LOW-WAGE WORK IN MISSISSIPPI:
ENHANCING OPPORTUNITIES FOR FAMILIES

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The purpose of this study is to understand the needs of low-wage workers in Mississippi, what the state is doing to address those needs, and what additional policies and programs can be implemented to address the myriad unmet needs of this vulnerable population. Mississippi is one of the poorest states in the country, with one of the lowest labor force participation rates; poverty, unemployment, and underemployment disproportionately affect racial minorities and women.

Mississippi ranks as the most dependent state; state dependency refers to how much each state receives back in federal dollars versus what they contribute to the federal treasury in taxes (Kiernan 2016). Mississippi gets $3.00 in federal funds for every dollar it contributes to the federal government (Tierney 2014). Neighboring Alabama and Louisiana also rank high as dependent states. This is primarily due to the high poverty rates in these states that result in them receiving a disproportionate share of federal funds through anti-poverty programs such as Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) and the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) (Tierney 2014).

The State of Mississippi is focused on helping residents find work. One of the primary investments the state has made is the introduction of MS Works in 2015, a website for job seekers and employers. In addition to listing open jobs and allowing people to apply directly through their website, the program is designed to help workers explore ways to increase their job market skills. Thus, an applicant can be directed to a community college program where they can increase their skill set and marketability. This is designed to help the state address what they perceive as a shortage of mid-skill level workers. Mississippi has also made employment, job training, or volunteering a requirement for SNAP (food stamps) beneficiaries who are able-bodied and not caring for dependents and whose eligibility is running out.

Additional public policies are necessary to help meet the needs of low-wage workers in Mississippi. Expanding Medicaid will benefit employers because it will help workers stay healthy, which allows them to be more reliable employees. Implementing a state Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC) and increasing the minimum wage are policies that put more money directly into the hands of low-wage workers, which will ultimately boost the economy when these workers spend their increased income.

Another suggestion is that Mississippi take the millions of dollars in unspent funds associated with their Child Development Block Grant and TANF (Temporary Aid for Needy Families) and spend it on child care assistance. This will allow more low-wage women to enter the paid labor force. Currently, states spend only slightly more than one-quarter of their combined federal and state TANF funds on basic assistance for families, 8% on work-related activities and support, and 16% on childcare (Schott, Pavetti, and Floyd 2015). These choices have weakened the safety net for poor families nationwide. Additionally, there has been significant erosion of TANF benefits in terms of purchasing power; due to inflation, the real value of TANF block grants has declined by 32.5% since the program was implemented in 1997 (Falk 2016; Stanley, Floyd, and Hill 2016). Cash assistance for 99% of recipients, the nation’s poorest families, has a purchasing power that is below 1996 levels (Stanley, Floyd, and Hill 2016). There have been no increases in federal TANF spending to adjust for inflation or increasing population size in two decades; federal TANF spending has remained at $16.5 billion for two decades (Vallas and Boteach 2015).
Mississippi can reform unemployment insurance benefits eligibility requirements, such as allowing eligibility for part-time workers and those who quit a job for a legitimate reason, which will make more low-wage workers, especially women, eligible for benefits. Additionally, some research finds that child support enforcement can help keep custodial parents off of welfare. The average child support payment for custodial parents in Mississippi in 2015 was $1,000 per year, a distressingly low amount that needs to increase. Mississippi’s child support enforcement policies can be reformed to include subsidies for legal representation for low-income parents who need to return to court to adjust their court ordered child support.

The state needs to find a way to encourage employers to commit to hiring fewer temporary workers, perhaps relying on higher education as a model for creating balance between temporary and permanent workers. In higher education, colleges and universities are relying more and more on temporary and part-time faculty members due to budgetary concerns. However, these institutions generally have established guidelines as to what percentage of faculty can be part-time or temporary. This not only protects from too much faculty exploitation, but it also helps maintain some faculty power within institutions. One way this can happen is to increase the percentage of the state labor force that is unionized and to support living wage campaigns. The more unionized workers in a state, the higher all workers’ wages; plus, it would help decrease industry reliance on temporary workers. Unionization is particularly effective at eroding the gender wage gap and the racial wage gap, both of which contribute to disproportionate poverty rates among women and racial minorities. Additionally, unionization is effective at narrowing the gender wage gap. Only 6.8% of Mississippi workers are currently unionized, compared to 11.1% nationwide. The situation is even more dire for public sector unions: nationwide, 35.2% of public employees are unionized compared to 9.4% in Mississippi. The state can support workers attempting to unionize at the Nissan plant in Canton, MS, and the unionization of service workers through Unite Here!, working to unionize casino workers in Biloxi and Tunica. Additionally, the state could support the Living Wage campaign at the University of Mississippi.

Finally, Mississippi must be proactive in reintegrating formerly incarcerated citizens into the labor market. Until recently, Mississippi had the second highest incarceration rate in the country, thus, tens of thousands of residents are constrained from employment by a felony record. Policies and program options include offering more community based alternatives to juveniles convicted of status offenses or adults convicted of non-violent drug crimes, removing state obstacles to employment licensure, funding reentry programs, banning the question on an application that asks if the person has ever been convicted of a felony, incentivizing the hiring of ex-offenders by offering tax breaks to employers, or establishing a state version of the federal bonding program.

While increasing the minimum wage, expanding Medicaid, and establishing a state EITC would require legislative approval, spending unused TANF and child care block grant funds is strictly an administrative shift which would not require convincing legislators to make the necessary changes. Strategies to help ex-offenders gain employment vary in terms of implementation; some can be done administratively, some legislatively. But Mississippi has shown a willingness to make some of these changes already by implementing criminal justice reform in 2014 and by extending the *MS Works* program to soon-to-be released state prisoners.
Chart 1. Average weekly wages by county in Mississippi, second quarter 2015

Average weekly wages (U.S. average = $968)
- $750 or higher
- $700 - $749
- $650 - $699
- $600 - $649
- Below $600


Persons living below the poverty line in Mississippi, by county, 2009-2013. (http://www.indexmundi.com/facts/united-states/quick-facts/mississippi/percent-of-people-of-all-ages-in-poverty#chart)
INTRODUCTION

Mississippi is one of the poorest states in the nation, with high unemployment and the second lowest labor force participation rate at 52.2% as of September 2016, trailing only West Virginia, compared with the labor force participation rate of the nation at large (62.8%), according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics (“Civilian Noninstitutional Population...” 2016). There is a considerable racial gap and gender gap on all economic measures, with African Americans and women faring much more poorly compared with whites. As the chart showing Average Weekly Wages by County in Mississippi, Second Quarter, 2015, shows, wages in Mississippi are well below the national average (see Chart 1, left). Southern states, led by Mississippi and Arkansas, have the highest percentage of low-wage workers in the nation (“Working Poor in America” 2014). Some counties in Mississippi, primarily in the Delta, have 40-45% poverty rates. The Mississippi Delta has remained one of the poorest places in the United States, along with Appalachia, for decades (Slack and Myers 2012). Poverty in the Delta has historical roots, and can be “linked to a history of slave-based plantation agriculture and the institutional mechanisms used to maintain a plantation economy and continue labor exploitation and subjugation after slavery was abolished (e.g. Jim Crow, sharecropping, tenant farming)... [and to] social and geographic isolation... the elite...have been able to exert great control over local life and influence development trajectories to their benefit” (Slack and Myers 2012).

