



January 21, 2022

Foreword

*A civic ecosystem has been burgeoning for decades in the South, and it now offers an opportunity to turn the tragedy of this pandemic into an opportunity to build prosperity and progress for all. Data and civic engagement will be critical as we chart the path forward. This addition to the *Pandemic to Prosperity: South* series draws extensively on the [national January 2022 Pandemic to Prosperity](#) report to provide a timely and comprehensive overview of Covid-related impacts on Southerners' lives and livelihoods, governments, civic institutions, and overall well-being. State and local governments prioritizing projects for the American Rescue Plan and the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act can use these findings to target disparities that ultimately undermine community resilience. January 21, 2022 marks 2 years since Covid was first announced on U.S. soil. Our review of 30 indicators related to the Covid crisis and the nation's civic health revealed:*

Covid Only 57% of Southerners have been vaccinated compared to 64% of the rest of the U.S. While older Southerners (65+) have been vaccinated at rates similar to their peers outside the South (86% and 88% respectively), there is a 9 percentage point gap between South and non-South populations ages 12-64 year old that have been vaccinated. As the new Omicron variant sweeps the nation, hospitalizations among younger adults are spiking in areas with low vaccination rates. In AR, for example, hospitalizations for adults 18-29 years old increased by 70% from January 5 to January 12. Nationwide, hospitalizations more than doubled in December for children under 5, for whom vaccination is not yet an option. Hospitalizations are now higher than their peak last winter, and intensive care units in half of all Southern states are near capacity as of January 14.

Internet access and learning loss More than 14% of Southern households lacked broadband internet access in 2020. Nearly 1 in 5 residents in AR, MS, and WV lacked broadband. When K-12 schools abruptly closed in March 2020, teachers and students alike struggled with remote learning. Nationwide, third-grade reading scores in fall 2021 were lower than in fall 2019 by 7 percentile points on average, with the most severe declines for Black third-graders who experienced a 10 percentile point drop and Hispanic third-graders who experienced a 9 percentile point drop.

Housing The December Stimulus bill (ERA1) and the March American Rescue Plan (ERA2) include a combined \$45 billion in rental assistance. Most Southern states are lagging in distributing Emergency Rental Assistance (ERA). As of November 30, 2021, only 44% of available federal rental assistance has been disbursed across the South, compared to 53% in the rest of the U.S. While Virginia has distributed 99% of its ERA1 funds, Georgia has distributed less than 30%. Many Southerners have been late making rent or housing payments, and 1 in 3 of those late on rent/mortgage fear they'll lose their home in the next two months. 45% of Arkansans and 42% of Louisianans who are late on their rent or mortgage are concerned they'll soon lose their housing.

Climate disasters Since March 2020, so many climate disasters have hit the South that 2 in 3 Southerners live in a county that has had at least one climate disaster declaration. These disasters are compounding housing and food insecurity among marginalized residents who often are hardest hit and receive less recovery aid.

Mental health and health care Nearly 4 in 10 adults in LA and WV reported symptoms of anxiety or depression in December 2021. Eight of the twelve states with the fewest mental health providers per capita are in the South. Many of these same states have refused to expand Medicaid, leaving 18% of the working-age population in FL, GA, and MS without health insurance. In 2021, 37% of Southern counties had no pediatricians, forcing rural residents to travel long distances to get care or simply go without.

Child poverty In 2020, roughly 1 in 4 children in LA and MS lived in poverty. In AL, AR, and WV, more than 1 in 5 children lived in poverty. Several studies have found that when low-income parents receive increased wages or benefits, their spending on clothing and books for their children increases, and their children's mental health and brain development improves. 85% of children across the South have received expanded Child Tax Credits (CTC) since July 2021. But Louisiana stands out as a state with a high child poverty rate (24%) where only 82% of the child population has received CTC benefits. Nationwide, child tax credits reduced child poverty from 20% in November 2020 to 12% in November 2021.

Democracy In 2021, AL, AR, GA, and FL all passed laws that will make voting more difficult; VA passed laws that will increase voting accessibility; and LA and KY passed a mix of both expansive and restrictive voting laws. At the same time, legislators in every Southern state except MS have introduced bills that will weaken the power and independence of state courts. In AR, GA, KY, and TN these bills have been enacted into law.

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



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References

For citations, see the [full report](#) at PandemicToProsperity.org.

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 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 fifth edition of *Pandemic to Prosperity: South*. **About Fair Count** (FairCount.org) Founded by Stacey Abrams in 2019 and anchored in Georgia, Fair Count works to build long-term power in communities that have been historically undercounted in

the decennial census, underrepresented at the polls, and whose communities are often torn apart in redistricting.

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

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

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