an average of 7 annually to 20 annually in the last 3 years. Every single county in AL, AR, LA, MS, NC, and SC has experienced at least one disaster since 2020. Every county (parish) in Louisiana has experienced 12 or more disasters since 2020. Power interruptions accompany many disasters and Louisiana has suffered the most hours without power. Nationwide, heat-related deaths nearly doubled from 2019 to 2022.

History has shown that large-scale crises accelerate pre-existing trends, exacerbate inequities, and permanently change societies and civic life. While the impacts of the pandemic have lessened, climate shocks are becoming increasingly intense and widespread. As massive once-in-a-generation federal investments come to state and local governments we will increasingly disseminate actionable, up-to-date data on community climate impacts. This data will support the burgeoning Southern civic ecosystem in making the case for where and how to bolster human resilience going forward.



Dr. Jeanine Abrams McLean
President, Fair Count



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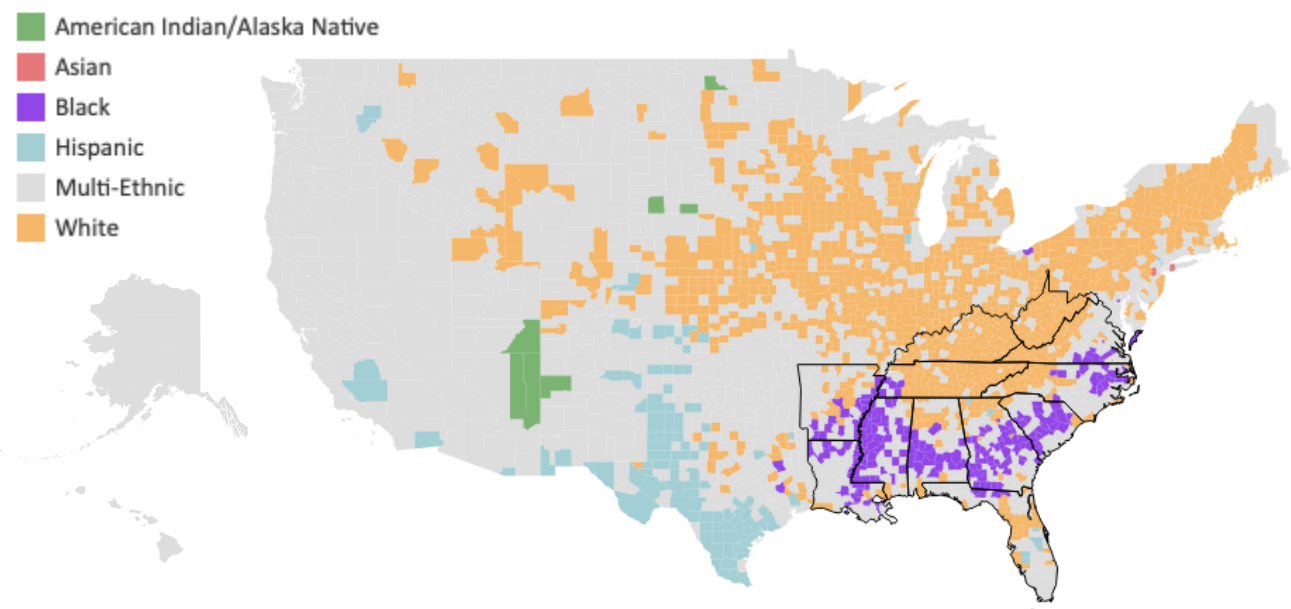
ABOUT, AUTHORS, AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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 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.

LIVES AND LIVELIHOODS

To recover from any disaster, an assessment of damages is essential. Covid exacerbated multiple health and economic trends. As such, tracking Covid-related damage requires monitoring a number of metrics. Additionally, shocks and stressors such as extreme weather are compounding the nation's distress.

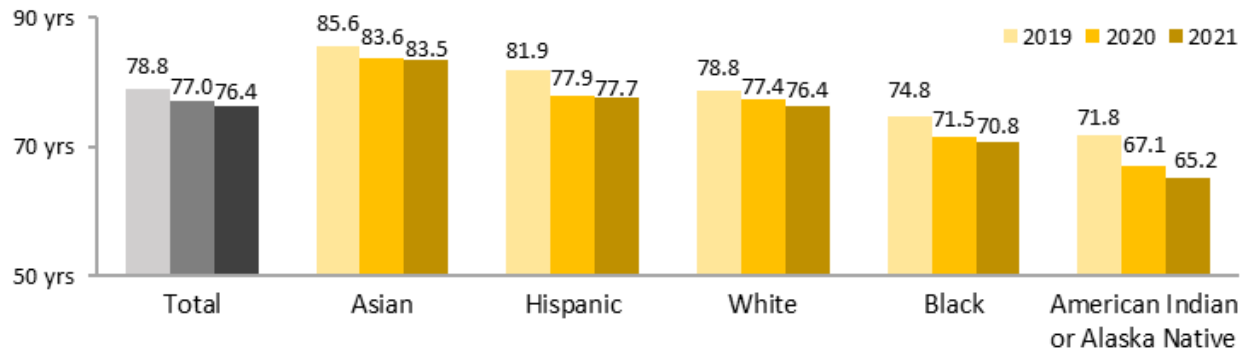
In later sections of this report, these indicators serve as context for a unique analysis of the complex interactions between recent shocks, the nation's civic health, and overall well being.

Indicators in this section

- Life expectancy, by race/ethnicity
- Death rates, by state
- Long Covid, by state
- Public health authority limits, by state
- Disaster declarations, by county
- Heat-related deaths, by race/ethnicity
- Corporate profits and employee compensation

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

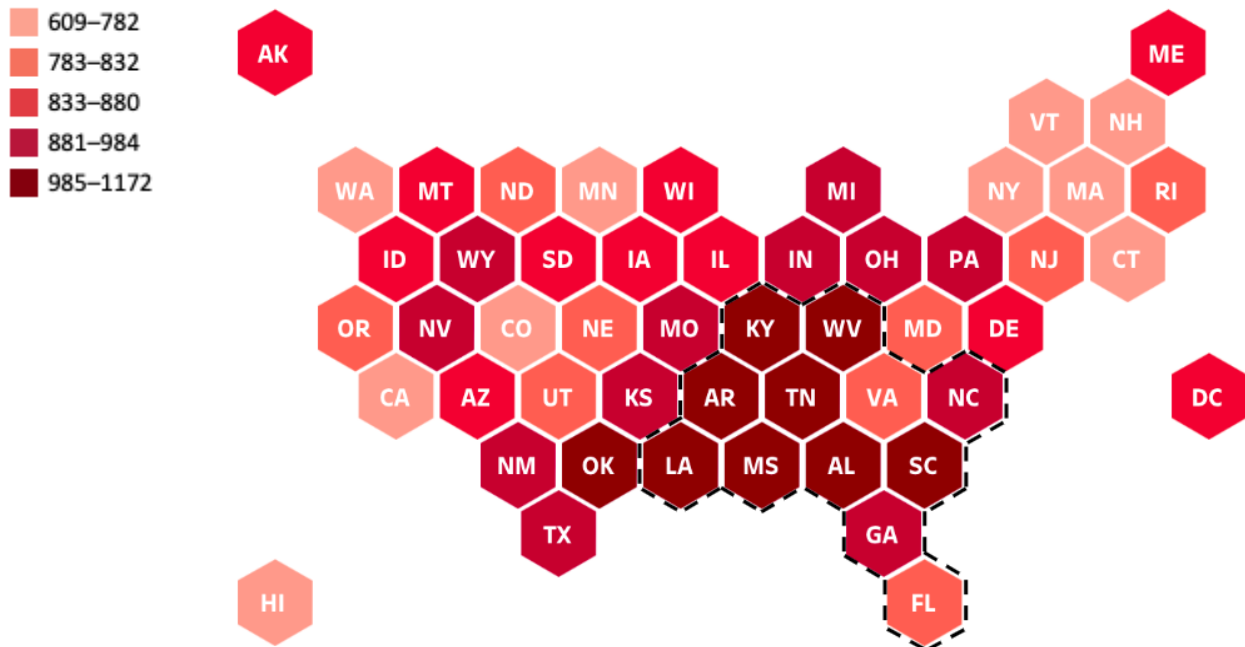


Source: CDC National Center for Health Statistics [Data Brief](#) and [Report](#). Notes: Life expectancy at birth is defined as how long, on average, a newborn can expect to live if current death rates do not change. However, the actual age-specific death rate of any particular birth cohort cannot be 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.^[1] (In comparison, studies show that peer nations had modest increases in life expectancy from 2020 to 2021).^{[2],[3]} 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. Covid was a significant contributor in driving down life expectancy, but health disparities rooted in discrimination and systemic racism have long impacted these populations.^{[4],[5],[6],[7],[8]}

States with the highest death rates in 2020 and 2021 are heavily concentrated in the South. MS has the highest death rate, followed by WV, AL, KY, LA, and TN.

Age-adjusted death rates per 100,000 population
Average for years 2020-21



Source: [CDC, Wonder](#).