Social scientists have long recognized that poverty is not random; women, racial minorities, and children, for instance, are all disproportionately impoverished. This is true whether the poverty is a result of unemployment or low wages. As of 2014, Mississippi ranked 51st in the nation on overall poverty rates; 51st in terms of poverty rates among women, with 23.1% of Mississippi women falling below the poverty level, compared to a national average of 13.4% for women; and 50th in child poverty rates, with 29% of Mississippi children living below the poverty line (“Mississippi...” 2015).

Women’s disproportionate poverty rates are partially explained by the gender wage gap, where women earn 83% of men’s wages nationally. The gender wage gap is also racialized; Black and Hispanic women earn 58% of white male wages (Gould, Schieder, and Geier 2016). Nationwide, two-thirds of low-wage workers are women, as they are twice as likely to work in occupations that pay $10.50 per hour or less. Even compared to men in low-wage occupations, women in low-wage jobs face a gender wage gap that results in them earning about 15% less than their male counterparts. The gender wage gap in Mississippi is 76% of male wages, according to the National Women’s Law Center (“State by State” 2016).

The shift from a manufacturing economy to a service economy has also negatively affected working class men, both in Mississippi and nationwide. For instance, gainful employment for American men without a college degree, such as jobs in manufacturing, has been disappearing for decades: some of it due to plant closings, others due to corporations’ choosing to relocate manufacturing plants to offshore locations to take advantage of cheap labor, while much of it is due to the increase in automation simply making employees in certain industries obsolete. Displaced workers have been disproportionately racial minority group members (Kletzer 2004). Job growth has been in the service sector, jobs historically considered “women’s work.” Service sector jobs are two-tiered: there are high-end service jobs that pay well and include benefits, which require higher education and, in many cases, advanced degrees; and there are low-end
service sector jobs, sometimes referred to as “McJobs,” which are low pay, lack benefits, and offer little to no opportunity for advancement, and are the kinds of jobs that individuals with a high school degree or less qualify for (Bluestone and Harrison 1984). These jobs result in full-time workers still falling below the poverty line. Finally, the shift to a service sector has been especially damaging for those without a college degree. In Mississippi, the labor force participation rate of those with less than a high school education is only 31.1% and for those with a high school education it is 54.6% (Donovan and McCormick 2016). Additionally,

Pull Quote:

“More than a fifth of American men – about 20 million people – between 20 and 65 had no paid work last year. Seven million men between 25 and 55 are no longer even looking for work, twice as many black men as white. There are 20 million men with felony records who are not in jail, with dim prospects for employment, and more of these are black men. Half of the men not in the labor force report they are in bad physical or mental health. Men account for only 42 percent of college graduates…” (Chira 2016:6).

End Quote]

What is Mississippi doing to address the needs of low-wage workers?

**SWIB (State Workforce Investment Board)**

**Workforce Development Needs Study** – The State Workforce Investment Board is under Governor Phil Bryant and is responsible for increasing economic opportunities for Mississippians and providing business partners with a well-trained workforce. According to their report to the Mississippi Legislature (Feb. 2015), the State of Mississippi was facing two primary workforce development needs: Mississippi lacked enough mid-skill workers, yet this is where many jobs are. Thus, the state should invest in increasing the skill level of many low-skill workers. Second, the state lacks a coordinated workforce development system that operates as an ecosystem where all
parts are connected and line up to achieve common goals and visions.

**MS Works** – To address both needs identified in the study, the state created *MS Works* in 2015, an app and website where jobseekers can turn to find work and employers can post an open position. They still have 44 brick and mortar offices where residents can come in and over 100 other access sites (in SNAP offices, libraries, etc.) where job seekers can use a computer and gain access to *MS Works*, if they are unable to use the website or app or do not have the technology in their home. Mississippi is one of ten states that received a federal grant to develop innovative strategies to move people into job training. There was a specific emphasis on the introduction of technology – connecting people to jobs through technology. It is updated in real time; at one point, the *MS Works* app showed that there were 39,100 open jobs in the state of MS. Described as a “game changer” by members of the Mississippi state government, this app does more than just list jobs; when people turn in an application for unemployment benefits through *MS Works*, they not only get a list of jobs near them that they are qualified for, but they also are informed as to what kind of jobs they will be eligible for with more training. According to Robin Stewart, Director of the Office of Job Connections, this is designed for people to “dream bigger.” They are linked in real time to a community college that offers the suggested job training (classes they can take to improve their skills and marketability). They are connected with an advisor to help them navigate community college (someone who can help them identify resources or assistance they may be eligible for, such as child care assistance, etc.). Mississippi officials argue that this is a better approach than simply mandating that they get job training, and “leaving them alone to figure” the system out. The objectives of *MS Works* are to move low-wage workers into mid-skill jobs to address the gap in workforce needs, to raise the workforce participation rate, and to provide a coordinated workforce development system. By June 2017, the program will be connected to other state programs referred to as “key partners”: The Department of Employment Security will be connected to ABE (Adult Basic Education), Vocational Rehabilitation Services, Human Services (SNAP). They intend is that a user’s experience with these various state agencies will be seamless.

