The Jesuit Social Research Institute (JSRI) was founded in 2007 as a partnership between Loyola University New Orleans and the Jesuits of the South to look more deeply at the social realities of the Gulf South states. We do this to promote a more just society in light of Catholic Social Teaching. The study which we release today—*The State of Working Mississippi*—is the fourth special report which we have published on the social and economic realities of Mississippi.

Our other reports on the state include: *The Privilege of Plenty: Educational Inequity in Mississippi, 2019; Low-Wage Work in Mississippi, 2017;* and *The State of Working Mississippi, 2016.*

After consultation with colleagues in Mississippi, we present this study of workers in the state based on 2019 data, the most recently available. However, in light of the ways in which the COVID-19 pandemic has shaken all of us since March, 2020, we are highlighting how Mississippi’s social and economic realities have led to the economic, social, and health devastation now engulfing the people of the state.

Because we began with the desire to improve the wellbeing of the people of Mississippi, this report specifically discusses ways in which policymakers, employers, business and labor leaders, workers, and all of us can come together to change the conditions under which Mississippi workers labor and the ways in which these conditions have expanded the inroads of COVID-19 into the state. Throughout the report we give specific recommendations for action steps to improve the working environment in Mississippi. Tackling each of these issues is essential to the economic and social progress of the state, especially as the state recovers from the pandemic.

Special thanks to JSRI Economic Policy Specialist Dennis Kalob, Ph.D., the principal investigator for this report, and Office Manager Kelsey McLaughlin, for their comprehensive and detailed work in compiling, analyzing, and presenting the statewide information critical for understanding the status of workers in Mississippi and how their conditions have enabled the current and growing impacts of COVID-19 in the state. Thanks also to our colleagues in Mississippi for their invaluable feedback and support on this report.

Fred Kammer, S.J., J.D.
Director, Jesuit Social Research Institute
College of Arts and Sciences
Loyola University New Orleans
December, 2020
INTRODUCTION

This report summarizes the working lives, economic security, and social conditions of the people of Mississippi. The data here show that there are serious weaknesses in the state that must be addressed if the people are to be able to have the quality of life that they deserve.

Mississippi is among the states with the highest unemployment, poverty, and uninsured rates and the lowest wages, education spending, and educational attainment. Such statistics are a recipe for poor statewide economic development and long-term hardship for workers and families even before the health and economic onslaught of COVID-19.

We invite readers to examine the data that we are presenting in these pages. While doing so, please understand that Mississippi has the power to alter its course and to significantly improve the lives and life chances of all those who live here. If the policymakers, employers, business and labor leader, workers, and all of us choose to take dramatic action, Mississippi can become an example for the nation of a state that has marshalled the political will to do what is necessary to meaningfully improve the economic and social conditions of its people.

COVID-19 Crisis Hits Mississippi

In the initial research and design for this report, we had no way of knowing that the COVID-19 pandemic would sweep the State of Mississippi and the nation in the months before its planned publication. On March 11, 2020, the first reported coronavirus case was diagnosed in Mississippi. Four days later, on March 15, 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared that a worldwide epidemic was underway.

We chose to delay publication until now to assess the initial scope of the pandemic in Mississippi in the light of how the conditions of working people contributed to or facilitated the spread of the disease, its deadly impacts, and its economic repercussions. We approached this task by considering and reporting on the impact of COVID-19 over its initial eight-month period from March 11, 2020—the first case—to November 11, 2020. On that eight-month marker, Mississippi reported 130,665 coronavirus cases, including 3,514 deaths. As of December 6, MS ranks 18th in per capita known infection rate and 7th per capita in deaths. The number of cases and deaths continue to escalate daily.