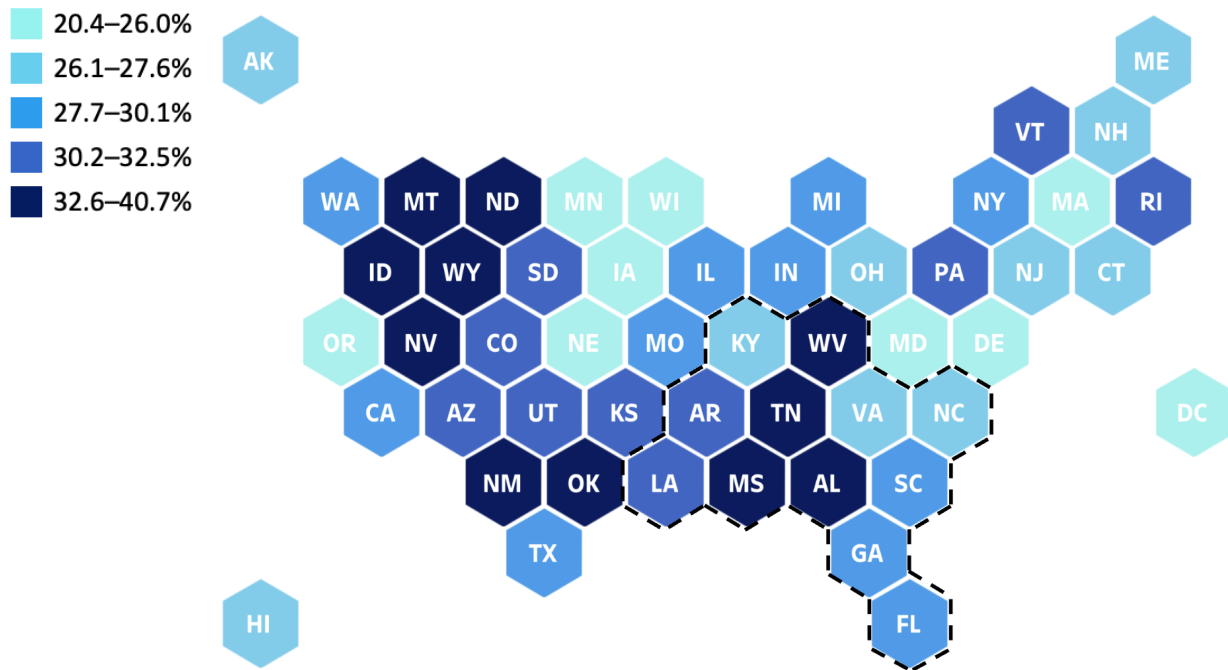
As Covid ravaged the nation in 2020 and 2021, on its way to killing more than 1 million Americans, the U.S. death rate jumped 20%. Among states with the highest overall death rates in 2020 and 2021, 7 Southern states (AL, AR, KY, LA, SC, TN, and WV) have all enacted legislation to weaken their state governments' authority to protect public health through options such as mask mandates and quarantine orders. This has left these states more vulnerable to future pandemics ([Public health authority limits](#)).

Drug overdose deaths are also ravaging the nation, with over 100,000 deaths in 2021. 4 Southern states (KY, LA, TN, and WV) suffered among the highest overdose death rates in the U.S. in 2021, contributing to their high overall death rates. [\[1\],\[2\]](#)

Among Americans who have ever had Covid, 29% suffered from Long Covid symptoms. In West Virginia, it's 41%.

Long Covid estimates, June 7-19, 2023

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



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

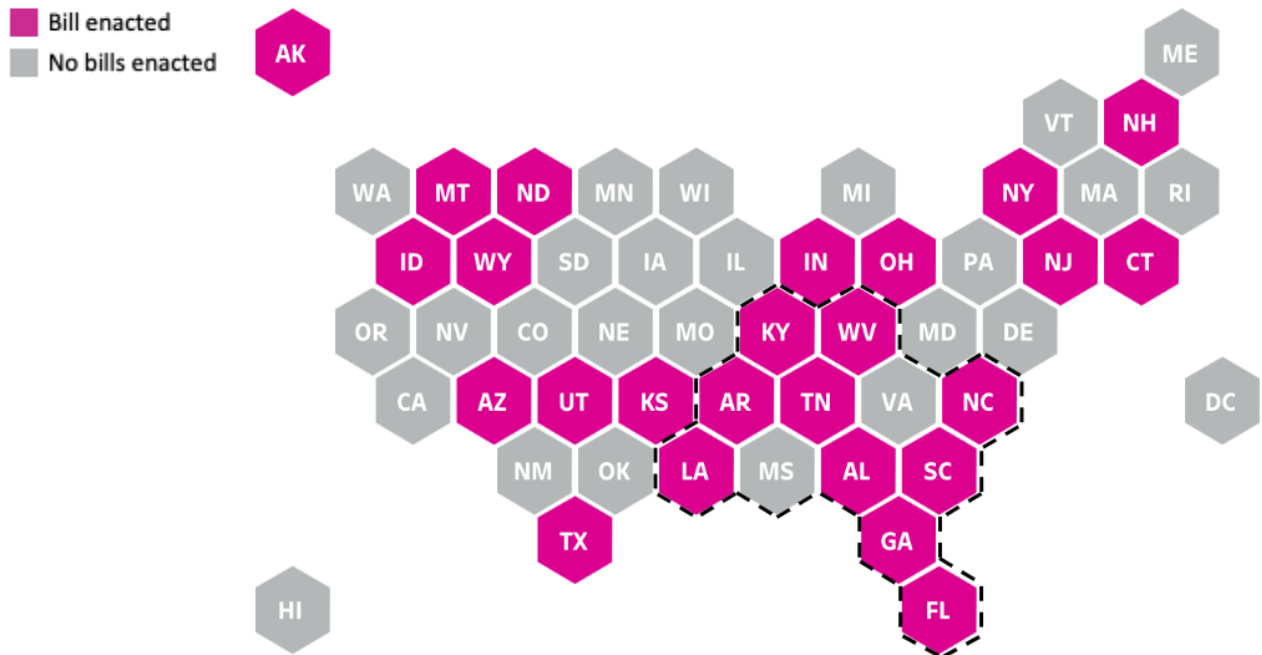
Among Americans who previously had Covid, 29% experienced prolonged symptoms known as Long Covid, in June 2023.^[1] Long Covid is the third leading neurological disorder in the U.S., and continues to impact millions of Americans across the nation.^[2] Long Covid largely affects immune and circulatory systems, as well as the brain and lungs.^{[3],[4],[5],[6]} In a recent study by the National Institutes of Health, patients and researchers identified over 200 symptoms associated with Long Covid.^[7] The study also found that Long Covid was more common and severe for patients who had Covid before the Omicron outbreak in December 2021 or who were unvaccinated. A separate study found that 85% of patients reported decreased quality of life, 51% had cognitive impairment, 45% had altered lung function, 83% had abnormal CT chest scans, and 12% had elevated heart rate on rhythm monitoring.^[8]

Persistent Covid symptoms sidelined approximately 500,000 workers in 2022.^[9] Safe and effective treatments for Long Covid patients are crucial for overall wellbeing and the nation's economic recovery.

As of May 2022, 10 out of 12 Southern states have enacted bills that limit authority regarding public health emergency orders.

States that have enacted bills limiting public health authority

Jan 2021- May 2022



Source: [Temple University Beasley School of Law Policy Surveillance Program](#). Notes: “Bill enacted” indicates the state has enacted at least 1 bill limiting the public health authority of the governor, state health official, and/or local health official regarding public health emergency orders.

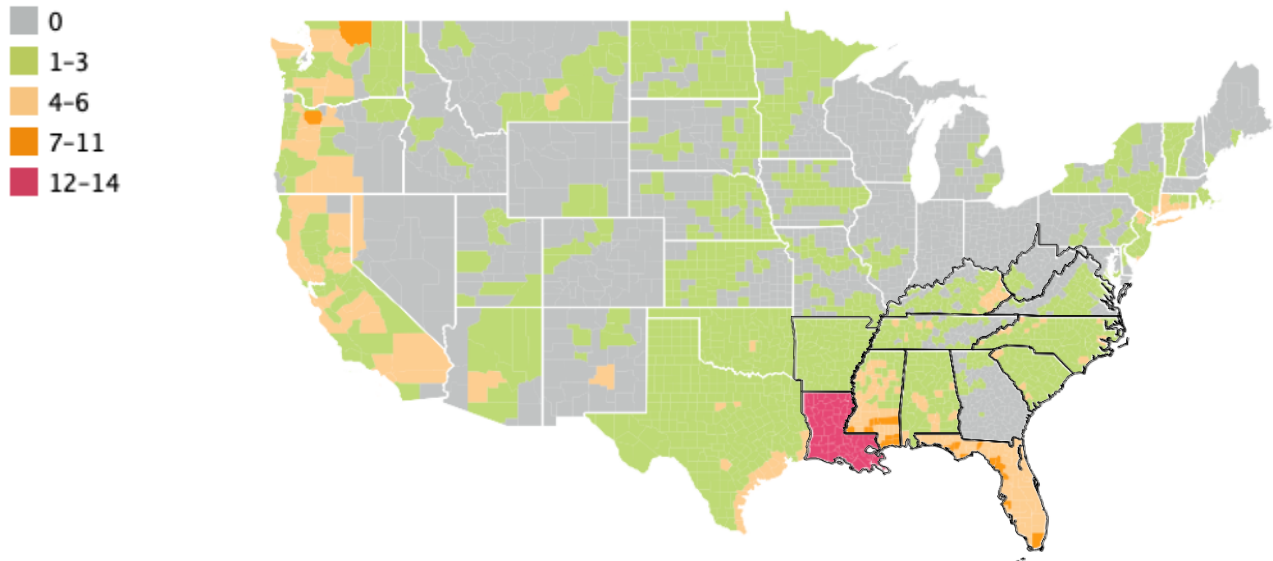
In response to the pandemic, legislators in 25 states enacted bills to limit the authority of officials regarding public health emergency orders. In Southern states, it’s 10 out of 12 (AL, AR, FL, GA, KY, LA, NC, SC, TN, and WV).^{[1],[2]} Bills have been enacted that restrict the governor’s and state and local health officials’ authority on everything: from issuing a public health emergency order to the duration, scope, and termination of the emergency order. Public health officials across the nation have expressed strong concern about how these restrictions will impact the response to future Covid outbreaks and potential pandemics.^{[3],[4]}

At the federal level, the public health emergency and the Covid national emergency ended in the spring of 2023, 3 years after they were first issued.^[5] Still, concerns remain as U.S. Covid deaths recently ticked upwards of 1,000 per week in September 2023 ([Death rates](#)).^{[6],[7]}

76% of Southerners live in counties that have experienced disasters in the last 3 years, compared to 64% of non-Southerners.