**SNAP** – The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) is the federally funded food stamp program administered through the Department of Human Services in Mississippi. The need for food assistance is high in Mississippi, as every county has more than 16% SNAP participation, and the overall rate of SNAP participation statewide is 19.4%. The Mississippi Food Insecurity Project at Mississippi State estimates that food insecurity is greatest in the South, with 22% of Mississippi residents being food insecure. Food insecurity is defined as lack of access to enough food to remain healthy and active (“About the Project” n.d.). To qualify for SNAP benefits in Mississippi, one must work for low wages, or be unemployed or work part-time; receive SSI or other assistance program; or be elderly or disabled and live on a low-income. Mississippi is mimicking Washington’s State’s success in linking SNAP benefits to education and job training, which is linked to *MS Works*, the technology designed to help Mississippians search for jobs. Governor Bryant introduced a 3-month limit on food stamp recipients who, in the past, would have lost SNAP benefits to maintain their benefits if they enter a community college program. If they
agree to participate, they enter a 4-week orientation program at a community college to help them achieve self-sufficiency. They get a personal coach who can help them navigate college and address barriers to their success (such as helping them with their need for child care or transportation assistance, for instance). They put them on a career path by getting them an apprenticeship after they finish their four weeks of training. The hope is that the employer hires them at the completion of their apprenticeship.

As of April 2016, almost 10,000 SNAP recipients were at risk of losing their benefits because they were required to get a job, be in an approved workforce training program, or volunteer in an approved program. Critics of the policy claim that the numbers just don’t add up – there are simply not enough slots (jobs, training programs, and approved volunteer sites) to absorb all of the SNAP participants (Hampton 2016). By the first half of 2016, 42,000 people disappeared from SNAP rolls (d’ Amora 2016).

The state is gathering a lot of data on this new program. The idea is that this could become a model for the nation since, “if you can make it work in MS” with their significant issues (poverty, low educational levels, rural, high unemployment), it can work anywhere, according to one state official. According to MS Works performance measures, which are reported to the Department of Labor, in the first quarter of 2015, 64% of MS Works participants entered employment, 85% retained employment, and the average earning was $11,612.00 for a six-month period, according to Robin Stewart, Director of the Office of Job Connections (the second quarter of 2015 had similar numbers). Importantly, while the program appears to be able to connect residents with jobs, many of the jobs are still low-wage jobs, which means workers are still extremely vulnerable economically.

As is evident by the discussion so far, Mississippi is not pursuing an increase in the minimum wage and is instead focused on introducing market-based solutions; specifically, MS Works. MS Works is a policy solution that makes workers more competitive, so that they can get mid-skill level jobs, which is a workforce development policy designed to meet the needs of employers. This policy solution is limited in that it will facilitate moving some low-skill workers into mid-skill jobs, which presumably pay better, but there will still be plenty of low-skill jobs out there and tens of thousands of poorly educated Mississippians will still be among the “working poor.” The “working poor” is a term used to refer to individuals who spend 27 or more weeks per year in the labor force or looking for work, but whose incomes still fall below the poverty level, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics (“A Profile of The...” 2016). These are not policies designed to provide a safety net for all workers and their families, but instead benefit employers by providing an incentive for some workers to improve their marketability.

These programs are clearly addressing what Mississippi officials saw as their workforce development needs in SWIB Workforce Development Study (2015): additional workforce training to improve skills, particularly moving people from low-skill to mid-skill level jobs, and to offer industry relevant training; and meet their long term goal of “restructuring of the state’s workforce programs and delivery systems” (SWIB 2015). In other words, the state has not identified the needs of low-wage workers as a problem they should attempt to alleviate. This is unfortunate; just as previous policies created the “nation’s burgeoning low-wage job market, a new set of policy interventions could improve the lot of the nation’s most exploited and insecure wage-earners” (Luce, Luff, McCartin, and Milkman 2014:8).
What could Mississippi realistically be doing to support their low-wage workers?

The state should expand Medicaid, implement a state EITC, increase the minimum wage, spend more of their TANF funds and their child care block grant on basic needs and child care for low-wage workers, reform address poverty among the disabled, reduce the use of temporary workers, increase the percentage of unionized workers, and help ex-offenders obtain gainful employment. These are realistic policy proposals supported by examples and research in similar states.

**Medicaid Expansion** – Mississippi should expand Medicaid so that low-wage workers have health care coverage; this will not only benefit an additional 300,000 citizens of Mississippi, but it will also benefit businesses by contributing to the maintenance of healthier workers (“Where the States Stand…” 2016). By denying the ACA and Medicaid expansion, the state of Mississippi is losing almost half a billion dollars per year from the federal government (Glied and Ma 2013). As a neighboring state, with similar poverty rates, Louisiana provides a good comparison to Mississippi on this issue. Louisiana recently expanded Medicaid coverage, effective as of July 2016; by November 2016, over 336,000 people had enrolled (Crisp 2016). The state projected that 375,000 Louisiana residents would be newly eligible for Medicaid, allowing them regular access to a physician, health screenings, and health insurance (Litton 2016b). Medicaid expansion is designed to offer coverage to people who fall within the “coverage gap,” people whose incomes are above the Medicaid eligibility limit, yet below the “lower limit for Marketplace premium tax credits” (Garfield 2016). In Mississippi, approximately 59% of those who would benefit by Medicaid expansion are working; 49% are female; 82% have dependent children; and 51% are people of color (Garfield 2016). If more Mississippi residents had preventative health care and health insurance coverage, fewer would end up disabled (Hill 2008; see below). Clearly, expanding Medicaid in Mississippi will strengthen workers and families, as well as benefit employers.

**State EITC** – In the absence of requiring employers to pay their workers a living wage, states should offer assistance to low-wage workers through tax exemptions. One of the easiest ways for states to assist low-wage workers and their families is to follow the lead of twenty-six states, including neighboring Louisiana, and the District of Columbia, and pass a state EITC (Earned Income Tax Credit). Despite Governor Bryant’s efforts to include a non-refundable EITC in the 2016 budget, which according to the Hope Policy Institute would have benefited 250,000
Mississippi families, the legislature did not support the proposal (“A State Earned…” 2015). Modeled after the federal EITC, state EITCs allow low-wage workers to keep more of their income and help make state tax systems more equitable – since they are generally regressive, with low-income people paying a higher percentage of their income in taxes than wealthy people (Williams 2016b). According to research, if Mississippi were to implement EITC, it would cost anywhere from 57 to 227 million dollars in 2017 (depending on whether it is set at 5, 10, or 20 percent of the federal EITC or whether it is refundable) (Williams 2016). This could have a dramatic impact on children; because “the additional resources help parents better meet their needs, young children in low-income families getting an income boost like that from the EITC tend to do better and go further in school” (Williams 2016). According to Dr. Laurie Smith, Education and Workforce Development Policy Advisor for Governor Bryant, the state recognizes it has to go beyond workforce development for adults; a focus on education is an essential investment in the future labor force. Thus, a state EITC can be viewed as an affordable investment in Mississippi’s future labor force, since more children will experience academic success as they grow up in households experiencing less dire poverty. Despite offering the smallest EITC credit in the country, Louisiana’s EITC returned 48.8 million dollars into the pockets of its residents in 2015 (Spires 2016).