The challenges the working people of Mississippi faced on March 11th are dramatically greater now. If the state and local leaders and the people of Mississippi do not rise to these greater challenges, illness and economic suffering will reverberate through the state for a protracted period of time. Bold action must be taken to protect and expand the social well-being of the people of Mississippi.
**DEMOGRAPHICS**

2.99 million  
Current State Population  

2.97 million  
Population in 2010

**Mississippi Population by Race/Ethnicity, 2018**  
Source: Census Bureau, American Community Survey

After eight months, on November 11, 2020, the Mississippi State Department of Health reported there had been 130,665 COVID-19 cases in the state. Of those for whom race and ethnicity were reported, 42.7 percent were Black and 47.9 percent were white. In terms of deaths, of 3,514 deaths in Mississippi by November 11, 2020, 46.1 percent were Black and 49.3 percent were white. These percentages reflect early national trends showing Black Americans and other historically disadvantaged groups experiencing disproportionately high infection and death rates. The number of cases and deaths continue to increase daily.
INCOME, WAGES, & EMPLOYMENT

Median Household Income
Source: Census Bureau Community Population Survey, 2018

Mississippi is last among the 50 states with a median household income of $42,781.

The United States average is $63,179.

Massachusetts is the state with the highest median household income at $86,345.

Unemployment

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Mississippi Unemployment Rate by Year, 2007-2019</th>
<th>United States Unemployment Rate by Year, 2007-2019</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2007: 6.1%</td>
<td>2007: 4.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2008: 6.6%</td>
<td>2008: 5.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2009: 9.5%</td>
<td>2009: 9.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010: 10.4%</td>
<td>2010: 9.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2011: 10.0%</td>
<td>2011: 8.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2012: 9.0%</td>
<td>2012: 8.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2013: 8.5%</td>
<td>2013: 7.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2014: 7.5%</td>
<td>2014: 6.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2015: 6.4%</td>
<td>2015: 5.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2016: 5.8%</td>
<td>2016: 4.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2017: 5.1%</td>
<td>2017: 4.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2018: 4.8%</td>
<td>2018: 3.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2019: 5.2%</td>
<td>2019: 3.7%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Median Hourly Wages

$15.00
Mississippi: the lowest median hourly wage in the country.

$19.14
The national median hourly wage.


Gender Pay Gap

Mississippi has the 13th largest gender pay gap (23.1%)


COVID-19 Crisis Hits Mississippi

The impact of COVID increased the number of unemployed in Mississippi from 64,286 workers (5.1 percent) in March, 2020, to 195,429 unemployed (16.3 percent) in April. The October number of 95,231 unemployed (7.4 percent) is almost a third higher than March. Reports are that even these numbers are underrepresented due to misclassification of workers.
LABOR FORCE

Largest occupations in Mississippi, May 2019

- **Cashiers**
  - 41,340 employed

- **Retail Salespersons**
  - 36,910 employed

- **Laborers and Freight, Stock, and Material Movers, Hand**
  - 31,950 employed

- **Registered Nurses**
  - 29,550 employed

- **Heavy and Tractor-Trailer Truck Drivers**
  - 22,600 employed

- **General and Operations Managers**
  - 20,530 employed

- **Secretaries and Administrative Assistants, Except Legal, Medical, and Executive**
  - 20,130 employed

- **Miscellaneous Assemblers and Fabricators**
  - 19,850 employed

- **Waiters and Waitresses**
  - 19,450 employed

- **Stock Clerks and Order Fillers**
  - 18,710 employed

The most common job in Mississippi: Cashier, a particularly low wage job.

COVID-19 Crisis Hits Mississippi

Virtually every sector has been—and remains—negatively impacted by the COVID-19 crisis. Low-wage, young, female, Black and Latinx workers have been the hardest hit. Most jobs listed above could not be “worked from home” when businesses closed or when employees feared COVID infection on the job or needed to care for children at home when schools closed or went on-line. Some, like nurses and food workers must be on the front lines of the pandemic.

Source: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. Icons from the Noun Project: Retail by Matías Pitters; Waiter by Adrien Coquet; Nurse by Muhammad Faizal Rahman Hakim; Grocery Buying with Cashless Payment, stocking supplies, manager, customer service, Forklift, truck driver, Factory Workers by Gan Khoon Lay.
POVERTY

Poverty Rates in 2018

Mississippi
19.7%
The highest state poverty rate in the nation.

United States
11.8%

Mississippi
11.8%
The highest state poverty rate in the nation.

Percentage of the population below 200% of poverty in 2018

Mississippi
43.3%
Mississippi, which is the highest in the nation.