Number of FEMA disaster declarations by county

Mar 1, 2020 - Apr 11, 2023



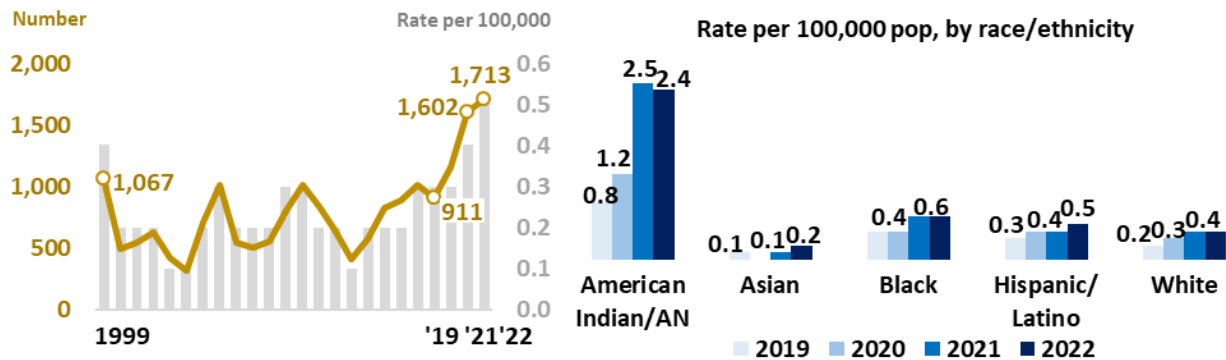
Source: [FEMA](#). Notes: Excludes COVID declarations. Includes all other county-level disaster declarations, for example: hurricanes, fires, floods, tornadoes, levee breaks, landslides, earthquakes, and severe ice storms.

Climate disasters have worsened the nation’s suffering over the last 3 years with an average of 20 “billion-dollar” climate disasters annually — up from an average of 7 annually in the two previous decades.^[1] Southerners have borne the brunt of these disasters, with 76% of Southerners living in a county that had a disaster from March 2020 to April 2023, 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 during this time frame. In Louisiana, every county (parish) has experienced 12 or more FEMA-declared disasters since March 2020.

Federal spending on disaster relief more than doubled in 2020 and 2021 compared to 2018 or 2019.^[2] 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.^[3] Moreover, the supply of available housing diminishes, and housing costs (including insurance) increase after disasters ([Unaffordable housing](#)).^[4]

Heat-related deaths increased 88% in three years, reaching a high of 1,713 deaths in 2022. Heat-related death rates are highest among American Indians.

Heat-related deaths, U.S. 1999-2022



Source: [CDC, Wonder](#). Notes: 2022 data is provisional. Rates are age-adjusted. AN=Alaska Native. Deaths are identified using ICD-10 underlying/contributing cause-of-death codes: P81.0, T67, and X30.

Older adults, young children, and pregnant women can experience damage to vital organs and even die from extreme heat.^[1] Extreme heat can also exacerbate medical conditions such as hypertension and heart disease. Drug overdose and alcohol-related deaths are more common during extreme heat days.^[2]

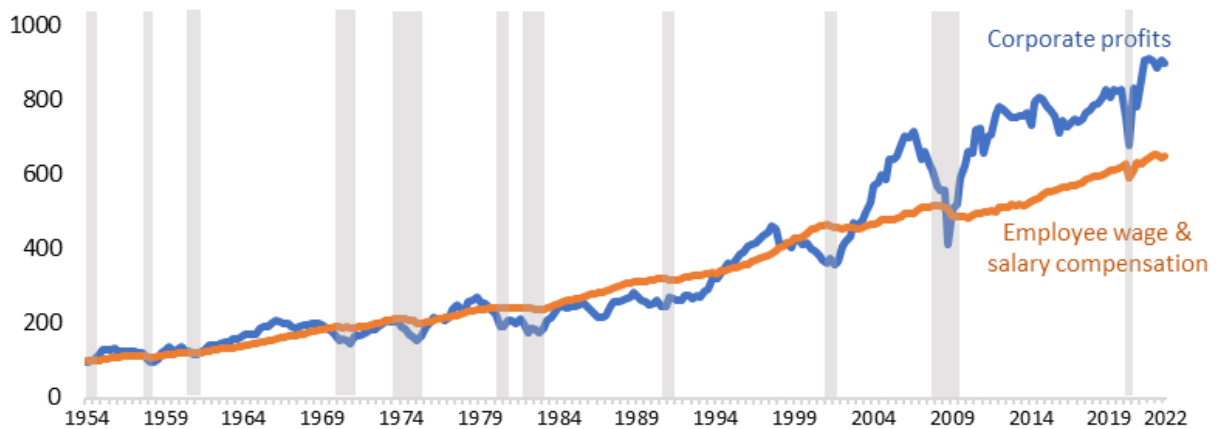
Since 1999, men have experienced increasing rates of heat-related deaths and are twice as likely to die from excessive heat as women.^[3] Heat-related deaths jumped from 911 in 2019 to 1,713 in 2022. American Indians experienced by far the highest rate of heat-related deaths in 2022 at 2.4 per 100,000 population.

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.^[4] The Inflation Reduction Act includes substantial funding that can be used for home weatherization, but only via tax credits for homeowners.^[5]

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 far outstripped growth in employee compensation.^[1] 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.^[2]

Average hourly earnings nudged upward from \$31.38 in December 2021 to \$32.82 in December 2022.^[3] 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.^[4] 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.

This section tracks measures of democracy and high-functioning governments that will be important as the nation continues to grapple with aftershocks from the pandemic.

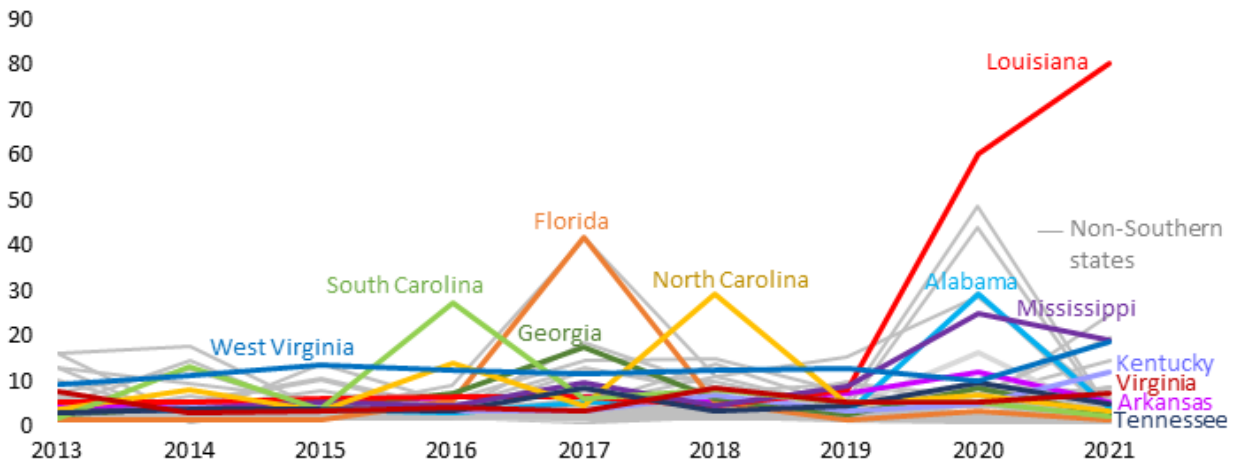
Indicators in this section

- Electric power interruptions, by state
- Vote share gap in 2020 election, by county
- State voting laws, by state
- 4th- and 8th-grade reading and math scores