**Increasing Minimum Wage** – Mississippi officials remain opposed to increasing the minimum wage beyond the federal minimum wage of $7.25 per hour; in fact, the legislature has prohibited any municipality from increasing the minimum wage beyond the federal level (individual employers can, of course, set their minimums higher). According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, 6.2% of Mississippi workers earn at or below the minimum wage (“Characteristics…” 2015). Raising the minimum wage to $10.10 per hour will benefit 24% of Mississippi workers (“Working Poor in America” 2014). Mississippi has not increased their minimum wage since 2009. Yet, nationwide, we are seeing a shift away from this perspective, among workers, politicians, and even many businesses. President Obama called on Congress to increase the minimum wage to $10.10 in 2014. Congress has not acted on this call. Fourteen states began 2016 with an increased minimum wage; twelve through legislative action. The States of California and New York, as well as the District of Columbia have all increased their minimum wage to $15.00 per hour, to be implemented over the next few years. Currently, 29 states and the District of Columbia have state minimum wages higher than the federal minimum. Mississippi, along with its neighbors Alabama, Louisiana, South Carolina, and Tennessee have not adopted a state minimum wage. Yet, increasing the minimum wage spurs the economy, as workers have more money to spend (“State Minimum Wages…” 2016).

Contrary to stereotypes, minimum wage workers are not mostly teenagers. Instead, 51% are 25 years and older and the great majority of them are attempting to support families on this low-wage (“Characteristics…” 2015). In Mississippi, 72% of minimum wage jobs are held by women, and two-thirds of families in poverty are headed by single mothers (Mitchell 2016). The federal minimum wage of $7.25 per hour leaves a family of three below the poverty level. More money in the pockets of workers through a higher wage would best address the needs of low-wage workers. Policies need to address the lives that workers actually lead: instead of focusing on increasing the skills of low skill workers to medium skill workers, focus on improving the lives of the low skill workers through an increase in the minimum wage since there will always be a need for low-wage workers (Applebaum 2016).
Even the nation’s largest employer, Walmart, long committed to earning profits through cutting labor costs, recently shifted toward an investment in their workforce in 2015 as a response to decreasing sales nationwide. They are now embracing a philosophy economists refer to as “efficiency wages,” the idea that when you pay workers more, they are more loyal, harder working, and more productive in return (Irwin 2016). In other words, paying workers more is good for business.

Child Care Assistance – Research shows that spending on child care is the best investment for getting women off public assistance and into the workforce. Specifically, variations in availability and in generosity have significant impacts on low-income mothers’ hours of work (Joo 2008). Child care difficulties often lead women to quit school or job training programs and return to public assistance (Lemke, Witte, Querault, and Witt 2000). The Mississippi Low-Income Child Care Initiative finds that 71% of children aged birth to 5 years are unserved and 95% of those aged 6 to 12 years of age are unserved. Child care support for low-income families can come directly from the Childcare and Development Block Grant or from TANF, as both programs have unspent funds (both discussed below). Legislators do not have to vote on the TANF spending, so the state agency could do so without legislative approval.

Numerous studies find that children of working mothers are not disadvantaged in any way (e.g. Joo 2008; Lemke, Witte, Querault, and Witt 2000). Nationwide, 35% of families were headed by a single female in 2014. In Mississippi, 49% of children live in single-parent families and single-female headed families account for 64% of families living in poverty (“Women and Economic Security...” 2015).

The US Commission on Civil Rights issued a report on “Civil Rights and Federal Low-Income Childcare Subsidy Distributions in Mississippi” (Dec. 2015) claiming that the way MS operates its federal Child Care and Development Block Grant (from the US Department of Health and Human Services) program is racially discriminatory; with thousands of eligible children left unserved (this is thought to be the first civil rights investigation into child care subsidies). According to the report, the program serves only 15% of the state’s eligible children and $11.8 million of the grant was left unspent in 2013. Program rules obstruct access to services, such as requiring single mothers to file for child support before they can qualify for the program. Since 92% of eligible people benefitting from the Child Care and Development Fund are black in Mississippi, compared with 42% nationwide, the report questions whether the barriers the state puts up to program participation are racially discriminatory. Child care providers also face barriers in that many cannot meet the criteria established by Mississippi’s Quality Rating System; thus, this ends up limiting low-income child care providers, who are overwhelmingly African American. Carol Burnett of the Mississippi Low-Income Child Care Initiative said that while child care advocates throughout the state were excited about the Civil Rights Report, nothing has really come of it. One reason is that the Civil Rights Commission does not have any enforcement authority.

The state has not yet acted on the Civil Rights Report, stating that the federal government has rewritten how states can spend these child care block grants. They have added some requirements concerning quality of child care. Since a large number of low-income children under the age of 5 are in a child care setting, and nothing is more important than early childhood education, according to state government officials. One stated, “if you are going to impact poverty, we have to address early childhood education; you can’t just attempt to address workforce participation among adults.”
The state also had $35.8 million in TANF (Temporary Aid for Needy Families) funding that went unspent in 2015, $21 million in 2014, and $7.8 million in 2013, which could have been used for child care; the state currently spends $19 million on child care (“Child Care in Mississippi” 2016). According to the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, states only spent an average of 16% of their TANF money on child care in 2014, while Mississippi spent 18%; nevertheless, with Mississippi’s extreme poverty and low wages, they should not leave any funds unspent as long as there are eligible families who need child care assistance. As a block grant, states can spend TANF funds as they see fit, so long as they meet one of the four broad goals established by the federal government, including meeting the child care needs of low-income families, preparing adults for the labor force, reducing out-of-wedlock pregnancies, and encouraging the formation of two-parent families (“Policy Basics...” 2015). Block grants allow some flexibility to states to meet their specific needs. According to Schott, Pavetti, and Floyd (2015), in the early years of welfare reform, states often shifted money toward child care and welfare to work programs. But since the Great Recession, states have instead been using the funds to plug holes in their budgets. Essentially, “the cash assistance safety net for the nation’s poorest families with children has weakened considerably under the TANF block grant, with potentially devastating long-term consequences for children growing up” in poor families (Schott, Pavetti, and Floyd 2015). Two states, Delaware and Illinois, spend more than 50% of their TANF funds on childcare, while 9 states spend less than 3%; as mentioned, Mississippi spends approximately 18% of its TANF funds on child care. This is cause for concern because TANF lifts fewer children out of deep poverty than AFDC did; the number of children living in deep poverty has increased 50% since the shift to TANF (Schott, Pavetti, and Floyd 2015). Mississippi should make protecting children and families a priority and spend more of their TANF funds on child care.  