United States
28.9%

Official poverty threshold in 2018, for a family of 4 (annual income for household of 2 parents and 2 children)

$25,465

Source: Census Bureau, Community Population Survey 2018
Family by Oksana Latysheva from the Noun Project

Poverty by Race/Ethnicity in Mississippi

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Race/Ethnicity</th>
<th>Mississippi</th>
<th>United States</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>12.6%</td>
<td>10.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black</td>
<td>32.7%</td>
<td>24.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>25.9%</td>
<td>21.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>13.7%</td>
<td>11.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Native American</td>
<td>31.3%</td>
<td>25.8%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Poverty by Race/Ethnicity in the U.S.

In Mississippi, 4.6% of full-time, year-round workers have incomes that keep them below the poverty line. That number for the nation as a whole is 2.8%.

Source: Census Bureau, 2018 American Community Survey 5-year estimates

COVID-19 Crisis Hits Mississippi

The COVID-19 crisis with its dramatic impact on employment and business will cause a significant increase in the poverty rate for Mississippi and the nation. Federal emergency assistance had mitigated the impact early on. However, by August-September of this year, 16 percent of Mississippi adults, the highest percentage in the nation, reported that their households did not have enough to eat. 14 percent of adults living with children reported that children were not eating enough because families could not afford more food. Families and businesses still wait for further federal aid.

HEALTH CARE

Health Disparities

Mississippi State Department of Health reports that Mississippi ranks last, or close to last, in almost every leading health outcome. These health disparities are significantly worse for those who have systematically faced obstacles to health due to their socio-economic status, race, ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, geographic location, and other characteristics historically linked to discrimination or exclusion. “The result is a disproportionate burden of disease and illness that is borne by racial and ethnic minority populations and the rural and urban poor.”


Uninsured Rates

- In 2018, nationally, 28.6 million people, 8.9% of the total population, were uninsured in 2018.
- Mississippi ranked 46th (out of 50 states and the District of Columbia) with 12.1% of the population uninsured. That was more than 350,000 people from the state who were without any form of health insurance, public or private.

Source: Census Bureau, American Community Survey, 2018

- In its 2020 session the Mississippi legislature again rejected adopting Medicaid expansion made possible under the Affordable Care Act, even though the proposed plan from Mississippi hospitals would have covered almost 300,000 Mississippi adults without health coverage and would have pumped $1 billion each year into the state economy, created 19,000 jobs, and significantly increased general fund revenue.


COVID-19 Crisis Hits Mississippi

In October, 2020, Families USA reported that, since February 2020, an estimated 37,000 more Mississipians have become uninsured because of job losses, but only a small number of these people have gained Medicaid coverage because Mississippi’s eligibility threshold is so low that very few laid-off Mississipians even qualify. States like Mississippi that so far have rejected Medicaid expansion as provided for under the Affordable Care Act tend to have significantly higher rates of uninsured. They also put their rural hospitals at financial risk.

On November 12, 2020, the Biloxi Sun Herald reported that, according to State Health Officer Dr. Thomas Dobbs, a surge in coronavirus cases had left no available ICU beds in Jackson, Mississippi, with “very few” available elsewhere in the state. A week later, on November 20th, Mississippi Public Broadcasting reported that coronavirus hospitalizations in the state had risen by 136% in two weeks, placing a significant strain on not just the largest medical centers, but also small, rural hospitals. A year earlier, a report in Mississippi Today indicated that Mississippi “has more rural hospitals at risk of closing than any other state in this country...”

As of December 6, 2020, the state ranked 18th in per capita known infection rate and had the seventh highest number of deaths per capita from the disease.

The COVID-19 crisis demonstrates that the nation and individual states need to have strong health care systems in place and, in particular, make sure that everyone has the health care they need. Reports during this crisis have revealed that people were not only scared of the medical impact of having the virus, but also very afraid of the financial impact. This crisis has clearly revealed flaws in our system that must be addressed.
The federal minimum wage is $7.25 per hour. It has been more than 11 years since the last increase.

- Mississippi is one of the 21 states that does not supplement the federal minimum wage.
  