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



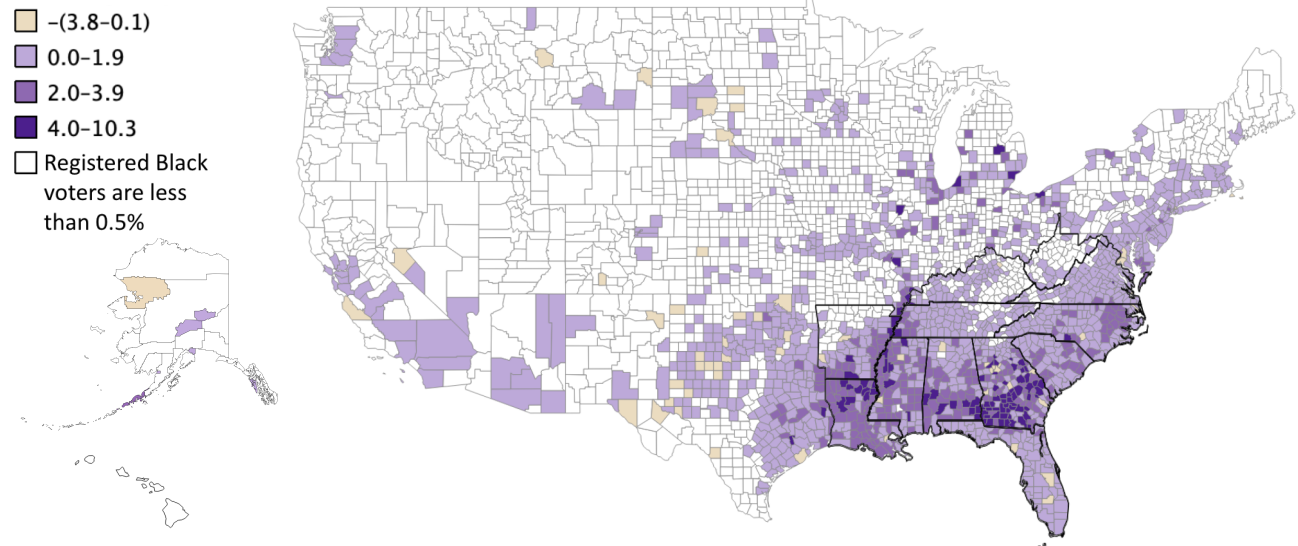
Source: [U.S. Energy Information Administration](#). Notes: "Momentary" interruptions that last 5 minutes or less are generally omitted. Data reported by utilities using IEEE standard as well as any other method.

Extreme weather events tend to cause the longest power interruptions.^[1] 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). 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.^[2] 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.^[3] The Inflation Reduction Act includes funding to increase the development of U.S. electricity transmission infrastructure.^[4]

Despite record turnout, the share of Black voters was less than the share of Black registrants in more than 95% of Southern counties in 2020.

Vote share gap for Black voters in the 2020 general election

Percentage point difference between % of registered voters and % of voters who are Black



Source: [Fair Count](#), based on 2020 election vote history and racial data from the TargetSmart national voter file.

Notes: In counties with no data, Black voters make up less than 0.5% of registered voters in the county. Positive values indicate that the Black vote share is less than the Black registration share in a particular county.

Despite the ongoing pandemic, the 2020 election saw turnout rates surge nationwide, reaching a record high of 67%.^[1] In 44 states, voter turnout rose from 2016, and nationwide turnout improved for Black, Latino, and Asian Americans.^{[2],[3]} Even in the wake of these overall improvements, disparities persisted between racial groups.

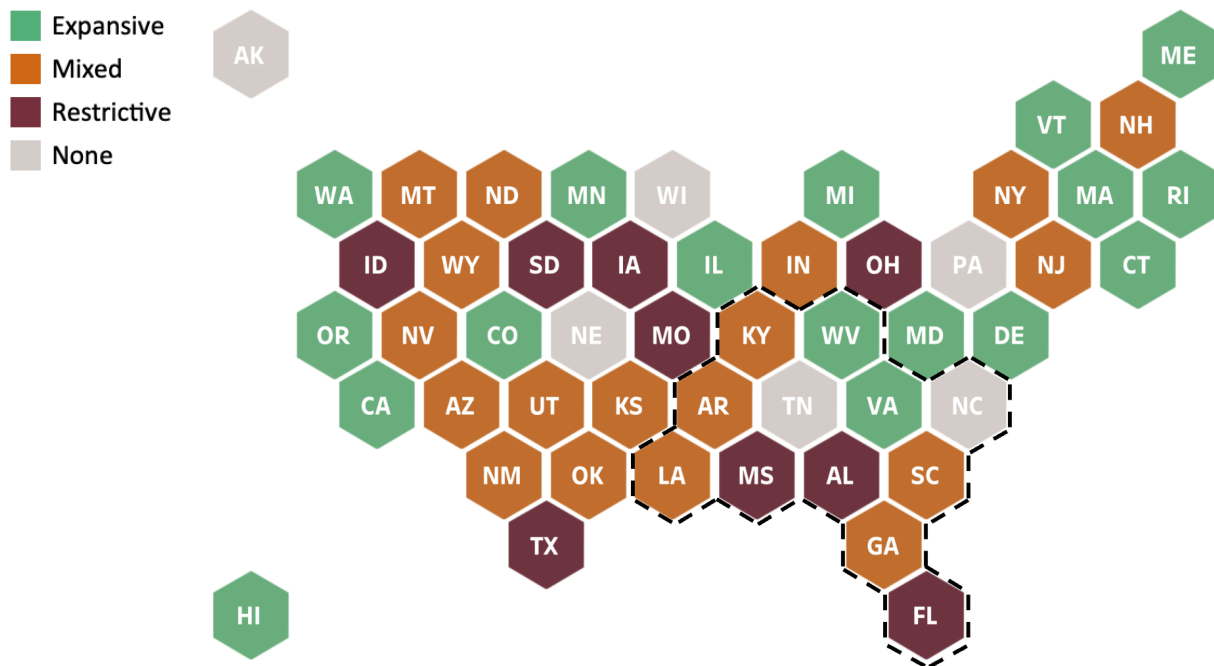
Vote share gaps tend to occur when the electorate does not closely match the demographics of the community. In the South, and across the nation, white voters tend to vote well over their share of the electorate and communities of color tend to vote under their share. In the South, Black vote share gaps occurred in more than 95% of Southern counties and more than a quarter of Southern counties had a Black vote share gap greater than 2%.

Significant challenges to improving these disparities exist. Section 5 of the Voting Rights Act, which was gutted in 2013, required preclearance before changing voting laws in 8 Southern states – where some of the largest Black vote share gaps exist today.^{[4],[5]} Additionally, existing voting restrictions, and the barriers proposed in new legislation to make it harder to vote, have been shown to disproportionately impact voters of color and therefore pose a serious challenge to reaching equitable access to the ballot box ([State voting laws](#)).^[6]

Despite gains made in voter turnout in 2020, 27 states have passed laws restricting voter access since 2021.

Voting laws passed

Jan 1, 2021 - May 29, 2023



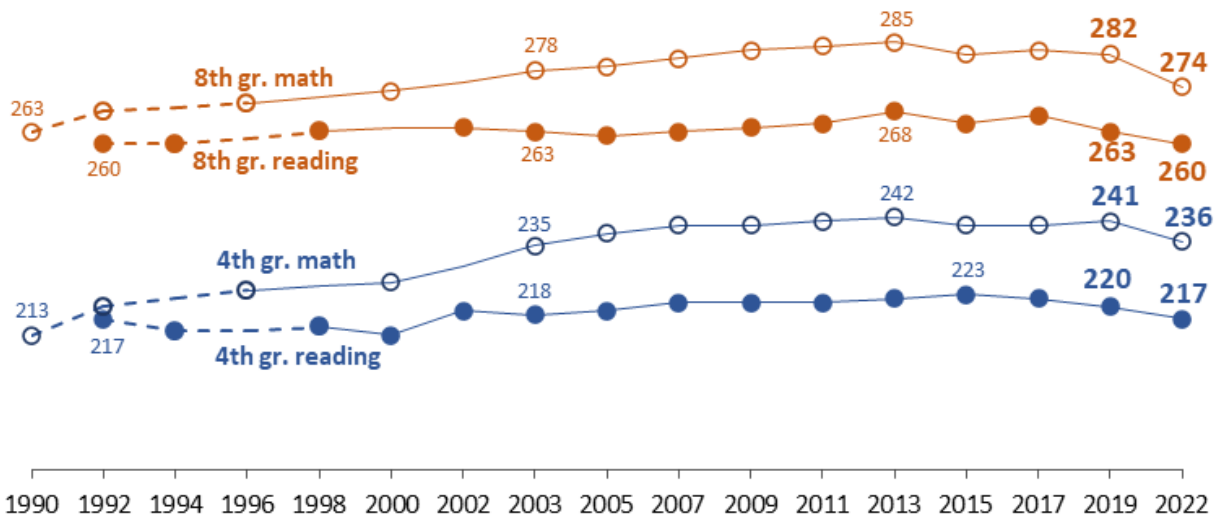
Source: [Brennan Center for Justice](#). Notes: "Mixed" indicates that a state has passed both restrictive and expansive voting laws.

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. Despite concerns that the pandemic might depress voting rates, voter turnout reached a record high in the 2020 election with national voter participation jumping to about 67% amid an increase in new voters from both parties.^[1]

However, since 2020, many states have reversed those temporary provisions and there have been a deluge of new voting laws passed in states across the nation. From January 2021-May 2023, 27 states passed voting laws that make it harder for Americans to vote. Rather than building on progress made in 2020, states' efforts to restrict voting access could significantly reduce participation in future elections, including the 2024 presidential election.

8th- and 4th-grade math scores declined 8 and 5 points, respectively, from 2019 to 2022. Reading scores also fell by 3 points.