**Child Support Payments** – Like all states, Mississippi offers child support enforcement through help with parental location, establishment of paternity, collection and distribution of child support orders through a central unit, and review and adjustment of orders, among other services, through the Department of Human Services. Congress enacted federal-state child support enforcement in 1975 with the dual goals of decreasing child poverty rates and reducing welfare rolls (Harris 2011). The Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study finds that child support enforcement policies are actually harmful to poor children and their custodial mothers, often reducing economic support from fathers and interfering with the father’s relationship with the child or children (McLanahan et al. 2003). Harris argues that “because trying to collect cash child support from poor fathers is largely unsuccessful on its own terms and undermines the relationship between the fathers and their children, these efforts [by the state] should be curtailed. Instead, the child support program should encourage absent father’s efforts to provide for their children voluntarily, both by paying money and giving noncash assistance” (2011:158).

Other research finds that receipt of consistent child support can prevent mothers from relying on welfare (Huang, Kunz, and Garfinkel 2002). Child support payments to custodial parents only average about $1,000 per year in Mississippi in 2015, which is discouragingly low. While DHS offers help with the review and adjustment of child support orders if the noncustodial parent’s income increases, or as the child ages, or as expenses increase due to medical conditions, any change in a court ordered child support requires a court date and obtaining the assistance of legal counsel, an obvious obstacle for low-wage working parents. This obstacle needs to be
removed through some kind of state subsidized legal assistance for low-wage working parents. Clearly, child support enforcement alone or increasing the amount of child support awarded will not be effective, especially for poor families; increasing the minimum wage and assisting men with felony records to find jobs (see below) will also put more low-wage working men in a position to pay their child support.

Unemployment Benefits Eligibility — Current eligibility requirements in many states, including Mississippi, exclude many workers. These are especially discriminatory toward women because they often work part-time, or have to quit jobs due to their family obligations, which means they often have not worked at one establishment long enough to be eligible for unemployment benefits. Mississippi can reform their unemployment eligibility rules as 39 other states have done, including Georgia, Oklahoma, Tennessee, and Arkansas, encouraged by the offer of federal funding under the Unemployment Insurance Modernization Act as part of President Obama’s stimulus package (Rampell 2009). These eligibility reforms specifically target low-wage workers, those who work part-time, individuals who leave work for compelling reasons (to care for a sick family member, or are victims of domestic violence, for instance), workers who have dependent family members, the long-term unemployed, and permanently laid off workers who require access to training (“Federal Stimulus Funding…” 2009; “Modernizing…” 2012). While federal incentives are no longer available, many states have kept the reforms in place, making over 200,000 jobless Americans eligible for unemployment insurance that would not have been eligible in the past (“Modernizing…” 2012).

Addressing Poverty Among the Disabled — Approximately 24.5% of persons between the ages of 21 and 64 are disabled in Mississippi, which is higher than the national average of 19.2% (Hill 2008). As of 2008, 18% of Mississippi women and 15.4% of men were disabled. The breakdown by race/ethnicity is as follows: whites 14.7%, African Americans 19.2%, Hispanics 6.3%, 5.9% of Asian Americans, and 34.8% of Native Americans have a disability (“Disability Status Report…” 2008). People with disabilities are disproportionately impoverished, often because their disability limits their ability to work full-time, year-round (Hill 2008; Soffer, McDonald, and Blanck 2010). Policy solutions involve reforming SSDI (Supplemental Security Disability Insurance) and TANF so that people with disabilities who receive either of those benefits are not forced to limit their hours worked, as both programs take benefits away from individuals after they earn a certain amount of money. In other words, these programs could instead be modeled after the Veterans Administration disability program, which “does not take away health and other benefits from veterans in its program, and earnings among these veterans averaged $2,300 per month in 2001, compared to $80 per month among persons on SSDI” (Hill 2008). Another policy solution is to encourage SSI recipients to accumulate assets, primarily through the use of Individual Development Accounts (IDAs), without losing their SSI benefits. According to Soffer, McDonald, and Blanck (2010), “the central and most cited barrier for asset accumulation among people with disabilities in the US are means- or asset-tests applied by the majority of the states to determine eligibility for public assistance, such as TANF and SSI” (p. 380).

Temporary Workers — According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, use of contingent, temporary workers was declining until July 2009 (1.7 million workers), then it rose to 1.9 million workers by December 2010 (this is an underestimate, since they only track through agencies, not when employers hire individual temporary workers). An increase in contingent work is part of the post-industrial economy. Temporary workers generally cost an employer 15-20 percent more in pay, but
that is because the employees cover their own benefits and because there is a fee for the temp agency (“Ten Pros and Cons…” 2011). Employers benefit by being able to terminate the employee at will, not having to provide them any benefits (insurance, vacation), and they don’t have to pay worker’s compensation or unemployment insurance for them. Recent research finds that “instead of using temps to fill in for absent employees or to meet short-term spikes in demand, employers are increasingly using temps as part of a long-term strategy to permanently ‘temp out’ specific jobs or job categories. Although temps are popularly associated with clerical work, numerous studies have shown that the industry has long outgrown its pink-collar days, penetrating virtually every sector of the economy” (Hatton 2011:12-3). Additionally, the temp industry has exerted downward pressure on wages, labor standards, and job security (Theodore and Peck 2002).

According to an article on temporary employees at Nissan plant in Tennessee; “Such experiences are increasingly common, according to Leone José Bicchieri, executive director of the Chicago Workers Collaborative (CWC), a non-profit workers center that organizes low-wage and temp workers. Not only has temporary employment expanded into sectors that used to be sources of stable full-time employment, he says, but it is often no longer really temporary. Some temps are brought on for only days or weeks, others work for years at the same plant through the same agency,” (Jaffe 2014). The Nissan plant in Canton, MS, is also staffed with many temporary employees by Kelly Services. While manufacturing jobs have been declining in the US since the 1970s, these industries have dramatically increased their use of temporary workers. Mississippi leaders can put pressure on Nissan to hire more permanent workers by referencing their original agreement with the company to locate their plant in Canton, MS: “reliance upon temporary workers undermines the promises company leaders made to state government in the years preceding plant construction, promises that they would bring stable, high-paying jobs to the area in exchange for millions of dollars in tax breaks and government investment” (“Anti-Union and Out…” 2016).