  Source: National Conference of State Legislatures

- In 2017, 4.1% of hourly workers in Mississippi reported earning $7.25 or less per hour.
  
  Source: Governing.com

- Of the 50 states, Mississippi is tied for the second highest percentage of workers earning no more than the federal minimum.
  
  Source: Governing.com

- The problems associated with a low minimum wage are exacerbated by the existence of a “preemption law,” which forbids local governments from passing their own minimum wage.
  
  Source: Economic Policy Institute

- A minimum wage hike to $15 per hour would benefit 41.6 percent of Mississippi workers.
  
  Source: Economic Policy Institute

A worker who works full-time (40 hours per week), year-round (for 52 weeks) at $7.25 earns just $15,080 a year before taxes.

This is not enough to raise any size family out of poverty.

The poverty threshold in 2020 for a family of two is $17,240.

Icons by the Noun Project: Money by Max Hancock, month by Milinda Courey, hours by counloucon.

COVID-19 Crisis Hits Mississippi

Minimum wage workers are highly unlikely to have savings for COVID-19 employment interruptions or medical expenses. In Mississippi, 54.6 percent of households are liquid asset poor, meaning they do not have liquid savings to cover basic expenses for three months if they experienced a sudden job loss, a medical emergency, or another financial crisis causing a loss of stable income. Only 46.9 percent of households kept emergency savings in the past year.
Wages have remained relatively stagnant for the past 40 years, while worker productivity, corporate profits, and executive pay have increased dramatically. Workers are getting a smaller slice of the American economic pie. Economic inequality has been growing and average workers and their families are suffering increasing economic insecurity. In the past, stronger labor unions have acted to counter these trends.

Across the country, the decline in union membership matches the decline in the fortunes of the working and middle classes.

In 1954, Mississippi became a “right to work” state, which means that workers are allowed to avoid joining a union even if the workplace is unionized. Such laws are designed to weaken union power. And indeed, they have done so. “Right to work” states have low unionization rates and as a result workers have lower wages and less power.

In 1983 the rate of unionization among all employed workers in the U.S. was 20.1%.

Estimates for earlier years place the peak of union membership in the mid-1950s when roughly 1 in 3 workers were in unions.

Source: Data on unionization rates come from the Bureau of Labor Statistics.

COVID-19 Crisis Hits Mississippi

Weak unions also mean that workers with complaints about employer practices, wages, or even workplace health and safety in the wake of COVID-19 have less of a voice about their concerns. Weakened unions have less voice in decisions made by the Mississippi Legislature with regard to pandemic-related legislation, unemployment compensation, safety, and health coverage.
EDUCATION SPENDING & ATTAINMENT

One study, examining 18 metrics across all 50 states, identified the “most and least educated states in America.”

Mississippi ranked as the least educated.

Public School Spending

$8,771
Per Pupil Spending in Mississippi

$12,201
U.S. Average of Per Pupil Spending

47th out of 51 States
(including D.C.)

Mississippi’s rank in per pupil spending in public schools.

COVID-19 Crisis Hits Mississippi

Greater educational attainment means higher earnings in Mississippi and the nation. Low educational attainment, on the other hand, correlates with higher unemployment and poverty rates. When COVID-19 hit Mississippi, those with less education were most likely to be laid off, unless they were in “essential” occupations, but often are face-to-face with the public and more susceptible to infection. Across the nation, in the first six months of the pandemic, about a third of adults with a high school diploma or less education (34 percent) and 27 percent of those with some college experience say they have struggled with paying bills, compared with only 12 percent of those with a bachelor’s degree or more education. Those with a high school diploma or less education were twice as likely as those with a bachelor’s degree or more education to have lost their health insurance in the same time period (6 percent vs. 3 percent).

INFRASTRUCTURE

Key to economic development, as well as quality of life in any state, is the health of its infrastructure—roads, bridges, water and sewerage systems, broadband availability and speed, and more. By all accounts, Mississippi’s infrastructure is badly in need of repair and improvement.

The American Society of Civil Engineers (ASCE) gives our nation’s infrastructure a grade of D+. They point out some specific problems in Mississippi.