4th- and 8th-grade reading and math average scores, U.S.
National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP)



Source: [U.S. Department of Education, NAEP](#). Notes: Dashed lines indicate that test accommodations were not permitted in those years. 2022 assessment period was Jan-Mar 2022, with some 100,000+ students participating on each assessment from 5,000+ public and private schools.

Many parents, teachers, and school leaders feared that extended remote learning during the pandemic would harm children’s educational outcomes. National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) test results from early 2022 confirmed that both math and reading scores declined for 4th and 8th graders, compared to before the pandemic in 2019.^[1]

Although NAEP test results varied by school district, disruptions to in-person learning were not the only factor accounting for these differences. Poverty levels were a key factor in the disparate impacts of the pandemic on learning loss.^{[2],[3]} Indeed, the pandemic has widened an already large achievement gap among students. For example, in 4th grade math, the top 10% of students lost 2 points between 2019 and 2022 while the bottom 10% of students lost 7.^[4]

To close these gaps in student achievement, states and local school districts can invest American Rescue Plan funds in intense tutoring, out-of-school enrichment activities, and increasing the pipeline of qualified teachers.^{[5],[6]}

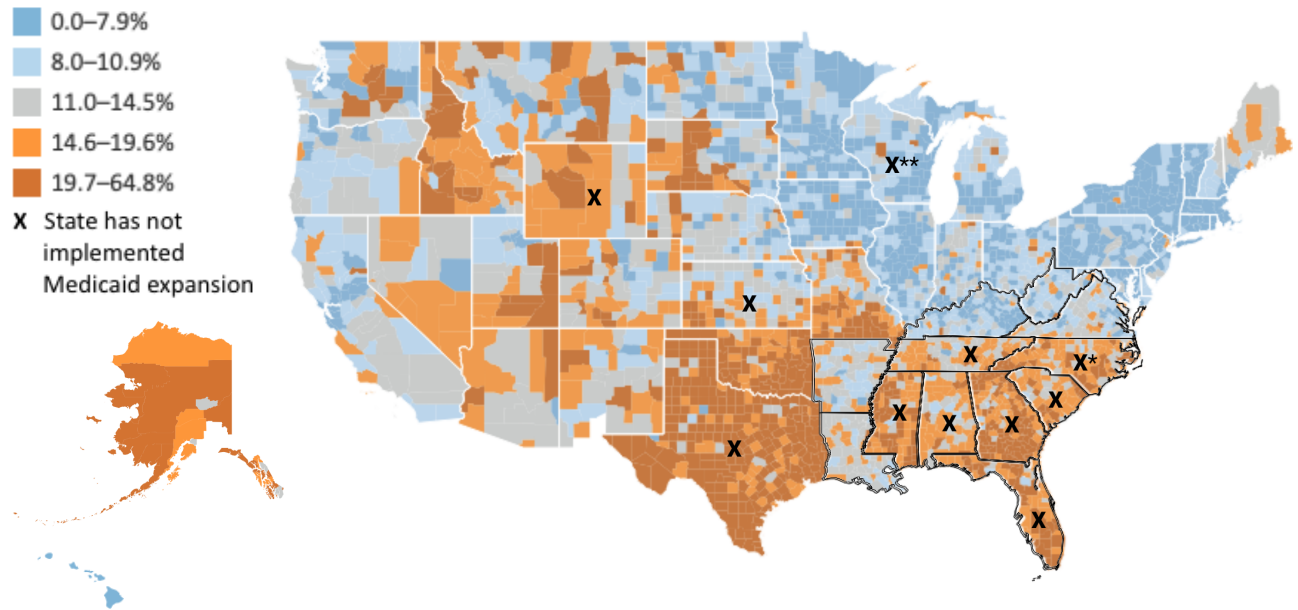
Beyond governments, American society has always depended on an array of civic institutions to provide critical information to constituents, hold governments accountable, and offer support to families and workers to be healthy, educated, and productive. This section examines civic institutions and whether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

Indicators in this section

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

Over 15% of Southerners lack health insurance, compared to only 11% of Americans outside the South, largely because 7 Southern states have not implemented Medicaid expansion.

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: *North Carolina has adopted but not yet implemented Medicaid expansion. **Wisconsin has not adopted the Affordable Care Act's Medicaid expansion but it has partially expanded Medicaid, under a Medicaid waiver, to include all adults under 100 percent federal poverty level.

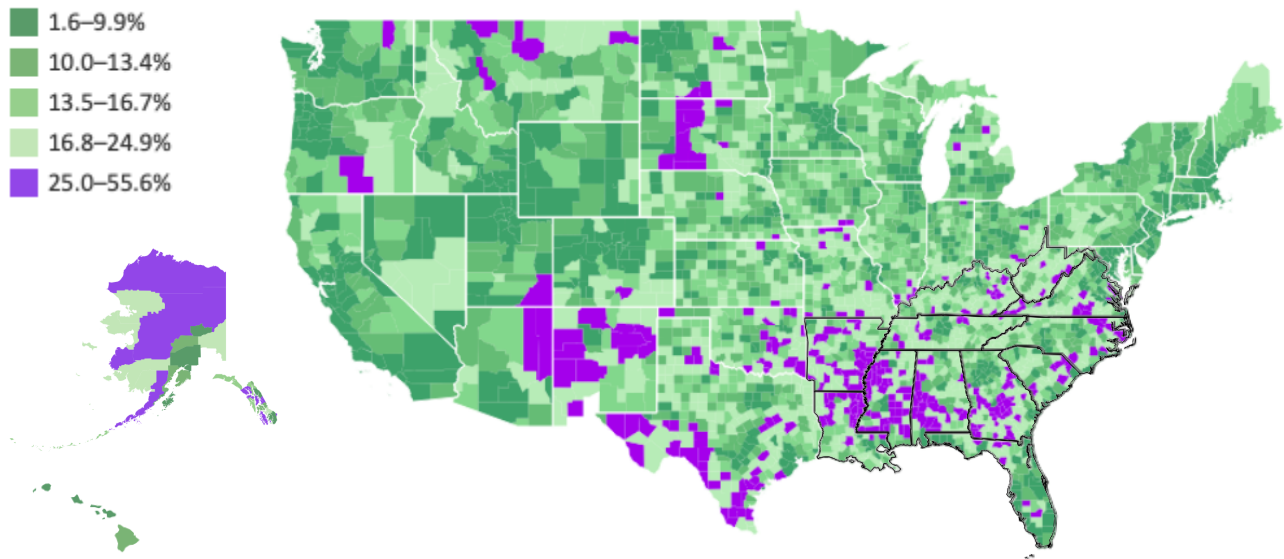
Lack of health insurance is one of the reasons that the U.S. has an excess death problem.^{[1],[2]} Americans without health insurance often fail to get treatment for chronic conditions until they are very ill and go to emergency rooms. In 2010, the Affordable Care Act began to dramatically reduce the number of uninsured people across the country through Medicaid expansion and new subsidies for health insurance “marketplaces.” 10 states (6 of them in the South) have still not adopted Medicaid expansion.

In addition, patients who qualify for Medicaid must regularly renew their coverage and periodically verify their eligibility which often leads to patients inadvertently becoming unenrolled. When Covid struck, Congress required that Medicaid keep patients enrolled continuously, a provision which ended in March 2023. An estimated 8 to 24 million people will lose coverage at some point this year.^[3] Hospitals that serve many uninsured patients become financially strapped, and thus high uninsurance rates have led to many closures of rural hospitals across the South.^{[4],[5]} In 2020, a record 19 rural hospitals closed.^[6] In 2021, 8 of the 10 states with the highest death rates were in the South ([Death rates](#)).

12% of Southerners have no internet at home — not even a cellular data plan — compared to 10% of non-Southerners.

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: “Lacking internet access” means the household has no internet subscription, no cellular data plan, and no access to the internet without a subscription (such as through property-wide Wi-Fi service in an apartment building).

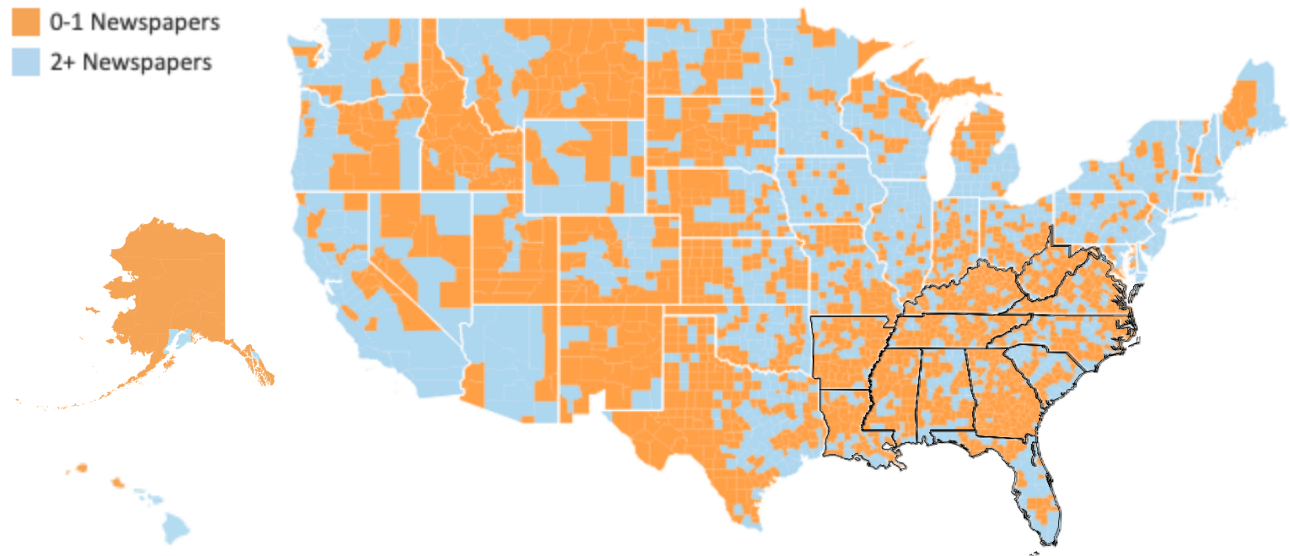
Internet access is essential for Americans to be productive, healthy, and informed. For low-income households, affordable internet increases employment rates and earnings.^[1] Increased internet access is also yielding cost savings in health care delivery through telehealth management of chronic conditions.^[2] Yet, 12% of Southerners have no internet access at home — not even a cellular plan.