Manufacturing jobs tend to be the focus of politicians; they retain a “powerful hold on the American imagination,” but they are not coming back due to automation; “there simply are far fewer jobs in manufacturing today” (Applebaum 2016:22). “This myopic focus on factory jobs distracts from another, simpler way to help working Americans: Improve the conditions of the work they already do. Fast-food workers scrape by on minimum wage; contract workers are denied benefits; child-care providers have no paid leave to spend with their own children. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, there were 64,000 steelworkers in America last year, and 820,000 home health aides” (Applebaum 2016:22). The best way to address the increasing use of temporary workers is to increase the percentage of workers who are unionized (see below).

The state can offer incentives for employers to hire more permanent workers and fewer temporary workers. Academia provides a model – most institutions of higher education limit the percentage of part-time and temporary faculty members versus tenure-track and tenured faculty members their institutions can hire. This is not just to limit the exploitation of temporary faculty members but also so that the faculty are not completely disempowered by the administration, as temporary faculty are unlikely to speak up at faculty meetings and resist changes imposed by the administration. This model could be applied to other industries.

**Unionization in MS** – According to the State of Working Mississippi 2016 Report, unions in MS...
continue to lose power due to long established state “Right to Work” laws. The percentage of workers represented by a union was 6.8% in 2015 in MS, compared to 11.1% nationwide, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics 2016. While most neighboring states have similar low unionization rates (Georgia 4.0%; Louisiana 6.8%; Texas 4.5%), Alabama has 11%, these are even more discouraging numbers if analyzed by race. Nationwide, black workers have higher rates of unionization (13.6%) than white workers (10.0%) or Hispanics. Having a higher percentage of workers unionized can help decrease industry reliance on temporary workers and increase wages. Unions help reduce the gender wage gap as well. Unionized black women workers earn 34% more than their nonunionized counterparts, Hispanic unionized women workers earn 42% more, and white unionized women earn 31% more (Anderson, Hegewisch, and Hayes 2015).

The low rate of unionization in Mississippi is no accident. One of former Governor Hailey Barbour’s objectives when he entered office was to shrink the size of Mississippi state government and to reduce state employee benefits (Pettus and Schlezig 2011). He actively sought to weaken the state employees’ union, the Mississippi Alliance of State Employees, specifically by denying them the right to collectively bargain. Thus, they have a right to voice their concerns to the legislature and the Governor, but without collective bargaining, lawmakers can make changes to their pensions, health insurance, or any other benefits without consulting workers (Pettus and Schlezig 2011). Public sector unions account for about half of union membership nationwide, which is why they have been targeted by lawmakers’ hostile to unions (Sauter and Stebbins 2016). This has contributed to Mississippi having one of the lowest rates of public sector unionization in the country; nationally, 35.2% of government workers are in public sector unions, whereas just 9.4% of Mississippi government workers are unionized (Sauter and Stebbins 2016). Mississippi teacher unions are also some of the weakest in the nation (ranking 46 out of 50) due to their low membership and lack of resources and prohibition on teacher strikes (“How Strong Are...” 2012). Current Governor Phil Bryant emphasized his support of Mississippi as a non-union state, claiming in his inaugural address that right-to-work protected workers from intimidation by union organizers (Fowler 2016).

The United Auto Workers (UAW) have been trying to unionize the 6,000 employees at the Nissan plant in Canton, MS, to no avail. They claim that workers attempting to organize there have faced retaliation, including termination, something the company denies (Fowler 2016). Employees are split on the issue, with a vote in 2008 failing by a 2 to 1 margin. In 2014, over 100 Mississippi ministers called for another union vote at the plant (“Clergy Group Supports...” 2014).

Instead of inhibiting unionization through the passage of right-to-work laws, Mississippi could encourage unionization as a way to strengthen the state economy. In addition to the unionization of auto manufacturing plants like the Nissan plant in Canton, other examples include: Unite Here! and a Living Wage Campaign at the University of Mississippi.

Unite Here! is a service and hospitality workers’ union in the US and Canada, with over 270,000 members. They are engaged in two campaigns in MS, one in Biloxi and the other in Tunica, to try and unionize casino workers. Unionizing hospitality workers is forward thinking, since that is where the job growth is, as opposed to focusing on factories and unionization of industrial workers; “The old working class still controls the megaphone of the labor movement, in part because unions have struggled to organize service workers. Manufacturing was, logistically speaking, easier to organize. There were lots of workers at
each factory, and most knew one another. Service work is more dispersed and done in smaller crews” (Applebaum 2016:24; Draut 2016). The fact that most union workers today are in service occupations, and are more likely to be female and people of color, illustrates how biased our vision of unions as white, male, manufacturing workers remains.

[Pull Quote:
“The enduring political focus on factory workers partly reflects the low profile of the new working class. Instead of white men who make stuff, the group is increasingly made up of minority women who serve people” (Applebaum 2016:24).

End Quote]

Living Wage Campaign at Ole Miss – This campaign is designed to address the problem of low-wage workers, who are disproportionately women and people of color, on the University of Mississippi campus. Started by an Ole Miss faculty member and his students, they use the Living Wage Calculator (developed by Amy Glasmeier; includes cost of food, transportation, housing, and other geographically variable factors) to estimate what the living wage should be in Oxford, MS. Right now, the university pays a $10.25 minimum wage; according to the Living Wage Calculator, a living wage is $17.25 per hour in Oxford, MS. The goal of the campaign is to get to this within 3 years. The state legislature in MS passed House Bill 141 in 2013 which prohibited any city, county, or municipality in the state from setting a minimum wage higher than the federal minimum wage of $7.25 per hour. Individual employers can, however, have a higher minimum wage, but the government cannot require it. The Ole Miss Living Wage Campaign is hoping that if they succeed, other universities and businesses will follow, and they hope to influence the state on this issue as well. University of Mississippi administrators say they made a commitment in 2000 for a “10 by 2010” campaign, and they almost made it (due to the economic crisis, they did not make it to a $10.00 per hour minimum wage until 2011, but they have come a long way) (Turnage 2015).