For example, they estimate that the average driver spends $705 each year in repairs due to driving on damaged roads.

About 12% of the state’s bridges are structurally deficient. The Mississippi Department of Transportation reports that there are 253 posted (weight limited) and/or closed bridges in the state. Source: M.D.O.T., 2020.

Capital needs in the state’s schools are estimated to cost $289 million.

According to research released earlier this year from BroadbandNow, Mississippi ranks 42nd (of the 50 states and D.C.) in “internet coverage, speed, and price access.” This is a situation that can be challenging to some employees working remotely and to students in need of reliable internet connections to facilitate learning during the pandemic.

These and other infrastructure needs can be expensive to address, but not to address them has significant costs to the social and economic development of the state.

To attract economic development projects requires a strong and supportive infrastructure.
OVERALL HUMAN DEVELOPMENT AND WELL-BEING

- The Jesuit Social Research Institute in their most recent *JustSouth Index 2019* has Mississippi ranked at the very bottom (51st out of 50 states and Washington D.C.) in this measurement of poverty, racial disparity, and immigrant exclusion.

- *Kids Count 2020* of the Annie E. Casey Foundation has Mississippi ranked 49th out of 50 states in child well-being.

- In *Sharecare’s Community Well-Being Index 2019 State Rankings Report*, Mississippi ranked last in community well-being.

- The *American Human Development Index (2018)* of the Social Science Research Council has Mississippi ranked 50th out of 50 states plus D.C.

Each year, Mississippi ranks at or near the bottom of the major indices of human well-being and development.

Additional Causes of Concern

Mississippi ranks first in hunger.

According to a Census Bureau survey this fall, 21% of adults in the state reported not having enough to eat in their households at some point in the previous seven days.


11.9% of Mississippi households in 2015 utilized high-cost, high-risk forms of credit, such as payday loans, rent-to-own and pawning.

Mississippi had the second-highest rate in the country (Oklahoma was first).

Source: Talk Poverty

Mississippi has one of the highest percentages of “disconnected youth.” The state ranked 3rd highest: 16.4% of young people age 16-24 are neither in school nor employed (2017).

Source: Social Science Research Council

COVID-19 Crisis Hits Mississippi

The people of Mississippi are vulnerable on many social, economic, racial, and health indicators. This is not a position to be in during a combined economic and health crisis. We already have shown just how this vulnerability has impacted the state and its people. Looking ahead, policymakers in Mississippi need to address these issues in ways that people and their institutions are made stronger and more secure.
There are many policy initiatives that should be employed to address the needs of Mississippi’s working families.

These would clearly include the following:

- Significantly increase the state minimum wage and repeal state preemption that prevents local communities from instituting their own minimum wage.
- Expand Medicaid (as provided by the ACA) so that everyone with income below 138% of the poverty level will be covered.
- Change labor laws to provide greater protections for workers and make it easier for them to unionize, such as reclassifying many independent contractors/gig workers as regular employees.
- Increase spending on education at all levels.
- Invest in significant infrastructure upgrades.

These recommendations, if adopted, have the potential to transform the state—increase wages, improve economic security, improve health, attract business, create jobs, and grow the state’s economy.

COVID-19 Crisis Hits Mississippi

The COVID-19 health and economic crisis reminds us how vulnerable we are as individuals, families, and communities. This should motivate all policy makers and elected officials to work together to do whatever it takes to improve our collective well-being and security. Most important are assuring that all our children have significant educational opportunities from pre-school through technical school or college and that all Mississippians have equal employment opportunities, livable wages, and accessible health care. This is not only in their best interest, but also in the best interest of the economic and social development of the state as a whole.
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Connect with us!

For more detailed data, methodology, and resources related to State of Working Mississippi 2020, please contact kalob@loyno.edu.

THE MISSION OF THE JESUIT SOCIAL RESEARCH INSTITUTE
The Jesuit Social Research Institute works to transform the Gulf South through action research, analysis, education, and advocacy on the core issues of poverty, race, and migration. The Institute is a collaboration of Loyola University New Orleans and the Society of Jesus rooted in the faith that does justice.