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.^[3] It also allocated \$14.25 billion toward a \$30 monthly subsidy of household broadband subscriptions for about 50 million eligible American households through the Affordable Connectivity Program.^[4] However, the program is projected to run out of funding by July 2024.^[5]

75% of Southern counties are “news deserts,” counties with no or only one newspaper, compared to 50% of 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] Southern counties are more likely to be what experts call “news deserts,” counties that have either no or only one newspaper. 75% of Southern counties are news deserts, compared to only 50% of non-Southern counties.

As local news sources rapidly disappear, “pink slime” journalism slowly attempts to fill the void. “Pink slime” journalism utilizes partisan reporting, mis- and disinformation, and political propaganda that disguises itself as legitimate local news, exploiting the vulnerability of news deserts and threatening journalistic integrity.^{[2],[3],[4]} However, a Stanford University study under preliminary review finds that consumer usage of these sites still remains low, signaling that the ability to revive trusted local news remains hopeful.

Community- and federal-based solutions are critical to revitalizing local news. The Southern Newspaper Publishers Association granted \$25,000 to Charleston, South Carolina newspaper *The Post and Courier* in an effort to help expand local news in deserts across the state.^[5] At the state and federal level, legislation such as the Local Journalism Sustainability Act (a bipartisan bill that would provide tax credits for subscriptions and employment at local news organizations) could provide needed support to the struggling industry.^{[6],[7],[8]}

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 community well-being.

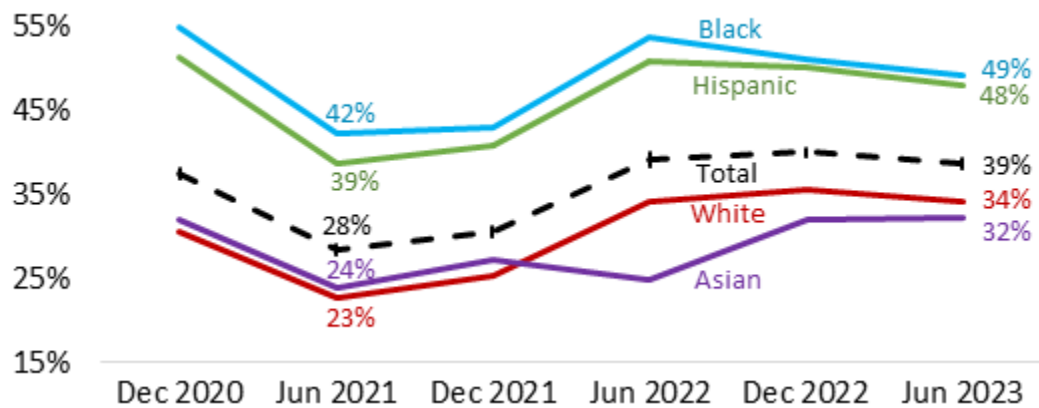
Indicators in this section

- Difficulty paying expenses, by race/ethnicity
- Unaffordable housing, by county
- Food insecurity, by state
- Pregnancy-related deaths, by race/ethnicity
- Gun deaths among children, by race/ethnicity
- Anxiety and depression, by state
- Youth mental health, by sex and sexual identity

Nearly half of Black and Hispanic adults struggled to make ends meet in June 2023. So did one-third of white and Asian adults.

Percent of adults having difficulty paying for usual household expenses, by race/ethnicity

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



Source: [Census Bureau's Household Pulse Survey](#). Notes: For June 2023, differences between Black and Hispanic adults, and between White and Asian adults, are not statistically significant.

The end of stimulus and child tax credits in 2021 combined with high inflation in 2022 added up such that by June 2023, more than 1 in 3 American households was having difficulty paying for usual household expenses, up from 28% in June 2021. Among Black and Hispanic households, roughly half struggled to pay for basic expenses.

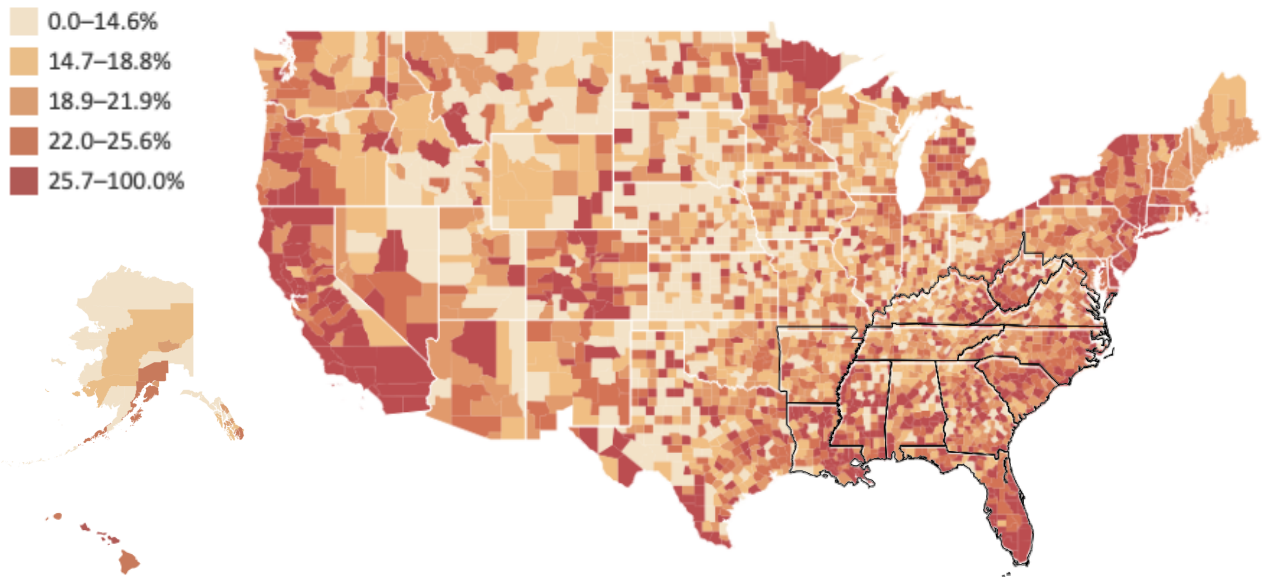
Southern Economic Advancement Project (SEAP) surveyed 1,600 Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) recipients in Louisiana, South Carolina, and Tennessee in early 2023, and found that 72% had difficulty paying utility bills and 54% experienced challenges with paying for housing. About 1 in 3 respondents wanted federal funding to be spent on affordable housing ([Unaffordable housing](#)).^[1]

Meanwhile organizers in Georgia are educating community members about flexible American Rescue Plan (ARP) funds and, as a result, Georgia localities have used ARP funds to invest in affordable housing. In North Carolina, Latino organizers won \$250,000 in ARP funds to help low-income homeowners pay rapidly rising property taxes. And in South Carolina, organizers with FoodShare are helping local communities to build relationships with local officials to communicate the need for food assistance ([Food insecurity](#)).^[2]

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](#).