Living wage campaigns have succeeded on other campuses, including Southampton College of New York (Dolgon 2000). Despite their name, campus living wage campaigns seek more than a living wage; often they are fighting for health care, tuition remission, child care assistance, and other benefits. Recently, the dining hall workers at Harvard University were on strike over wages and the cost of health care after four months of negotiations that failed to result in a new contract (Douglas-Gabriel 2016). The 750 food service workers at Harvard are represented by UNITE HERE Local 26 (see discussion of UNITE HERE! above). After a two-month strike, the university agreed to the workers’ demands.

Reintegration of Formerly Incarcerated Individuals into the Labor Market – As mentioned at the beginning of this report, one of the reasons for the low rate of labor force

Table 1: Percentage of Population Incarcerated by Race/Ethnicity, Mississippi and Nationally, 2010

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Percentage of U.S. Population</th>
<th>Percentage of Incarcerated Population</th>
<th>Race/Ethnicity</th>
<th>Percentage of Mississippi Population</th>
<th>Percentage of Mississippi Inmates</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>64%</td>
<td>39%</td>
<td>White, non-Hispanic</td>
<td>58%</td>
<td>30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13%</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>Black/African American</td>
<td>37%</td>
<td>57%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16%</td>
<td>19%</td>
<td>Hispanic/Latino</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>12%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

participation, particularly among men, has to do with the number of individuals burdened by felony convictions. In 2013, Mississippi had the second highest incarceration rate in the country, trailing only Louisiana on this measure. The prison population in Mississippi, like that of the nation at large, is disproportionately composed of racial minorities. For instance, only 30% of Mississippi prisoners are white, despite whites making up 58% of the state population; 12% are Hispanic, while Hispanics are only 3% of the state population, and African Americans make up 57% of the incarcerated population, which is disproportionate to their 37% of state population (see Table 1).

Between 1983 and 2013, the prison population in Mississippi grew by 300 percent, to more than 22,400 inmates (“Mississippi’s 2014 Corrections...” 2014). In 2014, Mississippi politicians got off that treadmill and, in a bipartisan effort, embraced criminal justice reform, resulting in a 15% reduction in the number of prisoners within a year (Curry 2015). Most of the reforms involved changes in sentencing, especially shorter sentences for property and drug crimes. These reforms are projected to save the state $266 million over the coming decade, although the demand for change was also based on moral and ethical considerations associated with mass incarceration rather than just on cost savings (Curry 2015). In 2014, Mississippi’s imprisonment rate was 5th highest in the nation, at 597 (per 100,000), while the US average was 471 (per 100,000).

While “the best thing we can do in this regard would be to incarcerate fewer young men to start with, especially for nonviolent drug offenses. Recent efforts to incarcerate fewer young people have centered on various alternatives to prison, such as drug courts, ‘smart’ probation, community corrections, and a range of efforts commonly referred to as ‘justice reinvestment’ and ‘restorative justice’” (Edelman and Holzer 2014:95).

While the reforms have the state moving in the right direction, a focus on job placement for the more than 20,000 formerly incarcerated individuals must be implemented. When looking at unemployment rates and low labor force participation rates in Mississippi, especially of black men, one cannot overlook the role of a felony conviction in explaining this. Political economist Nicholas Eberstadt (2016) argues that the presence of a criminal record is one of the most important explanations for why millions of men of prime working age are not in the labor force (NILF). In 2016, 9.6 percent of Mississippi’s population was disenfranchised due to a felony conviction, which also means this is a population of people who face significant employment obstacles (Uggen, Larson, and Shannon 2016). This is an especially difficult population when it comes to employment prospects because, “many have served multiple terms in prison...many have very low levels of education and little work experience, are disproportionately male and minority, and return to social networks with weak ties to the labor market... [yet] Stable employment is often characterized as being of central importance to the successful reentry of former inmates into non-institutionalized society” (Raphael 2010). African American men have been disproportionately targeted by the war on drugs since the 1980s, which explains their disproportionate incarceration rates (Alexander 2010). For instance, between the mid-1980s and the mid-1990s, the number of black men sentenced to prison for drug offenses increased 700 percent, despite the fact that whites actually use drugs at slightly higher rates than African Americans (Brown et al. 2003; Fitzgerald 2014).
Pager’s (2003, 2007) research finds that a criminal record acts as a negative credential for black and white job seekers, but is much more problematic for African Americans, as “employers, already reluctant to hire blacks, appear even more wary of blacks with proven criminal involvement” (2003:959). Thus, Mississippi has historically had some of the highest rates of incarceration in the nation, and has the largest percentage of African American residents in the nation, and according to Pager’s research, both race and a criminal record are negative credentials for job seekers. Thus, it is safe to say that the problem of felony convictions contributing to the numbers of men of prime working age not in the labor force is even more severe in Mississippi than in the nation at large.

Mississippi has recently expanded MS Works to connect with the MS Department of Corrections so that any incarcerated individual who is about to be released from prison can register with MS Works and they will have a list of job leads near where they will be living the day they get out. This is so new; they do not yet have more than one month of statistics. This is not in private or federal prisons yet, only MDOC. But, this program provides more than just a list of jobs; it also connects applicants to necessary training programs which focus on job skills, and also programs that teach “soft skills,” such as the importance of punctuality, attitude, and communication skills, things that are especially important for the ex-offender population (“Results-Based Public Policy…” 2012).

While this move is certainly laudable, Mississippi should do more than provide job leads for people currently being released. They must address the employment obstacles that face the tens of thousands of formerly incarcerated individuals. The State of Mississippi needs to extend their criminal justice reform strategies to include a focus on prisoner reentry, similar to the State of Connecticut’s Reentry Strategy 2010 (“Partners in Progress…” 2010).