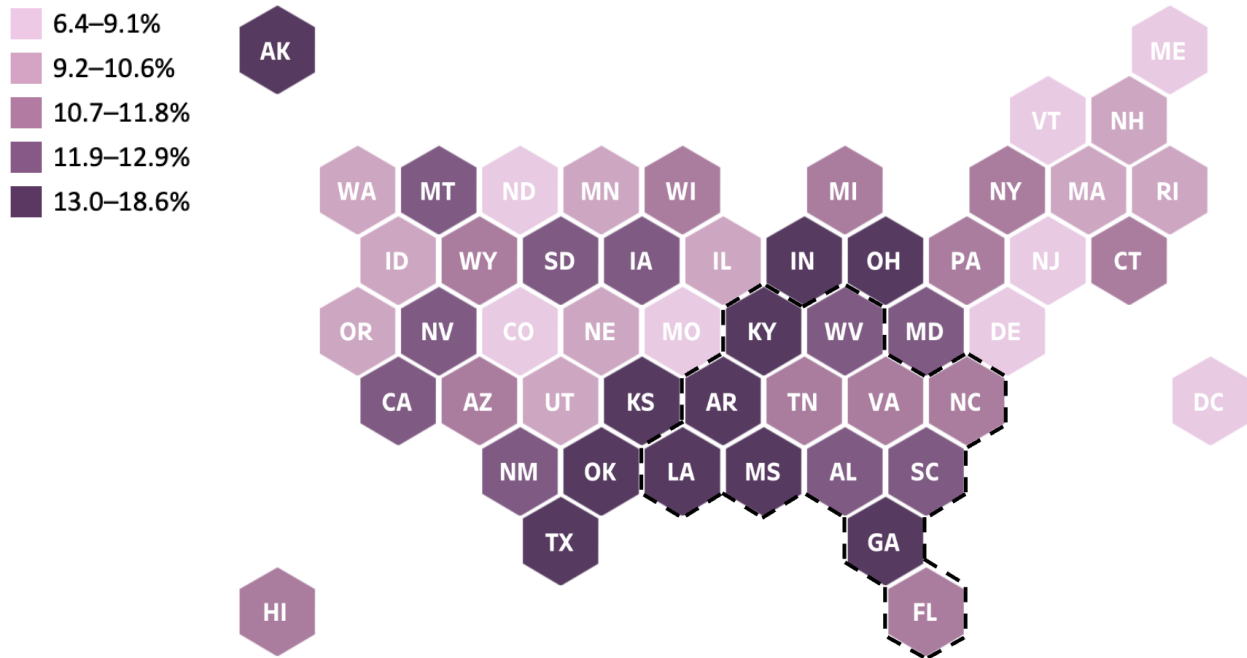
The United States has been experiencing a severe housing shortage since the Great Recession when new home construction dramatically declined — driving up home prices over the decade without commensurate increases in income.^{[1],[2]} From 2017-21, at least 1 in 4 renters in several Southern states (Louisiana: 29%, Florida: 29%, West Virginia: 25%, Mississippi: 25%, and South Carolina: 25%) paid at least half of their total household income toward housing costs. Having to spend the majority of their income on rent means less money for families to buy food, clothing, medical care, educational needs, and other necessities ([Food insecurity](#)).^{[3],[4]}

As the growth in rent prices continues to outpace the growth in income, renters look to affordable housing to ease housing cost burdens.^[5] But the National Low Income Housing Coalition finds that there is currently a shortage of 7.3 million affordable rental homes across the nation, driven by an increase in the number of low-income renters and a decrease in the supply of low-cost housing units.^[6] Some private markets were found to supply low-cost rental units, but with unaffordable utility costs, often totaling an additional \$500 or more a month. Three out of every four eligible families did not receive federal housing assistance due to a severely underfunded budget. A survey by the Southern Economic Advancement Project (SEAP) of SNAP recipients in Louisiana, South Carolina, and Tennessee finds that 1 in 3 respondents wanted federal funding to be spent on affordable housing.^[7]

13% of Southern households went hungry in June. The highest rates of hunger nationwide were in LA (19%), MS (18%), and AR (17%).

Food insecurity, June 7-19, 2023

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



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

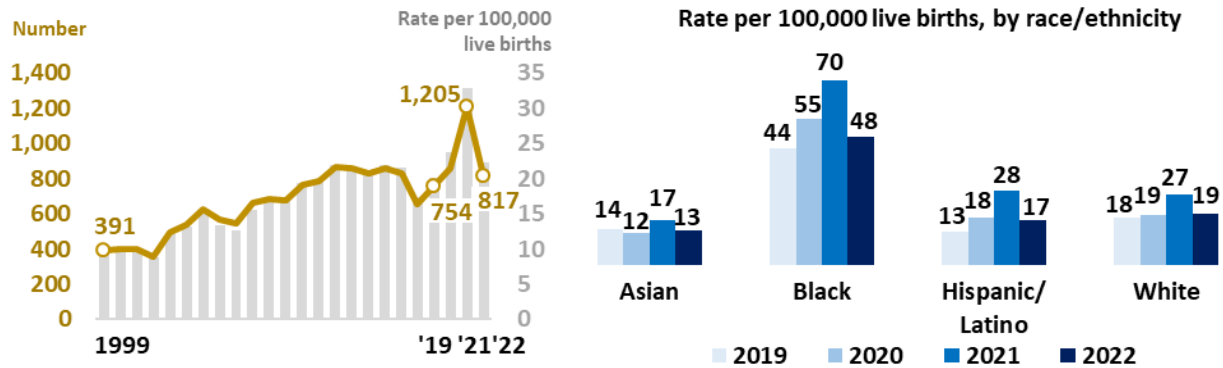
In June 2023, 12% of Americans reported that their household sometimes or often went hungry. In the South, it was 13%. Three Southern states had the highest rate of food insecurity: LA (19%), MS (18%), and AR (17%). In 2021, before high inflation took hold, households with incomes in the lowest 1/3 of all Americans spent an average of \$4,875 annually on food or nearly 1/3 of their income.^[1] Then, in 2022, grocery prices rose 10%.^[2] While inflation has cooled, grocery prices have still increased 5.7% for the 12-month period ending June 2023.

7 Southern states ended pandemic emergency food benefits early, and all states ended these benefits in March 2023, leaving SNAP recipients across the nation with at least \$90 less per month.^[3] More and more Americans are turning to food banks, nonprofits, and other community organizations for help.^{[4],[5]}

Food insecurity has effects on physical and mental health ([Symptoms of anxiety/depression](#)).^{[6],[7]} Food insecurity for children, in particular, contributes to chronic stress that actually disrupts the development of the brain.^[8] Eliminating or significantly lowering sales tax on groceries is one way that states can reduce food insecurity.^[9]

Pregnancy-related deaths increased 60% in two years, reaching a high of 1,205 deaths in 2021. Black people are about 3 times more likely to die from a pregnancy-related cause than white and Hispanic people.

**Pregnancy-related deaths, U.S.
1999-2022**



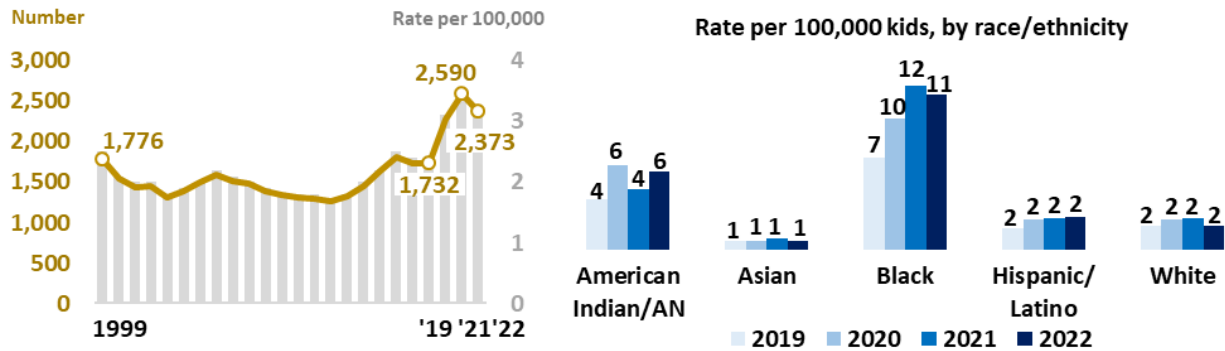
Sources: [CDC, Wonder Mortality Data](#) (deaths) and [CDC Natality Data/ Report](#) (births). Notes: 2022 data is provisional. A pregnancy-related death is defined as a death while pregnant or within 42 days of termination of pregnancy, from any cause related to or aggravated by the pregnancy or its management, but not from accidental or incidental causes. Pregnancy-related deaths are identified using ICD-10 underlying cause-of-death codes: A34, O00–O95, and O98–O99.

In 2020 and 2021, pregnancy-related deaths spiked in the U.S., jumping from 20 deaths per 100,00 live births in 2019 (754 overall deaths) to 33 per 100,00 live births in 2021 (1,205 overall deaths). According to GAO estimates, 25% of pregnancy-related deaths that occurred in 2020 and 2021 listed Covid as a contributing cause of death.^[1] Provisional data for 2022 shows that pregnancy-related deaths decreased to 22 per 100,000 live births (817 overall deaths). Still, pregnancy-related deaths in the U.S. have more than doubled since 1999. The American Indian and Alaska Native population had the largest increase in pregnancy-related deaths since 1999.^[2] Black people are 2.5 times more likely than white people to die from pregnancy-related complications. Black and Indigenous people have historically faced racial discrimination, bias, and inequity in health care systems, for pregnancy-related and other care.^{[3],[4],[5],[6],[7],[8],[9]}

Pregnancy-related deaths are more common in the U.S. than in any other developed country. In 2020, pregnancy-related deaths in the U.S. were more than 3 times the rate of other high income countries.^[10] Among efforts to reduce maternal health disparities, experts recommend increased implicit bias training across the field.^{[11],[12]} At the state and national level, 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.^{[13],[14]} 38 states have implemented the extension, 10 of which are Southern states (AL, FL, GA, KY, LA, NC, SC, TN, VA, WV).^{[15],[16]}

Gun deaths among children increased 50% in two years, reaching a high of 2,590 deaths in 2021. Black kids are about 5 times more likely than white and Hispanic kids to die from guns.

Gun deaths among U.S. kids (under 18 years old)
1999-2022



Source: [CDC, Wonder](#). Notes: 2022 data is provisional. Gun deaths are identified using ICD-10 underlying cause-of-death codes: U01.4; W32-W34; X72-X74; X93-X95; Y22-Y24; Y35. AN= Alaska Native.