Strategies the state can implement include funding reentry programs, like Paroled to Pride, described below, and a ban the box program where employers cannot ask on an application whether or not an applicant has been convicted of a felony. Employers have a right to know if applicants have a criminal history, but the “ban the box” movement is trying to allow formerly incarcerated individuals a foot in the door. Instead of disregarding the applicant because he or she checked “yes” to whether or not they have ever been convicted of a felony, employers don’t find out about the applicant’s criminal record until after an interview. Another strategy is to encourage employers to stop discriminating against people with criminal records, which could happen if the state incentivized hiring formerly incarcerated individuals; South Carolina Governor Nikki Haley is encouraging businesses to hire qualified, nonviolent ex-offenders upon release, as a way to reduce recidivism. While this effort was only implemented in 2014, Haley is expanding the program to try and have prisoners hired before they even get out of prison so they can get to work immediately (Roldán 2016). Governor Haley is not offering businesses a concrete incentive to hire formerly incarcerated individuals, but other states do. Examples of such incentive programs include the Federal Bonding Program and the Work Opportunities Tax Credit. Most employers are unaware that the federal government offers a program that provides free insurance to employers to cover theft – from larceny to embezzlement – if employers hire former offenders (“Federal Bonding Program...” n.d.). This is part of President Obama’s Fair Chance Business Pledge. Employers who take this pledge are committed to providing ex-offenders with a fair shot at a second chance and set an example for their peers (“Federal Bonding Program” n.d.). Mississippi could implement a
state-level version of the Federal Bonding Program as a way to help ex-offenders find gainful employment.

**Expanding Medicaid** (discussed above) is also a necessary part of economic development for ex-offenders. By promoting access to health care, ex-offenders will be healthier, better able to maintain their jobs, and thus save the state money by reducing recidivism.

Mississippi can also implement **community-based alternatives** to court for juvenile offenders. Juveniles who commit what are known as “status offenses,” truancy, running away, underage drinking, should not be held in detention in a juvenile facility, according to the Vera Institute of Justice. Mississippi could model neighboring Louisiana who has turned to the Vera Institute and their Status Offense Reform Center for assistance (“Status Offense...” 2016). The Vera Institute encourages community-based and family-focused responses to status offenses by juveniles. Courts are ill-equipped to deal with the underlying causes of these kinds of offenses and incarcerating these young people who have committed status offenses with others who have committed more serious offenses negatively affects their behavior (“Keeping Kids Out” 2014). The Status Offense Reform Center provides states with the tools and resources to make the necessary reforms. Youth of color are disproportionately represented in juvenile justice systems, particularly for status offenses. It is in the interest of Mississippi policymakers to engage in status offense reform efforts that have worked in other states as a way to keep youth of color out of the juvenile justice system (Davis 2014).

States can also **expunge a felony record** after a certain number of years in which a person has not re-offended (Edelman and Holzer 2014). This makes more sense than permanently barring someone from gainful employment because of a felony conviction they incurred when they were 19 years old. All states have enacted laws that allow people to expunge arrests and convictions from their records; once expunged, a person can honestly answer “no” to a potential employer’s question, “have you ever been convicted of a felony.” Currently in Mississippi, a person can get a felony conviction expunged if their conviction is for shoplifting, writing bad checks, or possession of a controlled substance or paraphernalia for which the person received a suspended sentence. Mississippi legislators could expand expungement eligibility to convictions for nonviolent drug offenses in which the offender served his or her sentence.

A final strategy that the state could try that would reduce recidivism by increasing employment opportunities is **removing obstacles to the employment** of ex-offenders, specifically by ending prohibitions on ex-offenders’ right to obtain a certain job. While each state sets their own specific laws, occupations such as hairstylists, barbers, make-up artists, security guards, residential painters, and florists, require state licensure which prohibits people with a felony conviction from qualifying for them.

**Paroled to Pride** is an organization based in Columbus, MS, that provides counseling, job training with accredited programs, and job placement for nonviolent offenders, specifically hospitality industry training. Since 45% of Mississippi’s prisoners are nonviolent, this program has the potential to help a large number of formerly incarcerated individuals (“Mississippi’s 2014 Corrections...” 2014). While this organization is doing important work, it should not be overlooked that many of the jobs in the hospitality industry are low-wage and thus, returning prisoners will simply be members of the working poor unless the state increases the minimum wage. Or other, similar, programs can be implemented to make ex-offenders more employable. An example is **Edwin’s Leadership and Restaurant Institute** in Cleveland, OH, which
trains ex-offenders in all aspects of high-end dining, from culinary arts to hospitality. This program began in 2007 and was initially a 6-month program conducted in prisons and is now a full-service restaurant that employs ex-offenders and teaches them every aspect of the business, offering worthy people a second chance. Clearly, this model goes beyond only training ex-offenders for low-wage jobs.

Seven years ago, neighboring Louisiana established a Re-Entry Court program where young inmates who qualified could learn a trade like plumbing, welding, or auto mechanics while they are incarcerated, so that when they are released, they have an employable skill. The program also offers anger management, parenting classes, and GED classes. This program is limited, however, in that it is only available at Angola, where “lifers” who graduated from Angola Bible College serve as unpaid mentors to the young inmates who are chosen to participate in the program (Lane 2014). Mississippi could implement a similar program, which would deter recidivism among young people entering prison for the first time. But this is not the kind of program that would address the thousands of Mississippians who are currently struggling to find work with a felony conviction on their record.

CONCLUSION

The state of Mississippi is one of the poorest states, with high unemployment and one of the lowest labor-force participation rates in the nation. The state is focused on economic and workforce development, through tax cuts to businesses and the top wage earners and the implementation of MS Works, a website and app designed for job seekers and employers seeking workers. As mentioned previously, the state has not identified the needs of low-wage workers as a problem they should attempt to alleviate. In this report, we instead suggest that the state take action to address the needs of low-wage workers. This report offers a range of suggestions that are designed to directly improve the lives of low-wage workers: expand Medicaid so that low-wage workers can have access to health care; implement a state Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC); offer more child care assistance so women are able to work outside the home. This can be accomplished simply by spending more of the federal TANF funds and the Child Care Development Block Grant that come to the state (millions of federal dollars designated to the state through these grants go unused every year). The state can also look to reforming unemployment benefits eligibility and child support payment enforcement. Poverty among the disabled can be addressed through reforming eligibility criteria for SSDI and TANF. A major shift in Mississippi’s economic and political culture is necessary for the state to increase the minimum wage, decrease industry reliance on temporary workers, and increase unionization rates. While Mississippi is a right-to-work state, this position is not benefitting workers and instead, is making them more vulnerable economically. Finally, we recommend the state implement a number of policies and programs designed to help ex-offenders reintegrate into the labor market. For many years, Mississippi had the second highest rate of incarceration in the country. While criminal justice reform has them improving on that statistic, there are still tens of thousands of formerly incarcerated individuals who struggle to find gainful employment or are simply not in the labor force and are no longer even looking for work.
REFERENCES


REFERENCES


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