Firearms are now the leading cause of death for children in the U.S.^[1] Gun deaths among children have increased by 50%, reaching a high of 2,590 deaths in 2021. Homicides were the largest category of gun deaths among children, making up 60% of the total in 2021. Suicides made up 32%, accidents were 5%, and other incidents were 3%.^[2]

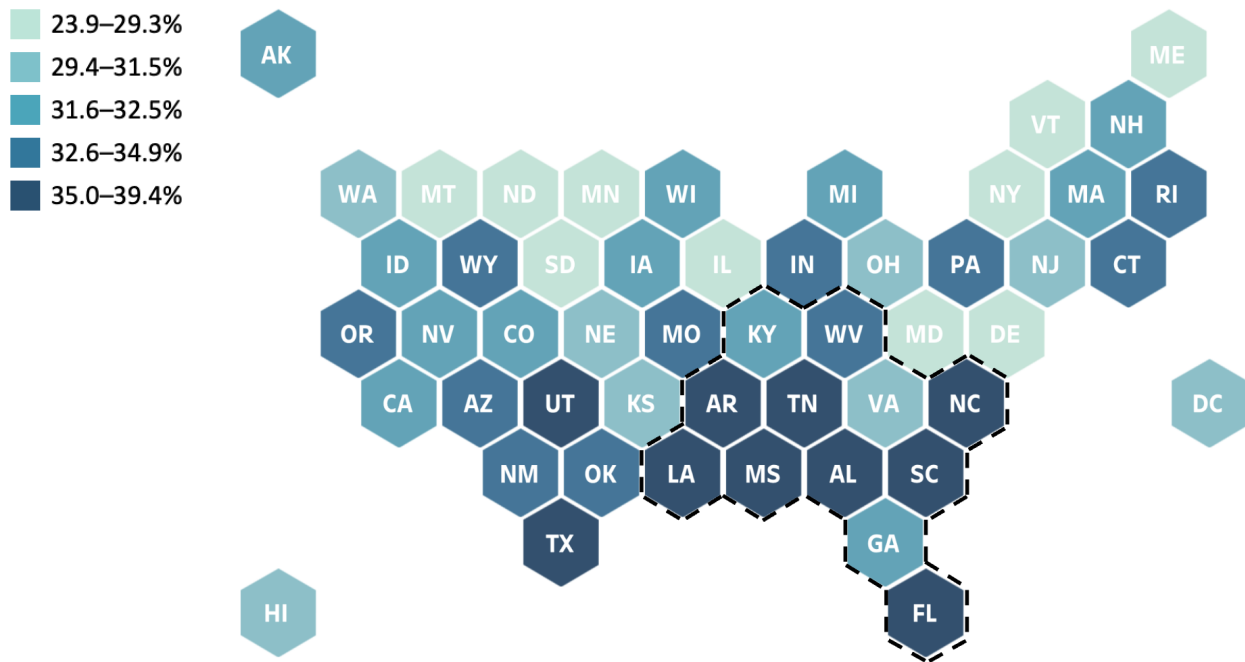
Racial disparities persist in gun deaths among children. Black children were victims in 46% of all gun deaths among children, despite making up just 14% of the child population in the U.S. They are 5 times more likely to die from firearms than white children. Types of gun deaths among children also differed by race. The majority of gun deaths among white children were suicides (66%), with homicides making up a much smaller share (24%). In contrast, 86% of gun deaths among Black children were homicides, and just 9% were suicides.

Compared to its peer nations, the U.S. has a disproportionately high rate of gun deaths among children. The U.S. is the only nation to have firearm deaths in the top 4 leading causes of death among children, let alone be the number one cause of death.^[3] Among the U.S. and peer nations, the U.S. accounts for 97% of all child firearm deaths, while making up just 46% of the total child population. To reduce firearm fatalities among children, experts suggest that states implement new laws, including universal background checks, extreme risk protection or “red flag laws,” and child access prevention or “CAP” laws.^{[4],[5],[6]}

One-third of Americans report symptoms of anxiety or depression, up from 11% in 2019. The South had 8 of 10 states with the highest rates.

Symptoms of anxiety or depression, June 7-19, 2023

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



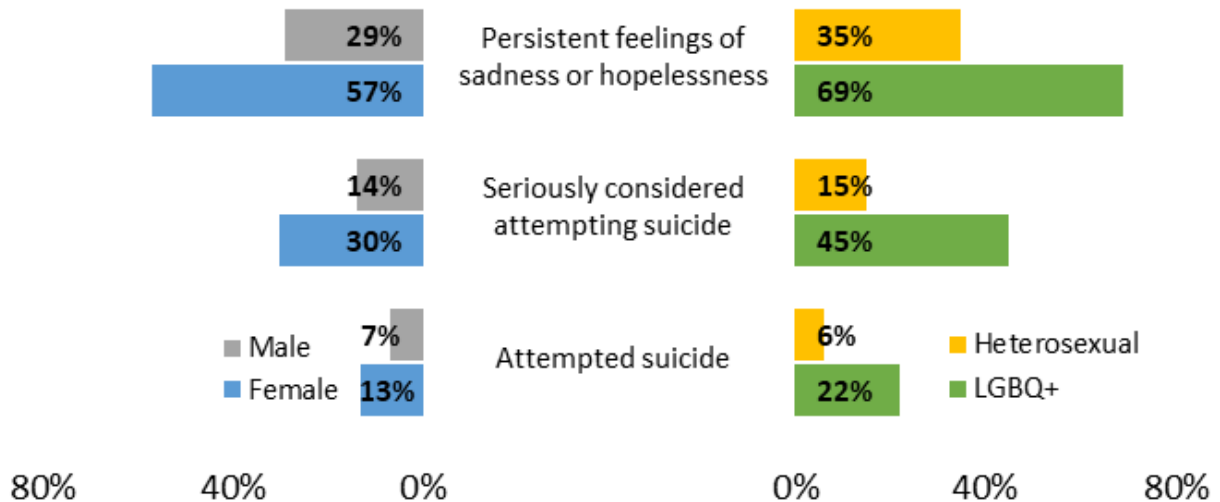
Source: [CDC](#) and [Census Bureau's Household Pulse Survey](#). Notes: This indicator is based on self-report of the frequency of anxiety and depression symptoms, derived from responses to the first two questions of the eight-item Patient Health Questionnaire (PHQ-2) and the seven-item Generalized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

Americans face a growing mental health crisis. The percent of adults in the U.S. reporting symptoms of anxiety and depression has tripled from 11% in 2019 to 33% in June 2023.^[1] 8 out of the 10 states with the highest rates were in the South: AR (39%), LA (39%), FL (38%), TN (37%), SC (36%), MS (36%), NC (36%), and AL (35%). The effects of this mental health crisis continue to become clear, with increasing incidence of substance abuse, drug overdose and alcohol-induced deaths, gun violence, and road rage and other vehicular fatalities.^{[2],[3],[4],[5],[6],[7]}

In June 2023, the U.S. Preventive Services Task Force finalized its recommendation for adults under 65 to be screened for anxiety, depression, and suicide risk.^{[8],[9]} This comes months after the force's recommendation for anxiety screening in children and adolescents back in October 2022 ([Youth mental health](#)).^[10] These recommendations are part of an effort to intervene and diagnose mental health concerns early. July 2023 marks one year of the nation's relaunched suicide and crisis prevention hotline, 988. Since its launch, the simplified dial code has had over 5 million contacts.^[11] Yet, a recent survey finds that over 80% of Americans are not familiar with the hotline.^[12] The Department of Human Health Services announced an additional \$200 million in funding in May 2023 for states, territories and tribes to build local capacity for the hotline.

Nearly 1 in 2 LGBTQ+ students and 1 in 3 female students in U.S. high schools reported that they had seriously considered attempting suicide.

Mental health among U.S. high school students, by sex and sexual identity
Fall 2021



Source: [CDC Youth Risk Behavior Survey \(YRBS\)](#). Notes: Because the 2021 national YRBS did not have a question assessing gender identity, data specifically on students who identify as transgender is not available. Survey questions on mental health and suicidality were worded as “During the past 12 months, did you...”

The youth mental health crisis surged prior to the pandemic, and recent studies show that it has heightened since.^{[1],[2]} From 2011–2021, the share of high school students that experienced persistent feelings of sadness or hopelessness, seriously considered suicide, or attempted suicide increased by 50%, 38%, and 25%, respectively.^[3] While reports of worsening mental health and suicidality were higher among all teens, female and LGBTQ+ students fared worst according to Fall 2021 data. The share of female students that experienced persistent feelings of sadness or hopelessness, and either seriously considered or attempted suicide, was twice the share of male students. Almost half of LGBTQ+ students seriously considered attempting suicide and 22% attempted suicide — rates 3 to 4 times higher than that of heterosexual students.

Social pressures, limited school resources, anti-LGBTQ legislation, and gun-related incidents are among the many challenges today’s youth face.^{[4],[5],[6]} In April 2022, 70% of public schools reported an increase in the number of students requesting mental health support since the pandemic, but only 12% felt that their schools were adequately able to provide services to all students in need.^[7] Over 300 bills that target LGBTQ youth and their right to healthcare and/or the ability to express themselves in school have been introduced across the nation, with many advancing to hearings and floor debates.^[8] Firearms are now the leading cause of death for U.S. children, with homicides making up 60% of gun deaths among children overall ([Gun deaths among children](#)).

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ABOUT THIS SERIES

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. In addition, this reliable source of wide-ranging, impartial information is valuable in aligning public and private sector efforts and assessing the progress made, or the lack thereof.

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 twelve 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.

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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